

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Maria Modrakowska

Anetka

Presented by: Anna Artwich

The novel *Anetka*, long forgotten and only recently rediscovered by literary scholar Paulina Pająk in 2021, presents a chronological depiction of the life of its eponymous protagonist, a non-normative individual. The work emerged during a period when Polish queer literature experienced a brief yet significant flourishing. This increased literary engagement with queerness and otherness is vividly reflected in *Anetka*. Several factors contributed to the emergence of this trend: the relatively favourable legal situation of homosexual individuals in interwar Poland (where, according to the 1932 Penal Code, consensual same-sex relations were decriminalized), the activity of progressive publishing houses such as Wydawnictwo Rój and Kobieta Współczesna, and the advocacy of intellectuals including Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and Irena Krzywicka.

Modrakowska's novel can be classified as a Bildungsroman: the protagonist's coming-of-age is narrated chronologically, with a clear effort to maintain causal and psychological coherence. Through detailed description, the author seeks to represent the full range of environmental factors shaping *Anetka*, reflecting the influence of contemporary psychoanalytic thought. Notably, however, Modrakowska refrains from moralizing or pathologizing her heroine's non-normative identity. This narrative approach proves particularly productive for exploring the conditions under which lesbian identity may emerge, potentially endowing the text with a didactic dimension.

In the novel, *Anetka*'s childhood is portrayed as profoundly lonely and unhappy. The manor house in which she is raised after the death of her parents is permeated by family secrets – much like the decaying mansion in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which serves as a symbolic space of degeneration and incestuous desire. Throughout her short life, *Anetka* endures a series of tragedies: the loss of her parents, her grandmother's cruelty, sexual abuse at the hands of her aunt and uncle, abandonment by her fiancé, and an unsuccessful marriage to an older man. *Anetka* repeatedly attempts to conform to social expectations – most notably through failed heterosexual relationships – but her efforts are inevitably futile. Yet the novel refrains from stigmatizing or condemning her lesbian identity. Exploited and unloved, she equates affection with subordination. Ultimately, she becomes entangled in a relationship defined by submission, serving her school friend Tea in hopes of mutual affection. Unfortunately, Tea regards their intimacy as an exciting but temporary transgression rather than a viable, enduring bond.

Anetka's ensuing depression – and finally, a suicide – can be interpreted not only as a consequence of her alienation from societal norms, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, as an outcome of her inability to articulate her own experience. The protagonist's tragic end stems from her deficit of self-determination; toward the close of the novel, she experiences a moment of profound disillusionment, recognizing and condemning in a surprising inner manifesto the hypocrisy of a society that selectively legitimizes adult relationships. Her suicide also aligns with the broader cultural trope of the "tragic queer," in which the self-destruction of non-heteronormative individuals is aestheticized as a fated or even inevitable consequence of transgression.

It appears highly probable that Modrakowska was familiar with Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of*

Loneliness and the controversy it provoked. The English novel was translated into Polish in 1933, and Modrakowska – as a famous opera singer who travelled extensively across interwar Europe – would likely have encountered the debates surrounding it. Numerous textual parallels between *Anetka* and *The Well of Loneliness* suggest that Modrakowska's novel may constitute a subtle commentary on the public outcry and legal persecution faced by Hall in the United Kingdom in 1928. Modrakowska's empathetic and remarkably modern portrayal of her lesbian heroine demonstrates an awareness of international literary currents and situates *Anetka* within a transnational dialogue on queer modernism. A close analysis of the motifs of classical antiquity and Gothic tropes in *Anetka*, in comparison with Hall's novel, reveals a meaningful intertextual relationship that underscores the existence of Polish lesbian modernism and its participation in broader global literary developments.

The novel appeared in only one Polish edition, although contemporary announcements by the publishing house Rój indicate that *Anetka* nearly sold out. Surviving reviews – albeit few and ambivalent – suggest that the novel was known and read by the interwar audience. Despite this initial reception, *Anetka* was never translated into another language and subsequently disappeared from both critical and popular memory. Nevertheless, its rediscovery demonstrates that literary representations of lesbianism emerged in Polish literature far earlier than previously assumed, challenging both established narratives of queer literary history in Poland and the preconception that the topic of non-normativity was not discussed in the literary political discourse of the era.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: