

# Herstory in Young Adult Fiction by Joanna Rudniańska Based on the Examples of *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy*

The wonderful life  
in that ancient rich town  
was no longer for me.  
Marked with crazy pain  
I was alien  
among the sisters and mothers.

Joanna Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

(..) Helena studies that space  
with that new sense of hers:  
the sight/hearing/smell.  
That cannot be expressed in words.  
Helena the calico sits on a windowsill  
and thinks with non-words and non-images.  
With something which has no name.  
No person could understand that.

Joanna Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, pp. 146-147.

## Introduction

“Cultural conditionings have resulted in focusing a historical narrative (at least within European historiography) on masculinity.”<sup>1</sup> This has been brought about by a patriarchal division of social spheres into a private sphere – to which women have been assigned – and a public one, in which men participated in the past and, in most cases, continue to participate today. It is the latter that has been arbitrarily considered as worthy of presentation, while that which is “privately feminine” has been subdued or even forgotten.<sup>2</sup> The experiences of women have been perceived as meaningless and not worth recording; especially from their personal perspectives.<sup>3</sup> What mattered in the public opinion were only the narratives of men, hence the descriptions of past ages could be referred to as “his-torical”, a term I understand – after Ewa Domańska – as a seemingly neutral androcentric narrative, which disqualifies herstories, or narratives developed by women.<sup>4</sup> A need to include herhistorical narratives, that is narratives exclusively female, in public discourses and to add value to women’s personal experiences within the social space was indicated by feminist movements of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Considering a multitude and diversity of herstories, I want to note that in this paper I will predominantly focus on 21st-century fiction herstories intended for young adults, perceived as personal girl/woman stories which offer essentialism, sensuality, intimacy, and personalised interpretation of the world. The foundations for herstory understood in such a way were offered by Adele Aldrige, who, in the 1970s, proposed to deconstruct the English word ‘history’.<sup>6</sup> According to the author, the term had a strongly androcentric undertone, which becomes visible if it is broken into the noun ‘story’ and the possessive pronoun ‘his’.<sup>7</sup> By using a pun, it becomes clear that ‘his-story’ is a narrative shaped by the experiences of man; or, simply “his stories”.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to androcentric narratives, Aldrige proposed the term ‘herstory’, which she devised in order to cover the scientific relations in the age-long story of women and their heritage, the fiction-based attempts at reproducing the specifically feminine experiences, and the literature of personal testimony, or using a lens through which it is possible to view women’s feelings, emotions, and experiences, and define a feminine mode of perceiving the world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. Witczak, *Herstory. Od historii do literatury*, “Sensus Historiae” 2016, issue 4, p. 63. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

<sup>2</sup> Vide P. Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, Massachusetts 1993, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Vide P. Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, transl. L. Kopciwicz, Warszawa 2004, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Vide E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Poznań 1999, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Vide R. Putnam Tong, *Myśl feministyczna. Wprowadzenie*, transl. J. Mikos, B. Umińska, Warszawa 2002, p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> Vide E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> Vide L. Marzec, *Herstoria żywa, nie tylko jedna, nie zawsze prawdziwa*, “Czas Kultury” 2010, issue 5, pp. 34-43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Vide E. Kraskowska, *Czy jest możliwa (i potrzebna) herstoria literatury polskiej?*, [in:] *Widnokregi literatury – wielogłosy krytyki. Prace ofiarowane profesor Teresie Walas*, eds. A. Łębkowska, R. Nycz, M. Popiel, T. Kunz, Kraków 2015, p. 24.

Herstories are increasingly becoming a point of focus of those female researchers in social sciences and humanities, who study long-forgotten or unknown women and their cultural heritage. Herstories are also interesting for female writers, who use them to present exclusively female experiences. In Poland, considerable popularity has been won by studies with a feminist and gender focus on local female writing, as well as herstories and herstorical novels. The herstorical novel has most intensely developed in the English-speaking countries since the 1960s, where it is an object of in-depth interdisciplinary analyses. It should be noted that an area of interest of Polish researchers regarding modern women's writing is the output of those female writers whose works have been intended for adult readers, whereas texts written for children and young adults, and herstories noticeably present in them, have remained on the fringes of literary studies.<sup>10</sup> Consider a statement by Bogumiła Kaniewska, who thus commented on little interest of local researchers in feminist or gender issues in Polish children's and young adult literature written by women:

(...) Less often children's literature (in Poland) was the focus of studies based on the selected methodologies, though the situation has undergone a radical shift in recent years: as various new readings of children's fiction also include a gender perspective. "Femininity" as a category has appeared in the reflections on children's literature in two ways: as an element which structures narratives and the internal world, and as a genealogical category enabling identification and description of the so-called novels for teenage girls. With a rather extensive representation in Western literary studies the first circle is just in its infancy in Poland. (...) Reflection on the novel for teenage girls is more common, though the category of femininity has rarely been studied directly in those texts as it has been subordinated to genealogical or literary history analyses. (...) Interestingly enough, even though in the discussions focused on women's writings for adults a question of authorship (and personality) is commonly raised, the issue is almost completely disregarded in the discussions about children's literature. The "group of female writers for children" is not as predominant as the "group of female writers" in highly artistic literature, while the issue of personality or autobiographism is of little interest for researchers of texts for children.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I am not developing a synthetic image of herstories in modern Polish women's writings for non-adults, since this research area deserves a monograph that would discuss herstories in children's and young adult literatures as a topic to some degree separate in relation to women's

<sup>10</sup> Vide G. Leszczyński, *Bunt czytelników. Proza inicjacyjna netgeneracji*, Warszawa 2010; M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Czytająca dziewczyna. O przemianach współczesnej powieści dla dziewcząt*, [in:] *Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży (po roku 1980)*, ed. K. Heska-Kwaśniewicz, vol. 1, Katowice 2008, pp. 158-179.

