Romana Kališová

# Gaps in the Narrative of Modernist Poetry

## Its Function and Ways of Interpretation

Modernist poetry frequently relies on narrative gaps. Taking Slovak lyric poetry as a case study, this paper examines the function, structure, and representation of these gaps, demonstrating that they serve as a central meaning-making device in modernist poetry, which is largely founded on the unsaid. Furthermore, it addresses the representation of character, highlighting how female figures are often depicted as incomplete, thereby embodying narrative gaps in themselves. It shows the narrative pattern that recurs across multiple modernist poems: the depiction of an unknown woman observed by the poem's speaker. The study presents the lyric narrative as inherently fragmentary, positioning narrative gaps as a constitutive component of its structure. Although the research focuses specifically on Slovak modernist poetry from the beginning of the twentieth century, its conclusions hold broader validity for modernist poetry as such. Ultimately, the modernist gap emerges as both an aesthetic strategy and a historical symptom as well.

## 1. Introduction

The tendencies of modernist writing in Slovakia emerged at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leaving the first two decades of the new century particularly significant. This period can be defined by internalization of poetic expression and the introduction of different thematic concerns, a focus that is quite different than before, usually self-referential: such as unfulfilled love and difficulties in communication; on the formal level of the text: the use of inner monologue, and a turn toward much more introspective poetics characterized by feelings of melancholy, anxiety, doubts, and loss. Slovak modernist poetry, just like e.g. Czech (similar tendencies to the Slovak one), or American modernist poetry – TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams – frequently uses a narrative scheme while at the same time remaining fragmentary (e.g., the short poem by William Carlos Williams *This Is Just to Say*). Rather than presenting complete narrative situations, poems typically focus on selected aspects, leaving the whole situation only suggested.

Gaps as empty spaces in the narrative, or rather as 'spaces of indeterminacy', were first discussed by Roman Ingarden (1973 [1931]) in his book *The Literary Work of Art*. There is no consensus on how the reader should fill in these gaps, or whether they should do so at all. In this context, Ingarden speaks of passive (receptive) and active reading. In passive reading, the reader understands the text but does not perform any further supplementary mental operations. However, if we perceive the work as the multi-layered entity that it truly is, then in active reading, the reader can engage with the individual layers and fill them in. In such reading, the reader somehow becomes a co-author of the work (cf. Ingarden 1967 [1937], 33–38).[1] For the readers to be able to constitute

[1] I worked primarily with the Czech translation of *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego, O poznávaní literárního díla*. The English translation *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* was published in 1973.

the world presented in a literary work, to concretize the objects presented, and to engage their own creative abilities, they must proceed only within the limits of what the text suggests and permits (cf. 47).

Marie-Laure Ryan (1991, 51) speaks of the so-called principle of minimal deviation. According to her, we transfer all the laws we know from the real world into the fictional world – unless the text states otherwise. Everything the text does not state is therefore the same for the reader as in his actual world. Ruth Ronen (1994) and Bohumil Fořt (2005), however, explain that the fictional world merely resembles the real world. Our projections may be based on experiences from the real world, but the fictional world is a separate system of structures and relationships, and filling in the gaps therefore does not necessarily operate according to the principles of the real world. If we accept the claim that the fictional world is a world in and of itself and exists independently of the real world, the rules, norms, and experiences we have in the actual world need not apply to the fictional world at all. It exists according to its own rules, establishes relationships among its elements, and functions according to its own principles.

Miroslav Červenka (2005, 736) offers a different perspective on understanding gaps in the fictional world of lyric poetry. He begins by arguing that the lyrical fictional world is primarily the subject's inner world, closer to the speaker's experiences, emotions, and attitudes than to external events. Červenka thus frames the structure of the narrative itself from a different point of view. Narration in a lyric poem becomes internalized, limited by the speakers themselves and their own experience of the event. Červenka addresses such a limitation with the logical concept of 'strand' (following the concept of 'strand' by Wolterstorff). For him, a strand is a specific situation within the subject's mental world, selected from the entire fictional world, illuminated by the text, and exposed to the reader's perception (cf. 741). M. Červenka captures the fragmentary nature inherent in poetry while not ruling out narrative gaps.

Lyric poetry, however, is fundamentally based on the unsaid. This brings to the fore the question of whether it is even necessary to fill in the gaps while reading, take them into account, and whether they carry any interpretive weight at all, and whether they have any significant effect on the meaning of a whole poem. As Thomas Pavel (2012, 150) points out, the modernist period saw an excessive use of gaps in narrative structure, reflecting the historical experience of an era marked by instability and social crises. According to Pavel, in times of crisis, literary works tend to maximize the incompleteness of the fictional world. Thus, if the modernist poem draws heavily on narrative gaps, these cannot be perceived merely as elements disrupting the text's structure, but also as meaning-generating factors that paradoxically play an active role in constructing the meaning of the fictional world in various ways. Among the authors of typically fragmented writing is the Slovak modernist poet and representative author of Slovak modernist poetry, Ivan Krasko (1876–1958).

## 2. Gaps as a Meaning-Making Element in Slovak Modernist Poetry

*Ballad*

When the bell was to ring for the day, we set out,
in the twilight, in the dusk,
believing that perhaps by the evening
We'll have back our trust.

And all day long we walked alone,
in faith, without rest,
hoping that, perhaps, weary,
The cruel pride will be tamed.

And by evening, the two of us arrived together,
without faith, out of sorts–
and one heart whimpered
like a dog, like a dog… (Krasko 1909, 6; 1966, 51; my translation)

The *Ballad* is a poem that, in essence, is built on the unsaid. The epic foundation, which remains at the level of a sketched-out plot, is represented in the poem by the motif of movement through space. This captures the complex experience of the interpersonal conflict between two characters, which, like any resolution, remains unspoken. The captured event is thus exclusively introspective, and so is its mediation. The external spatial setting plays a role in the poem only to the extent necessary to involve the very space through which the characters move in the action. Even this, however, is grasped metaphorically; movement in space is rather a change of state on a mental level, a change in experience. The speaker moves from the expectation of reconciliation to a state of dissatisfaction.

Information about the two characters and their surrounding world is significantly reduced. The characters are not defined by gender, the relationship between them is unknown, and the event remains unnamed. Ronen (1994, 108–114) describes fictional characters as inherently incomplete (in a logical and semantic sense), yet she also notes that readers usually do not realize this incompleteness. While reading, they do not even notice that some information is missing (Ronen also draws on the research of Ingarden). In the case of Krasko's poem, however, the question arises as to whether it is fundamentally important to know which heart "whimpered / like a dog" during the couple's conflict, since such a fictional fact would subsequently determine the direction of the entire interpretation. Active reading, however, naturally raises several questions, the answers to which are in no way indicated in the text. They concern not only the characters themselves – from general information about who they are to their relationships –, but also the unspoken event – the unspoken conflict between the characters in the narrative. The lyrical narrative conveys only the state that arose after the event, not the event itself.

The motif of movement through space adds exhaustion to the mental burden, which seems to carry over into the evocation of a physically demanding, almost slow walk ("in faith, without rest"). The physical and mental fatigue in tone resembles Maša Haľamová's poem *The Axe in the Forest*:

Our forest, cheerful, fragrant, rustling forest,
They cut down into squares of deathly white.
When we went for a walk together in the night–
The twigs beneath our feet cried...

The last axe fell silent–
a bare plain
grins at our sorrowful eyes.

We walked through the dead field
unhealed.
Our hands grew cold, and our palms hardened.

Without the trees whispering,
we returned in
sad and weary... (Haľamová 1928, 20; my translation)

Despite the considerable similarity of the event itself, Haľamová's poem has a different narrative framework – the action is outward-oriented. Not only does it not reduce the surrounding space, unlike Krasko's work, but it directly focuses on it within a comparable narrative situation – the return home, much like in Krasko's work only intensifies the shared sense of unease. The exact cause of the partners' conflict remains unspoken; the walk takes place in tense silence. In the poem *The Axe in the Forest*, the meaning-generating significance of gaps is clearly evident. The poem exists on two levels of meaning: the first emphasizes external events, the changes in the space in which the poem is situated. Two partners walk hand in hand through a recently deforested landscape that now lies bare. It brings an environmental issue to the forefront: the devastation of the forest evokes a sense of loss and anxiety about a space they once knew intimately. Their hands are harder and colder, evoking the feeling of having done heavy manual labour. This is a destructive, human-caused event that cannot be undone. They return home sad and disappointed; their emotional state mirrors the narrative situation's external setting.

The second interpretation, at its core, is based on identifying the poem's gaps. In this interpretive framework, the surrounding environment functions not as an ecological aspect but as an allegorical image of the partners' inner state. Following an intense human conflict – neither named nor hinted at in the poem –, the feeling of emotional emptiness transforms into a vast space that opens before the characters. The hardened palms suggest a loss of the ability to offer loving touch and, in the poem, create a contrast with Haľamová's frequent metaphor of the palm as a symbol of a tender, loving touch.

In both analysed poems, the gaps materialize through the motif of silence. In Haľamová's work, the silence of the axe conveys the blows' replacement by an emotionally exhausting silence, and the unspoken conflict between the partners shifts to the realm of the unsaid in the lyrical narrative. The text thus assumes the characteristics of incompleteness, disrupting the narrative's meaning while simultaneously shaping it into a metaphorical image. The axe has fallen silent, the struggle has fallen silent, the quarrel has fallen silent – a silence has spread that is difficult to bear and permeates the entire relational space between the partners. In Krasko's work, the silence stretches across the entire day, with the category of time taking on key significance. The poem begins "in the twilight, in the dusk" and ends in the "evening." This prolonged silence over an extended period intensifies the conflict, in which the speaker engages in no productive dialogue with the other character. The characters return home hurt and disappointed – the silence here creates a gap in which not only does a great deal remain unsaid within the text's structure, but it also translates into a mutual silence between the communicating partners. Much remains unsaid between them, both on the formal and semantic levels of the text.

The narrative situation in both poems, however, is essentially similar. The speaker walks through the space with another character, does not engage in dialogue with him, and they remain in a heavy silence. The characters themselves are largely incomplete, and in Krasko's poem, the narrative is so deeply internalized that the other character is merely an extra. In the poem *The Axe in the Forest*, the second character is defined not only by gender but also by the relationship between himself and

the speaker. It could be argued that Haľamová presents a more coherent narrative event that, while remaining unspoken, is less internalized in its lyrical expression. In the poem *Ballad*, Krasko remains exclusively at the level of the speaker's experience; the only hint of external events is a walk and the subsequent return home.

Krasko's poem *Ballad* could be described as a poem prototypically built upon the existence of gaps within the narrative structure of modernist poetry. For the reader, what remains unsaid is just as important as what the poem itself explicitly contains. Krasko brings these spaces of indeterminacy to the forefront, and the poem literally becomes a mechanism for the reader to construct meaning. According to Wolfgang Iser (2001, 41), it is the reader who generates the meaning of the text. In the case of the *Ballad*, the reader's cooperation is an almost indispensable element in understanding the lyrical statement.

## 3. The Incompleteness of the Female Character in Modernist Poetry

One narrative pattern that recurs across multiple modernist poets is the depiction of an unknown woman observed by the poem's speaker. The speaker, however, merely watches her; he does not address her, and the poem offers no further clues regarding her identity. Such a pattern appears, for example, in the works of Slovak modern authors, Vladimír Roy, Ladislav Novomeský, and Ján Smrek. From the perspective of narrative structure, the female character is largely incomplete; yet she remains unclear even to the speaker himself, who admits to knowing little about her. He perceives her as a beautiful and unattainable stranger who fascinates him. The indeterminacy of the female character, however, cannot be understood merely as a lack of information about her, but as a constitutive element of the poem's meaning. In these poems, the woman serves as a blank space into which the speaker projects his own ideas, desires, and judgments. The relationship between the speaker and the female character is thus not based on interaction but rather on perception: the woman is not a communication partner but an object of observation.

The meaning-generating function of such a void refers precisely to one of the modernist conceptions of woman. She is, admittedly, an individual character in the narrative, but she is also the impulse that triggers the speaker's inner monologue. The poem's narrative does not center on an event (such as their meeting), but on the very act of perception itself. The modernist poem preserves the state of unrealized contact. The fascination arises precisely from the non-realization of the relationship.

From a mediation perspective, this is a very limited focalization. All information about the female character exists at the level of the speaker's perception and does not extend into the realm of interaction. The possibility of a personal encounter between the speaker and the woman thus remains. The gap in the character's structure is simultaneously a space in the narrative structure: the speaker observes, but does not act. A narrative situation of this kind can be observed in Roy's poem *Magdaléna*.

> I used to see her, in luxury, in the light,
> her gaze ablaze with the fire of aroused desires.
> A blush of roses on her cheeks… her voice being bright…
> In the fragrant salon, the bustle of longing lovers.

Now, a black gown – who knows what she grieves for?
In her deep eye – a refracted ray,
pale radiance compels empathy and support…
– Have mercy, Lord, teach me not to blame!
– – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – –
She knelt… on her lips, no remorse,
a stream of tears trickles down her white cheek…
– For our club, this is an excellent source…
Behind me, I hear the lover's verdict.
1908. (Roy 1921, 31; my translation)

The poem captures the speaker's encounters with a woman he knows only by sight. He remembers her from the past as an attractive and sociable woman from salon circles, surrounded by the bustle of society and entertainment. Later, he sees her again – but now she is dressed in black, grief-stricken. He encounters her in a church, where he sees her kneeling. Her appearance evokes sympathy in the speaker, yet it remains unclear what has happened. The final verse, in which someone behind the speaker cynically describes her behaviour as 'excellent fodder' for society, suggests that her transformation is not seen as a personal tragedy but as a subject of gossip and judgment. The poem thus contrasts the female character's past with her supposed transformation and presents the perspective of those around her rather than her own inner story.

The poem's narrative is fragmentary. In the terminology of Červenka's stories, only one character in the plot is illuminated – a woman whom the narrator encounters repeatedly, yet hardly knows. This fragmentary nature does not arise from a fragmentation of events, but from a reduction of information about the character: Magdaléna is not developed as a character, but as a phenomenon that the speaker observes and to which he repeatedly returns. The speaker appears in the narrative solely as an observer, watching another character's experiences rather than his own. He also focuses all his attention on her: he knows her name, he can describe in detail what the woman looks like, but he does not know what she is experiencing or what event is causing her distress. The description he uses to define her appearance is also generalizing and stereotypical. He portrays the female character as the embodiment of men's desires, rosy-cheeked and energetic-voiced. Furthermore, the name Magdaléna evokes the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene, who is traditionally associated with the label 'sinner'.

The change that occurs in the plot due to an unspoken event runs parallel to the change in Magdaléna's appearance. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker presents Magdaléna as radiant, sought-after, and beautiful. However, due to the unspoken event, she transforms into a grieving woman, shrouded in black, pale-faced, and weeping. The unspoken event simultaneously positions Magdaléna as a victim. She begs God to teach her to forgive. Her suffering is merely a sensation to the society from which she came. Instead of compassion, she becomes the subject of gossip. The lover's speech in the final couplet sharply reflects her sorrow and renders it meaningless, important only as a topic of conversation in society.

The focal point of the event (Doležel 2003) is not the speaker himself, but the character of Magdaléna. She is predestined for this role by the very title of the poem, which bears her name. She is the one to whom all events pertain, even though the speaker is present in the poem. However, his mediation of the event is limited by the distance he maintains from Magdaléna: while he comments on it, he neither sees its course nor intervenes. This distance places him almost in the position of an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, who is part of the narrative but tells the story of another character, not his own (cf. Genette 1980 [1972], 248). The poem, however, remains a lyrical

statement; the speaker is not a disinterested mediator. The very fact that he chooses the character of Magdaléna, whom he observes, to speak for him speaks to his relationship with her. However, based on his actions, this relationship can be described more as fascination than as the building of a closer bond or affection. The only clue the reader receives about the narrator is the narrator's masculine gender. The intention of his narrative could also be a warning – both against the woman's behaviour and against the behaviour of the surrounding society – and a call to attention to certain unwritten social norms and phenomena. What is certain, however, is that the speaker does not know Magdaléna. The reader's ignorance, which corresponds to the speaker's ignorance, is also confirmed by the explicitly formulated question "who knows what she grieves for?" – while the answer to it remains a blank space.

Even though no interactive relationship forms between the speaker and Magdaléna within the fictional world of the poem, Magdaléna's interaction with the surrounding world develops, and the event itself manifests precisely in a change within this interaction. At first, the speaker watches Magdaléna in the salons, among the men ("the bustle of longing lovers"), with a gaze that is provocatively yearning ("her gaze ablaze with the fire of aroused desires"). The way Magdaléna looks at society a little later – or rather, the way society looks at her – changes not only the atmosphere of the narrative but also the emotion experienced. Magdaléna no longer pays attention to the world around her – at the very least, she does not react to it; her gaze changes: "In her deep eye – a refracted ray", her red cheeks pale. People notice her, however, and she becomes the subject of gossip. As Magdaléna undergoes this transformation, the setting also shifts from the bustle of the wealthy salons. Magdaléna, dressed in black, moves to beg God to help her forgive, and her withdrawal from the salon's bustle into a kneeling position evokes the image of a prayer.

