

The “New Man” and Male Homosocial Desire in Late Nineteenth-Century Polish Novels

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ABSTRACT

The study of nineteenth-century Polish novels offers an exploration of cultural constructions of masculinities within the upper class and evolving middle-classes towards the end of century. It explores different social contexts and the ways in which literature shapes and interrogates men's social roles and codes of behavior. The traditional rules and codes of the upper class are challenged by “New Men”, such as the parvenu Stanislaw Wokulski, and their attempts to assimilate into the world of the class to which they do not belong. An examination of these new protagonists also precipitates a deeper understanding of hierarchical structures in public and semi-public spheres, friendships and rivalry between and among men as well as their attitudes towards women in general. The aim of this article is to present briefly the story of Wokulski's unsuccessful homosocial climbing and to examine the ambiguities of his character from a gender perspective.

Keywords: masculinity, homosociality, the “New Man”, Wokulski, mediated desire.

This paper forms part of my current project: a study of changing masculinities in late nineteenth-century Polish prose, where “manhood” is examined as a cultural and social category. Gender (or rather the so-called “ideology of gender”) has become a controversial issue in Poland today. The public debate on this subject shows that the majority of Poles still wrongly perceive the concept. Gender studies in Poland and abroad have contributed valuable interpretations of Polish culture, and their legitimacy should not be questioned. Despite the progress made in the field of gender studies over the past few decades, comprehensive overviews of the field published in recent years show that problems related to the construction of male identity still remain an unresolved issue and the focus of regular media attention. Significant changes in gender roles are undoubtedly taking place in today's societies, followed by changing models of the family. Some people perceive the situation in positive terms, as a development towards Man's awakening and his liberation from the restraints of stereotyping. Others perceive it as a threat to traditional male and female roles, traditional models of the family and even national identity.

Literature, which is a narrative construction, can make an outstanding contribution with regard to male identity formation. Critics contend that literature fulfills a performative function, allowing for a variety of new models of masculinity to become available through their very conception. In fact, the novels themselves serve as “machine[s] of cultural [...] reproduction” leading to “the redefinition of manhood and the modification of the image of Man by the way of the novel” (Horlacher, 2011: 4). This is most relevant with regard to Polish literature because it has always played an important role not only in upholding Polish national identity, but also in reinforcing certain assumptions about gender-roles and establishing norms of masculinity and femininity, including the so-called hegemonic masculinities, that is, the idea of a “real man” in a given time and place.

My project as a whole suggests a way in which a study of writing the masculine may be

undertaken. It aims to contribute a new dimension to reading and interpreting such canonical novels as *Without dogma (Bez dogmatu)* (1891) by Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Doll (Lalka)* (1890) by Bolesław Prus, Stefan Żeromski's *Homeless People (Ludzie bezdomni)* (1899), or the less-known novel, *A Specialist (Fachowiec)* (1895) by Waclaw Berent. However, in this article I shall focus only on Prus's *The Doll* – a novel which is as complicated as the period it tries to depict.

All the above-mentioned novels were written during the last decade of the nineteenth century in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland, then part of imperial Russia, when huge socioeconomic and political changes were taking place in a new sociopolitical context. This period in Polish literature is often referred to as "mature (or psychological) realism". This is the time when new models of masculinity associated with the progress of capitalism began to appear in literature. These new models, which I call the "New Men", challenged the traditional models of masculinity but, at the same time, reflected the growing Polish ambivalence toward capitalism and skepticism toward the Positivist program¹. These ambivalences are apparent at several different levels. Structurally, the novels are all marked by a characteristic incoherence, a certain heavy-handedness and inconsistency, characteristic of pioneering work. How should a new hero behave? What choices will he make? The elusive character of the male protagonists is a puzzling feature that these novels have in common: each protagonist experiences a personal conflict that alters him in relation to the progressive ideology of Positivist thought. The works have been seen as "novels without a hero", because their central characters are "not heroic enough", when *de facto* they may as well be seen as heroes in the most traditional (Romantic) sense – as rebels, outsiders, unhappy lovers, dreamers, visionaries, etc. In any case, they express the authors' skepticism towards positive heroes, promoted by other writers according to the Positivist project. They are actually portraits of failure which involves the collapse of formerly successful plans, material and spiritual losses, personal degradation and in two cases – the loss of life at the end of the story.