<sup>11</sup> B. Kaniewska, *Kobieca twórczość dla dzieci*, [in:] *Polskie piśarstwo kobiet w wieku XX. Procesy i gatunki, sytuacje i tematy*, eds. B. Kaniewska, E. Kraskowska, Poznań 2015, p. 249.

writings intended for adults. Therefore, I am using an option of developing interpretative case studies, which I perceive as works which chart new routes for subsequent comprehensive studies of the topic. Ewa Kraskowska referred to such singular activities as “bore-holes,”<sup>12</sup> which “reach deep into that bedrock,”<sup>13</sup> which women’s literary works basically are. The “bore-hole” I propose includes young adult fiction by Joanna Rudniańska, whose works are examples of a nonconformist coming-of-age novel marked by experiences specific to teenage girls and women. It has been developing in Poland since the 1990s, featuring an emphasis on the personalities of teenage girls and women, presenting herstories of them especially focusing on a highly individualised process of growing up, as well as the intentional development of their identities.<sup>14</sup>

Rudniańska’s output consists of nine works, five of which are intended for non-adult readers: *Mój tata z obcej planety* (a novel first published in Japan in 2000, and later in Poland in 2008), *Rok Smoka* (2003), *Kotka Brygidy* (2007), as well as an illustrated book titled *XY* (2012) and a picture book titled *Bajka o wojnie* (2015). Her works for adults include *Miejsca* (1999), *Okno na skrzyżowanie. Baśnie świąteczne dla dorosłych* (2007), *Sny o Hiroszynie* (2018), and *RuRuRudniańska* (2019). I must be noted that Rudniańska’s exceptionally ambitious works for young readers may be placed at an intersection of highly artistic young adult fiction and adult fiction. The writer is known for raising existential, fringe, coming-of-age, ontological, psychological, and psychedelic topics. She displays a predilection for issues such as: individuality, otherness, rejection, deviation, trauma, the ambivalence of a human nature, a negative impact of life experiences, damaged biographies, and catastrophic events; she has also devoted much space to the terror of war, especially that of the Holocaust. She presents realities deconstructed by war – inscribed within the stories of young girls, teenage girls, and women – with a clear tendency for exposing their points of view, included in emphatic herstories and presented by means of convention that is phantasmatic, metaphorised, embellished with difficult symbols intended for personal interpretation.<sup>15</sup> In modern interdisciplinary studies into the Holocaust-related experiences of children and women, it is stressed that until recently those were marginalised and strictly separated and contained within zones of silence or non-expression.<sup>16</sup> These facts are raised in post-humanistic discourses with

<sup>12</sup> E. Kraskowska, *Z dziejów badań nad polskim pisarstwem kobiet*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX...*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Vide M. Bednarek, *Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX...*, pp. 67-70.

<sup>15</sup> As Maciej Wróblewski wrote, “Rudniańska raises in her works major existential, psychological, and socio-political problems. She is very consistent in her choices and approaches the selected issues, for example, growing up, generational conflicts, seeking own identity (Jewish, Polish), alcoholism, war, and violence, with sincerity”. Idem, *Między baśnią a parabolą – małe formy Joanny Rudniańskiej*, [in:] *“Stare” i “Nowe” w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży: małe formy narracyjne*, eds. B. Olszewska, O. Pajęczkowski, Opole 2017, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Vide A. Ubortowska, ‘Niewidzialne świadectwa’. *Perspektywa feministyczna w badaniach nad literaturą Holocaustu*, “Teksty Drugie” 2009, issue 4; eadem, ‘Pisałam sercem i krwią’. *Poetyka kobiecych autobiografii Holocaustowych*, “Ruch Literacki” 2008, issue 6.

a non-anthropocentric or non-androcentric focus.<sup>17</sup> Rudniańska's fiction includes micro-narratives by children and women, as well as by animals, and in that is why it must be emphasised that in the post-modern Polish young adult fiction she has been one of the first writers who has opened herself to those excluded voices.<sup>18</sup>

### *Smoczyca [Dragoness] and Kotka [She-Cat] as the metamorphic symbols of (de)construction*

This paper analyses *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy*, or the works in which herstories are deeply rooted. They are visible in the narrowing of narrative perspectives to personal, subjective, and sensual experiences of their protagonists. Those experiences are presented by means of phantasmatic and metamorphic images, symbols, and metaphors, through which interpretations of epiphanic, as well as borderline experiences inscribed in the coming-of-age of teenage girls become multi-layered and 'own', as they are branded by personal sensations of the readers of these novels. Rudniańska's herstories are elliptical and sensory, containing fluctuating meanings, as they are composed of intimate, traumatic, and sensual experiences, tabooed and subdued in the public space, since they rarely uttered, yet identifiable for women as traces, marks, and scars belonging to their private genealogies. The main topic of both works is the (de)construction of a fluid individuality of teenage girls and women as a creative act aimed at further defining themselves, gaining deeper knowledge of themselves, reaching that which is suppressed, ousted, or thrust into stereotypes regarding femininity and women's responsibilities, which herstories are supposed to mock, lynch, and even erase.

The central themes of both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are the coming-of-age attempts of the protagonists at defining themselves; reaching

<sup>17</sup> Vide A. Nikliborc, *Uwięzione w KL. Auschwitz-Birkenau. Traumatyczne doświadczenia kobiet odzwierciedlone w dokumentach osobistych*, Kraków 2010; E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the fact of adding significance to personal narratives is a result of noticeable biographical and autobiographical contexts in both novels, which Anna Pekaniec addressed writing: "A plot of the novel is quite thick, saturated with details, yet Rudniańska maintains perfect control over it, while Helena, the protagonist, is an exceptionally bright and sensitive teenage girl. At the same time, a biographical background of *Kotka Brygidy* must be considered, and then it becomes obvious that the story is not focused on war only, but also on growing up (so it is also a coming-of-age novel), loneliness, gaining knowledge about the world wandering in the dark, great longing, helplessness in the face of evil the consequences of which cannot be fixed within a global perspective, they can only be minimised within oneself". The researcher added that "*Kotka Brygidy* is a story of endless longing for a time when everything fit everything else, and people were able to be themselves – or at least that was what Helena thought. It is a story of an enduring grief over those lost in the war-time Armageddon and in the Shoah, which deprived the world of its sensitivity". Eadem, *Dwie opowieści o wojnie, Holokauście i nie tylko. Kotka Brygidy Joanny Rudniańskiej i Rutka Joanny Fabickiej*, "Czy/tam/tu. Literatura dziecięca i jej konteksty" 2017, issue 1, pp. 15, 25. Maciej Wróblewski argued that in Rudniańska's works, the selection of topics was dictated by the biography of a mother who had lived through the experience of a concentration camp. Idem, *Między baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 78. Vide also an interview with the author at <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/do-dziecka-mozna-tylko-podskoczyc-17992> (accessed: 11.07.2018).

memories defined by the family experiences of women; herstorically depicting special bonds with their closest relatives; finding unuttered or even tabooed traces, marks, and signs associated with the depictions of the major women characters in their families; and listening carefully to voices from the past and the desire to understand the ambivalent identities of their fathers. The herstories in Rudniańska's works fluctuate around damaged and distorted relations, which the author has enabled to resonate without enclosing them in any rigid framework of a happy ending, as if the growing up of the protagonists was a never-ending process or constituted a continuum in her writings. Therefore, it seems that the novels depict coming of age based on (de)construction which, on the one hand, enables the protagonists to unearth family secrets, understand the created identities of family members, and penetrate their thoughts and plans, and, on the other, it enables them to understand their and others' need to avoid painful truths, but also to come to terms with mental fission, a sense of alienation, and being excluded from specific systems, norms, or values; being mentally nomadic, constantly on the road, always searching for something.

