

Budapest and Its Heroines in *Fin-de-Siècle* Hungarian Literature

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The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, generally referred to as the *fin de siècle*, brought about dramatic shifts in the development of many a European city. Budapest experienced a rapid modernization as it was redefining itself as the capital of a nation that had finally acquired self-government after centuries of Habsburg domination. With the 1867 Compromise, Hungary received its long-coveted autonomy, and shared only foreign affairs, defence, and common customs and revenue policies with the Austrian half of the Habsburg state (Dreisziger 27). Budapest¹ became the fastest growing city of the Dual Monarchy. Between 1870 and 1910, its population tripled in size, from 270,685 to 863, 735 (Sármány-Parsons 85), a rate of growth nine times faster than that of the country as a whole. Hungary needed to validate a capital different from Habsburg Vienna. Thus Budapest quickly developed into one of the most modern cities of Europe and into Hungary's true economic and cultural centre. Its public transportation system was ahead of many other European cities: Budapest had an electrical tramway as early as 1889 and, in 1896, Swiss engineers built the first underground railway in continental Europe (Johnston 344). New boulevards crossed the centre of the city and many new buildings were erected, including the Parliament building, which was finished in 1902 and became the largest Parliament building in the world at the time (Lukacs 49).

These developments were coupled with a blossoming in *high* as well as *low* culture: literature and the arts, coffee houses, restaurants with *gypsy* music, and theatres with operettas flourished. Thus for the upper classes, Budapest represented a happy picture, a "dream world" (Frigyesi 4). This new metropolis also attracted a new kind of bourgeoisie, different from the Viennese. The Budapest bourgeoisie was more of a parvenu type, younger and less established than the old *Bildungsbürgertum* and *Besitzbürgertum* of Vienna (Hanák 157) and essentially started to be formed only after the Compromise (Pynsent 123). It was mainly composed of German and Jewish

ethnicities, as well as some lesser Magyar nobility. All this gave Budapest an atmosphere very different from Vienna. This seemingly “semibarbaric country and place,” looked down on by many a Viennese intellectual, among them Freud, was, however, “breaking away from the nineteenth-century habits of thought, vision, manners and even speech” much faster and in different ways than old imperial Vienna (Lukacs 27-28).²

On the other hand, the rapid growth and process of industrialization that took place in Hungary within a few decades, went hand in hand with negative social developments. A huge gap existed in Hungarian society between its wealthiest and poorest segments: “In 1901, 36 percent of the population of Budapest lived in what was considered at the time “worrisome bad conditions, — that is, six or more persons per room” (Frigyesi 45), many in humid basement apartments. As many as one in three inhabitants were subtenants, renters of, at best, a crowded room or, worse, a bed or even mattress for the night (Lukacs 98). It is estimated that as much as about 65% of the population lived in poverty. Although by 1900 illiteracy rates had declined to about 10% in Budapest itself (Lukacs 100), in the rest of the country, illiteracy affected as much as 50% of the population. With these large contrasts, the description of Budapest as “a city between east and west, between feudalism and modernity” (Johnston 346) seems justified.

Budapest, like other cities, offered ample material for the artistic imagination. In literature and art the city is frequently seen as a “centre of *negative* meanings for subjective passions: for vice, the body, for power and property; the city as whore, the jungle, the slaughterhouse” (Scherpe 130, emphasis in the original). On the other hand, the representations of the city as a destructive and alienating organism often go parallel with a fascination for the metropolis and its many modern attractions. Ilona Sármany quotes *fin-de-siècle* critic and writer Zoltán Ambrus, who was in love with Budapest, comparing its youthfulness to a young lady: “I like that beauty of yours that is transitory and belongs to the devil, the beauty of your youth. Because you are the youngest metropolis, you are the young lady of the ballroom among all metropolises” (*Ecset*).³ Sármany expresses this love-hate relationship between Budapest and its artists and writers with the metaphor of the “stepmother capital” (*mostoha főváros*). Ferenc Molnár, who expressed strong social criticism of Budapest in his famous 1901 novel *Az éhes város* (The Hungry City), later adamantly defended his native city. In 1913, in a speech held at the celebration of forty years of the city’s unification, Molnár stood up in defense of Budapest against its many detractors (Sármany, *Ecset*). He countered those who opposed modernization and who accused Budapest of being “American, international, lacking patriotism and Hungarianness [...] undeserving of the

name ‘the country’s heart.’” And in 1911, he expressed his own love-hate relationship with Budapest in another article (qtd. in Sármany. *Ecset*). This co-existence of a fascination for the city coupled with criticism bordering on disgust is typical for many literary and artistic expressions of the time.

Numerous *fin-de-siècle* writers took up the theme of the city and the contradictions of modernity in their fiction, offering different forms and degrees of social criticism. In Hungarian literature of the period, social realism is present in the writings of several canonical authors. Other than the above-mentioned novel by Molnár, *Az éhes város*, Tamás Kóbor’s novel *Budapest* (1901) was one of the first to present “the conflict of the modern city” (Frigyesi 43). Unlike in Molnár’s novel, Kóbor’s main protagonists are women whose lives are broken in their struggle for a better life in the city. The same is true for their contemporary Sándor Bródy who published the collection of novellas *Erzsébet dajka és más cselédek* (Nanny Erzsébet and Other Maids) in the same year (1901). These writers and their narratives are well known in the Hungarian literary canon. With the exception of Margit Kaffka, much less known today are their female contemporaries who offered just as interesting and valid representations and interpretations of women’s lives in the big city, Budapest, and thus add another dimension to the image of the city at the turn of the century. In the following, I will discuss Kóbor’s *Budapest* and Bródy’s *Erzsébet dajka és más cselédek* along with the following novels: Szikra’s *A bevándorlók* (The Parvenus, 1898), Terka Lux’s *Budapest* (1908), Anna Szederkényi’s *Lángok, tüzek* (Fire and Flames, 1917), and Margit Kaffka’s *Állomások* (Stations, 1917). All these narratives offer a portrait of the city through the perspective of a female protagonist. Szikra and Kaffka choose hers from the gentry, Szederkényi from the middle class, Kóbor and Lux from the working class, and Bródy from the peasantry. I will discuss the narratives in a chronological order according to their publication date and examine them regarding their literary style and common themes, from which I will be drawing conclusions as to their place within Hungarian and European literature.

Szikra’s *A bevándorlók*

In the novel *A bevándorlók* (The Parvenus, 1898), Szikra offers a criticism of Budapest’s upper classes and their lifestyle. This was the author’s first novel. Szikra alias Countess Teleki was, for about a decade, Hungary’s most famous woman writer.⁴ Even though her fiction is largely forgotten today, it was acknowledged and positively received by many a contemporaneous literary

critic and historian. Thus István Boross mentions her satire and sharp observation. He notes her novels' refined and polished narrative structure (15-6). Jenő Pintér praises her realistic and satirical portrayal of the aristocracy's haughty demeanour (127-28). Jób Bánhegyi, on the other hand, stresses the well-drawn psychological portraits of her characters and points out her talent for acute observation (69). Nándor Várkonyi adds to the above Szikra's talent to render not only fine details but also more complex situations. He also notes her interesting storylines (322). Anna Fábri, one of the exceptional present-day scholars to take any notice of Szikra's literary work, establishes a link between Szikra's feminist essays and her fiction: "She qualifies, judges, summarizes, stresses — which means that she remains a publicist in her fictional writings as well" (172). It is true that Szikra imports some of her feminist ideas into her literary texts. However, this should not undermine their overall literary quality as acknowledged by the above-mentioned critics from the first half of the 20th century. While all these scholars recognize the social criticism present in Szikra's work, none of them, including Fábri, mentions her critical portrayal of gender relations.

