

FAR AND AWAY: THE AGONY OF EMIGRATION IN FRANK MLAKAR'S NOVEL *HE, THE FATHER*

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Frank Mlakar's lucky star suddenly flared up in 1950 when Harper & Brothers published his novel *He, the Father*. but afterwards it set almost as quickly as it had ascended. Mlakar's name was to reappear in public only in the 1970s with the publication of an extract from Chapter 5 of this novel in the Gobetz-Donchenko anthology of Slovenian American literature¹ along with some biographical and bibliographical information on the author. The pioneer work in research into Mlakar the man and writer was performed by Danica Dolenc, a Slovene-Canadian from Toronto, who in the early 1980s lived and studied in Ljubljana. She established personal contact with Mlakar's widow in Australia, where the author had spent the last years of his life, changed his name to Malakar for the sake of easier pronunciation and where he also died in 1967.² Danica Dolenc thus acquired reliable data concerning Mlakar's origin and she also managed to obtain a couple of unpublished literary works from Mlakar's legacy. Unfortunately, she has not completed her research.³ The following biographical data have been adapted from her unpublished paper "Slovene American Author Frank Mlakar: An Introduction," which she presented at a Fulbright seminar in Dubrovnik (Croatia) in October 1980.

Frank Mlakar was born on May 15, 1913 in Cleveland, Ohio. His parents were Slovenes — his mother's birthplace the village Jelovec near Sodražica whereas his father was a *Notranjec* from the valley of Lož. They arrived in the United States separately, in 1907, and settled in Cleveland. They met there and got married in

¹ Giles E. Gobetz & Adele Donchenko, *Anthology of Slovenian American Literature* (Willoughby Hills OH: Slovenski ameriški inštitut, 1977) 87-97, 223.

² M(a)lakar died in Sorrento, Australia, February 2, 1967, and was buried in Melbourne. The information was provided by Ivan Dolenc of Toronto, Canada, and is to be included in the *Encyclopedia of Slovenia*.

³ In 1981 her article "Mlakar's image of Slovene immigrants in America" was published in *Slovenski koledar* 28: 310-314.

1910. It is important to know that Mlakar's father worked in a nail factory in Cleveland which, at the time, gave work to hundreds of Slovenian immigrants. The parents talked a lot about their homeland — and when Mlakar was nine years old his mother took him along on a visit home and so he came to know his family and his parents' homeland first-hand.

Mlakar attended high school in Collinwood where his talent for writing was first noticed. The Depression made the family hard-pressed for money and Mlakar was forced to quit school and take up work to help his parents out of their financial straits. When circumstances improved he continued and finished school. In the meantime he wrote a lot for Vatro Grill's Cleveland paper *Enakopravnost* as well as for English-language papers. For a short period of time he even attended dramaturgy classes at Western Reserve School in Cleveland but then he moved to New York where he soon met Louis Adamic and took up the post of his personal secretary, which he was to hold for twelve years. Between 1940 and 1942 he served as an assistant editor for Adamic's quarterly bulletin *Common Ground*. Between 1942 and 1946 he served with the U.S. Marine Corps in France. In 1948 he and his Australian wife visited Australia together and, according to Dolenc, he finished his only novel *He, the Father* there. When the novel came out in 1950, it was praised by the critics but it did not sell well. The Mlakars returned to Cleveland for three years during which time the Slovene author Tone Seliskar asked them to consider returning to Slovenia for good. The offer turned down, the Mlakars returned to Australia to stay. For the rest of his life Mlakar produced film scripts and just before his death finished his drama *Francie*, which was never published. He published little — Dolenc mentions two more stories⁴ — which is a pity for, undoubtedly, *He, the Father* represents one of the highlights of Slovene-American literature. In my opinion it is the best novel ever written and published by a Slovene-American author.

