

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE NOVEL *LOOK AT ME, KLARA*

JAKUB MAJKOWSKI

Univeristy of Wroclaw

Faculty of Social Sciences

e-mail: jakub.majkowski97@gmail.com

ORCID number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0806-1820>

ABSTRACT

Aim. The nomination for important literary prizes is not only a source of pride for the writer, but also a special encouragement for the readers to get acquainted with the book. The author of the article, subject to this kind of persuasion, tries to get a thorough look at the novel, especially in the psychological context.

Look at me, Klara is a novel about fears and obsessions as well as involvement in toxic relationships.

The concepts discussed. The author of the article interprets the psychological motifs in the novel based on Antoni Kępiński's concept of fear (1987) and John Bowlby's theory of attachment (2000).

Results and conclusions. The attitudes of the heroes of the novel can be identified in terms of their childhood experiences, which are unconscious reasons for current life problems.

Key words: women's literature, feminist literature, fear, obsession, John Bowlby.

The novels of Kaja Malanowska are listed in the category of the so-called women's literature, as well as feminist-gender literature (Pasterska, 2015). It is difficult to precisely define the concept of women's literature. "If we look for terms similar to «women's literature» in dictionaries and encyclopedias, we can find over a dozen of them. Those terms are formed on the basis of so many different criteria that they in fact become imprecise, or rather - temporary" (Budrowska, 2004, p. 284).

Kamila Budrowska gives opposing examples which are helpful in defining various types of literature: literature for children (contrary to literature for adults), underground literature (as opposed to official literature), shoddy literature (instead of artistic). However, she does not see a conflict between women's literature and men's literature: "because it is not created as a form of protest against what is considered masculine, but rather against what the culture considers as neutral - not only deprived of femininity, but of sexual characteristics in general" (Budrowska, 2004, p. 284). The only differentiating indicator could be the matriarchal language, although its study "in the contemporary Polish literature still doesn't seem to be achieved, however it is worth undertaking" (Budrowska,

2004, p. 284). Joanna Bator also points out "the need for a new language, a new rule, a new sexual difference, a new symbolic order in which a woman's positive distinctness would become a basic category" (Bator, 2001, p. 38).

Researchers often connect women's literature with feminist, thinking that "the category of women's literature is inseparably linked to that of feminist critique" (Borkowska, 1998, p. 388). In this discourse however, opinions about the lack of identity between women's and feminist literature also stand out. "Feminist criticism differs from apolitical feminist critique in that it is a specific kind of political discourse related to the fight against patriarchy and sexism" (Filipowicz, 2001, p. 231).

Yet another approach is based on the author's gender as irrelevant - the gender of the narrator testifies to the categorisation of the female novel: "the narrator's gender-intolerance, his proximity to the female world, the woman's social statute, biography and the disclosure of sexuality" (Budrowska, 2000, s.116).

I believe that the novel by K. Malanowska can undoubtedly be included in women's literature. However, I would not call it a feminist novel because of the lack of references to the fight against patriarchy and sexism.

ANXIETY AND OBSESSION

Look at me, Klara is the author's second novel, in 2013 nominated for the Nike Literary Award, and a year earlier to no less prestigious *Polityka Passports*. The book is written in three ways. The first narrative is the relationship of the main character, the title Klara, who succumbs to numerous obsessions, endless with the childhood, and even growing up. First, we observe the fascination of Klara with a friend from elementary school, later - during the period of studies - an accidentally met man, then a lover of her husband. These obsessive fascinations can be counted as perseveration, which manifests itself in repeating "the same forms of behaviour and survival despite their maladjustment to the external situation" (Kepiński, 1987, p. 86).

At the same time, the reader tracks blog entries of an initially unknown woman who later turns out to be "the third one". Finally - also in the form of a diary - he meets the inner world of the main character, expressed by means of strange, abstracted events (or rather imaginations), thanks to which he perceives Klara not only through the prism of what he does, but also about how he thinks what he feels what he wants and in this way he reaches the deepest recesses of her consciousness.

"Klara's basic dilemma is that the woman gets lost in the excess and complexity of her feelings, she cannot adapt emotions to practical needs. She has difficulties with making new contacts with her peers environment and functions as an inaccessible and introverted person. The disturbance between the «external» and the «interior», one of the traces of the crisis, determines the poetics of description in which the urban landscape, the surroundings of the heroine expresses her idiosyncrasies" (Maroszczuk, 2015, p. 205).

A. Kępiński (1987) confirms that obsessive-compulsive types are timid, introverted, stubborn, have problems with making decisions and would like to be different than in reality. Anankastic symptoms such as obsessions appear already in the period of puberty or directly before it. People with an obsessive personality feel the need for full power over themselves and often over the world around them. The more they struggle with their obsessions, the more violently they occur.

Obsession is a kind of compulsion to do things, the occurrence of irrational thoughts and impulses, accompanied by the conviction of their absurdity and the desire to free themselves from them. They often cause the build-up of emotional tension, while attempts to reduce it and free yourself from obsessions, lead to the so-called obsessions and compulsions (Bilikiewicz, & Strzyżewski, 1992, pp. 58-60).

Klara is not a person unaware of the acts committed. On the contrary - she does not only want them, but carries them out with admirable consistency, building an elaborate plan of revealing herself to her husband's mistress. The reader predicts that the girl's goal is to free herself from the obsession of obsession and regain her own identity, lost for years, or even undiscovered. It is difficult to know who you really are, when - like the protagonist - you live the lives of others, the need for eternal contact with them when you are addicted to them. It is difficult to build yourself when there is a lack of sense of security, and satisfying desires is conditioned by acceptance and attachment (to) people. Perhaps this is why the only salvation for Klara is to marry a boring and pompous Francis, in which, he believes, he will finally achieve peace and emotional stability. With an anonymous personality, however, this does not seem possible because the afflicted person is afraid of his own feelings and moods that could break her psyche (Kępiński, 1987). "He feels (...) self-resentment, which can grow into clear aggressiveness, and his own inertia and helplessness to the surroundings arouse fear in him" (Kępiński, 1987, p. 95).

