

The Romance of Teresa Hennert

Romans Teresy Hennert

Presented by: Dawid Borucki

The narrative focuses on the daily lives and struggles of people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, primarily former or rather currently inactive military officers, as well as their wives and lovers. Nałkowska goes into detail about their mental states, passions, habits, customs and daily routines, using the titular romance as a pretext for a study of the mechanisms of social upward or downward mobility, new forces on the political scene (e.g. Marxism), the collapse of old social hierarchies, but above all, different means of dealing with the political and cultural legacy of the nineteenth century.

In terms of formal solutions, *The Romance of Teresa Hennert* falls safely within the division of literary objectives (and the means of achieving them) that were pursued by Polish poetry and prose during the interwar period. While poetry experiments with its own language and plays with the literary and cultural paradigms that have defined it thus far, prose sets itself tasks akin to reportage: it aims to diagnose and describe the present state of political and social affairs, and study the newly gained, so to speak, self-reliance of Polish society.

Realism was in high demand. After regaining independence in 1918, Polish society found itself in turmoil: it was confronted with the task of laying the foundations for an independent and democratic state, while at the same time losing one of the key factors that had shaped its functioning until that point – the struggle for survival and preservation of its own identity under foreign rule. Without this, so to speak, common centre of gravity, many of societal institutions and hierarchies, as well as interpersonal relationships and arrangements, lost their established trajectories, often with a drastic consequences.

Zofia Nałkowska places her characters almost in the very centre of this great transition. Although she does not provide many direct clues as to the time in which her story takes place, it can be safely assumed that main plot of the novel is set in Warsaw around year 1922: after Polish – Soviet War but still before the so-called May Coup and turn towards authoritarianism. As in most of Nałkowska's other books, there is a strong emphasis on the role and position of women in changing society. Her heroine, Teresa Hennert, a woman with past full of successes and struggles and now, at first glance, a lady dispassionately preoccupied with a marriage based on reason and mutual benefits, although hardly active in the plot itself, acts in the novel as a narrative landmark, point around which the storylines of the other characters can converge or intersect.

Although *The Romance of Teresa Hennert* can be successfully (and, to some degree, satisfactorily) read purely as psychological fiction or a novel of manners, and its political character is present more like an echo permeating the plot rather than as a directly addressed issue, Nałkowska's novel remains one of the most skilfully written – and, more importantly – one of the most accurate

diagnoses of the political landscape of its time. Mainly because she was one of the few writers who recognized and approached military officers stuck in a moment of fragile peace as a separate social class, noting that perhaps those who are least equipped to operate in emerging independent and democratic reality are precisely those who fought for it.

Nałkowska devotes a lot of space to describing their almost fanatical attachment to (increasingly invalid) military hierarchies and customs, economic and family difficulties, and their sense of being victims of social and political change. From the meticulously woven narrative emerges a picture of military officers (embodied in the novel primarily by colonel Omski) as men plagued by a state of constant insatiability, unable to find either a proper place for themselves or an outlet for their desires.

Considering that the novel was written and takes place only a few years before the mentioned May Coup, Nałkowska's observations on the military situation, the marginalisation of women's voices, and the intelligentsia's inability to pursue the modernisation of society become exceptionally insightful.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

This title was not censored before publishing