

Agata Gać

Department of Russian Studies, Faculty of Applied Linguistics,  
University of Warsaw  
Warsaw  
agata.gacc@gmail.com

## Fictional Truth, i.e. the Biographies of Literary Heroines

Book Review: Katarzyna Szumlewicz (2017).  
*Miłość i ekonomia w literackich biografjach kobiet.*  
Warszawa: IBL PAN

### Abstract

This review of *Love and Economics in Women's Literary Biographies* by Katarzyna Szumlewicz focuses on the major issues and social functions of the theses presented in the book.

**Keywords:** women's biographies, female experience, literature and society.

Can the literature of the past two centuries support the emancipation demands and help shape women's social identity in the modern world? Katarzyna Szumlewicz (2017) attempts to answer this question: by juxtaposing "love" and "economics", she puts a new perspective

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License ([creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/)), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s), 2019.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor-in-chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing of this issue: Katarzyna Roman-Rawska, Tomasz Rawski

into the literary biographies of female figures known and rooted in world culture.

The journey takes place through diverse contexts: geographical (from Europe, India, to Canada and the United States), historical (the action takes place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and sociocultural (the protagonists belong to both the lowest classes and the aristocracy), outlining for us a network of connections, conditions and relationships. The book is divided into ten chapters, which are connected by a similar vision of female experiences. The decisive factor is, therefore, the class membership of the heroines, their life motivations and aspirations, the work they do or their fulfilment in the sexual sphere. What is important is the fact that Szumlewicz assigns literature an emancipatory and engaging function. She confirms this with the following words: "... literature is primarily a critique of social relations, made by showing their impact on the life and awareness of the characters depicted. Its liberating function is also to show the possibilities of a different, better social order"<sup>1</sup> (Szumlewicz, 2017, p. 12). The adopted perspective is intended to provide insight into the inner world of the heroines, their mind, body and soul - so it is an incredible opportunity to learn about the spontaneous reactions and desires of women in a particular social position. The author emphasizes that what is most interesting is that literature crosses boundaries and adopted norms, which she decided to focus on in her book. As the starting point, she takes emancipation and all its manifestations in the biographies of literary heroines. When choosing specific portrayals, Szumlewicz is guided by Danuta Lalak's approach, presented in the work *Life as a Biography: Biographical Approach in the Pedagogical Perspective* (2010), according to which a specific biography reflects the individual development processes of the individual, and also presents a subjective assessment of reality. The study cites publications of researchers such as Thorstein Veblen, Betty Friedan, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Luce Irigaray, Roland Barthes, Edward Said.

The book opens with chapters introducing selected works of the classics of English romance literature: *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* by the Brontë sisters. An analysis of women's portrayals reveals the principles within which the English aristocracy of the 17th and 19th centuries operated. The heroines, entering into an affair ending in marriage with men of the upper classes, gave themselves access to financial but also social benefits. Upward mobility was sometimes the only reason for getting married and starting a family. Seemingly idealistic, full of romantic and sentimental elation, the fate of the heroines of Jane Austen's works, in the

<sup>1</sup> This and further translations from Polish are by the author of this article.

presented perspective, is an example of the realization of the hidden desires and dreams of women of the 19th century. On the other hand, the Brontë sisters draw two possibilities that women (apparently) had - following their feelings, as Jane Eyre does, or acting against the heart, which resulted in the marriage of one of the heroines of *Wuthering Heights*. Though less frequent, the reverse situation of love between women from the upper class and men from the lowest rungs of society, is shown in the chapter discussing the affairs of the characters in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by David Herbert Lawrence and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Szumlewicz points out that the male characters in the aforementioned literary works are subjected to idealization and sacralization, and their role in the life of the main female characters seems to be crucial. Forbidden love, which is associated with degradation in a hierarchical or caste society, is a place where the passion of women is released, with the discovery of eroticism and a feeling of freedom. The heroines of the dramas by Thorstein Veblen and Henrik Ibsen want to reach for this freedom. Each of the women has a restriction imposed on her, because in life they should realize themselves as exemplary mothers and wives. The upbringing they have experienced, and then "realizing" culturally adopted gender roles, makes them deprived of joy and passion.