In *A bevándorlók*, through the story of Mrs. Szob, who is nicknamed Mrs. Sznob by Budapest's high society, and her daughter Ilona, the reader witnesses the life and value system of the Hungarian gentry and nobility. Although Szikra also addresses the schism between the city and rural Hungary, she does it through satire of the social mores thus eschewing a black-and-white portrayal. The widowed Mrs Szob is portrayed as the descendant of an old yet impoverished Hungarian gentry family. Her highest aspiration is to marry off her daughter Ilona to a Hungarian nobleman and thus move up the class ladder. In order to carry out her plan, she is willing to squander her modest means and visits Budapest with Ilona for the season of the balls, that major site of husband-hunting. Although in this novel Szikra's main focus is not so much the criticism of the marriage market and the double standard it imposes on young women (and men), this topic at least fleetingly becomes the object of her mockery.

In Budapest, Mrs Szob does all in her power to keep up an appearance of wealth. Yet she still encounters an arrogant and cool reception, bordering on disdain, among the members of Budapest high society. Although, in some situations, she almost becomes a tragicomical character, she fails to elicit the reader's sympathy, not only because of her prejudice against people without a title or with a different religious background, but also because of her arrogance toward those coming from the lower classes. One example is the scene where she takes a fiacre with her daughter to visit a rich relative and cheats the driver of the appropriate payment: "Mrs Szob turned a five-forint bill eightfold and,

with a movement suitable for an aristocrat, slipped it into the driver's palm. Then she walked up the stairs with hurried steps. By the time the driver could realize what amount she had given him, Mrs Szob had disappeared" (Szikra 77). In this paragraph, we see Szikra's taste for details that reveal the character's psychology and moral flaws.

Szikra's satire of both the nobility and the gentry is all the more convincing as she herself was an aristocrat and thus knew the flaws of her own class first hand. She aptly describes their decadent lifestyle, their anti-Semitism, their thriving on gossip, their use of theatre as a social institution rather than an art, and, mostly, their alienation from the people and their problems. As Frigyesi points out, the "two nations" of feudal Hungary, the huge schism between the upper and lower classes, was still very much a reality at the turn of the century (45). Ilona becomes everybody's favourite dancer, as, coming from rural Hungary, she is the only one who really knows how to dance the *csárdás*. But Szikra also demonstrates the importance of class and wealth on the marriage market; when it comes to considering Ilona as a potential wife, the aristocratic suitors quickly withdraw, for, despite her beauty and the fact that she comes from an old family, she has no title nor can she count on a large dowry.

Imre, the only suitor who, despite his lack of a title and Mrs Szob's disapproval, persists in his pursuit of Ilona, refers to Budapest as "Snobopolis," because of "the people who live there, its architecture, its customs" (Szikra 230). Here Szikra offers a critical view of Budapest's rapid growth as a city. Imre equates the city's architecture with its inhabitants and their desire to appear bigger than they really are: "the only desire and aspiration of the majority of those living in the houses is to appear as more than what they are entitled to in reality. So it is only natural that the snobs have turned the country's heart into Snobopolis. Although, he added in a very serious tone, dear God, how little would it take to make Budapest the world's most beautiful city!..." (213). Through Imre's words, Szikra addresses the discrepancy between Budapest's fast development as a new capital and a national metropolis and the remnants of a provincial position and mentality within the larger context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁵ She also confirms what John Lukacs says about the architecture of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest, namely, that it had a particular inclination for the neo-baroque style and lagged behind in modernism. Whereas in many European cities, including Vienna, a breaking away from traditional architectural styles had begun by 1900, in Budapest only a few modern buildings were built between 1903 and 1906: "It was not until 1910-11 that the first impressively modern buildings appeared in some of the Budapest side streets" (49).

But Szikra's criticism addresses more than simply a tendency in the city's architecture. It points out the fostering of appearances over authenticity. Budapest is presented as an artificial construct, a stage for a vanity fair. Moreover, Szikra implicitly thematizes the city's alienating mechanisms and thus anticipates some of Georg Simmel's ideas from his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In this essay, Simmel reflects on the alienation and de-personalization that he sees as by-products of life in the modern city. Simmel describes as one of the major effects of city life a reserved attitude and indifference between individuals, producing "a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion" (15) resulting in "quantitative relationships" (19). We can see these effects of the metropolis in Szikra's depiction of Budapest high society and the distrust its members have of each other. On the other hand, Szikra constructs Ilona and Imre, who both come from the "country," as more authentic and connected to their traditions and people and also capable of forming a relationship based on true love and respect rather than interest. One has to add that Szikra does not go as far as to embrace a conservative glorification of the "country" as the place of "true" Hungarian values in opposition to the city as a place of modernist decay. Such discourses were present in some of the literature on the city at the time as well, as we will see in Anna Szederkényi's novel *Lángok, tüzek*.

A bevándorlók offers a conventional happy end with Ilona marrying Imre, which confirms the novel's overall lack of pretentiousness on the formal level. Nevertheless, with its acute portrayal of class issues, of Budapest high society, its "blasé attitude" (Simmel 14) and alienation, this novel remains an important literary document of its time.

Tamás Kóbor's *Budapest*

Tamás Kóbor (1867-1942), who published the novel *Budapest* in 1901, addresses some of the same topics while also bringing in other ones.⁶ In *Budapest*, but also in other novels and short stories (as well as in journal articles), Kóbor puts social injustice under his scrutiny and demonstrates an acute awareness of social issues that were becoming rampant in the capital, such as rising poverty and sharp social differences: "Through the lives of many of his characters — most successfully in his novel *Budapest* (1901) — he depicts the appalling psychological and moral effects of poverty" (R. Horváth). Kóbor's literary style is closest to naturalism; Várkonyi sees it reminiscent of Zola with its thorough documentation (306-9). During his lifetime, Kóbor was called *the Hungarian Zola*.⁷ According to Antal Szerb, he

was the first Hungarian writer who “practised the naturalistic novel” (469 qtd. in Sánta). Aurél Kárpáti described Kóbor’s role in Hungarian literary history as one of the first writers who “discovered Budapest, the metropolis [...] for the Hungarian novel and who was one of the most talented writers in Hungarian literature to shape the novel with a social and psychological realism” (Kárpáti qtd. in Sánta).

In *Budapest*, the reader becomes acquainted with the city through the trials and tribulations of Éva, a young and beautiful woman from a working-class family that, as we find out much later, fell down the social ladder following the father’s death. Thus Éva carries much of her earlier middle-class upbringing, including her taste for nice clothes. Her name is chosen accordingly as the one who has been “banned from paradise” (Kóbor 7). Kóbor’s narrator likes to dialogue with the reader and invites him/her to follow him through the streets of Budapest and to visit the shops and meet the clientele that belongs to the various social strata. Kóbor aptly describes the mentality of the developing consumer society as one that creates false needs and fosters the upholding of appearance. Thus, similar to Szikra, Kóbor also constructs Budapest as a stage but one where only dramas and tragedies are played out. The vast social differences that separate the classes from each other feed the moral double standard, which becomes a major target of Kóbor’s criticism, replete with irony. Young women from the lower classes, like Éva, are shown to be the main victims of the upper-class men’s lifestyle that drags these young and still innocent girls into a life of financial dependency with no promise of marriage, ultimately leading to a road with no return. Kóbor offers a vivid (and ironic) picture of this double standard in the scene of the parliamentary session: “All along the ladies’ gallery one is surprised to see almost all the ladies that take their usual promenade along Koronaherceg Street around noon. And silently, with no interruption whatsoever to the country’s affairs, relationships are woven between the gallery and the council-room. By the time the agenda has been gone through, the following question has also been clarified: who will meet whom and where” (91). But Kóbor’s analytical eye delves deeper into the fallacy of the generally accepted moral double standard and demonstrates its fatal effects on the relationships between spouses that become rooted in lies and mutual manipulation. The city and its young money-economy become the backstage of various personal dramas and, ultimately, tragedies.

Through Éva’s love affair with a young politician who, for a while, breaks up their relationship when he marries a girl from his class, Kóbor presents an in-depth psychological portrait of the vicious circle of poverty, the alluring promises of money and luxury and their effects on social and moral

values. After she has become a “fallen” woman, due to her affair with Demé-
 ndy, Éva cannot go back to her previous lifestyle of honest but poorly paid work
 anymore. She must continue to keep up the appearances of a lady as this is
 what earns her a certain social prestige and, consequently, self-esteem. But
 that self-esteem gradually becomes mired in her ever growing disgust with her
 lifestyle. The love and admiration she at first felt for her lover turn into a
 desire for revenge over the fact that he rejected her for another, more “approp-
 riate” marriage partner. Kóbor could have used this motif of revenge and
 constructed Éva as a *femme fatale* that destroys men with her charms. Instead,
 he masterfully shows how class is a much stronger factor in shaping such an
 unequal relationship in the scene when the former lovers meet again and Éva
 feels how Demé-ndy is her superior, her “master” (159). Ultimately, her only
 motivation to keep up their relationship becomes the simple yet very real need
 for money, for herself, her mother and her siblings. Yet despite the gradual
 emotional distance between Éva and Demé-ndy and Éva’s increasing dullness,
 she does not completely lose her sense of self-worth and the insight that
 ultimately, it is her lover and his class that have pushed her into this situation.
 This is most strongly expressed in Éva’s diatribe against the double standard
 she pronounces during her brief visit to the Demé-ndy residence in the presence
 of both her lover and his wife, Olga: “Wasn’t I also pure and respectable, like
 yourself, before he put his hands on me? And after I became his, lulled by his
 sweet words and treacherous affection, captivated by poverty, didn’t I remain
 faithful to him — to him? no, to myself — to this day? [...] But I have had no
 share in legal respectability because I am poor, a creature sold for money
 because I need it, money that you receive just as I do but you do not depend on
 it. This is the entire difference” (362). I do not agree with György Bodnár’s
 criticism that both Éva and Olga lack cohesion and thus become “the author’s
 mouthpieces” (*Budapest* 384). Both protagonists are portrayed as intelligent
 young women who are capable of making their own judgments.

Éva’s moral and emotional tragedy is completed in Olga’s tragedy that
 leads to the death of the latter. Olga is Kóbor’s ironic construction of a girl
 from a good family who takes the ideals of her upbringing literally in a Don
 Quixotesque way. Olga is purity and naivety incarnated although she lacks no
 intuition. She, the child-wife as she is often referred to given her petite stature,
 believes in total love between spouses and is passionately in love with her
 husband not knowing anything about his double life. While the reader gets to
 know the Budapest of the lower classes through Éva and her family and
 friends, Olga guides us through the realm of Budapest high society, their
 manors in Buda castle and their parties that are a horror for Olga. She is
 ridiculed by women of her own class, including her own mother, as her

innocence and genuine belief in true and exclusive love between the spouses are taken for a childish dream, a refusal to grow up and accept the “true” reality of marriage. Her dream world will soon be trampled down as her mother makes sure that she finds out about her husband’s affair with Éva. Olga’s demeanour completely changes after this discovery and she falls ill, an illness from which she will briefly recover only to die shortly thereafter. She becomes the sacrificial lamb on the altar of moral and class hypocrisy, a hypocrisy she condemns in her passionate outcry to her father: “So why don’t you teach your daughters about all this? [...] Why don’t you tell them that marriage is a brutish condition and why do you marry off a girl who is weak and ill?” (Kóbor 337). What Kóbor expresses here are genuinely feminist ideas, ideas that Hungarian feminists like Szikra amply discussed in their essays, articles and fiction, in which they criticized young women’s upbringing that did not prepare them for marriage and left them in darkness regarding sexuality.

Olga’s death is mirrored in the suicide of Éva’s brother Jani who is, similar to Olga, an idealist and cannot accept the city’s morally corrupt reality to which both of his sisters fall prey. He gives up his high hopes of finishing grammar school and, eventually, throws himself into the Danube.⁸ Thus Budapest’s mores are shown as being fatally destructive for young and innocent people from both the upper and lower classes.

This rather unflattering image of Budapest regarding its morality becomes even less flattering through the image an outsider, a young Englishman, Webston, paints of it. He describes Budapest as a “young, small town” whose people are very withdrawn, not at all welcoming and inviting toward foreigners (99); it is a city in which a foreigner gets sucked into its destructive night life and street acquaintances (100). Indeed, Webston becomes a victim of the city and of its hunger for money exemplified through his morally corrupt wife.

Kóbor’s Budapest is a Janus-faced creature. It shows one face during the day, the face of busy streets with busy shops that offer a mixture of cheap and luxury items produced with the “slave labour” (7) of the lower classes. At night, another Budapest comes to life. Éva and her brother Jani have a brief encounter with this Budapest during their search for their little sister, Sárka who has disappeared into Budapest’s night life. Jani is fascinated by the rapid change of scenes he observes, like in a movie, from his seat on the carriage pulled by galloping horses through the streets. What he sees is a city in which he does not recognize his city. The doors of the shops that are so busy during the day are now closed; dark and sleepy streets alternate with lively ones filled with light. Busy cafés with loud “gypsy” music and tables populated with

young men in the company of ladies pop up. Prostitutes walk up and down dark street corners. Poverty and richness alternate. However, Éva and Jani do not become *flaneurs* with the luxury of discovering their city leisurely.⁹ The rapid succession of images of which they catch a glimpse from their horse carriage reflect the urgency of their mission to find their little sister. They do not choose their stations in Budapest's night life according to their whims and at the spur of the moment, as a real *flaneur* would, but rather so as to follow Sárka's tracks. And their discoveries of Budapest-by-night are anything but that of a "dream world" as described by Frigyesi; they get a taste of the city's night life from the perspective of the women from the lower classes who are its victims. The impressions of this night face of the city are so dismal for young and innocent Jani that he will not recover from them anymore.

Similarly, what may appear as Éva's *flaneries* during the day when she walks up and down Koronaherceg Street and its various side streets is actually motivated by her economic needs to visit the shops where she can get credit to buy new shoes and clothes so as to appear seductive and win back her estranged lover. Her choice of cafés is also economically motivated as she can only afford, before she meets Deményi again, some small cakes in a cheap pastry shop. Thus although on the outside, she appears as a *flaneur*, a closer look reveals her dire situation. She does walk seemingly aimlessly and slowly (which are typical *flaneur* elements in her character, as pointed out by Györgyi Horváth, 171), but this only makes her an object of the many male *flaneurs'* voyeuristic pleasure. The city and its men do not become the objects of *her* voyeuristic pleasure. Rather, we see her route revolve around Koronaherceg Street that another writer of the time called "a modern slave market" (Circulus 85-6 qtd. in Gy. Horváth 169). Women walking the streets of Budapest is thus a class issue for Kóbor. "Respectable" women do not walk certain streets and those who are not so "respectable" always come from the lower classes and fall prey to the men of the upper classes. Koronaherceg Street is thus part of the general stage of the city on which young lower-class women's moral tragedies are initiated. This theatrical aspect of Kóbor's Budapest is completed in the fact that Éva, in the end, becomes a celebrated actress. She loses her authentic self on the city's metaphorical stage so as to continue her life playing out many inauthentic selves on a real stage.

Éva also stands for the consumer which Rita Felski refers to as "a key symbol of modernity" (68). Although Kóbor in general takes on a negative and critical attitude toward the emerging consumer society whose products are made with the "slave labour" (Kóbor 7) of the lower classes, through Éva we can see the ambivalent nature of consumerism and consumption. As Felski points out, consumption does not simply stand for alienation, but, rather,

involves “agency, imagination, and even work” (68). This can be seen in Éva’s efforts when, on her shopping sprees for the latest fashion items she goes a long way and uses all her skills to negotiate the price and extensions for her payments. However, this consumer behaviour, while opening up some space of agency for the woman, is also shown to be anything but synonymous with freedom, to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai (33 qtd. in Felski 69). Rather, we can say that Kóbor demonstrates how consumer society feeds into the maintenance of the moral double standard along class lines and offers no real alternative for the women of the lower classes.

As part of his diagnosis of the city’s various social ills, Kóbor also weaves in the widespread anti-Semitism in *fin-de-siècle* Hungarian society and he shows its presence among both the upper and lower classes. The few instances in which there is any mentioning of Jews are enough to convey the impression that they were considered outsiders. One example is in the recaption scene at the villa of Olga’s parents. The lady of the house complains that she has to receive a Jewish woman out of consideration for her husband, the count, because that Jewish woman’s husband is important at the bank where the count is president. She gets the following reaction from one of her guests: “So what? [...] Her husband is your husband’s house Jew, let her be your house Jewess” (121) (a laughter of all those present follows). Another scene reveals the anti-Semitism of the lower classes. Jani, while wandering down by the Danube, runs into one of his classmates who invites him to the swimming pool, offering to pay for him. Jani is thinking for a moment that he could borrow some money from him, but then he changes his mind with the thought: “Jewish boy!” (291). These brief encounters with anti-Semitism give the reader a taste of its wide acceptance and they complete Kóbor’s critical portrayal of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest.

Sándor Bródy’s *Erzsébet dajka és más cselédek*

The same year (1901) that Kóbor published the novel *Budapest*, Sándor Bródy brought out a collection of novellas with the title *Erzsébet dajka és más cselédek* (Nanny Erzsébet and Other Maids).¹⁰ Of all the writers discussed here, Bródy is the one whose name figures uncontested in all literary histories as very much part of the Hungarian literary canon and who, therefore, does not need too much introduction. György Rónay considered *Erzsébet dajka* to be the best of Bródy’s works. In this collection, Bródy thematizes the life of the urban poor with naturalistic frankness. I will discuss two novellas from this

collection: the title one, which is divided into three parts, and a shorter one with the title “Maris dada” (Nanny Maris).

Both novellas have the same plot: a young peasant girl who brings “shame” to her family by giving birth to a child out of wedlock is given the chance to “correct” her faux pas by being employed as a wet nurse by a well-off Budapest family and their young child. It is interesting to note that both Erzsébet and Maris have a baby girl of their own that they have to abandon back in their village so as to give their invigorating breast milk to a weak baby boy in Budapest. Thus Bródy’s explicit class criticism is expressed, ironically, by Erzsébet’s “master” (az ura) while he is trying to seduce her: “it isn’t just that we, the gentlefolk exploit the ancient forces of the peasantry” (“Erzsébet elbocsájtatik” 31). This is coupled with an implied gender criticism: the peasant baby girl has to be abandoned and, in the case of “Maris dada,” dies due to malnutrition whereas the upper-class baby boy thrives and is given a chance to grow up on the breast milk of the mother of that very same baby girl.¹¹ Although Erzsébet’s little girl does not die, this very same topic is addressed in the scene when Erzsébet meets with other nannies in the park and some mention that their own children have passed away.

Erzsébet’s encounter with the city outside of the confines of the family’s apartment and its immediate neighbourhood happens abruptly and from the perspective of the underdog when she is brutally thrown out of the house in the middle of the night: “She left barefoot, in one underskirt, into the unknown city, the autumnal slush, the moist dirt of untrodden paths” (37). This image of the city reflects her own social position at that point. The city she gets to know during that one night is the city of the dispossessed: prostitutes, poor students and workers. She has no knowledge of the streets her anger, confusion and fear take her to as she is trying to avoid the lascivious approaches of various “gentlemen” whom she gives a good telling off. Unlike Kóbor’s Éva and Jani on their night race through Budapest’s streets in search for their little sister, Erzsébet is running through the streets of Budapest, “the evil city” (49) aimlessly until she reaches the Danube. Here the reader gets tricked into expecting for a moment that she would end her young life by jumping in, but instead she meets two helpers, two poor students who guide her to an acquaintance from her village. She spends a bacchanalian night of dancing and drinking at her village acquaintance’s quarters. Bródy describes here one of those dwellings of misery John Lukacs refers to where several renters or subtenants share not only a room but sometimes just a bed for the night or the day, in shifts. In the early morning, the owner, a policeman appears on the scene offering his litany of drunken wisdom that foresees no end to the cycle of poverty: “a poor girl brings a poor child into the world and

this way poverty cannot die out” (“Erzsébet boldog lesz” 55). Following a marriage proposal coming from one of the subtenants, the former blacksmith of her village who had lost one arm, Erzsébet drinks a glass of wine with toxic phosphorus and ends her young life that way. Bródy’s irony here is twofold: on the one hand, the subtitle “Erzsébet boldog lesz” denotes a double meaning, “boldog” in the sense of “happy” but also in the sense of “blessed;” the promise of happiness turns into death implying that there is no possibility of a happy ending-narrative for the wretched. On the other hand, he masterfully demonstrates the power of class hierarchy that haunts the poor nanny all the way into the last image she sees before her death, an image of a child, not her own miserable, malnourished little girl but the fat baby boy she so lovingly cared for.

“Maris dada” is less dark in its ending although it shares, as mentioned above, some common elements with the previous novella. Here the city gets introduced right at the beginning when the nanny has to find a grocery shop off Andrassy Street. But during the whole winter, she has to live “imprisoned” (84) in the apartment, i.e. confined indoors so as to look after the baby night and day; she can merely catch a glimpse of Andrassy Street through the window and see the tramway, a symbol of modernity. In the spring, she receives the news about her baby girl’s passing away. Soon after, Maris goes for a walk and wants to find the Danube. Again, like in “Erzsébet dajka,” the reader gets tricked into thinking that she wants to commit suicide in her sorrow over the death of her child that she does not get to fully express. Maris walks in a *flaneur*-like way through the streets of Budapest, dressed in her best clothes. For a moment, Bródy paints an almost expressionist half-abstract picture of the city when he describes the mass of people in a square moving slowly like a snake and above them, a concentration of some twenty churches but whose towers the nanny cannot see (90). This picture could, however, be a product of the nanny’s imagination rather than coming from the narrator as Maris is in a state of extreme exhaustion, not having slept properly for months. Finally, she arrives at the Danube. There, she meets a soldier who takes her hand and they go for a walk together, like two *flaneurs*. When she goes home late in the evening, she gets heavily told off and even slapped by her “master.” But instead of despairing, she can finally get a good night’s sleep as the little boy is taken away from her. The novella ends on an ambivalent note when the nanny has to interrupt her sleep after all due to the baby’s bitter crying.

Bródy’s two novellas demonstrate the vulnerable position of these young village women who came to the big city so as to earn some money and send it home to their families. Whereas Erzsébet’s life in the city comes to a tragic end, Maris may continue her “career” as a nanny but with unforeseen

outcome. Bródy depicts a brutally naked picture of the life of the lowest in the city's jungle, a picture that did not always earn him a positive appraisal.¹²

Terka Lux's *Budapest*

Terka Lux casts a young working-class woman as the heroine of her novel that bears the same title as Kóbor's. Lux's *Budapest* was published in 1908.¹³ Lux, similar to Szikra, is one of those female writers whose name had been edited out of Hungarian literary history to receive some scant attention more recently (see Fábri; Sánta, "Schneider"; Földvári). However, Lux was a well-known author in her own time, praised by her contemporaries, particularly for her critical portrayal of Budapest and its social life (Bánhegyi 70). *Budapest* continues the mostly negative image of the city that we have found in the previous narratives. This novel is interesting for today's readers for several reasons. Lux not only attempts "to address the birth of the myth about the Hungarian capital which had grown into a metropolis" (Fábri 183), but she also represents Budapest as an organic creature living according to its own rules. In this, Gábor Sánta detects Kóbor's influence ("Schneider" 97). But, unlike Kóbor, Lux embodies her Budapest as a female. Such "allegorization" of the city as female, "as a quasi-organic body" (Weigel 177) is not only a quintessential part of city-literature but builds on a very long tradition, going as far back as the Bible, a tradition of a stereotypical representation of femininity in the process of civilization (see Escher 178). Lux's novel continues in this tradition of an allegorical personification of the city as female, but she, as shall be demonstrated, also modifies this tradition.

Her *Budapest* equates the city with the main protagonist, Fáni Schneider, as described in the introductory "Chat with the Reader" which offers an anticipatory summary of Fáni's life: "That beautiful, lovely, elegant, intelligent, cunning Budapest of light morals that has made a fantastic career. Her mother is a Slovak day-worker, her father a Swabian foreman-builder and she, the barefooted little Fáni Schneider with tousled, flying hair plays at first in the dusty streets of Rácváros and later in the former Saint Peter suburbs. She sings for drunken horse-dealers and fishmongers, then at the present Gizella square and at the German theatre, to finally become a Hungarian courtesan and grind innumerable legions of people with her beautiful teeth" (Lux 7). Through Fáni, Lux exemplifies Budapest's shifting identity as a young capital where many ethnic groups met and merged; a city that offered many possibilities for some but exercised a destructive effect on many others by "sucking out their blood and their brains," "breaking their bones" and "squandering their

fortunes” (8). All the negative characteristics associated with the city as listed by Klaus Scherpe and quoted earlier (vice, power, the city as whore, jungle, slaughterhouse) are thus present. Moreover, Budapest-Fáni is clearly defined as a *femme fatale*, a vamp, a seductive and destructive female. The modern city was often represented in such terms which reflects, according to Sigrig Weigel, the fears associated with modernity and the big city that threatened to “gobble up” the individual (see Escher 180). The *femme fatale* was a popular figure in American, English, French, and Austrian *fin-de-siècle* literature and arts, yet, according to Ilona Sármány (“A femme fatale”) virtually absent in Hungary, which makes this neglected novel all the more interesting and valuable a literary text of the Hungarian *fin de siècle*. The definition of the city as a *femme fatale* usually connotes decadence and decay. But Lux’s *Budapest* is not unequivocally defined in negative terms. Her narrator conducts a love-hate relationship with the city, thereby taking a position of ambivalence: “They say that he who criticises, doesn’t love. Maybe. But I love Budapest. It hasn’t done me any good, but I love it” (Lux 10).

The narrative is divided into several units, the first three of which follow the life path of Fáni on the streets of Budapest: “The Street in the Morning;” “The Street at Midday;” and “The Street at Night.” All three are allegories of Fáni’s own development. In the morning, when the air of the city is still “virginally clean” and the city itself “strong, fresh, good and honest” (18), Fáni is an innocent, attractive fifteen-year-old from a modest family background who is easily seduced by a “gentleman,”¹⁴ a sculptor, whose mistress she soon becomes. While her brother Szepi reads Marx and becomes interested in class struggle, Fáni becomes a “fallen woman” who reads novels with dubious moral content given to her by her lover. While Szepi blames capitalism and the imbalance in class power for his sister’s seduction, Fáni’s life gradually moves away from her family and her class. Following the rejection by the sculptor, she becomes the mistress of an old count, who invests in her education. Within a few years, Fáni becomes a refined and very beautiful young woman. This is the “midday” of her life, the most fulfilling part. But class interferes again when the count refuses to marry someone of a non-aristocratic background. This class double standard hurts Fáni very deeply and she bitterly accuses the city of having pushed her into a debased existence: “This city has lost me, has robbed me, now I will rob it myself!” (64). Her revenge is thorough, as she turns into Budapest’s most famous, desired yet feared *femme fatale*.

The *femme fatale* is usually associated with destruction as she steps out of the traditional roles set for women: “She has lost her capacity to love, and with it her role as wife and mother. She is now a mistress, beautiful but

profoundly unnatural" (Ridge qtd. in Pynsent 180). It comes as no surprise that in this, third, part of her development, the "night," Fáni becomes one with the city's nightlife and its unleashed ruinous passions. She is the object of everybody's fantasies and the main topic of conversation at every *soirée*, to the point of absurdity. But as such, Fáni objectifies men and manipulates their desire. By constructing Fáni as a *femme fatale*, Lux brings in a feminist perspective. It is significant that the figure of the *femme fatale* is used here by a female author as, traditionally, it is a creation of male literary and artistic fantasy.¹⁵ According to Carola Hilmes, the image of the *femme fatale* at the *fin de siècle* comes out of a romantic tradition which relies on the "mortification of the feminine" (Hilmes 28). Hilmes regards the sensual woman as a projection of the male imagination, an expression of both male desire and male fears. The *femme fatale* thus becomes the "other" of the male self and an expression of the crisis of that very same self (Hilmes 236). In texts written by male authors, the *femme fatale*, despite the fact that her actions of destruction are central to the narrative, is still put into the background for the sake of the male (anti)heroes (Hilmes 225). Fáni's destructive actions, on the other hand, are not only central to the narrative, but the story is also told from her perspective. She is a literary figure that embodies feminine power and tries to subvert male supremacy. Through Fáni's seductive games with men, Lux also unmasks the projection of male desires and fears upon women as embodied in the image of the modern city. She exposes male fantasies that project upon women the dualistic images of Madonna and whore, images that Lux associates with Christian mythology and its morals. Thus Fáni, under her angelic face, harbours devilish qualities. This dualistic aspect in Fáni stands as a metaphor for the city itself, for both the fascination and the horror it inspires. Only one of her suitors, a journalist, realizes that Fáni has not become evil by herself, but that men and their desire have turned her into this vengeful creature. Her devilishness inspires fascination mixed with horror as she stands in front of him; Lux underlines Fáni's devilishness through her physical appearance: "Like a tall, slim torch, her red silk dress with a long train was burning on her in flames, her black hair throwing sparks and her face white as marble or a lily put in the middle of a pool of blood, was casting a cold glow" (130). However, the fact that Fáni helps the city's poor, her class of origin, with the money she earns through her morally dubious lifestyle shows the complexity of her character that argues against a black-and-white assessment.

Fáni's actions, however, are far from being motivated by remorse, which leads the narrative away from a moralizing denouement. The only true motivating force in Fáni's life becomes her desire for power which she hopes to share with her brother Szepi, who, in the meantime, has become a socialist

MP. In her striving to achieve power, Fáni moves away from the frequent scenario of physical destruction or self-destruction typical for the *femme fatale*. Yet these aspirations are short-lived, as Szepi is shot dead by the brother of a young woman whom he had seduced — thus mirroring his sister's story. This repetition of the same scenario shows Lux's critical attitude toward socialism as an alternative to capitalism regarding moral decisions. Lux does not portray the people of the lower classes as morally superior to the upper classes; she does not take sides nor does she idealize any segment of society.

Fáni becomes a bored, lonely woman whose only pastime is spending large sums of money and occasionally visiting “her dead” at the cemetery — yet her heart, as suits a *femme fatale*, is empty: “and her coach carried Fáni through the dark, early winter morning, alone, toward an unknown future. On her head, she wore a red wig, her lips were coloured red and her heart was dead...” (211). Although Fáni, unlike many *femme fatale* characters, does not physically die, her inner devastation is representative, on the one hand, of the “mortification of the feminine” that Hilmes (28) has defined as a dominant trait of the *femme fatale* at the *fin de siècle*; on the other hand, it also stands for the effect that the city's destructive forces exert on the — here female — individual.

With this ending, Fáni's life, now having reached its “night,” continues to mirror the city, its ambiguous identity and morality as well as its unpredictable future. However, whereas at the beginning of the novel the city's portrayal was not wholly negative but, rather, contained elements of a love-hate relationship, the ending offers a purely negative vision for the future, with death as the dominant image. Such a vision of the city is reminiscent of German expressionism that often represented the city in very negative, even hateful tones as a phenomenon with “cannibalistic manifestations” (Hermann 61).

Anna Szederkényi's *Lángok, tüzek*

Anna Szederkényi's image of Budapest is a similarly negative one. Szederkényi was already a successful author and journalist when she published the novel *Lángok, tüzek* (Fire and Flames) in 1917.¹⁶ She draws a very clear dichotomy between the “country” and the city. Interestingly, she gives her heroine the same name as that of the heroine of an earlier novel, *Amíg egy asszony eljut odáig* (Until a Woman Goes That Far): Judit Koszorús. But unlike the earlier Judit, who is a teacher and ends up leaving a bad marriage to find her path to an independent life, the Judit of *Lángok, tüzek* is initially a twenty-year old middle-class woman who, in her thirst for knowledge, leaves

her small hometown to study philosophy in Budapest.¹⁷ Given her belief in the principles and ideas of women's emancipation and women's responsibility for their own actions, she becomes a member of the Modern Women's Association (Modern Nők Egyesülete). However, it soon becomes clear that the narrator is far from supportive of the free lifestyle Budapest offers a young woman like Judit.

The first target of criticism is the morality of the city, the ideology of "free love" that makes Budapest so attractive to young people; this "love from Pest" is "artificial love." It is a "contagious fever" that "in those days crept into young girls' pure souls and swept them away" (39). The narrator, disapprovingly, calls it a matter of fashion, similar to the easy-to-open dresses or women's short hair. The "love from Pest," which also sweeps Judit away in her affair with the painter Demeter, is represented as a purely physical passion which ultimately leaves the lovers strangers to each other and does not result in any deeper connection between them. This distance between Judit and Demeter is also shown in their addressing each other with the formal "you," *maga*. In the depiction of this relationship, Szederkényi embraces Simmel's position regarding the alienating and depersonalizing effect of the metropolis on human relationships. Moreover, particularly in phrases such as "The holy fire didn't warm them" or "Not the holy madness in the name of which even the hand of the murderer dripping with blood must be forgiven" (39), the narrator adopts a Christian moralizing voice.

The image of Budapest as a place of moral decay and degeneration becomes more pronounced as the novel unfolds. During a visit to her hometown, following several months of exposure to "love from Pest," Judit's white dress with a 5 cm slit showing her ankle as she walks causes general disapproval. We could see here a touch of irony on the part of the narrator in exposing small town petty bourgeois mentality. This vacillation between a critical attitude toward the city and one toward the "country" is reflected at this point in the narrative in Judit's inner struggle between the values of her upbringing and those of the city that she thinks she has adopted. In a conversation with Mihály, who will eventually become her husband, she defends Budapest and her decision to live there, citing the freshness of the life it offers her, the "new woman," the "female human being" (74) that she has become, versus the provincial dullness and the "silent dying" (73) she has fled. Unlike with Demeter, Judit and Mihály address each other with the informal *te*, which shows their proximity. Mihály speaks up in defence of country people in a patriotic voice. He compares the people from the village to the people of Budapest, who travel on fast trains yet in their confusion fail to see the whole picture around them. Country people, on the other hand, have

more stamina and steadfastness and are therefore able to “stand guard” (75) for Hungary, as opposed to the “moderns” of Budapest who are not capable of producing any lasting truth. Although, during this conversation, Judit continues to defend life in the city for giving her a chance to be herself, her tone becomes less persuasive, her silences longer and her speech more lethargic. Gradually, she comes to the recognition that she belongs to the village, and that Budapest and its values have only been an aberration. The initial ideal of the strong, independent woman gives way to the desire to be led by Mihály’s strong arm. Thus, the criticism of the city and of modernity not only has a nationalist tone attached to it, with the idealization of rural Hungary, but is also accompanied by a re-embrace of a traditional ideal of femininity.

This is further stressed by the satirical portrayal of the leader of the Modern Women’s Association, who wants Judit’s support for their general meeting concerning trafficking in women.¹⁸ Szederkényi portrays the leader of the association with all the stereotypical attributes that antifeminists have used to ridicule feminists: she is physically unattractive, an “old maid,” and has absolutely no style in fashion or behaviour. All the other women who work in the association are represented in the same manner as well. Moreover, the whole feminist cause is ridiculed as a pastime of wealthy women who only throw around empty slogans but have no real platform for action and do not help women in need.

Judit’s last visit to the Modern Women’s Association only strengthens her already half-formed decision to leave the city and move back to the country where “firm” values await her and where she will be safe from various temptations. The conversation with her father upon her arrival concludes the return of the errant daughter: “So you are back, my dear daughter? – I am, father. – Have you had enough of studying? – Enough, father. – I had the blue room prepared for you. Máríka will help you unpack. I knew it would end like this. A girl needs a bonnet,¹⁹ not scholarship” (157). The one element of emancipation that Judit will keep is to be allowed to speak occasionally in an erudite way as a proof of her studies of philosophy. Yet overall, the voice of traditional, rural family life and conventional romance triumphs, with Judit marrying Mihály and giving birth to their child. This superiority of rural Hungary and of traditional values and lifestyles is also apparent in the act of Mihály “forgiving” Judit her pre-marital affair with Demeter. Moreover, rural Hungary’s vitality is also emphasized in the symbolic slaying of the city and its decadence when Demeter, the “modern” and “decadent” one, jumps under the train conducted by Mihály, the “traditional” and “stable” one. Thus in this novel, Szederkényi adopts a discourse of nationalism that was rising in Hungary around 1900, a new nationalism that regarded Budapest as “corrupt,

antinational, destructive, decadent” (Lukacs 186) and was anchored in a nostalgic view of a semi-feudal Hungary in which an ineradicable gap separated the capital (with its high percentage of a non-ethnic Magyar population) from the rest of the country.²⁰

Margit Kaffka’s *Állomások*

Margit Kaffka adopts a very different view of the city in her novel *Állomások* (Stations), also published in 1917, only a year before the author’s death.²¹ Kaffka has been called Hungary’s most prominent woman writer to date (Bodnár, *Színek* 297).²² Moreover, as Steven Tötösy notes, she is a “canonized woman author” (77, emphasis in the original), the only one among those discussed here, and one of the few in Hungarian literature altogether, although certainly not the only woman writer in Hungarian literature of the *fin de siècle* to have introduced in her fiction the struggles of the “new woman.”

Állomások has been repeatedly read as a *roman à clef* (see Bodnár, *Állomások* 542) and its protagonists have been linked to famous real-life figures of the modernist *Nyugat* circle in particular. But, as Bodnár rightly points out, this is not the most important value of the novel. Kaffka certainly shows the lifestyle of the “Budapest *bohème* [...] the small circle in which writers, artists, journalists, sociologists and those snobs rubbing against them lived” (Schöpflin qtd. in Bodnár, *Állomások* 545). Aladár Schöpflin also praises Kaffka’s ability to simultaneously move around about a hundred different protagonists, some more central, some more marginal to the plot, and her skilful placing of them into the novel’s structure (546). As in her other two novels (*Színek és évek*, 1912, translated into English as *Colours and Years*, and *Mária évei* [Mária’s Years], 1913) that, along with *Állomások*, are often considered Kaffka’s trilogy about the struggles *fin-de-siècle* women of the impoverished gentry faced, the author addresses these struggles from a woman writer’s perspective. Bodnár acknowledges that she dissects these struggles with such refinement of which a male writer would have never been capable (543). In *Állomások*, Kaffka yet again takes up the theme of the difficulty, not to say impossibility of happy male-female relationships. Yet unlike the two heroines from her previous two novels, Éva Rosztoky does not become ground up in an unhappy marriage nor does she end her young life. Rather, following her divorce, she chooses the independent life of a single mother and artist. Thus with this novel, Kaffka opens up a new perspective for women of her time (and class), a perspective that particularly life in the

metropolis, Budapest, made possible. She thus presents a more diversified image of Budapest than the narratives discussed before.

Kaffka herself called *Állomások* “a great novel about Budapest” (Bodnár, *Kaffka* 227) and others have also acknowledged that she presented here a most complete picture about the cultural life of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest (Horváth Gy. 175). The reader gets to catch a glimpse of the meeting sites of the cultural elite of Hungarian modernism in cafés, galleries, ateliers, at house parties, and of their promenades along Andrásy Boulevard in Pest or the *Halászbástya* in Buda castle. Much like in Kóbor’s or Szikra’s novels, a tension between a search for authenticity and the upholding of appearances in the big city and its consumer mentality are also present. This can be seen, for instance, in the different approach to life and art between Éva and her former husband. For Éva’s former husband everything is but an article for pleasure, nothing has lasting value, including a woman’s body. Kaffka weaves in a criticism of the sexual double standard when she has Éva distance herself from the man who never truly loved her and who continued his bachelor lifestyle during their marriage as well. But her criticism extends to one of the developing consumer society in general in which everything and everybody has but a market value attached to it. And Kaffka demonstrates how it is very difficult to escape from this pressure, despite Éva’s stubborn insistence on authenticity. As Györgyi Horváth has demonstrated, it is precisely Éva’s attempt to create art that does not fit into the expectations of the market that pushes up her market value for a while (183). This attempt to resist the power of consumer society’s values extends to Éva’s refusal to use her femininity as a tool on the marriage market. Following her divorce, she turns down another marriage proposal precisely because it comes in the form of an open business proposal: my money and social status for your youth and beauty. It is important to point out the class aspect that gives Éva the power to turn down such a lucrative proposal. Éva Rosztoky does not *have* to sell her body to a man she does not love, unlike Kóbor’s Éva or Lux’s Fáni who come from the very bottom of society. She can be a respected woman and artist while keeping unwanted suitors at a distance.

More and more, Éva moves toward a single lifestyle. Her gradual confirmation of such a lifestyle is reflected in her attempts to use the city as a *flâneur* who can walk its streets undisturbed and frequent art shops and cafés. But Kaffka points out that the space for the female *flâneur* was still rather limited and thereby confirms what Anke Gleber has observed about the situation of the female *flâneur* at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Even though in most big European cities public spaces became relatively open for the single woman, the perception of her presence in those

spaces was changing very slowly. Single women on the street and in cafés, in particular (as seen in Kóbor's novel), were generally perceived as “easy women” and as “available” and would often be approached by men. Thus it comes as no surprise that Kaffka's Éva feels uncomfortable in cafés on her own. She travels to Italy where she is hoping to have more of a chance to discover towns on her own. She seeks anonymity, something Budapest could not give her. She purposely avoids meeting Hungarian acquaintances and takes routes that cannot bring her in contact with anybody she knows. But even in Italy, she is occasionally harassed with words or looks. Kaffka thus confirms that the city and its women still largely belonged to the male voyeuristic pleasure. The only time Éva Rosztoky does not feel objectified because of her sex is in the German artists' colony near Munich where she feels she is being perceived more than just a woman: “I never once noticed that any of them would have seen in me anything but a *human being*, or that they would have given away anything like that; they drink, just like other students, a lot of beer but, goodness, they don't constantly bring their masculinity into the conversation” (*Allomások* 513, emphasis in the original). Kaffka implicitly expresses the hope for a new kind of male-female relationship, one based on equality, mutual respect, and camaraderie. The fact that she lets her heroine remain single speaks to her lack of trust that, in her time, such relationships were possible in Hungarian society.

However, Éva's single lifestyle opens up a new, clearer perception for her of her city, Budapest: “How *well one can look* at everything when one walks alone! ... How beautiful this world is!” (538, emphasis in the original). But, in the same monologue, Kaffka puts into Éva's mouth the same love-hate attitude toward Budapest seen in other narratives of the period as well: “Oh this city; ‘the hungry city, the poisoned city!’ as the poor late young poet Berei said it. Where is that contagious substance, the mushroom of decay [...] that with a rabid speed makes decompose, fall apart or crumble every beautiful, good and promising beginning? And where do all these dear scents and colours come from, the sad and kind beauty that makes us love it so much despite everything?” (538). In the beauty of springtime that she enjoys in her city, Éva is not afraid of solitude anymore and she embraces life.

Conclusion

In all Hungarian narratives analysed above we could see a critical portrayal of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest. The authors depict their capital as a place of both aversion and fascination, painting it often in a negative light and as a source of

numerous conflicts, struggles and shifting identities. Budapest is represented as a site of decadence which exercises a destructive force on those wanting to belong to it, usually by such means as trying to transcend class, social and gender boundaries, as well as on those who are outsiders (through their provincial roots or their belonging to a lower class or a different religion), which speaks to the very strong class and gender segregation and prejudice in Hungarian society of the time. This is demonstrated with a naturalistic bluntness in Kóbor and Bródy. Szikra, on the other hand, focuses her criticism on the capital's haughty demeanour and its provincial complex as a young metropolis. In Szederkényi's novel rural Hungary is sharply contrasted to the city and triumphs over its modernity with its more conservative and "stable" values that withstand new fashions and their "temptations." Lux, on the other hand, offers a feminist and an almost expressionist picture of the city, with no happy ending. Kaffka's novel is the one that, despite its critical focus, presents a heroine who finds her place under the sun in the city thus embracing the new horizons that the 20th century did open up for some women in the metropolis. For Kaffka's heroine, "urban anonymity" and "increased individualism," which Elizabeth Wilson has pinpointed as some features of modernity that "have been exhilarating and liberating for many women" (qtd. in Felski 204), take on a positive meaning. Speaking through the perspective of female heroines, the above narratives thus show both the negative aspects of Budapest's growing into a metropolis as well as the new possibilities it brought about for women's lives in particular. Moreover, they make abundant use of topoi that were typical for modernist literature, such as the *flâneur* or the *femme fatale*, which speaks to their relevance not only within Hungarian literature but in the wider European literary context as well.

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NOTES

¹ Budapest was created as one city officially in 1873, when Buda, Pest and Óbuda were amalgamated into one city.

² As reported by Terri Switzer, Austria regarded Hungary in many ways "as a problematic Eastern inferior." In the census reports of the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungarians were qualified as "Asians," which, at the time, was not a desirable ethnic labelling (Switzer 164). Carl Emil Franzos, the influential Austrian critic and writer, referred to the Eastern parts of the Monarchy as "Halb-Asien," (half-Asia) "a region of transition between Europe and Asia, civilization and barbarism, the Occident and the Orient" (Glajar 92). Although Franzos himself does not include Hungary in his list of

“half-Asian” regions (he includes Galicia, Romania, and South Russia), the general perception of Hungary at the *fin de siècle* in the Austrian part of the Monarchy corresponded to Franzos’s description. Hungary and Hungarians were thus a semi-oriental “other” in the German-Austrian cultural mind.

³ All quotes from non-English sources have been translated by Agatha Schwartz.

⁴ In her home in Pest, Countess Teleki b. Juliska Kende (1864-1937) organized a literary salon frequented by many intellectuals and other important women writers. In 1924, she co-founded the Magyar Irónők Köre (Circle of Hungarian Women Writers). Szikra was also a well-known feminist, an active member of the Feministák Egyesülete (Feminist Association), founded in 1905 and a regular contributor to the Association’s journal *A nő és a társadalom* (Woman and Society). She became a member of the editorial board of its sequel, *A nő*. Szikra was the author of numerous important feminist essays in which she criticized social problems of the day such as trafficking in women, the marriage market based on the moral double standard, women’s poor education and their lack of legal and political rights. In 1913, she was on the organizational committee of the 7th Congress of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance held in Budapest.

⁵ Georg Escher points out a similar process in the literature about *fin-de-siècle* Prague. See Escher 178. He refers to works by Gerhard Melinz and Susan Zimmermann on the same topic.

⁶ The novel appeared first in a series in the periodical *A Hét* in the same year (Gy. Horváth 168).

⁷ Kóbor was born in Pozsony (today Bratislava in Slovakia) as Adolf Bermann into a Jewish family. The family moved to Budapest when he was very young. Although the family was poor, the boy’s talent and intelligence attracted the attention of his famous teacher, Alexander Bernát whose protegee he became. He studied law and started his literary career at the periodical *A Hét*. Kóbor published in many periodicals, among them *Magyar Hírlap*, *Magyar Újság* and *Pesti Hírlap*. He often used various pen names, most often Semper and Simplex. He was a very prolific and a celebrated writer. Kóbor also tried to fight against his country’s growing anti-Semitism. He wrote a series of articles on the “Jewish Question” in *Az Újság*. According to the *Zsidó Lexikon* (Jewish Lexicon, 1929), these articles were the most important defence of Jews in Hungary (see R. Horváth). But the strengthening of anti-Semitism and WWII impacted his health and he died, following a long illness, in 1942 in Budapest. His only daughter, Noémi Kóbor, also a writer, was killed in the Holocaust.