With the exception of Louis Adamic who, with his works of literary journalism succeeded to make a breakthrough into mainstream American literature, Mlakar was the only Slovene American who managed to fulfill his literary ambitions in the best and

⁴ "My Uncle Polde," *Common Ground* 3/1 (Autumn 1942) 55 and "Grandmother," *Common Ground* 7/2 (Winter 1947) 45.

purest manner possible. He refused to become submerged in the sentimental, nostalgic, old-country-oriented writing that dominated the major part of contemporary Slovene American literature, and equally he escaped the other extreme of socialist propaganda literature. He went his own way, to come up with a psychological-realistic novel that must have been inspired by at least two literary masterpieces: F.M.Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and O.E.Rølvaag's American classic *Giants in the Earth*.⁵

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As the novel *He, the Father* opens we witness the protagonist Osip Princevich and his wife Lenka hailing the Statue of Liberty for the first time in their lives. She is excited beyond description whereas he, having just awoken from a nightmarish dream, approaches the New World with mixed feelings and even reproaches his wife for having dragged him across the Ocean.

The reader is then led back in time and space: the story begins at an unspecified time in a tiny Slovene village called Gobelye: a poor, backbreaking, backward place where time seems to have stood still. Osip and Lenka grow up in their separate families: he as one of three sons in a loveless atmosphere of a choked family life; she as a loved and protected only child of the village shoemaker Terta. Lenka has been known as a wild child ever since her birth and when she comes into young womanhood she lures Osip, who has fallen in love with her, to America. Unable to obtain the money for passage and facing opposition from his father, Krist, Osip steals his life savings just before his departure; and when he is caught red-handed by his father he fights with him and eventually knocks him down.

This deed, and especially the uncertainty of whether he has indeed killed his father, will not let Osip enjoy his new life. Lenka and he settle down in the Slovene community of a major American town called the Chicken Village. He soon obtains work in a nearby wire factory but is not happy. He is being repeatedly haunted by the same nightmare in which a beast preys upon him and he cannot escape. He even tries to exorcise his guilt by carving out a wooden replica of the Gobelye church Christ statue but then throws it away. When Lenka gives birth to a baby girl who

⁵ Originally published in Norwegian (Oslo: Aschehoug & Co., 1924), the English translation appeared in 1927 (New York: Harper & Brothers).

only lives for a couple of days, Osip takes it as a punishment for his crime against his father. For a time he now hopes that the spell is broken, but the nightmare returns and he begins to avoid the world of people. Lenka, on the other hand, finds comfort and welcome company in the person of old Smrekar, the innkeeper, who proves a real friend in need. Shortly before the birth of their second child, she leaves Osip and gives birth to the son, Rudy, far away from her new home. Although Osip has bought an old house (with Smrekar's help) and with his own hands turned it into a beautiful home, Lenka does not like it. After her return she feels choked; she wants to see America, to go among the people and be one of them. Her narrow, limited existence makes her very unhappy. She lives her own life and does her best to prepare Rudy for it, too whereas Osip literally flees underground: having mended and painted everything in the house, he now begins to widen the cellar. His mole-like toil only further widens the gap between him and his family. Lenka sees no point in trying to bring him out anymore. He does return to the world of the people, though, for a short period of time, as a bootlegger. When he is caught by the police — at the point when Lenka and Rudy are about to leave him for good — he puts the blame on her and she goes to jail. On the day of her release he decides to return to Gobelye alone.

His trip home is doomed from the start. Before he even sets foot on his native soil, both his legs are paralyzed — a mysterious, recurrent childhood ailment has now returned and made him an invalid in a wheelchair. Arriving home in an ambulance he is left lying outside in the scorching sun for a number of hours before his brothers take pity on him and carry him into the house. His return is most unwelcome but is tolerated.

With all the time on his hands and nothing to do but lie helplessly in the semi-darkness of his native hut, Osip's thoughts now repeatedly wander back into the time of his childhood, thus revealing more details of his troubled, complex youth. The old Polubnikova, who once miraculously healed him when he was suddenly paralyzed, later on began to hate him. The well-to-do woman, respected and feared alike, has a grandson named Stanek who now wants to marry the "wrong" woman, Polina Jamenik. And now, upon Osip's return, the old woman, having refused to help the invalid once more, is dying, too. Has Osip's return anything to do with it? This question seems to be on every villager's

mind. After a while Osip plucks up the courage to show himself again among his people — on a Sunday morning, in church. His firm decision to be carried there in a basket by his brothers proves fatal — the unforgiving villagers trample him to death.

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Mlakar's novel, very much like Dostoyevsky's, explores the moral juxtaposition between natural and ethical laws. Dostoyevsky's belief, expressed in many of his novels, that a man is egotistic and aggressive by nature, and must eventually pay for this, was transplanted by Mlakar onto his own characters. His attention focuses on the protagonist Osip Princevich: his psyche, his extreme pathological states stemming from the subconscious. This latter remains throughout the novel in the clutches of Gobelye "morality" adopted by Osip in his childhood and early manhood. And just as the action in Dostoyevsky's novel keeps spinning around the murders committed by Raskolnikov, so does the action of *He, the Father* revolve around Osip's crime which assumes the whole burden of the novel. Osip murdered twice: first as a child, in his mind only, wishing that his father drop dead, and then again, for the second time, on the day of his leaving home for good. Having been caught by his father in the very act of stealing his life savings, the two men engaged in a fight in which Osip proved to be the stronger. Yet he did not kill the old man's body: he killed his soul instead. As a matter of justice, Osip deserves and receives punishment. This, however, manifests itself outwardly in Osip's mysterious, incomprehensible suffering that comes to a head in the novel's final scene when the sinner is trampled to death by the outraged villagers of Gobelye. Nevertheless, Osip's suffering in the final moments of his life results in his moral purification, his becoming aware of the reasons of all his past inner struggles, as well as his final realization that it was he who destroyed his marriage and family although there was no need to do so.

Mlakar's novel, however, is not a simple, one-dimensional narrative dealing with the murder-victim and/or crime-punishment relations alone. It is rather a multi-layered narrative relating a battle between good and evil, the battle that outgrows the dimensions of an individual person's psyche and spreads, like a pestilential contagious disease, into the pores of each and everyone in the community. Like so many generations of Gobelye people, Osip,

too, is burdened with the same problem — the unconditional and unquestionable authoritativeness of the elders which apparently stems both from their socio-economic circumstances (the poverty of villagers, old people's fear of what will happen to them once they are too old and too weak to look after themselves) as well as religious dogmas (the Fourth Commandment). The requisite unquestioning obedience, coupled with cruelty, inevitably provokes rebellion in the village youth which, however, in due time and especially after their elders' death, turns into remorse and self-accusation. Osip Princevich's homecoming thus reopens the age-old Gobelye sore: the villagers are unpleasantly reminded of their own heretic youthful thoughts and secret wishes. They are overcome by fear that Osip's negative example may poison their own children's hearts.

The unyielding tyranny of the Gobelye elders leaves no room for the love of children. These grow up unprotected, like wild things; from the moment they are born they are treated like small adults. Osip's childhood is most traumatic and casts a shadow over the rest of his life. He has to fight for his parents' kindness instead of it being offered to him as something perfectly natural. What he does get are barely scraps and splinters of affection, short moments of happiness that enable Osip to taste what a normal relationship between parent and child is like. After the moment is gone, life is again as it was before: cold, hostile, emotionless. Throughout his early youth Osip is possessed by the horror that he might commit something really bad and sinful so as to lose the last straw of his parents' love forever; he lives in fear. But he is equally paralyzed by another feeling — that of shame: he does not understand life's secrets and like every growing child he has a number of questions to which he knows no answer. In order to come to terms with some of the most bewildering enigmas he spies on his parents. This, in turn, provokes a furious reaction not only on the part of his parents, but also that of others, for instance, Polubnikova. Accordingly, Osip becomes convinced that his curiosity is something bad and indecent and that it consequently deserves severe punishment. It is no wonder the grown-up Osip sees childhood both as the most crucial period in one's life and also as the most traumatic. "Childhood in Slovenia, childhood anywhere, what a terrible thing this is," Osip thinks to himself watching his own son Rudy grow up.

Osip's psychological traumas are deeply rooted in the environment in which he grew up. It is his personal tragedy to be stamped for life with an environment and upbringing that were not based on love but on suppression, orders and hatred. Osip seems to be helpless against this residue from his childhood: the moral codes of Gobelye have become part of him without his being aware of it. These values have been shaped by religion that dominates the people's view of the world, the meaning of one's existence, one's fate as well as that of society at large. Religion is the main driving force of Gobelye lives from birth to death. Yet the villagers' understanding of it is naive and primitive: there is no clear division, either, between religion and superstition. The moral code of Gobelye consists of one paragraph only: crime must be punished by God and, should He take too much time to carry out his vengeance, things are to be taken care of by the villagers themselves. There is a double standard of ethics in Gobelye: the villagers are shocked by Osip's 'crime,' yet deep down in their hearts they know that they would do the same as he did — if only they dared to. For they too are entangled in the conflict that seemingly concerns Osip alone: the battle between natural and moral laws. Natural laws require for the old to give way to the young for there is no room for both in this world. Moral (Christian) laws, on the other hand, demand that the young respect the old. Moral laws thus demand that individuals conquer their egotistic and aggressive natures. Yet the most these simple people can do is keep up appearances whereas internally they remain loyal to natural laws. With Osip returning from America, they become aware of their two-facedness and their fear of public denunciation coupled with the fear of God's punishment surfaces with unprecedented force. Once their fear has reached the limit of endurance, people can no longer contain themselves and before they know it their aggression erupts.

It is interesting, nonetheless, that Osip has not been suffering so much from the memory of his physical combat with father but rather from the memory of a sin he committed as a child; his secret, never-pronounced wish his father would die. The thought had stealthily entered his mind at a particularly ugly moment of Krist Princevich's life when — because of his illicit affairs with married village women — he was badly beaten up by the cuckolded husbands. Many years later, in America, Osip's guilty

conscience manifests itself in a number of different ways — the worst being his nightmarish dream which, however, has been his faithful companion ever since his childhood days. The recurring dream foretells inevitable punishment for the committed sin. The dream therefore represents Osip's subconscious reaction to his subdued guilt complex. At the same time it metaphorically spans his past and present. Having condemned himself to it, Osip cannot escape God's punishment. And having offended against the Fourth Commandment, he has become prisoner of his guilt which he cannot expiate. There is no person in this world he can confess his sin to — neither Polubnikova nor his own wife.

The original sense of guilt later on develops and achieves enormous proportions. Osip feels guilty for having offended against his own father and even his own son; the boy will never be able to forget Osip's moment of hesitation when he needed help to free himself from under a rock that had rolled on him in the basement of their house.

In his first years of life in America, Osip still hopes to get rid of his nightmarish self-accusations, to get even with his past, to be redeemed from vice by both symbolic and real actions. Yet he is soon to realize that all has been in vain. No matter how great the geographical distance, he will never escape the past and the twinges of conscience. So Osip begins to shun reality. Working in the factory where, due to the excruciating noise, it is not possible to communicate with anyone, or escaping underground to excavate the cellar in his house — in either case Osip works himself to death so as to silence the voice of conscience and the thought of Gobelye.

Despite his ten-year stay in America Osip has in fact never left Gobelye. The isolated Chicken Village is simply a surrogate for lost Gobelye. Chicken Village or Gobelye — here or there the pulse of life is dictated by hard work and survival is the only thing that matters. Typically enough, Osip has no wish at all to really get to know America, the part of it outside Chicken Village; unlike his wife Lenka he does not wish to become a citizen either.

One cannot help feeling that Mlakar found his inspiration, as far as the split between husband and wife is concerned, in the 1927 American classic *Giants in the Earth*. Rølvaag's novel relates the story of a young Norwegian couple who, at the turn of the century, makes the decision to emigrate to the United States.

Together with a group of other immigrants they end up in the middle of nowhere, on a peaceful, lonesome, untouched Dakota prairie. Like the Princevichs, Rølvaag's husband and wife differ in their viewpoints. He, Per Hansa, sees America as his greatest opportunity; therefore he accepts the challenge and shuns no hard work for he believes that eventually his new homeland will reward him as well as his family. She, Beret, cannot and will not adjust herself to new circumstances. Like Osip, she too is overcome by remorse and homesickness of a special kind: homesickness resulting from her pangs of conscience for having left her home and parents against their will. Neither she nor Osip will ever become accommodated to their new life. Both of them suffer from a guilt complex and seek refuge in self-imposed "punishment." They both have a feeling there should be no happiness for them in this world. Beret shuns reality by escaping into religious madness whereas Osip vanishes underground to dig like a mole. In these isolated worlds, inaccessible to others, they feel safe. Per Hansa and Lenka, on the other hand, both personify the unconquerable longing for adventure and progress. The two of them have long accepted America as their own. In both novels the ending is tragic, even if diametrically opposite: in Mlakar's novel it is the pessimist who dies at the end, in Rølvaag's the optimist.

Lenka and Smrekar, the saloon keeper, embody the spirit of enterprise so fundamental to their newly adopted country. They are pioneer adventurers seeing in the United States their Promised Land, the land of limitless opportunities, and they are both eager to get to know it as a whole. Yet both run into obstacles: Smrekar is hindered by old age and family, and Lenka by Osip. People like Lenka are not welcomed by Slovene-American pioneers. Her thirst for adventure is stronger than her sense of duty. This is why she must be condemned to loneliness as well as to be pushed to the edge of the immigrant community. Even Smrekar's open affection for her youthful spirit gradually wears thin against the backdrop of the stuffy Chicken Village environment. Lenka is right: Chicken Village and Gobelje *are* one and the same thing. In its own way the fact that by coming to the United States Osip has stopped being a peasant contributes to his personal tragedy. On the outside he still looks like a coarse peasant yet his spirit has completely subordinated itself to the rules of industrial America — in his particular case impersonated by the wire factory. Osip

divides his time between factory and cellar while outside seasons change without his noticing it. Lenka, on the contrary, has never broken with her peasant past. She has remained in close contact with the soil, cultivating her little garden, whereas Osip can neither become an equal member of the rapidly developing industrial America nor has he remained in touch with the land. As a consequence he feels suspended in empty space. His alienation from his environment gradually increases into alienation from his wife and son. Mlakar's description of Osip's and Lenka's inability to talk to each other after the death of their first born child, their inability to share their grief, is heart-rending. Deep inside Osip alienation breeds hatred and hatred further breeds vengeful thoughts. Apart from remorse these are the most powerful emotions getting the better of him. His painful childhood experiences, his expulsion from the safe haven of his parents' house to the cold, dark barn have made him fearful of history repeating itself. He is paralyzed with fear that his own son might end up homeless one day. This fear materializes when his pregnant wife leaves him without letting him know where she is going and eventually gives birth to their son far away from home. This breaks Osip's heart and little by little hatred begins to take the place of his tender feelings for his wife. His subsequent bootlegging adventure is thus to be understood as his subdued wish to render evil for evil. After having manipulated Lenka into prison, his thirst for revenge is quenched and he feels emptier than ever: his alienation has reached the climax. He has come to a dead end with no way out in sight. So he gives up his wife and son, his beautiful home, only to find himself at the most crucial moment of his life (like the protagonist of Saul Bellow's novel *Seize the Day*⁶) at a funeral parlor crying helplessly: not over the dead body but over himself. It is there that he becomes aware of his fateful link with his father as well as his past. Yet Osip's visiting the funeral parlor fails to bring about purification of soul: he still has a long way to go, both literally and metaphorically. In that moment however, death to him means nothing but redemption of human errors that is mercifully granted to the lucky few.

