

Master Adam

Majstor Adam

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Published at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, during a period of industrialisation and modernisation across what is today continental Croatia, the short novel *Master Adam* follows the life of Adam, an orphan who grows into a diligent and God-fearing worker, yet falls into trouble because of poverty and good-natured gullibility. By returning to “true” values, Adam eventually becomes a respected and knowledgeable master craftsman. Although printed in a relatively large numbers and widely read at the time of its publication, this short novel by Vjenceslav Novak, a canonical Croatian author, is today almost unknown and forgotten.

Adam is an orphan whose mother was forced to abandon him because she could not care for him after his father refused to marry her. Nevertheless, Adam grows up in the household of a Zagreb master tailor and becomes an apprentice tailor himself, even falling in love with the master’s daughter. Everything develops idyllically until a German tailor named Schneider (a common German surname that literally means “tailor”) arrives at the workshop. Schneider leads Adam into a circle of socialists, convinces him to drink alcohol, and encourages him to mock God. After the old master tailor’s death, Schneider seduces his widow, takes over the workshop, and through various intrigues prevents Adam’s relationship with the tailor’s daughter.

Although Adam is initially drawn to the utopian vision of a socialist society, he soon realises that the socialists around him are opportunists like Schneider, and that socialism stands in opposition to Catholic teaching. Reinforcing his faith in God, Adam leaves Zagreb and moves to an unnamed town where, over the years, he becomes a master tailor, the owner of his own workshop, a respected member of the community, and an autodidact. During one visit to Zagreb he meets the tailor’s daughter he once loved. He eventually marries her and learns that Schneider, by living in luxury, has run the once-successful workshop he took over into the ground.

The final third of the novel differs considerably from the rest. It is written as a conversation that takes place years after the events described, between Adam and a local teacher who also reveals himself as the narrator of the entire novel. In this dialogue, written in a catechistic style, Adam explains on the basis of his own experience that socialism is an idea brought in by foreigners, that it is harmful for Croats—especially for workers—and that they can improve their condition only by embracing what he calls “mild Christian socialism” and love for the homeland. Using his own life as an example, he emphasises how his devotion to the Catholic faith and to serving the nation allowed him to rise from orphanhood to a respected master craftsman.

Master Adam is a pedagogical novel written in simple language and intended for a wide audience. It is certainly one of Novak’s weaker works, but also one of his more widely read ones. It was published by the society Sveti Jeronim, which at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century

dominated the publishing field in Croatia. Sveti Jeronim produced a large number of educational booklets and some novels, and thanks to strong support from the Catholic Church and certain political parties, as well as low prices, its publications were widely read.

Published not long after the establishment of a more lasting socialist movement in Croatia in 1892, and in the very year of its first significant rise in popularity, *Master Adam* had a clear and explicitly stated political function. Aimed primarily at workers—whose numbers were growing in the midst of intensified industrialisation—the novel was intended to undermine rising sympathies for socialism by portraying it as a godless and anti-national idea. Socialism appears here as a disease that foreigners promote for their own benefit, seeking to corrupt the good-natured but often naïve Croatian working class. And the cure for the disease of socialism is a return to traditional values, including a return to traditional rural life, which, unlike the city, has not been morally corrupted.

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing