

*Who's Afraid of the Werewolf? An Imagological View of Kitzberg's Play*¹

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Abstract. The archetypal fear of the other and the idea that it is safer to hold on to the familiar are the central topics discussed in one of the best plays in Estonian literature *Libahunt* (*The Werewolf*, 1912) by August Kitzberg (1855–1927). Although the play was written at the beginning of the 20th century, it is still open to interpretation and has not lost its relevance. It is a play about conflict between values: the Tammaru family is conservative and afraid of strangers, of foreign blood, while one of their foster children Tiina is a free spirit whose appearance and nature is different from the family. She is not one of the villagers, she is an outsider and the family and the villagers are afraid of her. This stranger is seen as mysterious and dangerous – she is said to be a werewolf – and the xenophobic village casts her out. Using imagology as a theoretical basis, the article concentrates on the aspect of the foreigner and on fear of the other.

Keywords: the Other; fear, werewolf; August Kitzberg; Estonian drama

Introduction

When Europe found itself in a new situation due to the influx of refugees, not only were economic, political and financial issues brought to the fore, but also more existential questions. On the one hand it was said that the European way of life was in danger, raising the fear of losing one's (national) identity, while on the other hand refugees were seen as enriching society. The fear of the other/ the stranger was clearly detectible and it was considered safer to hold on to the familiar, to one's own. Recent years in Estonia(n politics) have also shown that the issue of foreigners and foreign influence has not lost its topicality.

These issues are discussed in the play *Libahunt* (*The Werewolf*, 1912) by Estonian writer August Kitzberg (1855–1927).² He is one of the most notable Estonian playwrights, who raised (alongside Estonian writer Eduard Vilde

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² The general information about Kitzberg can be found in Rebane 2009: 140–141.

(1865–1933)) the Estonian original drama to a high artistic level (Talivee, Tüür s.a.). The first Estonian professional theatre, Vanemuine, in Tartu, opened in 1906 with Kitzberg's play *Tuulte pöörises* (*In the Turning of the Winds*). Kitzberg's *Libahunt* was staged in 1911 as the opening piece for the third Estonian professional theatre, *Endla*, in Pärnu.³ *Tuulte pöörises* (published in 1906), *Libahunt* and *Kauka jumal* (*The God of Lucre*, 1915) form the chrestomathic core of Kitzberg's dramaturgy (Kruuspere 2005: 970), while *Libahunt* is considered one of the core texts of Estonian literature and theatre (Saro 2017: 46). It has been noted that in Estonian theatre and literature Kitzberg's play has the same importance and standing as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in world theatre and literature (Veidemann 2011: 36).⁴ Similar to *Hamlet*, *Libahunt* has inspired and continues to inspire a large number of directors both on stage and on screen, for example, in 1955 a ballet by Lydia Auster (1912–1993), in 1968 a film directed by Leida Laius (1923–1996), which has become a classic, and in 2011 a musical (directed by Neeme Kuningas (b. 1955)). It “has functioned as a national core text in the history of Estonian theatre, to which the theatre always returns” (Epner 2009: 91). Each decade is reflected in *Libahunt*, as each decade is reflected in *Hamlet* (Epner s.a.).

One of the central aspects of the play is the question of the Other, the foreigner. The Other has a crucial role: “In the process of identifying and constructing one's own Self, each society and period generates its own specific figures of the foreign as exemplary, counter, or oppositional images” (Albrecht 2007: 326). This article concentrates on the aspect of the foreigner and on the aspect of fear of the Other using imagology as its theoretical basis. Who is the foreigner? What is considered foreign? How is the topic discussed in the play? How has the topic been interpreted?

Libahunt: The Archetypical Story of Fear and Love

Libahunt is a play which, under its cover, hides a more complex and archetypical story. The events in the play take place at the beginning of the 19th century.⁵

³ The play has also been staged outside Estonia: in Latvia, Finland, Lithuania, Sweden, Hungary, Italy, Argentina and Ukraine (Rebane 2009: 141). For information about the translation of Kitzberg's plays, see: <https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/k/kitzberg/plays>.

⁴ In the production of the play by Estonian director Mikk Mikiver (1937–2006) in 1974 Hamlet's famous monologue “To be or not to be” (Act III, sc i) was entwined into the play (Kruuspere 2005: 973), which emphasised the main male character's hesitation (Epner s.a.).

⁵ The background of the play is formed using the traditional folk stories about werewolves, people's beliefs and customs. Kitzberg himself had gathered folklore about werewolves

Peasants are depicted as very conservative and cautious as their mentality has been deeply affected by living for centuries as serfs under the command of their masters. The main conflict in the play springs from the fact that one character, a young female named Tiina, starts to protest against the mentality of the peasants. Tiina is descended from the family of free elders who have been able to escape serfdom. Years ago, Tiina's mother had been captured from their distant cottage in the woods and, accused of being a witch, was punished by being beaten to death in the pillory in front of the church. Tiina is raised by a foster family in the village. The Tammaru family has another foster child Mari who, unlike Tiina, has acquired the peasant mentality of the family. Both Tiina and Mari have feelings towards Margus, the only son of the family. Margus's parents want him to marry Mari but Margus has feelings for Tiina. Consequently, being jealous, Mari starts spreading rumours that Tiina is a werewolf and she is cast out of the village. Tiina invites Margus to come with her but he does not have the strength to change his life, thus Tiina goes alone to the forest. Years later when Mari and Margus are in an unhappy and childless marriage, they meet again. While trying to scare away wolves, Margus accidentally shoots Tiina, who has come to Tammaru. She dies forgiving him and praying.

The play has five acts and is characterised by repetition and a cyclic nature: in the first act (the prologue) and in the fifth act (the epilogue) the situation and the atmosphere are the same: a winter evening, a dim barn, a storm and the howling of wolves (Epner 2005: 95). In both acts these characteristics predict the appearance of Tiina, who in the first act is a child and in the last act an adult. Furthermore, in the first act she is offered food and shelter, though in the fourth act she is denied both (see also Kalnačs 2009: 98) when she comes back after spending several days in the forest.⁶ As in the first act the word

that he sent to a notable Estonian folklorist Jakob Hurt (1839–1907) (Talivee, Tüür 2013: 857). It has been noted that although Kitzberg has used folkloristic motifs, his goal is not to give a truthful picture of the life in the 19th century. The play is not burdened with details depicting the milieu, therefore, the humane meaning of the conflict can emerge unhindered. The folkloristic elements are used to create either a romantic or a shadowy-mystical mood. Folk traditions, songs and games in the Midsummer's Eve bonfire, snake and wolf spells, folk costumes worn by characters, an old barn – all add archaic-traditional shades to the picture (Epner 1997: 26). Estonian legendary literary researcher Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971) has also noted that the historical decorations form only the outer frame where 'all the tenderness and liveliness of the soul of the modern human, all our thirst for the beautiful and profound has been sated' (Tuglas 1915: 382).

⁶ Tiina has a habit of fleeing to the forest when she is unjustly accused. When the grandmother asks, she says: "In the forest it is so good to... you can press your face into

mother is Tiina's first word, it is also one of her last words in the final act. "The impression of a cycle, a slow circular movement, is further strengthened by the time spans between the first and second, as well as the fourth and the fifth acts. These two interruptions together include a time period of fifteen years and strengthen the impression of eternal repetition" (Kalnačs 2009: 96).⁷ The repetition illustrates a mythical approach to time: time closes as a circle, everything turns back and starts again (Epner 1997: 30) as is also expressed by the elderly grandmother in the play: "Everything repeats here on earth – nothing changes. People – come and go, are born and die [...]" (Kitzberg 1976: 49–50). The grandmother is a central character, giving advice and guidance to all parties. Her comments are wide-ranging, from fear of God to syncretistic world magic (Talivee, Tüür 2013: 867). The grandmother is the only one who tries to explain why the family members are what they are and act as they act. Conversations between her and Margus unveil the core of the opposition between the familiar and the foreign.

Foreign vs Familiar

The relationship between Tiina and others is characterised by the opposition between the familiar and the foreign. When Margus talks with his grandmother and tries to defend Tiina, who from the beginning is seen as the Other, a stranger, the elderly grandmother states that Tammaru family members have always had yellow hair and blue eyes, adding: "The family has always taken wives from among our own – we do not have a drop of foreign blood in our veins, it is – pure!" (Kitzberg 1976: 41). The Tammaru family is proud of their blood, although they have always been serfs and their women lack beauty, as grandmother also notes (Kitzberg 1976: 41). The free spirit Tiina is different from the villagers, she has a different background and appearance. Tiina is dark-haired, impulsive, passionate and proud, while Mari is fair-haired, cautious and quiet, as are other members of the Tammaru family. The family values the latter characteristics, which are seen as normal, while Tiina's characteristics are seen as foreign and dangerous. A dark haired and passionate woman disturbs the quiet and dull life of the family, which has fatal consequences.

It is notable that although Tiina descends from the family of free ancestors, she has a socially lower position than members of the Tammaru family and

the moss and cry... until drop by drop the anger melts and the heart is once again light" (Kitzberg 1976: 45). All translations are by the author.

⁷ Between the first and the second acts there are ten years, between the fourth and fifth, five years.

other villagers. In a world deeply affected by living for centuries as serfs under the command of masters, Tiina's heritage has no value, although she could have a superior position as a descendant of ancient noblemen. Tiina herself draws attention to this fact: [to Margus] "Your breed? What is so special about your breed? One generation after another you have sat here in Tammaru and – worked for the masters. My mother said that we descend from free people [...] our generations go back to kings and elders. But that – that is of course ... nothing in your eyes?" (Kitzberg 1976: 21). The fact that Tiina is so self-confident and proud of her heritage is not tolerated by the Tammaru family, nor by other villagers. They do not admire those who have managed to escape serfdom and have preserved their special position; on the contrary, these are seen as negative characteristics. Tuglas has seen here the antagonism between the blood of kings and the blood of serfs (Tuglas 1915: 971). Tiina is not willing to tolerate injustice and submissiveness. Her blood is said to be different: "It is tender, it boils more easily" (Kitzberg 1976: 37). She does not have the obedient blood of a slave (Kitzberg 1976: 39). In this play the aspect of foreign blood, one of the main topics in Kitzberg's dramas, is discussed (the other topics are the curse of money and the evil of vodka) (Kruuspere 2005: 970). In a conversation with Tiina, Margus says, "You are different, joyful, mischievous, vehement. This is alien to them, they are just as afraid of you. While Mari is like they are, our family and breed" (Kitzberg 1976: 21). Margus is torn between his family and Tiina, seeing his family as "they" but at the same time talking about "our family". Margus struggles with himself, his feelings and beliefs. While he is hesitant, both female characters are determined and prepared to fight for his love. Margus can in some aspects be interpreted as a man going wrong, a type that has been seen as characteristic of Estonian tradition on the whole (see Haug 2010: 19). He, as numerous other male characters in Estonian literature, can be seen as responsible for the failure of the love story. Margus can also be characterised by his "inability to *act*" (Buttry 1982: 99). Already in the first act there is an event that may be seen as a metaphor. Margus makes a wheel of fire by putting hot coal on the spinning wheel (Kitzberg 1976: 8). Little Mari says it is beautiful but the adults do not see the beauty, they take it as mischievous dangerous. Years later Margus's relationship with Tiina can also be interpreted as playing with fire, as Tiina is several times described as hot and fiery. The Tammaru family is not accustomed to something outside of their routine, and although Margus tries he does not have the courage or strength to change his way of life. He stays with his family, the familiar and the safe, not wanting to take the risk of going with the Other, the foreign.

