

HUNGARIAN CULTURE COURSE

Hungarian Literature

From the sermon tradition and Petőfi to Kertész and Krasznahorkai: writing in a small language.

10 Chapters | Philip Osztromok | Generated with Claude

HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

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Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why Hungarian Literature? Scope & Sources

Hungarian is spoken by around thirteen million people worldwide, most of them in Hungary, and it is unrelated to the Slavic, Germanic and Romance languages around it. For centuries its writers worked in a small language surrounded by large ones, often under foreign rule, and poets came to carry a weight in national life that is hard to match elsewhere. This first chapter sets out the scope of the course, why the language matters for the literature, how names and translations are handled, and the sources to use. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

A Language Apart

Uralic, not Indo-European

Hungarian belongs to the Uralic family, with Finnish and Estonian as its better-known relatives, though the relationship is distant (check). Its grammar uses many suffixes and has no grammatical gender, which affects how it sounds and how it translates.

A small language among big ones

For much of its history educated people in the Kingdom of Hungary used Latin, German or both, and writing in Hungarian was a choice with cultural meaning (check; Chapter 3). The language reform of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was part of the story.

Readers and translators

Because few outsiders read Hungarian, the world's picture of the literature depends on translators and on which authors they choose. A writer can be famous at home and almost unknown abroad, or the reverse (check).

The Poet as National Voice

- **Poetry first.** Poetry holds a central place in Hungarian cultural life. National Poetry Day is held on 11 April, the birthday of the poet Attila József (check), and poems are widely memorised and recited.
- **Poets and politics.** Poets such as Sándor Petőfi took part in the revolution of 1848, and the anthem itself is a poem (Chapters 3 and 4; check). The idea that a poet speaks for the nation is strong, and it is also debated.
- **Prose later.** The novel developed in the nineteenth century and reached a wide audience through writers such as Mór Jókai (Chapter 4).
- **The modern turn.** From 1908 the journal *Nyugat* (West) brought a generation of poets and novelists together (Chapter 5).
- **Silence and survival.** The twentieth century brought war, the Holocaust, communism and censorship, and literature of those years is a record of what could and could not be said (Chapters 6 to 8).

Scope of the Course

Period (check)	Chapters	Examples
Origins to the Baroque	2	The Funeral Sermon, Balassi, Zrínyi
Reform and the nineteenth century	3, 4	Kazinczy, Kölcsey, Vörösmarty, Petőfi, Arany, Madách, Jókai
The modern turn	5, 6	Ady, Babits, Kosztolányi, József, Radnóti
Communism and after	7, 8, 9	Örkény, Ottlik, Szabó, Márai, Kertész, Esterházy, Krasznahorkai

The course is Hungary-centred. Hungarian-language writers in neighbouring countries, such as Transylvania, appear only where they are inseparable from the story. The course covers the major texts and the argument about how they are read, not a complete list of authors.

Names and Translation

Two things to settle at the start

Name order. Hungarians write the family name first, so the poet is *Petőfi Sándor* in Hungary. This course uses the English order, Sándor Petőfi, as English-language sources do (check). **Translations.** Most readers will meet these authors in English translation, and

translations differ a great deal in accuracy and style, and often in which edition they follow. When the course quotes, it quotes briefly, names the translator where it can, and treats any quotation as the translator's version of the original (check availability and translators).

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
Hungarian is a mysterious language unrelated to anything.	What is known about its family, and how distant is the relationship?
Every Hungarian is a poet.	What is the evidence for the central role of poetry, and what is a stereotype?
Hungarian literature is only known through a few Nobel winners.	Which writers are widely translated, and why those?
Great Hungarian writers are untranslatable.	What do translations lose, and what do they keep?
Communism silenced Hungarian literature.	What was banned, what was published, and what grew in between?
The national poet speaks for everyone.	Who is included in "the nation", and who is left out?

Sources to Use

- **The texts,** in named translations, and where possible in a bilingual edition so that readers who know some Hungarian can compare.
- **Literary histories** by scholars of Hungarian studies, who disagree on emphasis and on canon (check which histories exist in English).
- **Institutions,** such as the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest and the national library (check names and what is open).
- **Translation projects and reviews,** which show which authors reached English and when.

A British comparison

Compare the role of Robert Burns in Scotland, whose birthday is marked every year and whose poems are recited at Burns Suppers (check), or the Welsh national eisteddfod,

where poetry is part of public culture. In each case, writing in a smaller language or tradition carries a weight of national identity that the larger English tradition does not.

Check the details

Every name, date and attribution in this course comes from general knowledge and is marked "check" where it is uncertain. Literary histories are revised and recent events, such as new prizes, change quickly, so verify against current sources before quoting anything.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

List five Hungarian writers you already know of, and for each say one thing you believe about them, marking it as documented, claimed or unknown.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose one of the myths in the table and write a short plan for testing it: what evidence you would look for and where.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain in two or three sentences why translations of the same Hungarian poem can differ, and how you would choose which to rely on.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The language:** Uralic, around thirteen million speakers, unrelated to its neighbours (check)
- **Poets:** central to national life; Poetry Day on 11 April (check)
- **The course:** origins to the Baroque, the nineteenth century, the modern turn, communism and after
- **Names:** the course uses the English order (Sándor Petőfi)
- **The caution:** most readers meet the texts in translation, which is itself an interpretation

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · From the Funeral Sermon to Zrínyi

The story of written Hungarian begins with a short prayer-like text from around 1200, copied into a Latin manuscript. Over the following centuries, Hungarian writing was shaped by the Church, the Reformation, the Ottoman wars and the Habsburg monarchy, and a few writers stand out: a lyric poet who was also a soldier, and a soldier-statesman who wrote an epic. This chapter follows that early period, from the Funeral Sermon to Miklós Zrínyi, and asks what survives and why. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Oldest Texts

The Funeral Sermon

The *Halotti beszéd és könyörgés* (Funeral Sermon and Prayer) is the oldest surviving continuous text in Hungarian, dated to around 1192 to 1195 (check). It is a short address over a dead person, followed by a prayer, and was written into a Latin manuscript known as the Pray Codex (check).

Earlier scraps

A few Hungarian words and phrases appear earlier, in Latin documents, such as the foundation charter of Tihany Abbey from 1055 (check). These are place names and phrases, not a continuous text.

The Lamentations of Mary

The *Ómagyar Mária-siralom* (Old Hungarian Lamentations of Mary), from around 1300, is the oldest surviving Hungarian poem (check). It is a lament in the voice of Mary at the cross, in verse form, and survives in a manuscript now in Leuven in Belgium (check).

- **Why so little?** Latin was the language of the Church, the court and the law, and manuscripts were lost in wars and fires, so what survives is a small part of what existed (check).

- **The Mongol invasion.** The invasion of 1241 to 1242 devastated the kingdom and is often cited as one reason for lost records (check how heavily).
- **Oral tradition.** Songs, chronicles and tales were no doubt told aloud, but little is recorded, and later chronicles preserve traces (check).

The Reformation and Print

Development (check each)	Detail
Bible translation	Parts of the Bible were translated into Hungarian in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the first full printed translation is Gáspár Károli's Bible of 1590 (the Vizsoly Bible).
Printing	The first book printed in Hungary dates from 1473 (a Latin chronicle, printed in Buda); printing in Hungarian grew after 1530 (check).
Protestant writers	The Reformation encouraged writing in Hungarian for preaching, schooling and hymns, and spread literacy in the language.
Historical verse	Chroniclers and poets put the events of the Ottoman wars into verse, often in a plain narrative style (check).

Balassi

- **The man.** Bálint Balassi (1554 to 1594) was a nobleman, soldier and poet, who lived in a time of Ottoman threat and personal turmoil, including debts, exile and lawsuits (check).
- **The poetry.** He is regarded as the first major Hungarian lyric poet, writing love poems, religious verse and poems about soldiers' life in the border fortresses (check). He drew on European Renaissance models and also on Hungarian song.
- **The Balassi stanza.** A nine-line stanza form he often used is named after him, with a particular rhyme scheme (check the details).
- **The legacy.** His poems circulated in manuscript and were published long after his death, and later poets rediscovered him as a founding figure.

Zrínyi

A soldier's epic

Miklós Zrínyi (1620 to 1664) was a Croatian-Hungarian nobleman, military commander and statesman who wrote in Hungarian. His epic *Szigeti veszedelem* (The Peril of Sziget, 1651) tells of his great-grandfather's defence of the fortress of Szigetvár against the Ottoman army in 1566 (check). It is modelled on Italian Renaissance epics, and he published it with other poems. He also wrote prose on military and political matters, arguing for a standing army and for Hungarian independence from Habsburg control (check). He died in a hunting accident, which some at the time suspected was an assassination (check).

- **The significance.** The poem treats a defeat as a heroic stand, a pattern that recurs in Hungarian national memory (check, and Chapter 3).
- **Language.** Writing a Renaissance-style epic in Hungarian showed that the language could carry a long poem of high style.
- **Two peoples.** The Zrínyi family was Croatian, and he wrote in Hungarian and also had a Croatian-language tradition in his family, so his case shows the overlap of cultures in the kingdom (check).

A British comparison

Compare the Old English poem *Beowulf* and the later Elizabethan poets, or the Scottish Makars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (check). Hungarian shows a similar pattern of a few precious early survivals, followed by a Renaissance flowering that relied on foreign models.

Check the details

Dates, locations of manuscripts and the exact wording of early texts are from general knowledge, and Old Hungarian is hard to read without specialist help. Verify against scholarly editions and the National Széchényi Library before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the Funeral Sermon is important even though it is short and religious, and why so little earlier Hungarian writing survives.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the roles of the Reformation and of printing in the development of Hungarian as a literary language.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Balassi and Zrínyi: their backgrounds, their forms and what each shows about writing in Hungarian in the age of the Ottoman wars.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Oldest texts:** Funeral Sermon (c. 1192 to 1195); Lamentations of Mary (c. 1300) (check)
- **Print and religion:** Vizsoly Bible, 1590 (check)
- **Balassi:** 1554 to 1594; the first major lyric poet (check)
- **Zrínyi:** 1620 to 1664; *Szigeti veszedelem*, 1651 (check)
- **The caution:** what survives is a small, chance-shaped part of what was written

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Language Reform & the Age of Petőfi

In the decades around 1800 a group of writers set out to modernise Hungarian so that it could serve in poetry, drama, science and politics, at a time when German and Latin still dominated public life in the kingdom. The reform led to the great poets of the nineteenth century and to the revolution of 1848, in which one of them, Sándor Petőfi, became a national hero. This chapter follows the reform, the anthem, the national drama and Petőfi, and asks how literature and politics became so closely tied. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Language Reform

Kazinczy

Ferenc Kazinczy (1759 to 1831) was the leading figure of the reform. He translated, edited and corresponded widely, and he promoted new words and a refined literary style. He was imprisoned for several years for involvement in a Jacobin conspiracy in the 1790s (check).