The structure of Mlakar's novel is characterized by thematic repetition, the purpose of which is to underline the helplessness of

⁶ Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Viking Press, 1956).

the protagonist as well as of some other characters and to bring out more clearly their sense of entrapment without the slightest chance of escape. The novel introduces a series of motifs which reappear as variations on the main theme thus creating a vicious circle leading from Gobelye to Chicken Village and back to Gobelye. Let us point out the most obvious ones: the son praying for his father's death/a young person praying for an old person's death (Osip for Krist's, Rudy for Osip's, Stanek for his grandmother's, Dolinareva's daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law's); the son secretly idolizing his father (Karol — Kosmrlj, Osip — Krist, Rudy — Osip); the father renouncing or gravely disappointing his son (Krist — Poldek, Krist — Osip, Osip — Rudy); children feeling guilty about their sins against their elders (Osip — Krist, Stanek — Polubnikova); children being torn between love and hatred for parents (Osip, Rudy, Stanek, Karol, Poldek).

Parallellism exists on some other levels too. Not only contextual elements are repeated, but also some character traits, psychological particularities and even life stories indicate certain recognizable patterns. So, for example, one can detect numerous parallels in descriptions of Osip's and Rudy's childhoods: namely, both children are fighting against a mystery enveloping their parents' lives. It takes a long time for Osip to realize that the foundling Poldek Pepelin is his half-brother, Krist's illegitimate son never recognized by his father. Rudy, Osip's son, has a vague foreboding as to the secret of his mother's escape to Chicago just before his birth. Both children have thus been pushed into an emotional abyss; both wish to love and admire their fathers whilst deep down in their souls they sympathize with their mothers' silent plight and feel guilty and responsible. As a result, both grow up into silent, introverted boys who find it difficult if not downright impossible to share their troubles with any other person.

Even Osip and Stanek appear similar, in the sense that they are both afraid of taking a decisive move in their lives: both of them equally anguishing over their secret wish to see their elders dead.

The female characters of Lenka and Polina resemble one another, too — in terms of their frivolity and thoughtlessness that often turns into sheer ruthlessness. Lenka runs away from home, from her loving and caring parents. Her unexpected departure breaks their hearts, especially the father's; in a sense it causes their spiritual death. With Lenka gone, there is nothing left to live for.

In the United States, Lenka repeats her escape, this time inflicting the decisive blow on Osip, one he will never recover from. In a similar manner the reckless behavior of selfish Polina brings about the death of old Polubnikova.

The time span of *He, the Father* is some twenty-five or thirty years. The action takes place partly before World War I and partly after it, although the actual chronological time is not essential for the development of the plot. The time that is important is rather psychological time, i.e., time in the function of human consciousness. The above-mentioned chronological span serves Mlakar only to present the development of the human condition, that of the protagonist as well as those of others. Paradoxically though, Mlakar's characters are both fully individualized (Osip, for example, is no typical Slovenian immigrant — considering the fact that generally the main reasons for emigration from Slovenia were economic) yet on the other hand they are doomed to function as part of community at large. Although the characters are all Slovenes, not all their names are typically Slovene. Osip is a Russian version of the name Jozef and the family name Princevich (Princevic or Princevic in Slovene transcription) is all but unknown in Slovenia. So are Lenka's maiden name Terta and Poldek's family name Pepelin. The name of Osip's father Krist is rare in Slovenia but, of course, has not been chosen by Mlakar at random. Krist's name obviously recalls to mind the name of Jesus Christ. Both of them, Krist and Christ are sufferers whose mysterious sorrow is outwardly expressed in their averted faces. The child Osip equates Krist, the father, with the wooden statue of Christ in the local church. At the beginning voiceless and in the final church scene vocal, Osip's scream denotes an urgent plea to both his father and God to be recognized as a human being.