There is a fundamental difference between Tiina and other villagers. "Tiina has also been regarded as a representative of Dionysian culture in a

predominantly Apollonian environment. As a woman she is wild, unsubmitive, independent and reasoning individual who differs from the rest. Her story is a story of strong love that clashes against superstition, jealousy and submissiveness in a community of serfdom" (Talivee, Tüür s.a.) Tiina is also depicted as someone crossing the border between home and the forest. It is relevant that for her the forest is also a home as she has spent her childhood there and is capable of living in the forest. It has been noted that her closeness to nature, particularly in the forest, is emphasised in various ways: "she feels at home in the forest, she speaks to the squirrel and to the snake, she calls wolves her brothers, etc. In return, the forest seems to respond to her passions and demands" (Epner 2009: 90). Thus, the fact that she is a child of nature distinguishes her further from the villagers. The notion of werewolf indicates Tiina's double nature: she belongs at the same to nature (the forest) and to society (the village), or rather, she does not belong either of them (Epner 1997: 29). Tiina is not one of the villagers, she is seen as an outsider and both the family and the villagers are afraid of her. Tiina, like her mother, is familiar with nature and knows the secrets of healing, a type of knowledge that is unattainable to the village community and, therefore, the easiest solution is to describe it as witchcraft. By making this deduction, it is easy for the villagers to ascribe criminal motives to any of Tiina's actions that they view negatively (Talivee, Tüür 2013: 866)

The connection – Tiina is a stranger and therefore not completely trustworthy – escalates into suspicions that Tiina is a witch and a werewolf (Talivee, Tüür 2013: 864). The Other is seen as mysterious and dangerous. She is said to be a werewolf and so the xenophobic society casts her out. (Tiina's ultimate exclusion takes place in the fifth act when Margus tries to give a wolf bread on the blade of a knife, because according to common belief this helps a werewolf become human again, but Mari stops him (see also Kalnačs 2009: 98–99).) In other words, a stranger, a potentially aggressive Other, is deprived of the status of human being (Corbey, Leerssen 1991: vi). It has been noted that in Estonian witch trials there are similar traits. In several cases the defendant was either a foreigner or a descendant of free peasants, with the defendant already living on the periphery of the community (Talivee, Tüür 2013: 863). Having a special position and being different are not characteristics valued by the majority. The play can be seen as a reflection of archetypical oppositions shaping the human world view: foreign and known, nature and society.

Resistance vs Continuity

The opposition between the foreign and known is associated with more existential questions. The Tammaru family has lived for centuries in a certain way, adapting to living as serfs and accepting this as normal. It has given them a certain confidence as they live in a world where everything is predictable and clear. When Tiina rocks that certainty, they treat her as an intruder who threatens their way of life. There is a conflict of values; two totally different views on life collide. Tiina values freedom above all, she values the right to live as one chooses and love whom one chooses, as she states in the climactic scene (Act III) at the Midsummer's Eve bonfire when she is accused of being a werewolf.

“What do you want from me? You consider yourself humans but you are worse than predatory animals. You say that I am a werewolf. Yes, I am, as you do not want it to be the other way. Better to be a thousand times a wolf, a wolf in the forest with other wolves when a human is no better than you. A wolf only kills from hunger and a wolf does not kill other wolves, but you. And you consider yourselves better than me? Here – a wolf, proud, does not feel shame! But you – rods anointed with the blood of slaves lie behind the fences for dogs to lick. A wolf is free, does what it wishes, comes when it wishes and goes when it wishes, loves and hates whom it wants.” (Kitzberg 1976: 35).

Here too, the difference between the foreign and the known is marked using the human vs animal opposition, however, here the animal is seen as positive. The Wolf becomes the symbol of freedom and eventually Tiina identifies with wolves because society casts her out. Although she has lived among the villagers since she was a child, she was not accepted. Tiina clearly states this, saying to her foster parents: “You have given bread for the body but you have let the soul starve. You have nourished and covered me but you have not loved me. You gave shelter to the body but the soul was left alone. And I was looking for a soul. I was looking for a soul for ten long years, and did not find” (Kitzberg 1976: 46).

Tiina values freedom and the right to live and love as one chooses above all, but the Tammaru family does not rate personal happiness highly, rather they stress the importance of the continuance of the family and the nation. Age-old wisdom and beliefs are given by the grandmother, for example “We were phlegmatic and slow; [...] We served God and slaved at the manor trembling with fear; the pleasure and happiness of life were unknown to us. [...] We have honoured our traditional ways, we have been quiet and meek and ... tried to master our passions. [...] We are all destined to suffer [...] But time will heal everything.” (Kitzberg 1976: 42).

Therefore, there is a conflict of values as two different views on life collide: on the one side the uncompromising individual following her ideals, and on

the other conservative and calculating people. The tragedy lies in the fact that neither side can be completely condemned, and that both sides are justifiable. The conflict is inevitable and unsolvable (Epner 1997: 28).⁸ In the end neither side proves to be the winner. Although Margus marries Mari, they do not have children, so the Tammaru family line does not continue. At the same time Tiina cannot continue living in isolation in the forest among wolves. In the end the Kitzbergian resignation is detectable: Tiina dies forgiving Margus and praying (Epner 1997: 29).

The play has been open to interpretations and through the years different aspects have been stressed, for example the past of the nation has been depicted using ethnographic and folkloristic elements, the psychological aspect and human nature and the collision of two completely different views on life have been investigated, and the pursuit of freedom has been contrasted to submissive nature.⁹ It has been said that Kitzberg's tragedy embodies the dilemma of a small nation under foreign rule: personal liberty vs the continuance of a nation (Epner s.a.). For example, the film (1968), directed by notable Estonian director Leida Laius, concentrates on the strong female character Tiina, whose quest for freedom can be interpreted as the Estonian hope for freedom from the Soviet occupation.¹⁰ On the other hand, in different productions staged during the 1980s the Tammaru family was seen in a more positive light (Talivee, Tüür s.a.). "Thus, the foreign is not an objective quality of whatever is distant, strange, unknown, unfamiliar, or rare [...] but relative vis-à-vis to the observer's subjective experience or knowledge. It is part of a given social reality and, as such, subject to historical and cultural change" (Albrecht 2007: 327). The Tammaru family, who can be interpreted as a small nation, has lived for centuries in a certain way and managed to survive. It has managed to survive as it has not allowed in foreign influence or foreigners. Therefore, on a deeper level *The Werewolf* addresses the problems of identity and roots.

Conclusion

Kitzberg's *Libahunt*, a core text of Estonian literature and theatre, has not lost its contemporaneity and continues to intrigue both directors and audiences.

⁸ The ideological duel between values reminds us of the modification of conflict between the ideal of freedom and conformism in *Antigone*. Tiina can be interpreted as a national Antigone (Epner s.a.).

⁹ About the reception of the play see Järv 1979.

¹⁰ More detailed information about the film can be found in the Estonian Film Database: <http://www.efis.ee/en/film-categories/movies/id/209/general-information>.

The play can be interpreted as a work that introduces Estonian customs and folklore; as a collective portrait of Estonians; as a social generalisation (the quest for freedom vs conservativeness, or pantheism vs Christianity, or common sense vs superstition); as the conflict between a free human being and society; or as the tragedy of an extraordinary personality (Saro 2017: x). The existential question the play presents is whether and to what extent one can welcome the foreign. Does the foreign pose a threat or is it something enriching? In the play Tiina is depicted as a foreigner. Her appearance, character and heritage are different from the Tammaru family and other villagers; she has a double nature as she belongs at the same time to nature (the forest) and to society (the village). Tiina is not one of the villagers, she is seen as an outsider and both the family and the villagers are afraid of her. Finally, she is accused of being a werewolf and cast out from human society. The archetypal fear of the other/the stranger is clearly detectable; it is considered safer to hold on to the familiar, to hold on that what is one's own. There is a conflict of values as two different views on life collide: on the one side the uncompromising individual following her ideals, and on the other conservative and calculating people. The tragedy lies in the fact that neither side can be completely condemned, both are in some way justified. The play is open to an interpretation that says perhaps we should welcome the other, welcome diversity, as has been noted: "Interpretations of the 'foreign' thus carry affective qualities. Exoticism, xenophobia, and ethnocentric views are specific ways to organise and structure the perception and interpretation of alterity as foreign. [...] They conceive of what is seen as foreign either as something special or as stimulating, threatening, or inferior to one's own culture or society" (Albrecht 2007: 327). The dilemma presented by Kitzberg at the beginning of the 20th century remains.

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