New words

Reformers coined or revived thousands of words and adapted older ones, for science, politics and everyday modern life. Some of their creations are still in use (check examples and the scale of the figures).

The quarrel

Traditionalists accused the reformers of artificiality, and the "orthological" quarrel over correct usage lasted years (check). The result was a language fit for modern writing and a literary culture with its own institutions, such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825; check).

Kölcsey, Vörösmarty and Katona

Writer and work (check each)	Note
Ferenc Kölcsey, *Himnusz* (1823)	A national prayer in verse, "God, bless the Hungarians", begun in 1823 and set to music by Erkel in 1844 as the national anthem (see *Hungarian Music* 3).
Mihály Vörösmarty, *Szózat* (1836)	A patriotic poem, often called the second national anthem, which urges loyalty to the homeland. His long epic *Zalán futása* (1825) made his name.
József Katona, *Bánk bán* (1819)	A tragedy about a medieval nobleman who kills the queen's foreign favourite, often called the Hungarian national drama; it was banned or neglected at first and then became central to the repertoire. Erkel made it into an opera (check the dates).

- **The anthem as poem.** The words are sombre and prayerful and look back over a long history of disaster, which surprises many foreign listeners (check the content). The anthem is a poem, not a victory song.
- **Themes.** The writers of this period ask what the nation is, what it owes its past and how it can survive among larger powers.
- **Institutions.** A national theatre, an academy and literary magazines gave the literature a base (check).

Petőfi

The poet of 1848

Sándor Petőfi (1823 to 1849) wrote plainly, in the speech of ordinary people, and about love, nature, freedom and the common man. He wrote the verse "Nemzeti dal" (National Song), read out on 15 March 1848 as the revolution began in Pest, and joined the army in the war of independence against Habsburg rule. He is believed to have died in the battle of Segesvár in July 1849, though his body was never found and the circumstances have been debated (check all dates and details). His short life and his death made him the most revered Hungarian poet.

- **The style.** Folk-song forms, direct language, humour and love poems for his wife Júlia Szendrey. His long narrative poem *János vitéz* (John the Valiant, 1845), a folk-tale

adventure, is widely read, and was adapted as an animated film and a musical (check; see *Hungarian Animation & Children's Television*).

- **Politics.** He was a radical republican and democrat, more extreme than many of the revolution's leaders, and tensions with them are part of his story (check).
- **The cult.** Streets, statues and the national holiday on 15 March keep his memory alive. The memory has been used by many parties, from nationalists to communists to democrats, each emphasising different parts of his work (check).
- **The aftermath.** The revolution and war were defeated in 1849 with Russian help, followed by repression and then the Compromise of 1867 (check; see *Hungarian Music* 3).

A British comparison

Compare Burns in Scotland, who also wrote in the language of ordinary people and became a national symbol, and the way Byron's death in the Greek war of independence made him a romantic figure of liberty (check the comparisons). Petőfi combines both: a voice of the people and a poet who died in a national cause.

Check the details

Dates, the fate of Petőfi and the lives of the reformers are from general knowledge, and popular accounts of 1848 are heavily mythologised. Verify against a modern history and the Petőfi Literary Museum before relying on them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what the language reform tried to do, why it was controversial and what it achieved.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe why the Himnusz is a poem of lament as well as hope, and what that suggests about how Hungarians saw their history.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Write a short, balanced paragraph on how Petőfi became a national symbol, separating documented facts from legend.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Reform:** Kazinczy and new words; the Academy of 1825 (check)
- **National texts:** Himnusz (1823), Szózat (1836), Bánk bán (1819) (check)
- **Petőfi:** 1823 to 1849; "Nemzeti dal" on 15 March 1848; *János vitéz* (check)
- **Context:** the 1848 revolution, defeated in 1849 (check)
- **The caution:** the national poet's image has been used by many causes

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Arany, Madách & Jókai

After the defeat of 1849 the revolution's poets were dead, silenced or in exile, and Hungary lived under tight Habsburg control until the Compromise of 1867. Three very different writers shaped the period: János Arany, a poet of form and sorrow; Imre Madách, who wrote a single enormous philosophical drama; and Mór Jókai, a prolific novelist who became the nation's favourite storyteller. This chapter follows each, and asks how literature served a nation that could not speak freely. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

János Arany

The man

János Arany (1817 to 1882) was born into a poor family in the Great Plain town of Nagyszalonta, worked as a teacher and clerk and became famous almost overnight with an epic in 1847 (check). He was Petőfi's close friend (Chapter 3), and later secretary and then head of the Hungarian Academy (check).

Toldi

Toldi (1846 to 1847) is a verse narrative about a strong peasant youth who becomes a hero at the court of King Louis; its plain, vivid language won Petőfi's praise, and it became part of every schoolchild's reading. Arany later wrote the sequels *Toldi estéje* and *Toldi szerelme* (check).

The ballads

After 1849 he wrote some of the finest ballads in the language, short narrative poems often about guilt, madness and death, such as "V. László" and "Szondi két apródja" (The Two Pages of Szondi) (check the titles). They are admired for their dark tone and craft.

- **The epic trilogy.** Arany planned a larger epic on the Hungarians' origins and Attila, of which only parts were completed (check the works, including *Buda halála*).

- **Form and language.** He is known for his command of metre and his use of folk language and rhythm. A strong sense of craft sets him apart from the more improvisatory Petőfi.
- **The later years.** His later poetry, in small, introspective lyrics (the *Őszikék*, Autumn Flowers), is often seen as moving and modern (check).

Imre Madách

One great play

Imre Madách (1823 to 1864), a landowner and minor official, wrote *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man) in 1859 to 1860 and published it in 1861 (check). It is a long dramatic poem in which Adam, guided by Lucifer, is shown scenes from history, from ancient Egypt through Athens, Rome, medieval Europe and a future of science and then of cold and decline, and asks whether human effort has any meaning. The play ends with a message of hope that scholars read in different ways (check). It became a classic of Hungarian literature and is widely staged, though outside Hungary it is little known. It was written after personal disaster and the political failures of 1848 (check).

- **The form.** A drama in fifteen scenes, mixing Faust-like philosophy and historical pageant, usually read rather than staged in full (check the structure).
- **The question.** Whether history has meaning or progress. Different readers have taken it as pessimistic, as hopeful and as a reflection on 1848.
- **The status.** Taught in school, performed at the National Theatre, and quoted in everyday speech (check).

Mór Jókai

Item (check each)	Detail
Life	Mór Jókai (1825 to 1904) took part in the 1848 revolution, wrote for newspapers and became an enormously prolific novelist and a leading public figure.
Output	Over a hundred novels and many shorter works, a vast body of writing.
Style	Romantic, adventurous, humorous and moral, with vivid characters and plots set in history and in his own time.

Item (check each)	Detail
Well-known novels	*Az arany ember* (The Man with the Golden Touch, 1872), *A kőszívű ember fiai* (The Baron's Sons, 1869), and *Egy magyar nábob* (A Hungarian Nabob, 1853).
Reputation	Hugely popular at home and widely translated in his day, then neglected abroad, though he remains a household name in Hungary.

- **The national storyteller.** His books gave readers a vision of Hungarian history and character that was heroic and warm, and helped to build a common sense of nationhood (check).
- **Critical views.** Some critics call his work sentimental or formulaic, while others praise his invention and humour. The disagreement is itself informative.
- **After 1867.** He supported the Compromise and the political order that followed, and was a member of parliament (check).

A British comparison

Compare Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, whose very popular novels also shaped how a national public saw its history and society (check the comparison). Jókai's role as an immensely popular storyteller who is better known in his own country than abroad has parallels with them.

Check the details

Dates, titles and output counts are from general knowledge, and the English titles of many works vary between translations. Verify against a literary history and the library catalogue before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Compare Arany and Petőfi: their backgrounds, their styles and what each contributed to Hungarian poetry.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Summarise the idea of *The Tragedy of Man* in a few sentences and explain why it can be read as both pessimistic and hopeful.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why Jókai was so popular at home and so little known abroad, and name two things you would check to test your explanation.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Arany:** 1817 to 1882; *Toldi*, the ballads, *Őszikék* (check)
- **Madách:** 1823 to 1864; *The Tragedy of Man*, 1861 (check)
- **Jókai:** 1825 to 1904; over a hundred novels (check)
- **Context:** after 1849 and the Compromise of 1867 (check)
- **The caution:** popularity at home does not guarantee a reputation abroad

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Nyugat and the Modern Turn

In 1908 a new literary journal appeared in Budapest under the name Nyugat, "West". It became the centre of Hungarian literary modernism, gathering the poets and novelists who turned the national literature towards the European present. This chapter follows the journal, its main poets (Ady, Babits, Kosztolányi) and prose writers (Móricz, Karinthy), and the arguments around them, including the place of the city and of Jewish writers in Hungarian culture. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Journal

Founding

Nyugat began in Budapest in 1908, edited and funded by a group that included Ignotus (Hugo Veigelsberg), Ernő Osvát and Miksa Fenyő (check). It ran until 1941, with a short successor, and published nearly every major writer of the period.

The aim

To bring Hungarian writing into step with Western European modernism, to value artistic quality over national sentiment, and to open the pages to new talent (check how the founders described it).

The setting

Budapest was growing fast as one of the twin capitals of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, with cafés where writers gathered, such as the New York Café (check). Many of the writers and the publishers were from the city's Jewish middle class (check).

The Poets

Poet (check dates)	Note
Endre Ady (1877 to 1919)	The leading figure of the first generation. His rich, symbolic, often prophetic poems about love, death, the nation and its backwardness startled readers. He spent time in Paris and drew on French symbolism; he died of illness during the First World War's aftermath.
Mihály Babits (1883 to 1941)	Poet, translator (including Dante) and critic, who edited *Nyugat* in its later years; learned, classical and ethically serious.
Dezső Kosztolányi (1885 to 1936)	Poet, novelist and journalist, known for subtle, ironic prose and poems about childhood and death; his novel *Édes Anna* (Anna Édes, 1926) is a classic.
Gyula Juhász and others	Provincial poets of the same wave with a quieter, more personal style (check).

Ady and the nation

Ady's poems on Hungary, its failures and its possible renewal, are among the most quoted and argued over in the literature. Admirers saw a prophet who would not flatter his country, while critics accused him of contempt for it. After his death he was claimed by very different political groups, from the left to the right (check). The case shows how a poet's stance towards the nation can be read as love or as attack depending on the reader.

The Prose Writers

- **Zsigmond Móricz** (1879 to 1942). A realist who wrote about the peasantry and the gentry with unsparing detail; his novel *Légy jó mindhalálig* (Be Faithful Unto Death, 1920) is a school classic, and his work was widely read (check).
- **Frigyes Karinthy** (1887 to 1938). A humorist, parodist and essayist, known for *Így írtok ti* (This Is How You Write, parodies of fellow writers), for science-fiction fantasies and for the idea of "six degrees of separation" in a short story of 1929 (check the claim and the story).
- **Others.** Gyula Krúdy, a master of atmosphere and memory, and Margit Kaffka, a woman novelist of the first *Nyugat* generation (check).
- **Women writers.** Women writers were more numerous in the later generations, but their place in the canon is still being reassessed (check).