Life, however, brings a surprise to Klara - her boring husband finds a lover. This fact is an impulse to return to the obsession: this time the object of Klara's fascination is a strange woman, her rival.

And so, extinguished as a result of a marriage with an unloved man, Klara comes alive again - she has a purpose again to peep, search and follow. Again she is herself, and herself living on full emotions. One can get the impression that the definitional desire to free oneself from the obsession is not at all the desire of the main heroine, on the contrary - obsession gives her the drive to act, to live. Like in the case of an anankastic personality, where "one force pushes forward and the other pulls backwards" (Kępiński, 1987, p. 86).

TOXIC RELATIONSHIP OF MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

It is worth paying attention to the relationship between a mother and daughter depicted in the novel. The former compensating for her own deficits in childhood (lack of attention and tenderness on the part of the mother), overexposing love to Klara and hemming her in, although seemingly connected by a friendly relation-

ship described by the main character: "when they sat in the lounge, drinking tea and playing cards or watching television, Klara was filled with a kind of pride that linked them with such an extraordinary and so close a bond" (Malanowska, 2012, p. 76). Contrary to appearances, a young woman is not able to cope with the needs of her mother, connected with the constant desire to contact her daughter, rebels against them, although on the other hand she glorifies this arrangement: "[Klara] liked to boast of their affectionate attitude. Both played the role of the best friends in front of the strangers and often lost themselves to such an extent that they teased loudly and theatrically in a shop or bus" (Malanowska, 2012, p. 76).

The relationship with the mother is "the first human relationship in which the child participates [and which] is the cornerstone of his or her personality" (Bowlby, 2007, p. 277). Here one can find sources of problems for Klara's mother whose relationship with her own mother was probably based on an anxious-ambivalent style shaped by experiencing uncertainty about the availability of the object. The child lacks the sense of security and conviction about the support and assistance of the caregiver. He or she additionally fears separation (even when the guardian is nearby), which makes him or her less interested in discovering the surroundings (Dacko, 2011). The long-term effects of these early experiences may manifest themselves in the form of emotional disorders (Bowlby, 2000).

In addition to toxic relationships with people Klara wants to appropriate and at the same time is willing to submit to, the book also depicts a toxic relationship between a daughter and mother. Toxic, since it is based on the wrong proportions. It can be concluded that Klara loves her mother as much as she hates her, and the ambivalence of feelings does not help to maintain good relations between them. "Fear of separation and rejection characterising Klara's relationship with the environment, disturbs the sense of personal integrity, which results in neurotic and depressive symptoms in adult life (Maroszczuk, 2015, p. 207).

It would be worth considering, however, whether the burden of childhood experiences may be a justification for behaviour in adulthood because personality formation, apart from genetic and environmental factors, is also influenced by the factor of will and decision (Kępiński, 1987, p. 10).

AUTOTHERAPY

Protagonists, or actually the heroines of many novels presented in the so-called women's literature, struggle with emotional and psychological problems such as depression, obsession or anxiety disorders. This is also the case with *Look at me, Klara*. According to the writer, she suffered from depression herself and the process of writing had a therapeutic effect for her personality (Gliński, 2016). He points out, however: "but certainly writing a book will not heal you from depression. I have no doubts about it" (Gliński, 2016).

According to the theory of Antoni Kępiński (1979), life follows three vectors: love, escape and creativity, understood as subordinating the world and organising it in its own way. Creativity (creation) determines the same system of life-

giving factors as the metabolism of energy processes. Their disorders can cause illness or even death.

"Therapy through creativity always concerns man with a specific arrangement of character traits, a set of attitudes and values. What unites art and its participants is a specific relationship, a bond based on the expression and realisation of the «own self» by a human being" (Adamowicz, 2004, pp. 107-108).

A NOVEL WRITTEN WITH EMOTIONS

The novel by K. Malanowska is undoubtedly written with emotions, which the critics emphasise unanimously. The book includes a lot of interesting metaphors, comparisons and juxtapositions of words that fit neatly into the prose narrative causing a personification of the descriptions of places or even the aura itself: "the sky was overcast with clouds that fell low, heavy, swollen with rain. The light dimmed and she could clearly feel the city crumbling, tense and alert, aware of the approaching storm" (Malanowska, 2012, p. 97). Conducting three narratives adds dynamism to the novel, although it also distracts the reader. Perhaps today, in the era of fragmentation of the message, it is a good procedure to speed up the book's action. The novel, however, would be much more interesting to read if it were coherent as a whole.

It is difficult to argue with literary critics who nominated *Look at me, Klara* for the Nike award and *Polityka's* Passports, even harder to undermine their verdict. In my opinion, however, this story, although written in large part in a good, interesting language, is in fact quite trivial and secondary. K. Malanowska does not bring anything new to the knowledge of the human psyche and its mechanisms. The obsession issue is an old and rather well-knit topic, just like the use of a blog narrative with its specific blogging language (I am talking about a lover's diary), in my opinion a typical jargon used massively in real-life network journals.

I also get the impression that the subject matter of the novel attracts female readers rather than male ones. They seem to be the readers fascinated by "«cook-books», only written in a nicer language", as one of the Internet users put it (Elizabeth, 2016).

If I were to recommend the novel by K. Malanowska, it would be only for the sake of its original, almost poetic language. For communing with such a language - it is really worth, for the story told and the way it is presented - not necessarily.

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