



# The Importance of the Father in the Novel *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgård

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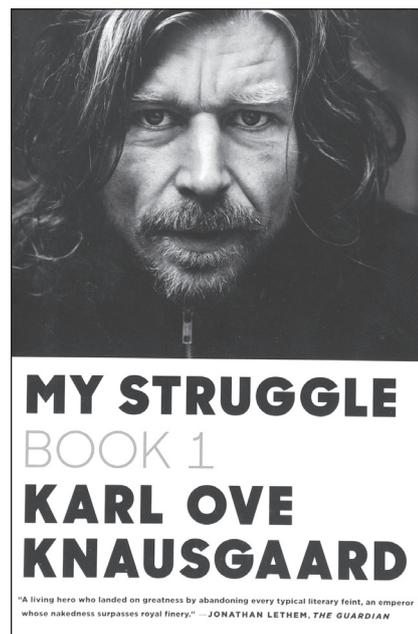
*The Importance of the Father in the Novel My Struggle by Karl Ove Knausgård*

The following paper aims at reconstructing the emotional universe of the main character of the novel *My Struggle* in relation to a father figure. Counting on previous research on affective narratology, the paper suggests a way of reading in which the father-son relationship lays central and it shows how it organizes not only the thematic universe of the characters but also the narrative structure of the book. The construction of the main character in the second part of Book One is analyzed according to several scenarios that follow him pursuing different goals after the death of his father. Seen in a broader perspective, the analysis conducted in this paper can be defintory for the entire novel sequence.

Keywords: *My Struggle*, Karl Ove Knausgård, father, affective narratology, detective plot, death



The starting point for this article is given by my proposal for a new mode of reading the novel *My Struggle* (the first volume particularly, but not exclusively). I suggest that *My Struggle* can be analyzed according to a father figure present in the novel at different levels, that takes various shapes and organizes the universe of the main character and the structure of the book. That being said, I argue that the father figure in relation to the protagonist and narrator Karl Ove has three different dimensions: The first one is created by the character Karl Ove and his living father, in which the narrative is built up as a continuous attempt for the son to distance himself from his father and it appears in the text as recollections of different times of past. The second one is the one that provides the framework of the novel, namely the dead father and Karl Ove and it has correspondence in the present time of the story and in the narrator's memories. A third one is represented by the identification between son and father, that takes places mostly in the essayistic parts and in Karl Ove's



meditations. In the middle of the novel we explicitly move from the first dimension to the second one.

The second case interests me in particular, because here the dynamics of the father-son dyad is unclear. The most at hand interpretive scenario is that once the father is dead, the son triumphs and gains his freedom, overcomes his fears and accomplishes his goals. This idea is supported by the protagonist himself, when he for instance declares: "I had long wished him dead, but from the very second I realized his life could soon be over I began to hope for it."<sup>1</sup> But is it really so? From the moment of the father's loss, the narrative follows an excessively emotional Karl Ove, who has contradictory reactions and tries to cope with the reality of the events in unexpected ways.

As I have previously showed, the novel *My Struggle* can be used as a suitable object for a new model of analysis proposed by affective narratology.<sup>2</sup> The respective paper was meant as an introduction to affective narratology and it briefly showed how it can be applied to *My Struggle*. As a sort of follow-up, I use in this article some of the concepts and ideas mentioned before, but with a slightly different purpose and with a more specific applicability.

From a historical perspective, the relationship between father and son in literature has always had two possible outcomes, either the son wins the fight with a tyrannical father or the father is a needed authority in the life of the son. Wendel Stacey Johnson is the author of one of the few extensive studies about the theme of filial relationship in literary works, *Sons and Fathers: The generation Link in Literature, 1780-1980*. She notes that on the one hand, in poetry sometimes but more often in the mid-Victorian or the modern novel, there is a social and, in a narrow sense, the psychological matter of the tenuous link and the frequent break between generations, with the father overshadowing or otherwise failing the son, with the child reacting against paternal authority to establish an authentic new self. On the other hand, sometimes in the novel but more often in preaching and in poetry, there is the mythic and religious motif of the Father figure needed as a generative power and authority to give authentic life to sons of men.<sup>3</sup>

There can be found enough arguments to support both of the cases discussed above in Knausgård's novel. Even if the predominant thought would be that the protagonist is undermined and even cancelled by the presence of his father, a more speculative approach could suggest that he also benefits by his harsh behavior (his passion for reading and writing has been developed as an escape from the reality, for example). But I argue that none of these directions is plainly outlined in *My Struggle* and therefore an attentive analysis of this part of the novel might lead to interesting conclusions.

Although it is early suggested, especially by means

of paratextual information, it isn't until past the page two hundred that the fact that Karl Ove's dad is not alive anymore is mentioned. But beyond the paratextual hints, a more important association is between death as a figure of identification and reconciliation for Karl Ove in the very first pages of the novel. Claus Elholm Andersen notes about the opening of *My Struggle* that "in *My Struggle* maybe we can also talk about the fact that Karl Ove is warming up his cold life by writing about death, and especially about his father's death" (my transl.)<sup>4</sup>. The choice of beginning the book with an essay in which death is described as a physical, objective phenomenon denotes an attempt to understand and accept it as a normal dimension of life. This comes in contrast with how the narrator perceives and reacts to the death of his father, when it really happens.

In the following parts of this paper I will use the scene of father's death as frame and I will examine different interpersonal relations that reveal themselves elicited by the mentioned circumstance as well as an arguable reaction to it, namely the cleaning of a physical and emotionally encoded space. I will make use of some concepts taken from affective narratology and bring into discussion some Norwegian scholars' point of view.

Patrick Colm Hogan talks about characters' goals and how pursuing them structurally affects the literary texts. He notes that "stories are defined, first of all, by the goals of characters and, crucially, that those goals are produced by emotional responses to situations."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "the significance of a goal—a specific goal, as instantiated and pursued by the person we are considering—is a function of the degree to which the achievement or non-achievement of that goal will have enduring effects on the person's life"<sup>6</sup>. We can apply this to the Knausgård brothers, or to Karl Ove, because Yngve plays the role of a companion for him, while the narration is in fact Karl Ove's personal story. On this note, it seems plausible that from the moment he finds about his father death, the story becomes a race for achieving a goal. At this point of the novel, I identify three possible goals pursued by the main character.

The ample scene of the father's death begins with the main characters' brothers standing in a room with their dead father and watching him as he was lying on the table.

I was almost thirty years old when I saw a dead body for the first time. It was the summer of 1998, a July afternoon, in a chapel in Kristiansand. My father had died. (...) I was there with my brother. The funeral director had left the room so that we could be alone with the deceased, at whom we were staring from a distance of some meters.<sup>7</sup>

This introductory passage illustrates perfectly the



situation surrounding the death of Karl Ove's father. There are the characters dealing with the event, the setting, which is their childhood hometown and the emotional distance between the protagonist and the dead person, whom he describes as a "dead body" or "the deceased".

We are invited into the thoughts of Karl Ove, who looks at his father with a feeling of strange freedom given by the dissolution of an authority. He experiences contrasting positions regarding the legitimacy of such a gesture. "The idea that I could scrutinize this face unhindered for the first time was almost unbearable. It felt like an act of violation. At the same time, I sensed a hunger, an insatiability that demanded I keep looking at him."<sup>8</sup> It is the morbid fascination of a son that has always been part of a subordinate relation with his male parent, for the sole act of looking at him when for the first time the hierarchical barrier disappears.

The introduction into the story of his father's death establishes some general ideas about how the sons relate to the event. It is clear that Karl Ove doesn't know exactly what are the consequences, what this means for him and how he really feels about it. When noises coming from the outside world create the expectation that his father would open his eyes, the son becomes terrified. ("It was a terrible moment"). A similar moment takes place later in the book, but that happened actually earlier in the chain of events, when while they were cleaning the house, a sudden movement made the brothers believe that it was their dad who was not actually dead and that came back home. This thought frightened both of them, which denotes that they would prefer the condition of their parent as a dead man.