Szumlewicz also touches on the topic of excluded women, including servants. She describes this problem by choosing two Polish works of the 20th century - *Granica* by Zofia Nałkowska and *Kaśka Kariatyda* by Gabriela Zapolska. The presented literary biographies of servants show the cruel, brutal and unjust reality that affects a large part of the poor. Women are not only stripped of their femininity, dignity and respect, but are also fully dehumanized. Servants are an opportunity for their "masters" to demonstrate power - for men they are mostly a sexual object, and for women owners they function as a phantom that can be exploited to the maximum in household duties. Although the possession of servants in class society was associated with prosperity, luxury and the wealth of the owners, it was in fact a series of tragedies that affront the humanity of slaves. Szumlewicz emphasizes how their essence was reduced to their bodies, using all reserves of physical strength from them. The examples discussed show one more important aspect of servants' lives, namely the lack of any solidarity among women, both in the owner-servant relationship and in relations between servants.

Among the excluded, there are also prostitutes and courtesans, to whom the author devotes her thoughts on the novels *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas and *Nana* and *L'Assommoir* by Emile Zola. The heroines of these novels belong to two worlds - to the lowest class due to their origin, yet "professionally" are associated with the world of the aristocracy.

Performing the service of luxury prostitution leads to contact with wealth and spheres inaccessible to ordinary people. As the author indicates, this occupation was the only way to improve the economic situation of French women and guaranteed the achievement of financial stability. The writers kill off their heroines, thus suggesting that their occupation had a devastating effect on their morality and life itself.

The author devotes one of the last chapters to the experience of rape and various other forms of physical violence. Analysis of the plots of novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker reveals the functioning of gender stereotypes, justifying the torturer and blaming the victim. Attention is drawn to the contrast produced by the growing injustice between man and woman. What affects the heroines is huge oppression that accompanies all of them regardless of age, origin or latitude. Szumlewicz refers several times in the book to the theory of the American philosopher Nancy Hartsock and her work devoted to the experience of the oppressed and the oppressive: *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (1983). According to her, in order to find the truth one should break with the version of the dominant group, which is imposed on others and considered right. The solution to this is to show the world of the oppressed group, the accounts of people in an “inhuman” situation.

Szumlewicz shows social, economic and cultural mechanisms that have shaped the position and role of women in particular countries for hundreds of years. She exposes what was hidden under the slogan of “love” - the world of emotions, senses, spirit and “economics” - a combination of material features and conditions. An aspect that is lacking, and which could complement the analysis, would be the study of the language layer of the texts. The publication *Love and Economics in Women’s Literary Biographies* is not only an analysis of female literary portrayals, but a deep insight into historical and social processes that shaped contemporary reality. Perhaps careful analysis of and reflection on the books we know would have allowed us to deal with many problems of gender equality, respect for human dignity and individual freedom a long time ago.

## References

- Hartsock, N. (1983). *Money, Sex, and Power. Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Lalak, D. (2010). *Życie jako biografia: podejście biograficzne w perspektywie pedagogicznej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak.
- Szumlewicz, K. (2017). *Miłość i ekonomia w literackich biografjach kobiet*. Warszawa: IBL PAN.

---



---

## Fikcyjna prawda, czyli o biografiach bohaterek literackich.

Recenzja książki:

Katarzyna Szumlewicz (2017). *Miłość i ekonomia w literackich biografiach kobiet*. Warszawa: IBL PAN.

Artykuł jest recenzją książki *Miłość i ekonomia w literackich biografiach kobiet* Katarzyny Szumlewicz, w którym skupiono się na głównych założeniach oraz funkcjach społecznych zaprezentowanych twierdzeń w publikacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** biografie kobiet, doświadczenie kobiece, literatura i społeczeństwo.

### Note

Agata Gać, PhD. Student in the Department of Russian Studies, Faculty of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw.

agata.gacc@gmail.com

The preparation of the article was self-funded by the author.

No competing interests have been declared.