Arguments and Aftermath

- **The populist–urbanist divide.** From the 1930s, writers who stressed the peasantry and rural roots (the "populists") and those who stressed the city and Western culture (the "urbanists") argued over what Hungarian literature should be, and the argument had political and sometimes antisemitic overtones (check).
- **Trianon.** The Treaty of Trianon (1920) removed about two-thirds of the kingdom's territory and left millions of Hungarians outside the new borders, a shock that shaped the writing of the 1920s and after (check the figures).
- **Closure.** *Nyugat* ended in 1941 after the death of Babits, under the pressure of war and political change (check).

A British comparison

Compare *The Criterion* and *The Egoist* in Britain, or the Bloomsbury circle, where a small group of writers and editors reshaped literary taste (check). *Nyugat* was larger and more central to its national literature than any single British review.

Check the details

Dates, founders and the details of the arguments are from general knowledge. The treatment of Jewish writers and the political uses of *Nyugat* after 1920 are sensitive topics, so verify against literary histories and avoid simple summaries.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what *Nyugat* was, what it aimed to do and why its title mattered.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Ady, Babits and Kosztolányi: what did each bring, and how did their styles differ?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the populist–urbanist argument and say why a simple summary of it is risky.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The journal:** *Nyugat*, 1908 to 1941 (check)
- **Poets:** Ady, Babits, Kosztolányi (check)
- **Prose:** Móricz, Karinthy, Krúdy (check)
- **Context:** growing Budapest, then Trianon in 1920 (check)
- **The caution:** the populist–urbanist argument had political overtones

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Poetry in Crisis: Attila József & Radnóti

Two Hungarian poets of the twentieth century are known well beyond the language: Attila József, who died young in 1937, and Miklós Radnóti, who was murdered in 1944. Their poems are among the most moving in European literature, and their lives are bound up with poverty, political extremes and the Holocaust. This chapter follows them, and then two poets of the next generation, Sándor Weöres and János Pilinszky, who found new ways to write in the shadow of the war. The material is sensitive and is handled descriptively. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Attila József

The life

Born in 1905 in a poor family in Budapest, left fatherless, raised partly in foster care and supported by a series of benefactors, József studied briefly in Szeged, Vienna and Paris (check). He joined the communist movement and was expelled from it, and he suffered from depression (check).

The poetry

His poems join a modern, intense voice with simple language and strong images of childhood, class, love, work and the cosmos. He wrote about poverty and loneliness with a directness that moved readers (check examples such as "Tiszta szívvel" and "Altató").

The death

He died in December 1937 under a train near Balatonszárszó, aged 32, in circumstances usually described as suicide, though that is debated (check). His birthday, 11 April, is celebrated as Hungarian Poetry Day (Chapter 1; check).

- **Recognition.** Largely unrecognised in his short life, he became one of the most loved Hungarian poets after his death.

- **Political use.** He was claimed by the communist state as a proletarian poet and by others for different reasons, and the simplified image can hide the complexity of his work (check).
- **Translations.** There are several English translations, which differ widely, so it is worth comparing (Chapter 1).

Miklós Radnóti

Poems from a forced march

Miklós Radnóti (1909 to 1944), born in Budapest into a Jewish family and later baptised a Catholic, was a poet and translator who wrote with classical forms and a gentle, humane voice (check). In the Second World War he was repeatedly conscripted into forced labour. In 1944 he was marched with other labour servicemen from a copper mine in Serbia towards Hungary, and was shot near Abda in November 1944 when he was too weak to continue (check). When his body was exhumed in 1946, a notebook of poems, now called the Bor notebook, was found in his coat pocket (check). The last poems, written in pencil, are among the most remembered of the war.

- **The "Razglednicas".** His final short poems, written as picture postcards ("razglednica" in Serbian), set a calm description beside the horror around him (check).
- **The form.** He often used strict classical metres, and this control gives the later poems much of their force.
- **The context.** The Hungarian anti-Jewish laws from 1938 and the mass deportations of 1944 shaped the lives of many writers (check; treat figures with care).
- **The memory.** He is widely read in Hungary and in translation, and is treated as a central witness of the period.

After the War: Weöres and Pilinszky

Poet (check dates)	Note
Sándor Weöres (1913 to 1989)	A virtuoso of form and voice, who wrote in many styles and personas, from nursery rhymes to philosophical sequences; *Psyché*, a long work in the voice of an invented eighteenth-century poet, is a famed example (check).

Poet (check dates)	Note
János Pilinszky (1921 to 1981)	A Catholic poet of spare, stark lines shaped by the experience of the war and the camps; his poems are short and often dark (check).
Others	Gyula Illyés, Lőrinc Szabó and Ágnes Nemes Nagy are among the other major poets of the period (check).

The communist period constrained these poets in different ways, and Chapter 7 returns to censorship and the strategies writers used.

A British comparison

Compare the First World War poets Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, who died young and whose poems are read as witness (check). Radnóti's case differs in that he wrote in classical forms under conditions of persecution and died as a victim of a genocide, not as a soldier.