The world described in these novels is a "man's world" where the male protagonists are predisposed to participate in the power structures of the patriarchal world dominated by men's relations with other men. The ways in which male characters interrelate with one another are often referred to as "homosocial". The term was initially coined by Jean Lipman-Blumen (1976) in order to define the social bonds and interactions between men, the bonds that maintain hegemonic masculinity, but in her classic study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985: 1), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick modifies the term homosocial as essential for understanding of male homosocial desire in literature. In this context at least three of these novels could be studied as stories of unsuccessful homosocial climbing.

The stories share an overt investigation of changing class structures and the relationship between an individual and society. They look at the individual as a social unit and a public man rather than as a domestic unit. The ambition of the nineteenth-century novel was to achieve a balance between individual and social experience. It tried to achieve credibility by making the hero's character dependent on his environment and upbringing – the genesis of the main character was the key to understanding his eventual choices and failures. However,

¹In her book *Rewriting Capitalism* (1998), Beth Holmgren analyses the figure of the New Merchant as the new literary character that appears in Polish and Russian literature at this time.

as Krzysztof Stala (2003: 241) has pointed out, Polish literature has effectively left the “family space untouched by conflict and struggles”, allowing family members to live in “paradise-like co-existence”. (Interestingly, the protagonists in the above-mentioned novels are all orphans.)

Except for the romantic plot, the problematic tensions we find in these novels are created mostly through rivalries between male groups and between male individuals. Women are excluded from the system of “male exchange” – rather they are the objects of exchange. Kosofsky Sedgwick terms this phenomenon “male traffic in women”, which characterizes every “normal” marriage. Hence the woman protagonist is an indispensable element in the novel’s structure, which also results from the tradition of the romance as a genre where the female protagonist plays a necessary role in the romantic plot. However, I would claim that in the late nineteenth-century novel there appear new types of female protagonists who obstruct both the romantic story line and get in the way of homosocial relations and “men-promoting-the-interests-of-men” projects. Given more psychological depth than the heroines of, let us say, Henryk Sienkiewicz, such protagonists as Izabela Łęcka (*The Doll*) or Joasia Podborska (*Homeless People*) become anti-heroines who do not really fit into the structural concept of the workings of desire within the triangle of a man-woman-man relationship, as described by René Girard in his classic work on mimetic desire (1961). Disintegration of the homogenous form of the novel is in a way connected with the birth of modern emancipatory discourse, where all protagonists have equal opportunity to speak their minds. Nevertheless, the texts often bear the marks typical of many a nineteenth-century novel: frustrated by failed plans, the female protagonists prove redundant while the author makes them choose a “regressive variant of existence” and, like the heroine of *The Doll*, Izabela Łęcka, they enter the convent (Borkowska, 1996: 91-92).

Let me now present briefly the protagonist and the main plot of the novel that I have chosen for this article. The hero of Prus’s well-known novel *The Doll*, Wokulski, comes from an impoverished noble family; we learn this from certain clues in the novel. (As a matter of fact we get to know Wokulski mostly through the accounts and comments of other characters in the novel.) Having lost his mother, he was raised by his father – a man with a weak and unstable character. Wokulski owes nothing to his parents. He is the self-made man, who first becomes a shopkeeper and then a successful capitalist. He starts his career from the bottom as a waiter at Hopper’s restaurant. After taking part in the 1863 uprising, he is sentenced to exile in Siberia, where he develops an interest in science. On return in Warsaw in 1870 he becomes a salesman at Mincel’s haberdashery. Certainly he is not a Russophobe since, together with his Russian business associate, Suzin, he makes his fortune selling war supplies to the Russian army during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). Moreover, his business dealings, as Prus describes them, seem almost entirely motivated by romanticism and altruism. The main plot of this complex novel describes Wokulski’s pursuit of the beautiful and almost bankrupt aristocrat, Izabela Łęcka, and his maneuvers to buy himself a new image in order to marry her.

Wokulski compromises many of his earlier dreams when, in order to secure his future prospects, he marries an elderly widow Mrs Mincel, endures a loveless marriage and after five years is rewarded with a fortune. In his shopkeeper’s career he is assisted by his faithful friend, Ignacy Rzecki. But it is through his friendship with a financial genius from Moscow,

Suzin, that Wokulski learns how to use the capital. With Suzin's help Wokulski establishes trading relations in Moscow and Paris. His financial success brings him fame throughout aristocratic and Jewish circles in Warsaw and abroad. At this point Wokulski might appear to be a man totally possessed by success, until he meets Izabela. From this point on, he experiences emotional confusion, he loses much of his former confidence and his character begins to falter. Even his great dream of a scientific career eventually ends up in reality as a mere hobby, as does philanthropy, as he realizes that he is merely a useless member of the new class of frustrated men known as the intelligentsia.