Apart from symbolic names Mlakar introduces other stylistic means that reach beyond the limits of traditional realistic narrative. He frequently evokes biblical scenes or makes use of tropes and even ancient myth. In the final church scene of the novel Osip's supernatural strength suggests the biblical analogy of Samson destroying his enemies' temple; his subsequent death transcends the death of an individual in becoming a sacrifice for the sins of others, just like Christ's. Book Two of the novel places side by side two scenes that symbolize light (i.e., life) and darkness (i.e., death). The lively, vivacious throbbing of the

Chicken Village market place, its overall hustle and bustle that attracts Lenka and Rudy is juxtaposed against Osip's underground world, the world that requires no taking sides with anyone, the world of utter darkness, silence and isolation. In Greek mythology Hades, the son of Kronos and the brother of Zeus, was the god of the underworld, the habitation of the shades and the dead; later the name itself became synonymous with the place of the dead. Osip's underworld is equally a sanctuary for dead souls. It is both sanctuary and haven in the true meaning of the word; just like Hades it bears no resemblance to Christian hell. Osip seeks refuge down there voluntarily. He feels safe underground, out of reach of just punishment for no one is ever punished there. In order to take his punishment Osip — the dead soul — must return to the world of the living.

Christ's bleeding heart, both the Christian symbol of suffering and Osip's agony, dominates all major phases of his life: as a wooden, broken and clumsily repaired artefact it dominates his youth; later, as a copy made with his own hands from a piece of driftwood, it fatally dooms his North American life; finally, as a memory of both the first and the second it fatally interferes with the events upon his return to Gobelye.

In the profusion of Slovene American literary production Mlakar's novel deserves a special place due to its quality. Unlike many others Mlakar the artist dominates over Mlakar the immigrant. His novel, presenting the story of an individual, is free of generalizations so typical of (Slovene) immigrant writing. Mlakar, the omniscient narrator, keeps out of his story, never explicitly taking sides with anyone. Yet, despite everything, the tragic death of his protagonist probably does, in a way, reveal Mlakar's unique, indirect opting for something extremely important: for the openness of human spirit, the readiness to accept the new as well as to ennoble oneself with the foreign and the unknown.

Univerza v Ljubljani

POVZETEK

**DALEČ IN PROČ: AGONIJA IZSELJENSTVA V
MLAKARJEVEM ROMANU HE, THE FATHER**

Mlakarjev malo znani roman He, the Father (On oče), ki je izšel leta 1950 pri ugledni založbi Harper & Brothers predstavlja enega od umetniških vrhuncev slovensko-ameriške književnosti. Pripoveduje o mladem slovenskem paru s podeželja, ki emigrira v Ameriko in za seboj podre vse mostove. On, Osip, pred odhodom ukrade očetove prihranke, ker rabi denar za pot, in ko ga starec zaloti, se spopadeta in oče obleži. Ona, Lenka, edinka in ljubljenska svojih staršev, še posebej očeta, odide zdoma brez slovesa. V Ameriki skušata začeti znova, a Osipova vest je močnejša: uniči mu zakon, družino in dom in ga slednjič požene nazaj domov, kjer neslavno konča. Lenki se novo življenje bolje posreči in ko zapusti prizorišče, bralec ve, da bosta s sinom Rudyjem uspela. Mlakarjev psihološki roman se tematsko močno zgleduje pri Dostojevskem (Zločin in kazen) in pri norveško-ameriškem pisatelju O.E. Rølvaaugu (Giants of the Earth/Velikani zemlje), zanimiv pa je tudi po svoji strukturi. V slogovnem smislu roman uvaja vrsto elementov, ki segajo preko ravni realistične pripovedi - od biblijskih podob do antičnega mita in izvirne metaforike.