⁸ The Danube seems to be a kind of Styx in Hungarian *fin-de-siècle* literature. Literary characters often throw themselves into the Danube when they see no further hope for their lives.

⁹ The *flâneur* is a quintessential topos connected to modernity and the city, which the various national literatures (and films) of the 1920s will fully explore.

Traditionally, *flanerie* was a male privilege and the *flâneur*, on his rambles, turned the city and its women into the object of his voyeuristic pleasure (Weigel 179). The situation of the female *flâneur* followed a different development. Anke Gleber refers to Jules Michelet and his analysis of women's increasing presence in public spaces at the end of the 19th century: "How many irritations for the single woman! She can hardly ever go out in the evening; she would be taken for a prostitute. There are a thousand places where only men are to be seen and if she needs to go there on business, the men are amazed, and laugh like fools. For example, should she find herself delayed at the other end of Paris and hungry, she will not dare to enter into a restaurant. She would constitute an event; she would be a spectacle: All eyes would be constantly fixed on her, and she would overhear uncomplimentary and bold conjectures" (Pollock 69 qtd. in Gleber 71). Even after public spaces started opening up for the single woman toward the end of the nineteenth century, the perception of her presence in those spaces was changing very slowly. We can see elements of this perception of the single woman in public spaces in Kóbor as well. They are generally perceived as "easy women" and as being "available" and get approached by men on the street and in other public areas.

¹⁰ Sándor Bródy also published a play with the title *A dada* (The Nanny) in 1902 which has the same plot. Bródy was born as the son of a poor Jewish tailor in Eger in 1863. He started his writing career in Kolozsvár (Cluj, today in Rumania) and later moved permanently to Budapest. He wrote for the *Magyar Hírlap* and later founded the monthly *Fehér könyv* that he published for a year. Then he founded the weekly *Jövendő*. Bródy has been called the most influential writer to prepare the literary stage for the modernist generation of Endre Ady. Literary historians often call him the first Hungarian naturalist writer. However, others have contested this judgment and see other strong elements in Bródy's writing, such as a continuation of romanticism and realism. He was a prolific author of novellas, novels, and plays. In the footsteps of Mór Jókai, he introduced the topic of the poor into the literature of the Hungarian *fin de siècle* which he approached with a mixture of romantic and naturalistic elements. Bródy's personal life was full of conflicts. He attempted suicide in 1905; and in 1919, the antisemitic wave of the counterrevolution forced him into exile to Vienna. His long love affair with another celebrated Hungarian writer, Renée Erdős, is famous for the scandal it caused as Bródy was not only much older but also married with four children. He died in Budapest in 1924.

¹¹ Although in the Western world the status of female children has substantially improved over the past hundred years, in some parts of the developing world female babies are still being considered useless and a burden on the family and therefore abandoned or starved in the hope for a male offspring.

¹² Thus Várkonyi pronounces the following judgment on Bródy's works: "But because of the struggles between his accepted tendencies and his true nature, his messages became fragmented and deficient, messages that were not very pleasant anyway" (297).

¹³ The novel had previously appeared in a series in the *Pesti Hírlap* between 1907 and 1908.) Dancsházi (or Dancsházy) Oláh Ida was born in Szilágysomlő in 1873. She married when she was only sixteen, but the marriage did not last long. Following her divorce, she adopted the pen name Terka Lux and became a prolific Budapest-based author of stories, novellas and novels. She was also known as a feminist and published in the feminist journal *A nő és a társadalom*. She also had a feuilleton in *Pesti Hírlap* under the title "Hétköznapok" (Weekdays). She often chose female protagonists for her novels (such as in *Marcsa gondolatai* [Marcsa's Thoughts, 1903], *Leányok* [Girls, 1906], and *Budapest* [1908]). She thematized women's lives and the city's social atmosphere. She died in Budapest in 1938.

¹⁴ The Hungarian original, "úr" means both "gentleman" and "master". Thus it connotes not only the class difference between the two protagonists but it also implies Fáni's subordinate position as a young woman.

¹⁵ Thus Hans-Joachim Schickedanz in his by now classic *Femme fatale* completely ignores the existence of *femme fatale* characters in the works of female authors and artists.

¹⁶ Anna Szederkényi (Pármiczkyne) was born in 1882 in Mező-Nyárad. After finishing teacher's college, she first worked as a teacher and then began publishing in various periodicals. She moved to Budapest and became the first Hungarian woman member of the Budapest Association of Journalists (Budapesti Újságírók Egyesülete). She was also involved in various charitable women's organizations. Her drama, *A kőfalon túl* (Beyond the Stone Wall), first performed in 1911, caused a lot of controversy due to the touchy topic of adolescent sexuality, the taboos attached to it and its criticism of young girls' religious upbringing behind the walls of a convent. As a prolific writer, Szederkényi subsequently published numerous novels: *Amíg egy asszony eljut odáig* (Until a Woman Goes That Far, 1915), *A nagy nő* (The Great Woman, 1914), *Lángok, tüzek* (Fire and Flames 1917), *Amiért egy asszony visszafordul* (What a Woman Turns Back For, 1929), to mention but a few. She is the first Hungarian woman writer whose works became published in a series. Her protagonists are usually women whose lives she portrays from different angles, from feminist to conservative. For her interest in women's lives and the depiction of their struggles for emancipation she was placed next to Margit Kaffka. She died in 1948 in Budapest.

¹⁷ The Faculty of Philosophy (Arts) and the Faculty of Medicine (which included pharmacy) were opened for women in Hungary by a ministerial decree in December 1895 and began admitting students in the fall of 1896.

¹⁸ Trafficking in women was a major problem in Hungary at the time. In her speech *A feminizmusról* ("On Feminism," read before the Lloyd-society and published in 1911), Szikra quoted some frightening statistics on this issue, namely, that Hungary was responsible for 50% of the world trafficking in women.

¹⁹ Bonnet (*fűköti*) is used here as a metaphor for marriage, as traditionally, in Hungarian a woman who was not married, would be referred to as *hajadon*, meaning a woman who does not cover her hair.

²⁰ This city-country dichotomy and conservative literary representations of the city can also be observed in other national literatures of the time as pointed out by Georg Escher: "The metropolis becomes the starting point for a culturally conservative criticism of civilization directed against the city as the place and essence of a story about civilization's decay, a criticism that establishes the country as a compensatory counter-utopia" (181).

²¹ An earlier, abridged version of the novel was published as a series already in 1914 in the weekly *Vasárnapi Újság*.

²² Margit Kaffka was born in 1880 in Nagykároly. She was a secondary school teacher and taught in Miskolc. Many consider her one of the most important, some even *the* most important Hungarian woman writer of the early 20th century. She began writing in 1902, initially mainly poetry. Her first volume of poetry appeared in 1904 under the simple title *Versek* (Poems), followed by a volume of novellas in 1910, *Csendes válságok* (Silent Crises), the title of which alone marks it as a major contribution to literary modernity. Following her divorce from Brunó Fröhlich in 1906, she moved to Budapest in 1910 where she re-married. She became a regular member of the circle around the modernist magazine *Nyugat*. Between 1910 and her tragic and premature death from Spanish influenza (both her young son and she died from it) in 1918 in Budapest, she was very productive and published several novels and volumes of novellas, poems and fairy tales. Three of her novels in particular deal with the struggles of women's emancipation and are often regarded as a kind of a trilogy: *Színek és évek* (1912, translated into English as *Colours and Years* in 1999), *Mária évei* (Mária's Years, 1913), and the one discussed here, *Állomások* (Stations, 1917). Kaffka often expressed feminist views outside of her fiction as well.