As a way of getting closer to Izabela, Wokulski secretly helps her father financially by giving him an unreasonably high percentage on a small investment. Rumors about the profit he makes from his trading company pave the way for him into the inner circles of the aristocracy. However "social influence, mingling with the nobility, charitable acts and other by-products of life at the top, cannot obliterate the memory of his clambering-up" (Pietrkiewicz, 1960: 100). Deprived of fulfillment, his love for Izabela grows into an obsession thereby revealing his weakest spot. The previously strong and ambitious man suddenly experiences a sense of non-belonging, disappointment, and lack of motivation, resulting in inertia and suicidal thoughts, one failed suicide attempt and maybe even a successful one. The novel has an ambiguous ending: Wokulski vanishes and it is up to the reader to figure out what has happened to him. Has he committed suicide, blowing himself up in the ruins of the castle? Has he disappeared to an unknown country as he did before? Or has he gone to Paris to help the old scientist Geist with his experiments with the metal lighter than air?

Many critics have tried to explain the inconsistencies in Wokulski's character and the fissures in the novel². Wokulski's failure has been explained in terms of Romantic legacy, quixotism and Polish chivalric tradition. The "fractures" found in *Lalka* were most frequently interpreted in terms of the clash between Wokulski's Romantic idealism and Positivist attitude. At times the "failure" was explained as the expression of the author's own disillusionment with the Positivist project (Pietrkiewicz, 1960). Some critics tried to perceive Wokulski as convincingly human both in his prosaic behavior and in his romantic obsession, in his clever financial schemes and silly gestures. Others considered his character so ambiguous that they called *The Doll* "a novel without a hero" (Pietrkiewicz, 1960: 97; Przybyła, 1995: 111-112). Traditionally, *The Doll* has been considered to be a story of a disintegrating world that buries its hero beneath its ruins. However, in recent studies the novel is examined as a story about the disintegration of the old world with all the myths and values it has created, where the hero "finds his identity in the landscape of destruction" (Paczoska, 2008: 12-13). For Wokulski, identity is fluid and undefinable as he is a hero of a society undergoing transformation.

In his canonical analysis of *The Doll*, Jan Kott has effectively criticized these clichéd readings, according to him, of the novel based on the naïve metaphor of the struggle between the mind and feeling. He termed these traits "psychological mythology" that reflected the ideological conflict and illogicalities inherent in Positivism itself (1959: 31). Instead he postulated a reading of the novel as a "drama of the development of capitalism", which was of a different character in the Polish territories than in the rest of Europe. According to him, in Polish literature a "novel about social advancement" had no *raison d'être*, because the

² One of the discussions among literary critics, known as the so-called "dispute over *The Doll*" ("spór o *Lalkę*"), took place in the 1950's.

classic model of the Polish novel is about the social degradation of the hero (33). For even though the story of Wokulski begins as a story of social advancement (i.e. of the financial and social career of the protagonist), his falling in love with the aristocratic Izabela Łęcka marks a turning point and *The Doll* turns into a “story of disappointment”. According to Kott, the major flaw of the novel is the fact that the psychological portrait of the main protagonist does not agree with his actions:

“There is probably no other such novel in world’s literature, in which the motive, and not only motive, but primarily the excuse for making money [...] by a merchant, is unhappy love. Prus’s embarrassment at his hero making a fortune from profitable commercial operations would be something completely incomprehensible to a Frenchman or an Englishman. And for us? We have considered it something so natural and understandable in itself that no one has ever paid any attention to it.” (Kott, 1959: 37-38; my translation)³

Provocatively, Jan Kott argues that Prus tries to justify all the stupid things that Wokulski does – getting the Diploma of Nobility, playing cards with counts, the purchase of a race horse and a horse and a carriage, the duel, taking English lessons, public philanthropy, and so on – by making the reader believe that he does it in the name of his unhappy love for Izabela Łęcka. According to Kott, it is not really relevant, whether Wokulski loved Łęcka, or not. In the given socioeconomic circumstances he simply had no other choice. In Kott’s reading, the novel describes the characteristic progress of capitalist gain from patriarchal establishment (aristocracy) to anonymous international cartel. The unrequited love is a way for the idealist Prus “to save the purity of Wokulski’s soul”, at the same time as the realist Prus describes meticulously all his transactions and profits and financial connections with the aristocracy, which is the only possible way in which the hero’s financial career can progress. Eventually, and paradoxically, it is “poor Miss Izabela who is to blame for all the mistakes of the aristocracy, and... of capitalism” (41). And that is the biggest flaw of the novel. One cannot but agree with Kott on this point. Indeed, Wokulski as a romantic hero as well as the romantic plot itself are cultural anachronisms that strike a false chord in a world transforming into modernity.