Check the details

This chapter covers suicide, persecution and murder. Dates, places and circumstances are from general knowledge and must be checked against reliable biographies and the poets' collected works before being relied on or repeated. Translations of the key poems differ, so name the translator when quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe what makes Attila József's poetry distinctive and why he was claimed by different groups after his death.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Radnóti's last poems are treated as witness, and what the Bor notebook shows about his work.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Weöres and Pilinszky: their styles, their relation to the war and what each adds to the picture of Hungarian poetry.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **József:** 1905 to 1937; plain, intense poems; Poetry Day on his birthday (check)
- **Radnóti:** 1909 to 1944; forced labour; the Bor notebook found in 1946 (check)
- **Weöres:** 1913 to 1989; a virtuoso of form (check)
- **Pilinszky:** 1921 to 1981; spare, stark poems (check)
- **The caution:** sensitive history; verify and name the translator

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Writing Under Communism

From the late 1940s to 1989 Hungarian writers worked under a one-party state that controlled publishing, rewarded some authors and silenced others. The picture is not simply one of silence: some of the best Hungarian prose of the century appeared in these decades, often by writers who found ways of saying things indirectly. This chapter describes the system, then looks at four writers and the strategies they used. It handles the period factually, with attention to how writers worked within and around it. Names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The System

The early years

After the communist takeover of the late 1940s, publishing was nationalised and a doctrine of socialist realism was imposed, with a requirement that literature serve the Party's aims (check the dates). Writers who did not conform were silenced, imprisoned or forced into translation and hack work.

After 1956

The uprising of October 1956 was crushed, and a period of reprisals was followed, from the early 1960s, by a gradual relaxation under János Kádár (Hungarian Music 7; check). The policy let more writing appear, within limits.

The three categories

Writers and works were informally sorted into those supported, those tolerated and those banned, sometimes called the "three Ts" in Hungarian (*támogatott, tűrt, tiltott*; check the term and how strictly it was applied). The same scheme is discussed in connection with popular music in *Hungarian Music* 7.

- **Mechanisms.** State publishers, editors who acted as gatekeepers, review of manuscripts, control of paper and print runs, and informal pressure (check).

- **Self-censorship.** Many writers learned what could not be said and adjusted in advance, which is harder to document than official bans.
- **Samizdat and exile.** In the 1970s and 1980s some writers circulated typed manuscripts and journals outside official channels, and some works were published abroad (check).

Four Writers

Writer and work (check each)	Note
István Örkény (1912 to 1979), *Egyperces novellák* (One Minute Stories, 1968)	Very short, absurd and darkly comic pieces that satirise bureaucracy and the absurdity of daily life; they could be read as political comment without saying so directly. Örkény also wrote *The Tót Family* (check).
Géza Ottlik (1912 to 1990), *Iskola a határon* (School at the Frontier, 1959)	A novel about cadets at a military boarding school, built on memory, loyalty and the pressure of an institution; it was influential for later writers (check). It was initially suppressed and then published.
Magda Szabó (1917 to 2007), *Az ajtó* (The Door, 1987)	A novel about the relationship between a writer and her housekeeper; it was widely translated and won international attention in the 2000s (check).
Tibor Déry (1894 to 1977), *Befejezetlen mondat* (Unfinished Sentence, 1947)	A senior writer of the earlier generation; imprisoned after 1956 for his role in the uprising's aftermath, he was later released (check).

Indirect speech

Writers used several strategies: absurd and grotesque comedy, historical settings that echoed the present, private and domestic subjects, and a language so layered that officials and readers could take it differently. Readers learned to read between the lines. The method worked because it was shared, and it also has limits: a message that is hidden from the censor can be hidden from later readers, and it is easy to read protest into works that were not meant that way (check; see the caution in *Hungarian Music* 7).

Other Voices

- **Poets.** Weöres, Pilinszky and Nemes Nagy continued to write (Chapter 6), some publishing little for years.
- **Drama and film.** Playwrights and filmmakers also worked under the same system (see *Hungarian Film & Television*, planned in this series).
- **Émigré writers.** Writers who left in 1956 or later, such as the novelist and critic Sándor Márai, wrote and published abroad (Chapter 8; check).

A British comparison

The closest British parallel is the Lord Chamberlain's control of the theatre until 1968 (check), where plays had to be licensed and writers learned to work within limits. The Hungarian system was far broader and harsher, but the habit of writing so as to pass the censor shows a common pattern.

Check the details

Dates, the history of censorship and individual writers' fates are from general knowledge, and accounts have been revised since 1989 as archives opened. Verify against literary histories and archival studies, and treat claims of hidden protest in individual works with caution.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe how literature was controlled in Hungary between 1948 and 1989 and explain why the control changed over time.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose one of the four writers and explain how their work could comment on the system without attacking it directly.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain the risks of reading works from this period as secret protest, and how you would test such a reading.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The system:** socialist realism in the early years; relaxation after 1956 (check)
- **The categories:** supported, tolerated, banned (check)
- **Writers:** Örkény, Ottlik, Szabó, Déry (check)
- **The method:** absurdity, history, private life, layered language
- **The caution:** reading in protest is easy and often unproven

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Márai, Kertész & the Nobel

Two writers stand for how Hungarian literature reached readers abroad late in the twentieth century. Sándor Márai wrote in exile and was largely forgotten at home before his work was rediscovered after his death. Imre Kertész wrote about the Holocaust for decades with modest recognition before the Nobel Prize of 2002 brought him world attention. Their stories show that a literature in a small language depends on translators, publishers and chance as well as on talent. Names, dates and titles are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Sándor Márai

Before exile

Márai (1900 to 1989) was a successful novelist, essayist and journalist of the Hungarian middle class between the wars, born in Kassa, now Košice in Slovakia (check). He wrote in a polished, civilised prose about the bourgeois world he belonged to.

