

Nothing Grows by Moonlight

Av måneskinn gror det ingenting

Presented by: Øyvind Soldal Rasmussen

Torborg Nedreaas's debut novel *Av måneskinn gror det ingenting* (*Nothing Grows by Moonlight*), published in 1947, is considered an integral part of the Norwegian canon of 20th century literature. Through its depictions of the female protagonist's poor material conditions and experiences with illegal abortions, the novel explores the zones of friction between the personal and the political, between the private body and the public sphere. In this way the novel became a central part of the abortion debate in Norway, highlighting with anger and indignation the societal structures that limit and repress women's rights to self-governance. Nedreaas would later receive several awards for her works: Most notably she was the first author to be awarded the Norwegian Critics Prize for Literature in 1950, in addition to receiving the Swedish-Norwegian Dobloug Prize in 1964.

The beginning of *Nothing Grows by Moonlight* is at first centred on a male narrator. The narrator has been wandering around the city for several days, frantically searching for a woman whose name he doesn't even know, but who he had briefly encountered one day at the train station. He recollects how the encounter happened: he sees her at the train station, spontaneously invites her to walk with him, and after a while, by silent agreement with hardly a word exchanged, they enter his apartment. On entering the apartment, the narrative shifts: they start drinking and the woman starts speaking, slowly narrating her life up to their meeting at the train station.

The narrator gradually disappears from the narrative with the woman's voice replacing his as she narrates her own past experiences while the man listens to her story. The narrator's search of a nameless woman serves first and foremost as a framework for the actual focal point of the novel, namely the woman's story. She recounts her childhood growing up in a poor working-class family in the small fictional village Gruben; the emotionally violent beginnings of her relationship and affair with her former schoolteacher Johannes – who is engaged to another woman – at 17; the tip-toeing between public condemnation and private satisfaction, trying to keep the affair secret; and the several unplanned pregnancies that come as a result from the affair, as well as the subsequent illegal abortions carried out. Published roughly thirty years before the law on self-determined abortion was passed in Norway, the novel's depictions of infidelity, illegitimate pregnancies, and – in particular – its harrowing and realistic descriptions the woman personally executing one of her abortions using a knitting needle, played an important early role in debates on abortion in Norway the years following its publishing.

In a sense, Nedreaas's novel is deeply occupied with the personal and the private, though only to a certain extent. On the one hand, the woman's narrative revolves around her gradually intensifying lust and longing for Johannes, and thus her own feelings, desires and corporeality. On the other, however, this private aspect of her narrative is never fully isolated, never fully treated as private: her relationship with Johannes always has a social and juridical dimension to it, imposing the public

sphere onto the woman's private life. As soon as the nameless woman becomes pregnant with an illegitimate child, her body can no longer be considered her own. What she can and cannot do with her body is largely governed by social and political factors. Keeping the child means facing scrutiny and becoming an outcast; getting rid of the child is illegal and thus impossible without incriminating herself. Her private sphere, her self-determination, and her self-governance is impeded by the world around her. She faces impossible choices: She can choose to be forever shunned (by keeping the child), become a criminal (by having an abortion), or to give in to death (by taking her own life).

Johannes, on his part, is left with far more options and freedom than his lover. His desires are also restrained by marriage and public decorum, but his self-governance is never impeded in the same drastic manner as in the case of the nameless woman. Their blame in the affair is regarded unequally in the public eye – thus, Johannes can continue living his married life with the other woman, whereas the nameless woman must reconstruct or scrape together a new life for herself.

Although Nedreaas disliked being labelled as a political writer and expressed contempt for the idea of literature with an explicit social function, the dynamics of the public and private in *Nothing Grows by Moonlight* undoubtedly gives the novel a socially charged dimension. Nedreaas highlights the impossibility of the nameless woman's situation as she is left with few options, both due to the legal factors hindering her bodily self-governance and the normative morality of the public.

In this way, the novel is fuelled by a feeling of necessity. As the nameless woman states, it is important that the man, her listener, hears her story – not because her story of female repression and poor material terms of living is new or unique, but because this story has never been told. Women's stories of suffering and oppression have been kept away, hidden in shameful secrecy and covered up by lies. The woman's narration can at times be read as an exorcism of past traumas, but it can also be viewed as driven by anger and indignation towards the social structures that have shaped her life. Thus, at the novel's core there lies a political awakening, a growing anger against inhumane aspects of Nedreaas's society, that are pulled out of their hiding and forced into the public consciousness for all to see.

Despite Nedreaas's reluctance to include her work within the category of politically committed literature, her work has played a central role in shaping the canon of feminist literature in Norway. Moreover, in 2023 *Nothing Grows by Moonlight* was included in a new literary canon for the left by the Norwegian left-wing newspaper *Klassekampen*. Nedreaas is here placed alongside authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Marx, and Frantz Fanon.

LANGUAGE: Norwegian/Norsk

This title was not censored before publishing