After the moment of their encounter with the dead father, the narrative flashes back to the moment when Karl Ove received a phone call from Yngve and learned about his dad passing away. What follows next are expressions of ambivalence of the situation in which the main character finds himself, between the apparent feeling of freedom and the moral duty of experiencing pain for losing one of his parents. The first things that pass through his mind are the most superficial of them, like money or masturbation. I see this kind of reactions, apparently emotionless as exactly the opposite, dramatic and charged with emotion that is not yet expressed, that accumulates so that at some point, soon enough will be released. Intensity is gradually constructed in this manner. We keep expecting the reaction from a son that has just lost his father. Karl Ove declares: "in fact, I don't feel anything"<sup>10</sup>, but at the same time he doesn't "bear the thought of uploading all this onto her [Tonje] as she came in the door"<sup>11</sup>.

The awareness of the father's death is reached by Karl Ove in at least two different manners: in the first place there are moments of emotion release by means

of the most common reactions, like crying, but there are also objective depictions of death as a phenomenon, or analysis of the dead person as being just someone, outside him, not belonging to his epistemological universe.

As important as the relationship between Karl Ove and his father, that is unveiled from new memories and hidden thoughts, feelings, emotions and wishes at this point, in the large scene of the father's decease is the connection between the two brothers. Much more subtle, and apparently falling on a secondary plan, the interactions between them are not less significant in the context of analyzing paternal influence and the effects it has on the children.

The brothers' journey to Kristiansand can be also understood as a symbolic return to one's origin and part of the ritual of burying a dead man, as the narrator himself suggests: "As I stepped out of the house that morning and followed Yngve to the car, for a moment it was as if I was entering a larger story than my own. The sons leaving home to bury their father"<sup>12</sup>. This kind of mythical nuances is to be seen also in the scene of cleaning the grandparents' house.

Per Thomas Andersen introduces in affective narratology the notion of *emotional triggers*.<sup>13</sup> The concept was named *emotional trigger figures*, because it referred to minor characters in literary texts. I borrow just a part of Andersen's thoughts and reduce the term to *emotional trigger*. He uses the term in his analysis of *Brothers Karamazov*. But the narratological perspective in the Russian masterpiece is different from the one in *My Struggle*. Here the first-person narrator is very generous in giving access to his psychological universe and he is often preoccupied with autoanalysis. In this context, it becomes difficult to identify moments when other characters play the role of an emotional trigger in the sense of Andersen. Situations in which other characters can reveal something about Karl Ove that we don't know are rare and they might seem a little forced to fit the concept. Thus, I use the concept of emotional triggers in a slightly different manner. By an emotional trigger I understand both characters and situations, motifs or elements that are meant to activate an emotional reaction. Yngve has many times the role of destabilizing and challenging the emotional world of his brother and generating emotional reactions.

Yngve is together with Karl Ove from the beginning of the scene, when they see their dead father for the first time. His initial role is that of providing emotional support to Karl Ove, who apparently is affected by the tragic event on a larger scale. "He came over and stood next to me. His presence totally reassured me. I was so glad he was there, and I had to fight not to destroy everything by losing control again"<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, it looks like Yngve plays the role of a paternal figure, or at least of a sort of authority for Karl Ove, since he

feels that he has to restrain his reactions in order to not disappoint him, that is “to destroy” everything. Could it be that Karl Ove, as much as he apparently wants to break free, actually needs some sort of power system to relate to? And all the father issues that he has had since childhood are actually originated in the loss of authority, represented by the father’s decision to “gave up his life and start afresh”<sup>15</sup>?

Curious enough, Yngve is a very passive, inert and silent character, as opposed to his importance. There are many moments when he is in fact not doing anything (“This is like when we were small, I said. I cry and you watch”<sup>16</sup>), but he is still significant to the text and the story. In all the critical moments and situations, Yngve’s presence is at least slightly felt. At the same time, the physical interactions between the two brothers are non-existent. Every single time Karl Ove cries, or has an emotional expression or situational reaction Yngve is motionless, he either stands there without saying a word, or makes the narration move forward by bringing something else into discussion. But the narrator never reveals that there was any sign of physical or verbal consolation. The same observation applies to the dynamics of the entire Knausgård family, in which showing any type of emotion was not seen with good eyes, especially by the father. It is not surprising then that even in situations like this, they maintain the same order. This illustration of the emotional life of a family speaks not only for the particular case of the Knausgårds, but it very well reflects the Norwegian society, with its unspoken rules and expectations. Eivind Tjønneland notes that “it is actually not normal to be angry, happy or sad in Norway. Stuff like these should be kept under wraps until one maybe stands in front of the TV and admits that s/he has been depressed”<sup>17</sup> (my transl.).

Moreover, by looking at their behaviour when dealing with the mentioned event, we notice the differences between them, as well as their different ways of relating to their parents.

He would be the realistic, practical person; I would be the idealistic, emotion-driven one. Dad was father to both of us, but not in the same way, and my wanting to use the funeral as a kind of resurrection could, along with my tendency of crying all the time whereas Yngve had not yet shed a tear, be interpreted as evidence that my relationship was more heartfelt and, I suspected, as a covert criticism of Yngve’s attitude.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the two brothers is also revealed in typical knausgårdian style, through childhood recollections. Karl Ove cannot avoid mentioning the father which is described as another reason for the close connection between him and

Yngve, because he was the enemy. “Also because we faced a common foe, Dad, that is.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this is an example of the influence the father has on Karl Ove’s life. Even when he refers to other characters and situations in his life, he uses his father’s image or memory as a filter. Instead of analyzing his relation with Yngve, he is actually unveiling even more information about his dad. This happens again in some later depictions of his grandmother.

The strongest and to some extent obsessive reaction to death, except for the ever-present crying, coming from Karl Ove is the cleaning of the house in which his father had lived his final years, together with his old and sick mother. But behind the banal action of washing and rubbing the dirt or throwing away empty bottles for practical reasons, the scene is charged with meaning and open to interpretations. On the one hand, the careful cleaning can be perceived as a ritual of getting rid of toxic elements and implicitly eliminating the father. On the other hand, it could be Karl Ove’s attempt to follow his father’s final days with the understated goal of reconciliation. Nevertheless, the characters’ effort of getting rid of the external dirt is a metaphor for their inner, emotional universe. Øystein Vidnes notes that “the cleaning of the material chaos is reflecting the emotional chaos that this book is”<sup>20</sup>. Also, Ane Farsethås believes that the cleaning of the physical space has implications on the psychological world of the characters: “while the brothers wash out layer after layer of dirt, Karl Ove buries himself in dirty memories of his father, an internal clearing-up operation, parallel with the external one”<sup>21</sup>.

Another idea, uttered again by Karl Ove is the struggle of not becoming like his father. “Oh, all I had to do was clean. Scour and scrub and rub and wipe. See how each tile became clean and shiny. Imagine that all that had been destroyed here would be restored. All. Everything. And that I would never, never, ever, ever, end up where he ended up”<sup>22</sup>. We identify the fear of becoming his father and the effort of finding a way of avoiding that. Gro Jørstad Nielsen reads the work as an open declaration of the author’s efforts of avoiding the paternal legacy. “Throughout the entire novel, the father portrait has created a kind of dark and powerful energy, and the title *My Struggle* literally seems to be the author’s struggle against becoming his own father”<sup>23</sup>.

It could be also argued that all the plans with cleaning the house, having the wake there, and organizing everything as it is supposed to be done might come from a sort of moral duty that the main character feels that he has in the world. “There had been something undignified about doing this. Inasmuch as the trivial life it demonstrated did not go together with the solemnity death evoked. Or that I wanted death to evoke.”<sup>24</sup>

Claus Elholm Andersen, in his paper *Som far, så*



son. *Om fædre, sønner og litterær indflydelse i Karl Ove Knausgård's 'Min kamp'*, notes the following:

What follows is probably one of literature's most thorough cleanings. Everything is washed, scraped and scrubbed. Even when Yngve after a couple of days goes back to his family in Kristiansand (sic) Karl Ove continues with the cleaning after his father's alcoholic life, that in the novel takes place over a couple hundred of pages. And the cleaning continues for so long and it is so thorough, that we as readers cannot doubt how dirty and ugly it was.<sup>25</sup>

He suggests that the purpose of such a detailed and long depiction of the action is to convince the reader of the veracity of the narration and to make them trust the narrator. But beyond the narratological function, Elholm Andersen also interprets the scene as symbolic for something else. Namely, he states that by cleaning after the mess of his dad, Karl Ove wants to break the distance between them by making him human, deadly and easy to overcome. "He is not the powerful, dominant father that he remembers from childhood, but a poor alcoholic, that has so little control over his life that the son has to come and take over".<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, by washing every bottle that his father has drunk, every dirty dish, all the clothes, wandering from room to room, Karl Ove follows the itinerary of his father from the last years, in which he had lived his life enclosed in the house of his mother. It can be argued that the methodical and meticulous process of cleaning the house is like stepping into his father final days, as an attempt to understand him and the decision that he had taken and that had such a strong impact on the life of his sons.

In her recently defended PhD thesis, Kjersti Aarstein argues that *My Struggle* presents a hidden murder accusation, namely that Knausgård accuses his uncle of provoking his father's death, through the characters of Karl Ove and uncle Gunnar. She observes that Knausgård has built a plot in which he indirectly accuses his uncle of murder. She notes that "anyone who comments that accusation has the responsibility of reminding that it doesn't come out unmediated as facts, but it rests on Knausgård's construction of a plot."<sup>27</sup> Without supporting or rejecting Aarstein's hypothesis I agree that the novel also provides a detective story related to the death of Kai Åge, Karl Ove's father. Aarstein constructs her argumentation mainly on the sixth volume of the novel, but the starting point is the scene of father's death in Book One. In this context, a new scenario can be taken into consideration when analyzing the second part of the first volume *My Struggle*. Speculations regarding the heart attack provoked by the exaggerated alcohol consumption are pushed forward, but a real, conclusive

answer is never given by the narrator Karl Ove. The return of the Knausgård brothers to their childhood town can be understood as part of a detective job, in which they try to find out the real story behind their father's death. The plot is constructed in such a way that it is almost impossible to find out the truth. Karl Ove's grandmother is the only witness, who becomes unreliable because of her health problems. In fact, she is given the role to complicate the story, to put forward different hypotheses, to confuse the protagonist as well as to create suspense.

## Conclusions

Some conclusions arise from this investigation. In the case of the novel *My Struggle*, the narrative is constructed in a manner that invites to an emotional oriented analysis. Based on the characters' emotionally driven reactions it is emphasized the fundamental role that the construction of the father's character has on the story. Facing accusations of sentimentalism and emotionally blackmailing the readers, I see the use of affect as a necessary feature of Knausgård's project. The main character has often reactions and develops in ways that are easier to understand with the help of tools promoted by affective narratology. Trapped between the sorrow of losing a parent, the incapability of understanding his own reactions and the feeling of relief given by the escape from paternal authority, Karl Ove represents a chaotic emotional system characteristic for the entire novel. Revelatory for the father-son relationship is also the dynamics of Karl Ove - Yngve dyad. The older brother represents a role model and a father replacement for Karl Ove, but at the same time an ally in his fight with the paternal authority.

At the same time, this paper shows that in *My Struggle* the story can be analyzed in concordance with the main character's goals. To this respect, I identify three possible scenarios that can be followed throughout the entire novel, namely Karl Ove's enterprise to defeat his tyrannical father, the pursuit of reconciliation with the father, or the detective job of revealing the mystery of the father's death. Without suggesting that only one of them is right, I argue that there is actually the possibility that all of them coexist and have influence on the development of the story and the narrative structure. On the other hand, precisely that indecision or impossibility of the main character to follow a direction, or on the contrary the ambivalent behaviour is what pushes the narrative forward. For six volumes.