Let us now look at the shifts in Wokulski’s career in terms of homosocial relations. *The Doll* is arguably the most homosocial of nineteenth-century Polish novels⁴, different however from western novels of the so-called “social advancement” type. After having made one social advance by marrying a moneyed woman, Wokulski tries another way determined by the laws of homosocial climbing. Wokulski strives to achieve *public legitimacy* through financial and entrepreneurial affiliations. Respected by his co-workers, admired by his old friend Rzecki, Wokulski manages to outwit his early failures with the help of his male friends and associates, such as Suzin. Yet, the aristocracy judges Wokulski by their own criteria of *public masculinity* – their *status quo* is based on hierarchical male orders of privilege,

³ Nie ma chyba w literaturze światowej drugiej takiej powieści, w której motywem, i to nie tylko motywem, ale przede wszystkim usprawiedliwieniem zarabiania pieniędzy [...] przez kupca, była nieszczęśliwa miłość. Dla Francuza czy Anglika owo zawstydzenie Prusa, że jego bohater dorobił się majątku na korzystnych operacjach handlowych byłoby czymś zupełnie niezrozumiałym. A u nas? U nas uznano to za rzecz tak naturalną i sama przez się zrozumiałą, że nikt na to nie zwrócił uwagi.

⁴ Even Żeromski’s *Homeless People* may be said to be a novel of social advancement, while Berent’s *A Specialist* is rather a novel of social descent, as it describes the heroes assimilating into the world of the working-class.

exclusivity and exclusion, defined by their own ethical code, or set of usually unwritten rules and principles governing their elite community⁵. No matter how much they value his entrepreneurialism, his financial achievements and success – proficiencies that are highly valued within the middle class, among the highborn other rules should be observed. Meritocracy is not the system that the noble circles believe in, since they believe in the privileges of noble descent, which can be negotiated, confirmed and authenticated only at informal receptions and meetings in the salon.

The aristocratic *salon* is thus the second homosocial sphere that Wokulski enters and where his social legitimacy and competence are surveyed and discussed. This semi-public world of the *salon* necessarily demarcates insiders and outsiders, and is an important space where homosocial credibility is negotiated through discussions of male-to-male and male-female relations. The salon gives much credit to Wokulski's talent for making money, yet nevertheless perceives him as a parvenu representative of a meritocracy who would have no scruples when it came to taking advantage of the rich pickings of fallen aristocracy. Wokulski's social legitimacy turns out to be a strange deformation of conflicting attitudes. His attitudes towards the aristocracy are mimicry and provocation. Wokulski tries to follow the rules of the upper class, but, while imitating their lifestyle, he at times defiantly remonstrates with their manners. At Łęcki's party Wokulski scorns the required table etiquette only to later acknowledge that "it is more agreeable to live with these gentlemen than with tradespeople. They really are beings made from a different clay" (*The Doll*, 196). His attempt at a duel with Baron Krzeszowski is another example that clearly demonstrates this disharmony. Afterwards the members of the aristocracy reprove him for it.

"May I not even do that?" Wokulski interrupted.

"Of course, of course," the eminent lawyer agreed, affably, "you may indeed, but in doing so, you are only repeating former sins, which in any case are better committed by others. But that was not why I and the Prince and these Counts appealed to you, merely to warm up old dishes – but so that you should show us new ways." (*The Doll*, 202)

Izabela Łęcka plays a crucial role in Wokulski's homosocial climbing. To get to the top, Wokulski has to marry her, but this fact remains untold. Instead she gets the blame for Wokulski's weakness. In Wokulski's own words, she is "a mystic point where all memories, longing and hopes coincided, a heart without which his life would have neither sense nor meaning" (*The Doll*, 70). His initial quixotism expressed in his idealization of Izabela Łęcka turns later into disappointment. Late on in the novel, when he tries to recover his senses, he goes through some of his illustrated books, but seizes especially on a Doré illustrated *Don Quixote*:

"Most often he looked at Don Quixote, which made a powerful impression on him. He recalled the strange story of a man living for years in the sphere of poetry – just as he had done, who had hurled himself at windmills – like him, who was shattered – like him who had wasted his life pursuing an ideal woman – like him, and found a dirty cow-girl instead of a princess – as he had done." (*The Doll*, 600)

⁵The only written code is the Code of Honour (Kodeks Honorowy) from 1919 that set the standards for behaving honorably when dueling (Skoczylas, 2010: 191-199).

Seeing himself in the figure of Don Quixote allows Wokulski to “step outside” himself in order to take control of his feelings and see his unwise behavior in a different light. At the same time, he is able to gradually establish an emotional distance towards the object of his desires as well as towards his own feelings which he scrutinizes with a big dose of skepticism (see also Borkowska, 1996: 89). One may go even further and say that Don Quixote represents here “mediated desire” – a Girardian concept that can be used to understand a great many literary works. By analyzing several novelistic masterpieces (including Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*), René Girard reveals a certain mechanism characteristic of human desire as described in literature. This one does not fix itself in an autonomous fashion according to a linear pattern subject-object, but by imitation of an Other, according to a triangular plan: subject-mediator (Other)-object. This is what Girard calls “mediated” or “mimetic” desire. Thus his hypothesis rests on the existence of a third element, the mediator of the desire, which is the Other. The object has some value only because it is desired by the Other. In his book *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, Girard argues that the presence of the Other in desire lies at the heart of all novelistic genius. Wokulski maintains that desire for Izabela was aroused by the Romantics. Is this the reason why he chooses the unattainable Izabela instead of the angelic widow Mrs Stawska or the emancipated Baroness Wąsowska, who both seem more suitable wives for the New Man? Is his being in love with Izabela enough an explanation or justification for his copying the lifestyle of the upper class?

One could easily apply Girard’s model of desire to *The Doll*, where two active males compete for an apparently passive female (Wokulski’s major rivals are the young scientist, Ochocki, and the playboy, Starski – both are aristocrats). With the exception of Madame Bovary, Girard does not consider women as desiring subjects. Masculine desire is the narrative motor that propels the Girardian plot and provides the emotive point of reference for the reader. Is it really Izabela, or what she represents that Wokulski desires? Like mimeticism, homosociality explains the ways in which men bond with each other through a female object of desire and exchange. Patriarchal power is shown to be organized around a ritualized traffic in women in which the “sexually pitiable or contemptible female figure is [the] solvent” which binds together two men, so they will be able to exchange power and confirm each other’s value (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1985: 160). According to Kosofsky Sedgwick, this homosocial set-up shapes and canonizes literature (and has shaped the entire European literary canon since the Renaissance and, more impressively, structures the whole “heterosexual European erotic ethos” (see also Veldman-Genz, 2012: 110).

Due to the routine interpretations of her character, Izabela has a terrible reputation among Polish audiences. Discussing the romantic plots of Modernist novels, Anna Nasiłowska pinpoints the issue that could have troubled many women readers, namely that

“...the plots of many outstanding nineteenth-century novels make no sense if seen solely in the light of twentieth-century logic. [...] The fact that Izabela did not want to marry Wokulski seems quite logical, since they had not developed a close personal relationship. If one felt tempted to tell the story from the point of view of Izabela, it would become extremely nebulous.” (2003: 159)

Nasiłowska (2003: 160) identifies the same problem in Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*: the marriageable young woman is the object of the action, but she is voiceless, her personal

view does not exist. "The narration is a mirror of the social situation, and also shows the oppression, of which, however, the heroes are unaware." The woman, as mentioned before, is an indispensable element in the novel's structure. This results from the tradition of the romance as a genre, and from its holistic ambitions. What is at stake in this case is a contract between new money and high rank in the social hierarchy, and only Izabela's sympathy could make the transaction possible. Izabela's point of view does not influence the action of the novel. However, I would argue that, in contrast to what the majority of the critics have said about this protagonist, Izabela is not simply the dreamy, frivolous, and frigid doll of the title that plays with Wokulski's heart. One aspect of the function of her character is that she actually has the strength to turn down Wokulski's proposal, even though she later changes her mind a few times. This crucial moment when a woman figure becomes the speaking subject and initiates or influences action contributes to the disintegration of the plot and the homogenous form of the novel – a development which is seen more clearly later in Modernist novels.

When we speak about the "grand narratives" that European culture has created, the grand narrative of Polish culture would certainly be the Romantic one, creating the ethos of a hero on a mission: either in love, or in the fight against an Enemy of the nation, or in the fight for Polish sovereignty. Among the models of masculinity that Polish culture has generated, one can hardly find any other than these phantasmagoric ones. Nineteenth-century texts display and reveal the contradictions and anxieties of the culture that shaped the masculine subjectivity of that time. The novel's central character, Wokulski, escapes the stereotypical boundaries that define him both as a man (and even as a Pole) – and Prus conveys this symbolic feature by simply letting him disappear without a trace.

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