Within the narrative structure, Magdaléna finds herself not only in the position of the story's central character but also in a space of semantic indeterminacy. Although she is the story's agent, her identity remains unspoken. In this context, Fořt (2008, 97–100) points out the impossibility of filling the gaps that arise in such mental constructs as literary characters. Since the text is not infinite, neither can the characters be defined in their entirety. At the same time, however, he works with the concept of so-called "interworld identity", which connects fictional characters across various fictional worlds and allows them to be perceived within a broader intertextual horizon. When reflecting on the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene, Roy's poem (as a fictional encyclopaedia of the reader, according to Umberto Eco and Lubomír Doležel) activates a network of meanings linked to her prototext. The readers can thus bring their knowledge of the biblical Mary Magdalene – if they possess it – into the interpretation, which can fundamentally shape the poem's reception. The prototext thus enters a relationship with the metatext and guides the reader's interpretation. However, this depends on the extent to which the author himself draws on the character's original characteristics. The portrayal of Magdaléna with longing glances in the salons corresponds to the biblical conception of Magdalene as a sinner, and this overlap of meaning arises precisely based on the character's interworld identity.

## 4. Conclusion

Interpretive findings show that narrative gaps are a constitutive part of modernist poetry and not a random phenomenon. Whether it is silence, which manifests as a gap between communicative partners, or the incompleteness of characters, the unsaid functions here as a structural principle that disrupts the narrative while simultaneously creating new meaning. From a theoretical perspective, these gaps confirm Iser's assertion that reading is a process of negotiation between what the text provides and what it does not say (Doležel's zero texture). What is left unsaid is not a necessary deficiency that must be filled in, but rather a space for interpretation. The reader oscillates between perceiving gaps as traces of the world (whether biographical, social, environmental, or ultimately even gender-related) and recognizing them as important aspects of interpretation. The modernist gap thus appears as both an aesthetic strategy and a historical symptom. It reflects the instability and fragmentation of the early twentieth century while simultaneously articulating the very essence of the lyric poem's communication with the reader. Meaning is created less by what is explicit than by what is left unsaid; it is rather the absence that compels the reader to engage with the text actively and engage cognitive processes. In this sense, modernist Slovak poetry fits within the broader concept of modernist art: it elevates the unsaid and the incomplete from mere structural elements to bearers of interpretive meaning.

### Works Cited

Červenka, Miroslav (2005): "Fikční světy lyriky." In: Daniela Hodrová (ed.), *Na cestě ke smyslu. Poetika literárního díla 20. století*. Prague, pp. 713–766.
Doležel, Lubomír (2003): *Heterocosmica. Fikce a možné světy*. Prague.
Fořt, Bohumil (2005): *Úvod do sémantiky fikčních světů*. Brno.
Genette, Gérard (1980 [1972]): *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. New York, NY.
Haľamová, Maša (1928): *Dar. Básne Máši Haľamovej*. Bratislava.
Ingarden, Roman (1973 [1931]): *The Literary Work of Art*. Evanston, IL.
Ingarden, Roman (1967 [1937]): *O poznávání literárního díla*. Prague.
Iser, Wolfgang (2001): "Apelová struktura textů. Nedourčenost jako podmínka účinku literární prózy." In: Miloš Sedmiburský (ed.), *Čtenář jako výzva. Výbor z prací kostnické školy recepční estetiky*. Brno, pp. 39-61.
Krasko, Ivan (1909): *Nox et solitudo*. Turčiansky Sv. Martin.
Krasko, Ivan (1966): *Súborné dielo Ivana Krasku. Zväzok prvý. Poézia*. Ed. by Michal Gáfrik. Bratislava.
Pavel, Thomas (2012 [1986]): *Fikční světy lyriky*. Trans. by Hynek Zykmund. Prague / Brno.
Ronen, Ruth (1994): *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge.
Roy, Vladimír (1921): *Rosou a tŕním*. Trenčín.
Ryan, Marie-Laure (1991): *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington, IN.
Williams, William C. (1934): "This Is Just to Say." *Poetry Foundation*. URL: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56159/this-is-just-to-say (26.03.2026).

Mgr. Romana Kališová
Institute of Slovak Literature
Slovak Academy of Sciences
Dúbravská cesta 9
841 04 Bratislava
E-mail: romana.kalisova@savba.sk

**How to cite this paper manuscript:**
Kališová, Romana: "Gaps in the Narrative of Modernist Poetry. Its Function and Ways of Interpretation." Paper presented at the 8th ENN Conference, September 29–October 1, 2025, University of Wuppertal.