Both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are dominated by 'contaminated worlds': the first one depicts a breakup of the family, while in the latter one shows a decomposition of the world destroyed by World War II. Sylwia (the protagonist of *Rok Smoka*) and Helena (the protagonist of *Kotka Brygidy*) furtively observe micro-spaces in which they live. They peep into them or they see mysterious things, or those which they had not noticed before. The essentialism of those observations, or the fact of noticing specific details in the behaviour of their relatives, is the reason why they are no longer single-dimension figures, as they sometimes become disturbing. Sylwia's and Helena's strong personalities influence considerably how they perceive themselves and the world. The protagonists struggle with decoding behaviour, words, and gestures of their loved ones, which enables them to notice many crises, breakdowns, depression, fears, and the metamorphoses of family members. Through their inherent gentleness, tenderness, and an understanding for difficult biographies, they record in their memories the symbolic portraits of their loved ones, which despite their flaws, or perhaps because of them, they try to root in themselves, finding a place for them in their own herstories.

As she grows up, the protagonist of *Rok Smoka* notices changes in the behaviour of her beloved father, who suffers from depression, separates himself from the family, and eventually leaves. The story's breakthrough moment is the time of a critical metamorphosis: from a withdrawn, silent, yet sensitive father, who loved his daughter, he suddenly, as she perceives him, changes into a stranger, someone mysterious, and dark. Sylwia describes his transformation as a change into a dragon and she associates it with press reports about people disappearing under unexplained circumstances. The girl discovers her father's secret life; under a new form, he dances in an abandoned theatre. Fascinated and disturbed by a dark image of her father, she watches him covertly and recalls how quite recently he used to dance with her and sing to her: "This was my daddy's song,

my daddy's dance, this was my daddy! I felt that with every drop of my blood, which was his blood. He was so strong and large! And how beautiful, all covered in scales shimmering like the inside of a seashell, with a rainbow tail and ruby eyes. Now, he would surely be strong enough to dance, lifting me up even though I was so big."<sup>19</sup> Sylwia does not clarify what problems troubled her father; as herstory, tightly covered with symbols, only enables readers to intuitively read phantasmatic images. Her father's dragon image constitutes a dissonance in reference to how a loving friend he used to be when she was a child. In her memories, he appears as an empathetic sensitive person, capable of perceiving sadness, pain, suffering, sometimes even a death wish in all living creatures. The protagonist intuitively understands that the negative transformation of the beloved member of her family is impacted by her coming of age, which entails a loss of closeness and a shared sense of loneliness.

When the father withdraws or disappears from home for extended periods, Sylwia learns about the history of her grandmother Krystyna, in whose company other women in the family feel insecure and ugly, especially Sylwia, who takes much after her father, whom Krystyna has always discredited and disliked:

My grandmother never smiled, which she did only when she was reading something. She was a tall slender woman of an excellent silhouette and fabulous ash-grey hair. Mum was somewhat similar to her, but if they stood side by side, no one paid attention to her, only grandma was the one who counted. Then me, I failed through and through. Black African curls, chubby and rather short, that was unforgivable, and my grandma often reproached me for that, yet the real culprit, my daddy, has never been accused directly. The realisation of his guilt ensured looks directed at him and seemingly unimportant gestures, many occasions for which were offered by the fact that we all lived together.<sup>20</sup>

Sylwia is watching her grandmother reading a book and she says: "She devoured books and magazines like a dragon, sitting by the table straight, at the edge of her chair, and storms rumbled through her face. She cried, she smiled, and she giggled like a little girl. I watched her in awe and I imagined I was a character in a book: Alice, Ophelia, Clara from *The Nutcracker*".<sup>21</sup> The protagonist describes the ritual of brushing her grandmother's knee-long hair; she talks about bombastic monologues describing the rituals rooted in the matrilineal line of their family. Sylwia does not identify herself with the grandmother; she sees the traits she shares with her father and feels being discredited by the doyenne of the family. Krystyna rebukes the defects in her appearance, she constantly depreciates the girl's attachment to her father, and she actively interferes with the relationships of not only her daughter and her daughter's husband, but also her granddaughter and

<sup>19</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, Warszawa 2003, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

her father with whom the girl has a very strong bond, which remains in contrast with the formal relationships with the women in the family. As Sylwia grows up, she gradually discovers even darker secrets of her father's personality, she feels the need to get to know him deeply or, rather, diagnose the reasons for his destructive melancholy, or depression. Similarly, she analyses the complicated personalities of the women close to her and their tragic biographies.

A major role in the protagonist's life is played by Krystyna's first cousin Agnes, a disquieting relative from America. The extravagant and direct aunt sees people's auras; around Sylwia she sees an aura inscribed within the matrilineal line of their family. When the girl sees Agnes off to the airport on her return to the US, they are accompanied by the father, whose problems Agnes seems to understand perfectly. Her last words before boarding intrigue Sylwia and make her view him differently: "I would like to take you with me, but I don't think I'm the right company for small girls, and also this brown bear would have died without you because you are *sweet, sweet*, I had a brown bear just like that one once, but they burnt him (...)"<sup>22</sup> The protagonist sees emotion in her dad's face, yet we do not know whether she completely understands what her aunt is saying, since she is talking about the experience of a death camp, where her family was gassed, and probably about similar experiences of Sylwia's father. They both notice in the girl's behaviour and appearance the auras of their loved ones, ruthlessly killed during World War Two. After the aunt's death, the protagonist meets Ludwiczek, a lover of her distant relative, who tells strange stories about Agnes' life which are the outcome not only her non-conformism, but also stemmed from her time in a death camp. What Sylwia remembers in particular is her aunt's grotesque and rebellious acts:

Not only did she have the silhouette of a young girl, but even her walk was exciting. At times a man would follow her in the street. She would then walk in an even more exciting fashion only to suddenly stop under some pretence. When the man came very close, she would turn around and make a wry face. She never used make-up; she never went to a beauty parlour. She was obsessive about her face. When the man would flee, she laughed like crazy. She considered that a great practical joke.<sup>23</sup>

I don't know what kind of hair Agnes had. Ever since I've known her, she was bald as a coot. She left the camp without a single hair on her scalp. She had never told me how it happened. She wore a wig. She had enough money to have such fabulous natural hair. It was very exciting when she took her wig off. She had a beautiful head, an absolutely perfect shape, Nefertiti might have had similar. She would sometimes put make-up on it, that was the only place she would wear it, I'm not sure I should be telling you this.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 35.



Sylwia learns from none other than Agnes about the uniqueness of the matrilineal line in her family, in which women every other generation possess huge powers, the power of clairvoyance, longevity, and the power to cast spells. The herstorical, and fantastic tale includes surprising and almost fairy-tale events in the lives of Krystyna and Agnes, such as the fact that when they were young, they survived a plague spread by rats. Agnes reminisces about herself when she was young. She also talks about Krystyna's past talents, as she was supposed to take up studies at the Sorbonne but, after her parents' death, was unceremoniously married off by her callous brothers. Sylwia understands that women are treated as objects in the patriarchal culture and she is critical of men's decision-making. She herself wants to decide about her mind and body, to search on her own for paths of her development. Meanwhile, Agnes talks overtly about the further tragic fortunes of her first cousin, not considering even for a moment how that might influence the adolescent girl:

They didn't want to have any problems with the eccentric maiden so they married her off with Robert. He came from a good family, but was old, spoiled, and stupid. He impregnated Krystyna child after child, they were all boys, they all died, and he himself gambled away his wealth. (...) One time Robert beat Krystyna hard, he got mad because she laughed reading *Alice in Wonderland*. He could not understand, the poor fellow, how you can laugh while reading a book. He himself could barely write his name. So, Krystyna went mad, completely losing her mind. In the past, she wrote wonderful translations of French poems, in fact Robert burnt them all. She wrote a treatise in mathematics; she had an outstanding sense of humour.<sup>25</sup>

The last message from Agnes, given to Sylwia after her aunt's death, says about an evil spell of transformation that Krystyna supposedly cast on the protagonist's father, presumably because she despised him (or because she despised men in general, as it was those closest to her who had hurt her the most) and because of the complete and unrelenting control over Sylwia which Krystyna mistook for caring. Rudniańska incorporates into the plot descriptions of expanded, symbolic, and feminine rituals which support bonds among women being based on their ability to engage in subliminal communication, as well as on mysterious rites inscribed in a girl's coming of age. A visible fable-like topos of a journey which Sylwia must complete to lift the spell off her father acquires an emphatically feminising undertone in the novel. The path of coming of age is devised by Old Women, namely the already dead Agnes and the dying Krystyna. It is owing to them that the protagonist is supposed to experience her initiation. Interestingly enough, the girl demanded from her grandmother help by exerting violence, both symbolic and physical, forcing her to return to her suppressed memories, painfully pulling on her long hair. Thus, Sylwia assumes in the matrilineal line of the family the role of the strong, yet cruel leader disregarding her

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

grandmother's old age and remaining indifferent to her mother, who was a washed-out and completely unexciting character, a person almost invisible within the genealogical map drawn by the daughter.

This forced act of sisterhood resembles fairy tale or mythical initiation scenarios when a maturing protagonist discovers within the structure of female relations mechanisms of violence imposed on young women by the old ones, which she must completely reject in order to define her own femininity and to feel free.<sup>26</sup> Sylwia receives from her witch grandmother a feminine attribute necessary for the initiation journey to be successful: a thin wristband twisted into a braid of the hair of the doyenne of the family, as well as a piece of advice as to where she should go and what she should remember:

You will climb stairs to a desert. You will find a city upon a hill. There, you will see the Dragon Pond. You must step into it, but before you do that you will tie this braid tightly around your left wrist. It will be your talisman, I believe. Then you will know what to do. But you cannot be sluggish, or proud. And avoid pleasure, remember that.<sup>27</sup>

The young girl begins the journey in time and space at night. Blind and forced to rely only on her own instinct, she claims the stairs to a land of Arcadia where she regains her sight and reaches a pond where dragons swim around:

Those were female dragons, dragonesses. One of them took her young to her swollen breast. Young dragonesses, full of charm and grace, splashed and frolicked, while the old ones, like moss-covered logs, lurked like crocodiles. (...) "Approach them," her heart suggested. "They will accept you like a sister because that's what you are."<sup>28</sup>

An act of entering the pond is a metaphysical and a transformative experience for the protagonist. Swimming in it in ecstasy, she experiences lightness and transforms into a dragoness, like the mothers and sisters. That transformative motion is meaningful since Sylwia as a dragoness experiences a genealogical birth for the community of her great-grandmothers who were pacifistic and lived in a paradise-like archetypal land. This echoes Luce Irigaray's feminist psychoanalysis; in her essay titled *Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother*, where she says that "the first body we as women had to relate to was a woman's body and our first love is love of the mother, women always have an ancient and primary relationship to what is called homosexuality."<sup>29</sup> The celebration of sisterhood is visible through the scene

<sup>26</sup> Vide G. Lasoń-Kochańska, *Córki Penelopy. Kobiety wobec baśni i mitu*, "Słupskie Prace Filologiczne" 2004, pp. 173-182.

<sup>27</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>29</sup> L. Irigaray, *Ciało-w-ciało z matką*, transl. A. Araszkievicz, Kraków 2000, p. 20. English version: L. Irigaray (1993), *Sexes and Genealogies*, New York: Columbia University Press.

of a ceremony of the regeneration of Sylwia's body, in which all dragonesses participate: "(...) they, my sisters and mothers (...). They said that I am beautiful, and I felt beautiful. I played with my peers and I gave into cuddles by the older ones; I listened to legends and songs."<sup>30</sup> The transformation triggers in Sylwia apathy and a desire to be constantly warmed by the warmth of motherly bodies; a desire to remain an element of the feminine universe, without the need to separate from them.

