Zbigniew Uniłowski

Common Room

Wspólny pokój

Presented by: Krzysztof Ostrowski

Published in 1932, Zbigniew Uniłowski's *Wspólny pokój* is often described as a roman à clef. Behind the characters' fictional names lie numerous members of the historical poetry group "Kwadryga". The author paints a detailed portrait of the interwar literary scene and the bohemian circles centered around it. His bold and realistic depictions – which in many places border on the aesthetics of naturalism and frequently employ vulgar language – allow the writer to capture the emotional atmosphere prevailing in the vividly described gathering places of Warsaw's artists. The title of the work refers to the boarding house where the protagonist, Lucjan Salis, lives along with numerous subtenants. The living space is crowded and stifling, a fact emphasized by the work's poetics, which appeal to the senses of smell and touch. Thus, from the description of the daily lives of young aspiring poets emerges a critical commentary on living conditions in the capital of the Republic of Poland, which had regained its independence a little over a decade earlier.

The story begins with the arrival in Warsaw of the promising writer Lucjan, who is returning from Zakopane, where he had been undergoing treatment. He sublets a room from his friend and fellow writer Zygmunt. The young man is suffering from tuberculosis. The theme of illness is significant for at least two reasons. First, it highlights just how devastatingly destructive poor housing, sanitary, and hygienic conditions are to the human body. Second, it serves as a critique of the literary discourse on tuberculosis, in which this previously fatal disease had taken on a mythical character. In Romanticism, it influenced the epiphanic abilities of artists, strengthening their connection to an ideal reality. We also encounter the aestheticization of tuberculosis in the canon of modernist literature, to cite Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. In this German masterpiece, Hans Castorp's recovery serves as a metaphor for the process of constructing his own subjectivity. *The Shared Room* challenges the artistic myth of tuberculosis. Lucjan falls into a spiral of self-destructive behavior. In the cafés where members of the Kwadryga gather, he spends his time on trivial conversations and alcohol abuse. He squanders his talent. Instead of scaling the heights of Parnassus, he and his companions plunge into the abyss of the modern literary scene.

My acquaintances with other writers help me on this vertical journey to the very bottom. A particularly significant figure in this context is "Dziadzia" – a slightly older author of several short stories that, in their time, allowed him to make a name for himself in the literary world. His established reputation, however, turns out to be illusory. Dziadzia strays from his chosen path, becoming entangled in a life of debauchery, alcoholism, and financial troubles. He has a child for whom he pays no child support, as he spends the money he earns on the sly on the entertainment offered by Warsaw's nightlife. The writer's character illustrates a phenomenon in which living conditions lead to a progressive erosion of life's values in society and moral decline.

While spending time regularly at a café, Lucjan meets Miss Leopard, the beautiful and

unapproachable muse of all poets. He soon falls in love with her. After some time, he establishes direct contact with her and begins a romance. When they meet for a tryst, the woman informs him that the inexperienced poet must limit himself to expressing platonic admiration. She states that the possibility of a physical relationship is reserved for someone else. The protagonist rejects the proposal of a polygamous relationship. Another female character who appears in the novel is Teodozja – a servant from the countryside working at the boarding house. Salis seduces her, treating the girl merely as an object. Later in the novel, as the writer's illness progresses, Teodozja cares for him, revealing at the same time that she has had an abortion. She makes this decision for Lucjan's sake – raising a child would have ended his literary career. The portrayal of women in *The Shared Room* reveals the patriarchal foundations of society in the Second Polish Republic. In both the public and private spheres, women function as objects of desire. Miss Leopard serves as a refined ornament in bohemian circles, while Teodozja, due to her humble origins, cannot even claim the right to exist within that circle.

Meanwhile, Józef Bednarczyk, a law student of peasant origin, moves into the apartment with his mother. From the very beginning of their stay, they are treated with contempt by the other tenants. One of the characters claims that Bednarczyk's dreams of social advancement are doomed to failure from the start, due to his upbringing, his lack of familiarity with bourgeois etiquette, and his inherently lower intellectual level. Another source of classist remarks is the odor emanating from Józef and his mother's bodies. This example illustrates the political dimension of the sense of smell, which allows the characters to reinforce an oppressive social hierarchy. Ultimately, Bednarczyk fails his exam, leading him to commit suicide by hanging himself in the restroom.

Lucjan also dies at the end. His dire living conditions accelerate the progression of his tuberculosis. In describing the protagonist's death, Uniłowski employed the aesthetics of naturalism. On the brink of death, Teodozja cooks chicken soup from a rooster whose death has been meticulously depicted. The description of the meal's preparation evokes revulsion and serves as a symbol of the poet's dying body.

The political resonance of Zbigniew Uniłowski's novel lies primarily in its critical depiction of the housing and economic crisis affecting the characters. This crisis is the cause of the creative and existential inertia within the poets' community and contributes to the erosion of the axiological foundations upon which interwar society was built. Another significant issue is the politicization of both the peasant and the female body, whose ontological dimension takes on a legislative character at the level of class and gender hierarchies.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: