

Anna Édes

Édes Anna

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Anna Édes tells the story of a young maid who murders her mistress and master. The narrative takes place in the turbulent years after the First World War, in the aftermath of the Commune of 1919 and the subsequent takeover by the right-wing forces led by Miklós Horthy (ruling as governor from 1920 to 1944). The larger political upheavals of Hungary frame the domestic developments: the docile servant Anna replaces a rebellious maid unwilling to remain under the domineering mistress' control. Anna also comes recommended and forced into serving the Vizy family by her godfather, the janitor in the Vizys' apartment building, who tries to atone for his arrogant behaviour during the short-lived Communist dictatorship. Mrs. Vizy's domestic tyranny is enabled by her husband's rise in the political hierarchy under the new Christian-conservative regime. The murder happens after a party celebrating his appointment to Ministerial Councillor. The narrative raises important questions about the intersections of the private and the political, of ethics and justice, and the complex interplay between class, gender, and other social determinants.

Anna Édes is the last, and the most widely read, novel published by the Hungarian poet, prose writer, and journalist Dezső Kosztolányi in the 1920s. The title character, a young peasant girl hired as a live-in maid by an upper-middle-class family in a gentrified Budapest neighbourhood. Anna surprises her employers by being "the perfect servant," completely obedient and selfless, with no private life outside of service. After being seduced and abandoned by her mistress' nephew, she becomes pregnant and is forced to abort her child, which nearly kills her. Her mistress, completely dependent on Anna's services, prevents Anna's planned marriage to a decent working-class man and emotionally blackmails her into staying when she wants to resign from her post. In a sudden but not-quite-unanticipated twist, Anna murders both her mistress and master by stabbing. The plot concludes with Anna's trial and sentencing (to fifteen years of imprisonment).

In the last chapter of the novel, two side characters are shown gossiping about the writer Kosztolányi (also a resident of this neighbourhood), citing rumours of him being a Communist in 1919 and a right-wing Christian conservative now (in 1922), concluding that he must be an opportunist and a turncoat. This mise-en-abyme complicates a direct propagandistic interpretation of the novel (on either side) while buttressing the significance of the novel's political context. The novel opens with a prayer for the dead from the Roman Ritual in Latin and Hungarian, suggesting a universal human fate beyond social and political divisions.

Anna's status and personality add a gendered dimension to the social-political issue of domination. Her family name Édes means 'sweet'. Her first name carries, in Kosztolányi's own interpretation, the connotations of softness (due to the easily pronounced nasal consonants) and even submissiveness—Kosztolányi connected the name Anna to the Hungarian conditional verb form

adna ('he/she would give') and the Hebrew manna, a divine gift (Kosztolányi 1990, 520). Anna's symbolic character is also reinforced by the similarity of her full name to *édesanya* (lit. 'sweet mother,' meaning 'mother, biological mother,') and the fact that she was born in 1900. Her primary relationship is with her mistress who controls her life. Mrs. Vízny's obsession with Anna is readable as an expression of social stratification, as the manifestation of a psychological disorder, and it may even have a sexual component.

The narrative structure of the novel is relatively conservative, offering a subtle variation on nineteenth-century models of storytelling. The narrator exhibits limited omniscience, the narration is either focalized externally or through one of the central characters, and in certain cases the narrator mediates the collective consciousness of the neighbourhood, relating rumours and legends. The first chapter tells of the fantastically exaggerated story of Béla Kun, the Communist dictator, leaving the country by airplane. In Chapter 10, the narrative follows the legend of the perfect servant, Anna, spreading across the district. The title character embodies the notion of "the subaltern" (Spivak) in her inability to voice her thoughts and emotions. The narrator sympathizes with her, and, in a few instances, gains access to her consciousness but never probes deeply enough to understand her as a complex personality. She is often the subject of others' talk, presented as an enigma open to interpretation, including a famous discussion on "sponge fingers, compassion and equality" in Chapter 9, and her trial in Chapter 19. In both discussions, an old doctor named Moviszter (from Latin *move*, 'to move') argues against the exploitation of the lower classes from a Christian-egalitarian perspective, which others mistake for Communist agitation. The narration gives up its impartiality in the chapter on the trial when the narrative voice directly addresses Moviszter (perhaps imitating an internal thought process, perhaps as direct narratorial intrusion), encouraging him to speak up on Anna's behalf, to highlight her masters' inhumane treatment of Anna as a mitigating factor.

The representability of "the subaltern," the textualization of bodily experiences and the mystery of alterity have been at the forefront of much recent critical interpretation. Employing various critical theories such as phenomenological criticism, feminist theory, and deconstruction, contemporary Hungarian criticism has revalued the significance of the political (among other things) in *Anna Édes*.

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LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

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