Leaving

He left Hungary in 1948 as the communist state took hold, and lived in Italy and then the United States, where he died in San Diego in 1989 (check). His books were unwelcome in Hungary for decades, and he continued to write in Hungarian for a very small readership abroad.

Rediscovery

His novel *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (1942), known in English as *Embers*, is a conversation between two old friends after forty years, about friendship and betrayal. Translations in the late 1990s, notably into Italian and French, brought him a new international audience, and his work returned to Hungary (check the sequence).

- **Why it matters.** Márai's rediscovery shows how a writer can become known through translation before the home audience takes full notice.
- **Other works.** His diaries and memoirs are valued as records of exile (check titles).

Imre Kertész

Point (check each)	Note
Life	Born in Budapest in 1929, deported as a teenager to Auschwitz and then Buchenwald, and returned to Hungary after the war; he died in 2016.
Main novel	*Sorstalanság* (Fatelessness, 1975), the story of a boy in the camps, told in a flat, observing voice with little sentiment; it was published in Hungary to modest notice at first.
Method	Kertész treated the camps as an experience to be understood in plain language, and avoided the consoling patterns of heroism or redemption.
Later works	Further novels and essays on the Holocaust and on life under dictatorship (check titles).
Prize	The Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002, the first awarded to a Hungarian writer (check; and see Chapter 9 for a later award).

What a prize does

A Nobel Prize brings translation, reviews and sales, and can change how a nation sees a writer. Kertész's award also raised questions about how Hungary remembered the Holocaust, and reactions at home were mixed (check). The prize does not settle a writer's quality, but it is a strong example of how a small-language literature gains world attention.

Reading Them Together

- **Contrast.** Márai writes of a vanished civilised world with elegance; Kertész writes of the camps with deliberate plainness.
- **Common thread.** Both were shaped by the catastrophes of the twentieth century and both depended on readers outside Hungary for much of their fame.
- **Translators.** The reputation of each owes a great deal to translators (check the English translators and how they are credited).

A British comparison

The best British parallel for Márai's rediscovery is the modern revival of a neglected writer through reissue and translation, as with the republishing of forgotten mid-century novelists by small presses. Kertész's route to the Nobel is closer to that of other writers from smaller literatures who became known through a single book in translation.

Check the details

Dates, titles, the sequence of translations and the reaction to the 2002 prize are from general knowledge. Verify with biographies, the Nobel Prize site and the translators' own accounts. Handle the Holocaust material with care and use sources from survivors' and historians' accounts.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Summarise Márai's career in three stages (before exile, exile, rediscovery) and say what the third stage shows about how literature travels.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain what is distinctive about the voice of Kertész's Fatelessness and why a plain style might suit its subject.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Discuss what the role of translators and prizes suggests about the position of a writer in a small language.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Márai:** exile from 1948, *Embers*, rediscovered through translation (check)
- **Kertész:** *Fatelessness* (1975), Nobel Prize 2002 (check)
- **Contrast:** elegance against plainness
- **Lesson:** translators and prizes shape reach

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Contemporary Voices

Since the 1970s Hungarian prose has produced writers of unusual formal ambition, several of them known abroad through translation. This chapter looks at four of them, each very different, and at what it takes for Hungarian writing to be read in English. The Nobel Prize of 2025 went to László Krasznahorkai, the second Hungarian laureate after Imre Kertész (Chapter 8). Titles and dates are from general knowledge and flagged "check"; the 2025 award was checked against the Nobel Prize site.

Four Writers

Writer (check each)	Known for
Péter Esterházy (1950 to 2016)	A playful, allusive postmodern writer, from a famous aristocratic family whose history he used in his work. *Harmonia Caelestis* (*Celestial Harmonies*, 2000) is a large novel about his father and his family, with a later companion volume that dealt with the discovery that his father had been an informer for the secret police (check).
Péter Nádas (born 1942)	An exacting prose stylist. *Emlékiratok könyve* (*A Book of Memories*, 1986) and the very long *Párhuzamos történetek* (*Parallel Stories*, 2005) are major works (check).
László Krasznahorkai (born 1954)	Born in Gyula; known for long, winding sentences and bleak, darkly comic visions. *Sátántangó* (1985) and *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (*The Melancholy of Resistance*, 1989) are best known. He worked closely with the film director Béla Tarr, whose films made from his books are famous (check).
György Dragomán (born 1973)	Born in Transylvania, Romania, and writes in Hungarian. *A fehér király* (*The White King*, 2005) is a novel of a boy's life under dictatorship, seen through a child's eyes (check).

The 2025 Nobel Prize

What was awarded

The Swedish Academy announced on 9 October 2025 that the Nobel Prize in Literature went to László Krasznahorkai "for his compelling and visionary oeuvre that, in the midst of apocalyptic terror, reaffirms the power of art" (Nobel Prize website; check the wording there). It followed Kertész in 2002 as the second Hungarian laureate. Reactions, debate and new translations are developing, so use current sources for anything beyond the citation.

Writing in Translation

Translators

English readers know Krasznahorkai largely through the work of George Szirtes and Ottilie Mulzet, among others (check), and Nádas and Esterházy through their translators. A distinctive style such as very long sentences poses a real challenge for a translator.

Prizes and visibility

Krasznahorkai won the Man Booker International Prize in 2015 for his body of work (check), an earlier sign of wider attention. A prize can lift a writer's whole backlist into translation.

Other media

Film, as with Tarr's adaptations, has carried Hungarian literature to audiences who may never read the books (see *Hungarian Film & Television*, planned in this series).