Note:

1. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book One*, translated by Don Bartlett, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 237.
2. See Ștefana Popa, "Introducere în naratologia afectivă. Studiu de caz: *Lupta mea* de K.O. Knausgård," *Transilvania*, no. 7 (2018).
3. Wendel Stacey Johnson, *Sons and Fathers: The generation Link in Literature, 1780-1980*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), 154.
4. Claus Elholm Andersen, *Så tæt på livet som muligt. Perspektiver på Karl Ove Knausgårds Min Kamp*, (Bergen: Spring/Alvheim & Eide, 2017), 20: "I *Min Kamp* kan vi måske også tale om, at Karl Ove varmer sit kuldske liv ved at skrive om døden, og især om sin fars død", Claus Elholm Andersen, "At forsøge det umulige. Knausgårds kamp for at forene form og indhold."
5. Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology. The Emotional Structure of Stories*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 78.
6. *Ibid.*, 78.
7. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, 226.
8. *Ibid.*, 227.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 234.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
13. See Per Thomas Andersen, *Story and Emotion: A Study in Affective Narratology*, trad. Marte Hult, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2016), 45.
14. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, 228.
15. *Ibid.*, 38.
16. *Ibid.*, 229.
17. Eivind Tjønneland, *Knausgård-koden. Et ideologikritisk essay*, (Oslo: Spartacus, 2010), 94: "[D]et er egentlig ikke normalt å være sint, glad eller trist i Norge. Slikt bør man legge lokk på inntil man eventuelt står frem på TV og bekjenner at man har vært deprimert."
18. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, 346.
19. *Ibid.*, 321.
20. Øystein Vidnes, "Å skrive er å trekke det som finnes ut fra skyggene av det vi vet", *Morgenbladet*, 15 September 2009: "Ryddinga av det materielle kaoset speglar den ryddinga i eit emosjonelt kaos som denne boka er."
21. Ane Farsethås, "En sjelden bragd", *Dagens Næringsliv*, 19 September 2009: "Mens brødrene vasker ut lag på lag med dritt, graver Karl Ove seg samtidig nedover i tilsmussede minner om faren, et indre opprydningsarbeid som går parallelt med de ytre."
22. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, p. 319.
23. Gro Jørstad Nilsen, qtd. in Eivind Tjønneland, *Knausgård-koden*, 132: "Gjennom alle bindene har farskikkelsen skapt en slags mørk og voldsom energi, og tittelen *Min Kamp* virker bokstavelig talt å være forfatterens kamp mot å bli sin egen far."

24. Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, p. 429.

25. Claus Elholm Andersen, "Som far, så søn. Om fædre, sønner og litterær indflydelse i Karl Ove Knausgårds 'Min kamp'", (Oslo: *Norsk litterær årbok*, Det Norske Samlaget, 2013), 178-179: "Herefter følger en af litteraturhistoriens måske mest grundige hovedrengøringer. Alt bliver vasket, skuret og skrubbet. Selv da Yngve efter et par dage tager hjem til sin familie i Kristiansand (sic) ,fortsætter Karl Ove med rengøringen efter farens alkoholiserede liv, der i romanen pågår over små hundrede sider. Og rengøringen fortsætter så længe og er så grundig, at vi som læsere ikke kan være i tvivl om, hvor møgbeskidt og ulækkert der var."
26. *Ibid.*, 180: "Han er ikke den mægtige dominerende far, som han husker fra barndommen, men en stakkels alkoholiker, der har så lidt styr på sit eget liv, at sønnen må komme og tage over."
27. Irene Aarstein Kjersti, *Vold og visjoner i sjette bind av Karl Ove Knausgårds Min Kamp*, (Bergen: Universitetet i 2018), 108: "enhver som kommenterer denne anklagen, har et ansvar for å minne om at den ikke springer uformidlet ut av kjensgjerninger, men beror på Knausgård's konstruksjon av et plott."

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