

JERZY PILCH'S MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC: AN INQUIRY INTO THE MODERN WOMAN IN PILCH'S *INNE ROZKOSZE* (*HIS CURRENT WOMAN*), AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HER SEXUAL AND TEXTUAL INFLUENCE.

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The unimaginable actually occurs—what is to be hidden is becoming the center of the protagonist's life—the taboo is at the center of the household, causing an inversion of the traditional sphere, once deemed a respectful space. The current woman breaks the taboo and shows up at the home of her lover, Kohoutek, a married man living in a household filled with relatives, thus Pilch's novel unfolds around the presence of his current woman. In her essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Elaine Showalter places feminist criticism into two distinct varieties: the woman as the reader—with the woman as a consumer of male-produced literature, and the woman as the writer—with the woman as the producer of textual meaning.¹ Understanding these distinctions and working alongside them in order to interpret the literary woman, this essay will discuss the significance of the written woman as the intra-textual director of a male-produced literature, that is to say that Pilch's female character is constructed as a powerful, modern, and uninhibited influence on the protagonist, thus guiding the audience towards a possible feminist critique of Jerzy Pilch's *Inne rozkosze*.

The presence of the current woman has a structurally formative function within the plot as the events within the novel unfold around the circumstance of her arrival and presence in the household. As the opening line of the novel reveals, the presence of this written woman will guide the development of the novel from the onset as well as construct the underlying textual narrative message, "that [the] adventure [that] had befallen...ought to serve as a warning for all".² Chapter one, although brief, astutely reveals details about the situation between Kohoutek and his current woman. The audience is informed that their romance has been thriving for seventeen weeks, that Kohoutek promised his current woman 'goodness knows what' and more than he was ever willing to give, that she is a modern woman—and a literary one at that, and last that he is terrified of the situation and expresses regret for having spent time in her 'crazy company'.³ To add to the situation, although for the purpose of the plot and Pilch's narrative the arrival of the woman would have sufficed, Kohoutek immediately grabs hold of his mistress and takes her up into the attic of the old slaughterhouse. Furthermore, if the act of placing the woman in the attic was not symbolically sufficient, Kohoutek begins to utilize storage items in the attic to create an even more secretive space for the woman. Already by the third chapter, Kohoutek has established himself as the keeper of a madwoman in the attic.

The *madwoman in the attic* as an image has contributed to feminist literary critique, and was initially represented in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and later defined as: "The madwoman in the attic is read as the unconscious articulation of the hidden fears of patriarchy and as the protest of the feminine subject against her exclusion and monstrous distortion".⁴ This image is present in Pilch's *Inne rozkosze* and is suggestive of a similar, symbolic reading of the construct. The current woman breaks the taboo and shows up uninvited at Kohoutek's home, and Pilch describes the ultimate destruction of a married man—getting caught committing indiscretions.

Kohoutek would be most impacted by this scenario when his current woman enters his reality and the taboo that resides within him cannot accommodate the pressure. The arrival of the woman is described by the narrator as a nonchalant act on the part of the woman, consisting of no more than a handful of steps: she packed her bags, settled her accounts, and boarded a train to his hometown. The description provided by the narrator follows that she is a modern woman, of the literary kind, that is

free from outstanding commitments, and free to pursue her desires. In her modernity, she is stigmatized as a reckless, unreasonable, and thus mad woman by the narrator. The argument is not concerned with whether the woman is mad but that the written woman is written and exaggerated as a madwoman, and in this way is fitting for Pilch's narrative on the dangers facing libertines, representative of the 'hidden fears of patriarchy' and the 'protest of the feminine subject against her exclusion'; this needs to be considered in light of the fact that this is a male-literature in which reflections of a feminine critique can be discerned.

Home is the sphere of anxiety for Kohoutek, a textualization of the primordial, archetypal situation taken from the imbedded narrative of Kundera and Dr. Oyermah's story. Kohoutek refers to the situation at his home as 'crazy' as literature, text and sex are bound together. The following discussion will center on the subconscious fears of patriarchy and how they are manifested through the written woman's arrival. Kohoutek is aware of his sexual drive in his life, and has some conceptions about what causes it. The current woman outs his shortcomings in explaining that Kohoutek's victory over women is his unwritten novel, his libido is a substitution for literature in his life that leads to a process of sublimation. It therefore follows that the current woman is written as a literary woman. In the first descriptions of her the reader understands the importance of books and their presence as definitive of her aesthetics, with writers such as Kundera, Broch, Taterkiewicz, Baranczak, Krynicki, and the greatest living Polish writer—none other than Pilch.⁵ The affinity that Kohoutek's current woman holds for books is a sign of her modernism, but even more so is her own writing. She is granted license by Pilch to become a woman writer in the scene that she is described as a poet. After reading her haiku, Kohoutek uses poetry writing to set a difference between him and his current woman. That he is not capable of writing, yet his current woman is capable of seemingly deep and thoughtful art through verse is a challenge. Feminist critique would suggest that the idea of the woman as mastering the pen would be to overcome the patriarchal stigmas of male-centered literature and art, yet this makes the woman subject to judgment as someone that is unruly, uninhibited, and even mad. But to further the condition granted by Pilch to this written woman, the act of writing by a female writer is underscored by the fact that the man does not comprehend the content as symbolic of the narrator's attempt at discrediting the female artist, or better yet, that his attempt to discredit her in turn results in his misunderstanding of the art form—a hint to the ultra-progressive nature of woman and patriarchal nature of man that prevents him from moving out of the stasis of traditional society: "...the inscrutable five-line haiku grew between them like an unscalable wall. They never spoke of it...only from time to time, when he felt particularly hurt, would he...emphasize that he knew nothing about poetry".⁶ This inability to bridge the gap between them, as well as the insistence on highlighting the radical differences between Kohoutek and his current woman serve to further define the woman in terms of the other, meaning that she is not like the patriarchal, traditional man and his society thus she must be labeled as the other, opposite extreme of defined rational reality: madness.

Moving away from the repressed desires of the man towards that physical condition of the written woman, the reader finds her residing in an attic. She is written as spending her time sitting, or lying in waiting for her lover to come and visit her. She spends her time with her books, smoking cigarettes, and in solitude or rather isolation. Her spontaneous decision to come to her lover and hope that they could start a life together was not a symptom of madness, rather her recluse existence in the attic is symptomatic of her desperation being written as madness. Feminist criticism argues that traditionally, women have been written by men along the parameters of certain traditional roles and expectations, and when they do not happen to fall into those ascribed roles they are portrayed as cruel, monstrous, or vile. It is interesting to note the Pilch's modern woman was written as mad for the cause of spontaneity and her initial unannounced arrival, but became symptomatic of madness only after

being confined to the attic. The attic is analogous to a state of limbo between her world, the modern world, and Kohoutek's world, that resounds with traditional, patriarchal society. The attic is neither here nor there, it is an in between space that is conducive to flights of imagination as well as a breeding ground for doubt, assumption, and questioning. It is after his current woman has spent some time, unattended to in the attic that her moods change erratically, she is cold and standoffish, as well as Kohoutek beginning to deliberate with Dr. Oyermah on her motives in inhabiting his home sphere:

'The possible reasons why your current woman did what she did are numerous, and as follows. She may have done it because she wished to force you to take a definitive decision, to say yes or no, to assume an actual position. In such case her arrival would be blackmail....She may have been brought here by a mad feminine love, or perhaps feminine cruelty. She may have come not out of her own free will but rather was led here by [a] demon...Or perhaps everything is actually much simpler; maybe she decided to pay you an unannounced visit because she is just an ordinary unpredictable young lady?'⁷

There is yet another undertone in the narrative about Kohoutek's current woman, evidenced here in the possibility of her being propelled to come to Kohoutek not out of her own free will but from being led by a demon. The implication that is subtle, yet present in the novel, concerns the possibility of his current woman being a witch. Wiedzba, the Polish equivalent of the word meaning 'woman who knows', and his current woman has been described as all-knowing on numerous occasions. The first instance that the reader is granted occurs in chapter two where the woman is crossing the lawn yet does not turn her head because 'she knows' that he is not in the dining room or anywhere else except for where he is, followed by an exclamation that, 'the woman knows everything, always'.⁸ The question of how and why she knows these things are not attainable answers, but the mystery of the woman's knowledge adds to her magical intuition. Also, the end of chapter five describes an episode where his current woman knows Kohoutek has been to bed with his wife, "How did you know?" asks Kohoutek.⁹ Feminine intuition is ascribed to the event by the narrator, but perhaps there is more? Perhaps his current woman is more than what she seems, more than an 'ordinary, unpredictable young lady?'. The chapter concludes with Kohoutek's promise that he will be back to see his current woman in the evening, and she in turn threatens him that 'maybe [she'll] come by this evening too' meaning that she would come down to the family space an out of hiding in the attic. What is most startling about this scene is the way his current woman is described, in the way she elicits fear from Kohoutek and the manner in which she is described, "He looks up and sees the face of his current woman...her features are distorted with such tremendous fury that Kohoutek is literally petrified with fear... [as she] spits out [the words] with a truly reptilian hiss".¹⁰

Above everything else, Pilch's written woman is highlighted as a madwoman. Driven by 'ordinary feminine cruelty' and despair, because 'everything a woman does is done out of despair', she is not capable of rational thought as she is guided by passion, or in other words her madness.¹¹ The one level of feminist critique would lend that this woman was written by a man to fulfill a certain purpose in his novel, as per the roles ascribed to her. I argue that although this woman was written by a man, her function in the plot is parallel and perhaps supreme to the function of the protagonist within the novel. She is leading the action from the first line of the novel, a constant presence and concern of the protagonist throughout, as well as the ultimate reason for the exile of the protagonist from his homestead, and thus literally from the novel as it reaches the end. Although driven in her actions by the hand of a male-writer, she is granted a level of autonomy, perhaps as a result of her 'madness' and can be read as a powerful influence on the protagonist.

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¹ *MLT*, 146-7.

² Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 3.

³ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 5.

⁴ *MLT*, 145.

⁵ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 4.

⁶ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 104-5.

⁷ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 111.

⁸ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 12.

⁹ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 27.

¹⁰ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 28.

¹¹ Pilch, Jerzy. *His Current Woman*, 124.