At the moment of her ordeal, placed within a symbolic frame of a fight with a male dragon, or her own father, Sylwia the Dragoness feels dazed. She does not know whether the fight that awaits her will be for her or for her father, off whom she is supposed to lift the spell. She notices a dissonance between the sisterly covenant of dragonesses, that is the land of milk and honey where there are no wars, and the demonic form of her father who brings in anger and despair which, as she senses, will destroy the harmonious ancient harbour, the sisterly centre of legends, myths, and tales, where you can remain endlessly in a state of bliss, satisfaction, close to the warm bodies of sisters and mothers. However, the protagonist's task is to reject the matrilineal kingdom, engage in the struggle for her own identity, and face both her emerging femininity and her father, no longer a neutral daddy, but a man. Beata Mytych-Forajter has argued that the transformative experience constitutes a prelude to an increase of the protagonist's life and somatic strength; it is the trigger of her imminent act of non-conformism and of activities saturated with emancipation and freedom.<sup>31</sup>

When Sylwia returns to the paradise-like sisterly land, she puts on her wrist the bracelet made with her grandmother's hair, which painfully cuts into her dragoness arm. No longer in a semi-lucid state, she notices a clear intertwining of various space-time continuums: the archetypal place which belongs to the original mothers and sisters, the Holocaust biography of Agnes and the tragic story of Krystyna, and her own, contemporary herstory. The palimpsest nature of the space-time continuum, the overlapping fortunes of related women, and the vision of eternal stagnation in the Arcadia of the dragonesses without a single trace of her father's story are all emotional signs for Sylwia, which help her make a difficult decision: "The wonderful life in that ancient rich town was no longer for me. Marked with crazy pain I was alien among the sisters and mothers."<sup>32</sup> The process of growing up is presented in an archetypal manner as a confrontation with a beast. Sylwia finds a dragon, or a dark version of her father, and fights with it viciously, eventually becoming victorious. At that point, the Arcadian town has already fallen into decay and the original mothers are no longer there. After the painful coming of age, Sylwia leaves the dream-like land and the fallen den of the dragonesses in her memory.

<sup>30</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Vide B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, [in:] B. Mytych-Forajter, I. Gralewicz-Wolny, *Uwolnić Pippi! Twórczość dla dzieci wobec przemian kultury*, Katowice 2013, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

The girl decides to trace the patrilineal line unknown to her; she intends to get to know her father anew and find a place for him in her story. Through a herstorical depiction, the dad's figure becomes 'visible' and 'audible'. Sylwia fills the identity 'cracks' in his biography and discovers the reasons for his vexing melancholy, which, among others, are related to his Jewish descent. The filling of those 'cracks' as a symptom of a new stage in the protagonist's life is reflected by her mother's tapestries presenting the journey of the daughter to the land of the original mothers and her symbolic fight for herself. In that instance, Rudniańska initiated the feminist metaphor of weaving, which Karen E. Rowe discussed when analysing the concept of weaving/spinning stories by women, which she took from tales and myths, and which is a metaphor of women's personal herstories.<sup>33</sup> Despite that clear gesture of solidarity with her daughter, the mother's bond with Sylwia wanes and vanishes altogether. The girl perhaps thinks that the motherly support has come too late, or perhaps she wants her mother to stop being afraid of the shadows of already dead cousins, and finally start living on her own terms instead to weave her own herstory. The protagonist decides the travel to America and to take her father with her. Zofia Beszczyńska argues that the fact of leaving her childhood means for the protagonist a gradual farewell to the world of tales and subsequent maturation into individual femininity; learning how to differentiate her own feelings from the feelings of others, making life decisions, and bearing their consequences.<sup>34</sup>

The novel's ending is symbolic: the transformative principle, which is a unique trademark of Rudniańska's text, is finally complete when the father and the daughter take the form of a dragon and dragoness on the plane. In a euphoric dance, they fall towards the Atlantic. The ending should be referred to the above thesis according to which coming of age in Rudniańska's novels is based on (de)construction. On the one hand, it carries the message of freedom, liberation, and growth into mature decisions, in that respect being constructive initiation, but, on the other, the fact that both the daughter and father leave home, breaking of the relation with the mother, the fact of leaving the country, and a shared dragon flight and fall into the Atlantic all suggest a subversive nature of the plot of initiation. According to Alicja Baluch, this subversiveness consists of personality and identity fissures in the daughter and the father, both anxious about the unrelenting sense of non-fulfilment, the internal split, and the inability to free themselves from past events and their internalisation. All this amounts to a kind of a mental enslavement to the past.<sup>35</sup> Baluch adds that the writer uses sophisticated symbolism and creates a multi-layered message:

<sup>33</sup> Vide K.E. Rowe, *The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tales*, [in:] *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. M. Tatar, New York 1999, pp. 299-300.

<sup>34</sup> Vide <http://www.ebib.pl/2005/64/beszczyńska.php> (accessed: 11.07.2018).

<sup>35</sup> Vide A. Baluch, *Siedem pajków mojego taty, czyli mitologemy we współczesnej fantastyce*, [in:] eadem, *Od ludus do agora. Rozważania o książkach dla dzieci i młodzieży i o sposobach lektury, które wiodą od zabawy do poważnej rozmowy o literaturze*, Kraków 2003, p. 93.

She builds meanings and references both “superficial” (which is visible in the final scene where the air journey to America ends in an explosion, a catastrophe and the death of the protagonist?) and “deep” ones with the discovery of mysteries of the subconscious (that same final scene could be understood as the necessary departure from the family home, a flight to another world, and a passing of tests which end in “initiation death,” or the birth of a new person).<sup>36</sup>

Beata Mytych-Forajter continues Baluch’s thought, noting that:

[Rudniańska’s works – K. S.], despite their different stories and characters, share a surprisingly steady tendency to present the world at the moment of metamorphosis, during the act of transformation. Such transformation entails, of course, an effect of fluidity, the original blurriness of the worlds or people being described, who may change into a dragon, cat, or, at least, a god. Every now and then, you can hear between the lines doubts regarding that which is invented and dreamt up vs. that which actually happens. Such question may not be directly answered with complete certainty as the goal is to remain in the land of the non-obvious, or in constant balancing among words, forms, and shapes.<sup>37</sup>

The researcher argues that rooted in coming-of-age mythical and fable scenarios, Rudniańska’s prose reinterprets them considerably by associating the motif of transformation with the broadly understood issues of alienation, otherness, and exclusion, with a clear predilection to the topic of the Holocaust, or a topic which is introduced by *Rok Smoka* and expanded upon by *Kotka Brygidy*.<sup>38</sup>

The metamorphic principle derived from archetypal stories is used in the latter work to emphasise the issue of otherness, broken identity, and the subject of the Holocaust, yet with appropriate interpretation it does not constitute a universal narrative concerning problems of large communities at their historic moments. What is noteworthy is, again, essentialism of the herstory narrative, as a result of which the story can be viewed as Helena’s personal herstory, and it is hard to find in it any objective indications of the war-time world.