A British comparison

The Booker International route, in which a prize for a body of work lifts a foreign writer's earlier books into English, is a modern British mechanism for bringing small-language writers to readers. A British reader meeting Krasznahorkai may find his long sentences comparable in ambition to the later work of some English-language modernists, though the comparison is only a way in.

Check the details

Dates, titles, translators and the 2015 and 2025 prizes should be verified against publishers' pages and the Nobel Prize website. Contemporary reputations and political debates are still changing, so treat anything recent as provisional.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose two of the four writers and describe how their approach to prose differs.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why a style built on very long sentences is difficult to translate and what a translator must decide.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare how Kertész in 2002 and Krasznahorkai in 2025 reached the Nobel Prize, and say what the two cases suggest about Hungarian literature abroad.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Writers:** Esterházy, Nádas, Krasznahorkai, Dragomán (check)
- **Nobel 2025:** Krasznahorkai, announced 9 October 2025
- **Reach:** translators, prizes and film
- **Caution:** recent reputations are still changing

Hungarian Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Writing in a Small Language

Hungarian is spoken by around thirteen million people (check), and it is related to few other languages in Europe. Writing in it has meant writing for a small audience, often under pressure, with the hope of being translated. This capstone follows two threads through the course, the poet as national voice and the dependence on translation, then sets out the course's main claims in a timeline, tests some common myths and gives a six-question method for judging claims about literature. Dates and names are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Two Threads

The poet as national voice

From Kölcsey's *Himnusz* (Chapter 2) to Petőfi in 1848 (Chapter 3) and Ady and the *Nyugat* generation (Chapter 5), poets were expected, and often chose, to speak for the nation. Radnóti and József (Chapter 6) show the cost of that role in a century of catastrophe.

Translation and survival

A small language survives by being used, and a small literature is known abroad only if translated. From the translators of the nineteenth century to those who carried Kertész, Márai and Krasznahorkai to English readers (Chapters 8 and 9), the story is one of intermediaries.

Writing around constraint

Censorship, exile and war are recurring conditions (Chapters 6 to 8), and the strategies for writing around them, indirection and form, are part of the tradition.

A Timeline

Period (check each)	Landmark
Early	Early texts and the sermon tradition (Chapter 2)

Period (check each)	Landmark
Reform era, 1848	Kölcsey, Petőfi and the revolution (Chapter 3)
Later nineteenth century	Arany, Madách and Jókai (Chapter 4)
Early twentieth century	*Nyugat* (Chapter 5)
Interwar and war	József and Radnóti (Chapter 6)
1948 to 1989	Writing under communism (Chapter 7)
Late twentieth century	Márai, Kertész and the Nobel, 2002 (Chapter 8)
Contemporary	Esterházy, Nádas, Krasznahorkai, Nobel 2025 (Chapter 9)

Myths and Evidence

Common claim	What to check
"Hungarian is too unusual to be translated."	Translators have rendered it in many languages; the difficulty is real, but it is a matter of choices, not impossibility. Compare translations of the same text.
"Every poet under communism was secretly resisting."	Evidence of intent, from letters and records at the time (Chapter 7, Exercise 3). Many positions existed between support and defiance.
"The Nobel Prize shows Hungarian literature is the best in the world."	A prize is a judgment by a jury and shows reach, not a ranking. It reflects translation as much as merit (Chapter 8).
"Petőfi died on the battlefield in 1849, and that is settled."	His death is not documented in detail, and later legends grew around it (check; see Chapter 3).

A Six-Question Method

1. **Who says it?** A critic, a translator, a publisher or a politician?
2. **What is the evidence?** The text itself, a letter, a review of the time, or a later memory?
3. **When was it written?** Nearer the events or long afterwards?
4. **Which translation?** Does the claim depend on how one translator rendered a word?
5. **Who gains?** Does the claim serve a nation, a school or a sales campaign?
6. **What would change my mind?** What evidence would show the claim to be false?

A worked example

Claim: "The poems of a given writer were a code of resistance to the regime." Apply the method. Who says it? A later critic. Evidence: the poems, and maybe a few comments by friends. When? After 1989. Translation: depends on word choices in the translated lines. Who gains? A nation proud of its dissident past and a publisher selling the book. What would change my mind? A censor's report of the time, or the writer's own letters. Result: plausible but unproven, so write "claimed" until a contemporary source is found.

A British comparison

A British reader can compare this with the way English literature is often made "national": Shakespeare as the English voice, or Dylan Thomas and the Welsh language, where writers in a smaller tradition are read alongside a dominant one. The Hungarian case is stronger because the language stands almost alone.

Check the details

Population figures, dates and the status of individual claims should be verified against standard literary histories and current translations. This course is an overview from general knowledge, and its flagged items are meant as a list for further reading.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one thread (the poet as national voice, or translation and survival) and trace it through at least four chapters of the course.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Apply the six-question method to the claim "Petőfi was killed in battle in 1849" or another claim from the course, and give a verdict.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compose a reading plan of five Hungarian works available in English translation and justify each choice.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Threads:** the poet as national voice; translation and survival
- **Constraint:** war, censorship and exile shape the tradition
- **Method:** who, evidence, when, translation, who gains, what would change my mind
- **Habit:** mark unproven claims as "claimed"

Course complete

You have finished *Hungarian Literature*: the language and its place, the early texts and the sermon tradition, reform and Petőfi, Arany, Madách and Jókai, *Nyugat*, József and Radnóti, writing under communism, Márai, Kertész and the Nobel, contemporary voices, and a method for testing claims. Related courses include the other Hungary-specific Culture courses on the site, such as *Hungarian Music*, *Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions* and *Hungarian Animation & Children's Television*.