We meet Helena as a young girl carefully observing the micro-world in which she lives; she notices the nuances over which she ponders and which she remembers. As an adult woman, she will return to many of those, seeking fluctuations in their meanings. Her herstory enables the reader to see the characters and events through her eyes, narrow down a big to a micro scale in order to analyse matters which are important in herself and for herself. Helena’s reflexivity is emphasised already at the beginning of the novel when, as a six-year-old, she watches the world from the top of a mulberry which grows in the yard. The tree fulfils the central function within

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Vide Ibid., p. 88.

the microcosm of the protagonist's childhood, which she later mythologises as the safe "pre-wariness". The mulberry constitutes the classical axis of the world (*axis mundi*) – to use Mircea Eliade's concept – or a central point in which that which is earthly combines with the land of gods (up) and the land of death (down).<sup>39</sup> The real world is found between *sacrum* and *profanum*, while in Helena's case it is a microcosm, not only because she is a child, but also because, as a result of the war, the space in which she lives shrinks and becomes surrounded by an actual zone of chaos; the war-time town with the terrifying place, or the ghetto:

In Helena's yard, there was only one tree. It was a mulberry. Its fruit resembling gooseberries, but light, white-and-green, were very soft and sweet. Helena liked mulberries. She liked to climb the huge tree and find them under leaves. And the tree liked Helena. It hid her from Stańcia and other children in the yard. (...) From the top of the mulberry, Helena could see three temples. A different God lived in each, and it was to those three Gods, the Holy Trinity that she complained about Stańcia. That was what Helena thought looking from above on a small round synagogue, greenish copulas of the orthodox church, and the brick tower of St. Florian's church. It's a good thing that three Gods live here. Nothing bad can happen. Ever.<sup>40</sup>

In the mulberry's crown, Helena not only prays to Gods, but she also meets a calico female cat with whom she shares her secrets and problems. And even though Helena does not agree to the she-cat being domesticated, she is taken in by Mr Kamil, her father's associate, who promises to give the cat a home, particularly because that is what his little sister Brygida wants.

When the Second World War breaks out, Helena's microcosm changes dramatically: her aunt Róża, who is of Jewish descent, loses her home; her uncle Eryk, the "chocolate man", becomes an SS-man, and the chocolates, though tempting, become perceived intuitively by Helena as a source of sin, which is why she puts them aside until the war ends. The Jews close to her family start wearing armbands with the Star of David. Helena's friend Tomek lets her try the band on and that is when she learns the magnitude of the ostracism which Jews who wear it must face. Mr Kamil, also a Jew, explains the significance of the armband to Helena.<sup>41</sup> Adult Helena recalls the conversation with Kamil, but she mostly remembers talking to Tomek. This is because the boy jokingly gave her the band instead of a wedding ring. Though considered as quite childish by the protagonist, that event will forever evoke in her remorse as her first unfulfilled emotion – forever tainted with the Shoah and the retained

<sup>39</sup> Vide M. Eliade, *Święty obszar i sakralizacja świata*, [in:] idem, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*, trans. by A. Tatarkiewicz, Warszawa 1993, pp. 66, 68-70.

<sup>40</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, Żabia Wola, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> The issue of anti-Semitism and its various faces and shades in *Kotka Brygidy* was discussed in: M. Skowera, *Polacy i Żydzi, dzieci i dorośli. Kto jest kim w 'Kotce Brygidy' Joanny Rudniańskiej i 'Bezsenności Jutki' Doroty Combrzyńskiej-Nogali*, "Konteksty Kultury" 2014, collection 1, pp. 57-72.

final memory about the boy, filled with ugliness, fear, and sadness, i.e. features inscribed into the space of the ghetto.

The novel's herstory is transferred through the introduction of a nameless female cat known as Brygida's She-Cat. That symbolic character allows interpreting the text as a herstory based on monologues and internal dialogues, and sensory and intuitive uncovering of the world. A special bond forms between Helena and the calico cat as the animal ends up in the protagonist's house. The girl's father brings the cat along with the news of the establishment of the ghetto: "Kamil brought her. This is Brygida's female cat (...). They have to move to the other side of the Vistula River, to the ghetto. They will have only one room there. They won't be able to keep a cat. Brygida asked if she could stay with us for a little while".<sup>42</sup> The moment the cat appears in Helena's house, the protagonist begins to realise the impending Shoah. She will forever retain in her memory the image of Jews walking into the ghetto, which will be treated as an unexpressed farewell.

Helena saw Jews walking from the Praga district to the ghetto, to the other side of the Vistula River. She was standing in the pavement and holding Stańcia's hand tightly and Jews walked down the street. There were so many of them, adults and children. They were carrying suitcases and other things. There were carts and carriages, but they were moving very slowly, at a walking pace. It was very quiet, almost no one was talking. You could only hear the clapping of heels and the slow rattle of wheels. Jews were walking endlessly. Helena and Stańcia followed them and stopped only when they reached the bridge. Jews went onto the bridge encased in steel bars as if into a long low and narrow cage. There Helena lost sight of them, but new people entered the bridge, those who were walking behind them. That day the sky was overcast and heavy, it hung over the Vistula River so low that it seemed as if it was soon going to drop into the waters. "Why aren't you saying anything?" Helena asked Stańcia. "What's there to say. They are going on and on. There were so many of them here," said Stańcia and waved her hand in front of her face as if she was waving off a mosquito or some persistent thought. "What about Tomek? Is he also going to the ghetto?" "Why wouldn't he? A Jew's a Jew," Stańcia said. I didn't even give him flowers, Helena mused. And she felt sadness greater than she had ever felt before. "But they will return to Praga, right?" "Yeah, right," Stańcia said and again waved her hand. "Why wouldn't they?" Helena asked. "Why would they? They are not going there only to return." Jews were still walking, they entered the long low cage and they went on, to the other side of the river, who knows where to.<sup>43</sup>

For Helena, the Holocaust becomes a very personal event. The story's leading tracks are the fortunes of the female cat and the fortunes of Brygida, whom the protagonist has never met in person; and the facts from the lives of

<sup>42</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

individual Jewish friends and nameless persons rescued by Helena's father. Rudniańska focused on the micro elements of the Holocaust, those which are not present in universal androcentric narratives.<sup>44</sup> Helena's personal/own perception of the world – first as a girl and later as a mature woman – does not match a typical Holocaust narrative.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, this herstory means the inclusion of the personal voice of a child (and, later, a woman) in the universal story of the Holocaust; a voice which can function aside or in contrast to it; thus, it is, to quote Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, “a triumph of personal memory over cultural memory or post-memory”.<sup>46</sup> In *Kotka Brygidy*, the individuality and essentialism of the story is topped with a finale with an emphatically accentuated motif of reincarnation, which changes the collective memory of the Holocaust into personal memory with a stigma of one's own trauma that is hard to understand for others.

Brygida's She-Cat is her mental guide – through the sphere of premonitions, intuition, that which is private, hidden in speculation, or in more or less realised fears, and absent from the official space. The physical and ontological status of the cat can be interpreted as a phantasmatic element binding the storyline, a subliminal signature thus described by Anita Jarzyna:

[There are – K. S.] major doubts regarding the nature of the titular she-cat, basically nameless, a character somewhat fantastic and super-conscious, which is indicated the most by the conversations she has with Helena, the protagonist, which, however, may be only a figment of the girl's imagination, who is very lonely among adults preoccupied with the war.<sup>47</sup>

Mytych-Forajter considered the calico cat within the pantheistic perspective as a deity, which seems significant as the cat appears for the first time in the mulberry from which Helena watches three Gods. The researcher also saw the calico as a symbolic equivalent of Helena's psyche, possibly as a super-conscious and subliminal figure:

The feline perception utilising completely sensory experiences unknown to humans transcends the capabilities of human language. It would be difficult even to imagine a cat's image of the world, especially if the cat is Helena. Synesthetically mixed experiences enable to have a different view of reality, a global view of which seems fuller thanks to that, limited only to that which dominates the human perception of the world, that is the eye.

<sup>44</sup> Vide N. Żórawska, *Dziedzictwo (nie)pamięci. Holokaustowe doświadczenia pisarek drugiego pokolenia*, Katowice 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Vide B. Engelking, *Zagłada i pamięć. Doświadczenie Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, Warszawa 1994; M. Wójcik-Dudek, *W(y)czytać Zagładę. Praktyki postpamięci w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży*, Katowice 2016; J. Kowalska-Leder, *Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego*, Wrocław 2009.

<sup>46</sup> M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Transfery Zagłady. Przypadek 'Kotki Brygidy' Joanny Rudniańskiej*, "Biblioteka Postscriptum Polonistycznego" 2015, issue 5, p. 355.

<sup>47</sup> A. Jarzyna, *Szlemiele. Zwierzęta wobec Zagłady w literaturze dla dzieci*, "Narracje o Zagładzie" 2016, issue 2, p. 235.



Brygida's She-Cat plays a major role in the story as she silently crosses the borders set up by humans, suddenly appearing in places and situations which require her presence. (...) [The she-cat – K. S.] verges on the intuition of some divine protection, which seems absent from the war-ridden world.<sup>48</sup>

It is owing to her that Helena learns about her father's secrets, she sees things that are at first glance unnoticeable, hidden under the cloak of night, which includes him rescuing and hiding Jews. The father's role in the life of the protagonist is just as important as in *Rok Smoka*. However, in *Rok Smoka*, the father is a character overwhelmed by the genealogy of women, whereas in *Kotka Brygidy* he is a clearly dominant figure. Helena is going to struggle throughout her life with his mandate to remember about the Holocaust and his ethically ambivalent attitude, considered many years later. The father sensitises Helena to the tragic situation of Jews and to the trauma of war. He accompanies her on two tram rides through the ghetto. Wójcik-Dudek wrote that he was

[a] truly uncompromising Holocaust educator. (...) The father not only offered his daughter stories from the ghetto, but also took her on the other side of the ghetto wall, just like Virgil showing Dante around the circles of hell, he wanted Helena to know the truth about the closed district. The tram ride through the ghetto proved an almost borderline experience for the girl making a major mark on her adult life.<sup>49</sup>

The researcher added that the father was responsible for the canonical narrative about the cruelty of war; he ordered Helena to interpret dramatic events and remember them.<sup>50</sup> "The protagonist collects Holocaust images, though probably it would be better for her mental balance to suppress them. Yet, the authoritative mandate of her father requires her to struggle throughout her adult life with unremembering the past".<sup>51</sup> That collective experience of the trauma of the Holocaust is, however, subject to gradual condensing. During both tram trips through the ghetto, Helena has Brygida's She-Cat hiding in her backpack. The second trip becomes the central point in the map of the protagonist's borderline experiences; in its course Helena sees a traumatising emptiness of that dark part of space, while the cat, having bid farewell to her, disappears in the dead empty streets in search of Brygida. The protagonist can only hope that: "(...) they will surely meet one day: Helena, Brygida, and the calico".<sup>52</sup> Brygida's She-Cat abandons the Arian side, and since she is a super-conscious being that emphasises the herstory, also Helena completes a passage into the space of the ghetto, mentally forced to search for and commemorate the enigmatic unknown Brygida.

<sup>48</sup> B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, pp. 95-97.

<sup>49</sup> M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Elementarz Zagłady w polskiej najnowszej literaturze dla dzieci*, [in:] *Śmierć w literaturze dziecięcej i młodzieżowej*, ed. by K. Slany, Warszawa 2018, pp. 290-291.

<sup>50</sup> Vide ibid., p. 292.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>52</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, p. 101.

Helena as an adult woman dwells on the past and composes the her-story anew; she considers the attitudes of both her mother and father as ethically controversial. Her mother leaves her family after World War Two and goes to Munich, where she marries uncle Eryk, the Nazi. She starts to suspect her father of rescuing Jews only to maintain the family's good situation. Hidden twice, though visible to the interlocutors, that is her father and Mr Kamil, she witnesses their confrontations. First time, right after the war, she hears her father distance himself from Kamil, whom he hid throughout the war in the cellar: "You see, Kamil, I told them you came here with the army, the Russians. But, anyway you can't stay here. I don't want them to figure out that I was hiding a Jew. Why give them a reason to say that I made money on Jews? I don't need that. (...) No one should know that you stayed all that time here under the floor. Do you understand?"<sup>53</sup> The second time, Helena watches the meeting between her father and Kamil many years later, after her high school graduation, when they already lost their money and after the mother left:

She wanted to run up to Mr Kamil and say *hi* to him. But she didn't do that, she was stopped by her father's reserved attitude. She came closer and stood behind the mulberry. "It's been a while..." said Mr Kamil, but the father interrupted him. "Indeed. And it should've stayed that way. Why did you come, Kamil?" he asked shrilly. "I would like to do something for you. I would have it written down. How you saved me. Not just me, I know that (...)" "Me? Saved you? That was just good business, you know that. And I told you once it should stay between us. I don't want anyone to know that I was hiding a Jew here," he pointed to the workshop. "In fact, that's no longer mine. (...)" "I know that. And I also know that Dzia left and you and Helena are alone," Kamil said (...) "How do you know that, Kamil?" "I helped her to get a passport," Kamil replied. "That's great. You're a good boy, Kamil, you know how to return a favour. So, leave now, Kamil. It would be better if you weren't here when Helena comes back from school."<sup>54</sup>

After her father's death, Helena discovers several dozen unopened wooden cigar boxes that her mother had sent him from Germany. She was disgusted by them, just like by the chocolates from uncle Eryk. Honour and ethos instilled in her by her father trigger in her reluctance to benefactors or to luxury items which she perceives as objects tainted with betrayal, trauma, and the Holocaust. That unwritten ethos was also a reason she never went to visit her mother in Munich and "(...) the letter exchange stopped, just like that, as streams sometimes dry out".<sup>55</sup> Adult Helena is very careful when building relations with people. Sections depicting the protagonist's old age are emphatic; they are void of any euphemisms. They portray her obsessive attachment to the incomplete figure of Brygida.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

(...) Helena is old. She is tall and thick. She has diabetes and needs to take shots every day. Her knees hurt. She lives with seven cats on the last floor in a tenement house built after the war in Nowolipki. Recently, she has been thinking more and more about that girl she once was, about Helena who had a mum, a father, and Stańcia, and who lived in Praga. Sometimes it seems to her that that girl is right beside her, in the same room, standing behind her or sitting on the bed. She turns around quickly, but the girl is not there. She looks into the mirror and only sees an old face, grey tangled hair and big arms. There is no girl, there is no Helena. There is an old, ugly, strange woman. Helena loves her she-cats and he-cats, but neither of them is like Brygida's calico was. She is not able to talk to any of them, though she does not exclude a possibility that those discussions were only a figment of her child imagination.<sup>56</sup>

Herstorical interpretation requires considering the uniqueness of the finale: Helena, whose family consists of cats, finds in the mulberry a piece of information about a calico, identical to Brygida's She-Cat, whom a woman wants to give away to a good home because she is leaving for Israel. She turns out to be Brygida and the female cat is that very Brygida's She-Cat. Interestingly enough, Brygida's flat is a reflection of Helena's flat; even more so: they are neighbours, but on opposite sides. Helena lives in a tenement house at Nowolipki Street, while Brygida at Nowolipia Street. A strange similarity of the locations, the reverse opposites of the flats, a supplement to the fates of Kamil, Brygida's brother, the cat, and Brygida herself – who was led out of the ghetto during the uprising by the calico – could constitute, according to the rules of fantastic narratives, symbolic returns to the borderline points of Helena's childhood; particularly to the second tram trip through the ghetto and the moment when the cat left the girl to search for Brygida.

As already indicated that this was the moment of the transfer of the super-conscious figure of "Helena the She-Cat" into the space of the ghetto as a symbol of mental and identity-based attempt by Helena to identify with the unknown Brygida. Therefore, an argument may be presented that the dialogue with Brygida constitutes an element of a child-related fantasy recurring along a sinusoidal pattern. Even more so, considering that Brygida talks about being led out of the ghetto by the calico, as if the narrative was subordinate to Helena's desire (when she was a child) to meet Brygida, which enables the old woman to add meaning to her emotions, to anchor them within the space of experiences of the projected friend, and to construct an emotional parallel for their common stories. A herstorical reading of the novel allows interpreting its ending as Helena's obsessive search for the conclusion of herstory. Wójcik-Dudek has argued that it is melancholy that prevented the protagonist from abandoning the projected figure of Brygida, accept the possibility that she had died, "and thus there occurs

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

a «literaturisation» of the character of Brygida, who, in Helena's imagination, becomes a seemingly real image, a near *simulacrum*<sup>57</sup>.

The return of Brygida's She-Cat, her ability to reincarnate, enables a phantasmatic interpretation of the finale, similar to that in *Rok Smoka*. The metamorphic motif of reincarnation manifests itself through the transformation of Helena into an animal, while the herstorical story line emphasises the reference to the cat's memories, similar to the reference to Helena's memories – a collection of the most personal and borderline events associated with the war – understood as being experienced personally, which is indicated by the reference to the vision of the fall of the three Gods and Helena's nagging question about the ethics of her father's attitude. She confesses her worries to Brygida, as if only she could properly evaluate his actions. Interestingly enough, Brygida's comments include the father's words processed in Helena's subjective memory, which she overheard in his discussions with Kamil. Therefore, it seems that the protagonist attempts to convince herself that her beloved member of her family acted absolutely fairly. She once again takes the calico from Brygida, as she did in her childhood. A year later, we see Helena in a terrible condition: she lives in utter poverty, she may soon be evicted, and her talks with the cat assume a schizophrenic nature. Abandoned by everyone, lonely, unmarried, and childless, she resembles the archetypal figure of a rebel madwoman derived from the feminist discourses of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,<sup>58</sup> whose fate Rudniańska concludes in a schizoid metamorphosis: on the night of the turn of the century the protagonist decides to leave her old body and become Brygida's She-Cat. Helena and Brygida, two strangers during the war, become present in the form an immortal calico cat, this time Helena. Brygida's She-Cat.

(...) Now Helena sees everything differently. She can see not only with her eyes, but also her ears. And her nose, too. So, she sees much more. Scents and sounds, and images form one multidimensional space. Helena studies that space with that new sense of hers: the sight/hearing/smell. That cannot be expressed in words. Helena the calico sits on a windowsill and thinks with non-words and non-images. With something which has no name. No person could understand that.<sup>59</sup>

In this form, she leads her cats out of a burning house, like the calico once led Brygida from the burning ghetto. The herstorical pact allows using here a phantasmatic key and notice the underlying oneiric reminiscence of the burning ghetto firmly etched in Helena's memory, which continues to update itself in the sphere of her imagination, giving the protagonist an opportunity to euphemise her traumatic recollections, expand them in her own way, weave personal narratives about people and events which ruthlessly tattered her personality and forced to live through the past. They

<sup>57</sup> M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Transfery Zagłady...*, p. 354.

<sup>58</sup> Vide S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven-London 1979.

<sup>59</sup> J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, pp. 146-147.

turned her into a woman who is separate, excluded from the present, and inscribed mentally into her war-time childhood. From the flat in Nowolipki, in which Helena dies/transforms, we transition to Jerusalem, where – within the sphere of a projection – a meeting between Brygida and Helena the She-Cat takes place. It resembles the first meeting between Helena and the calico, but it is Brygida who directly speaks. The oneiric scene is a transformed recollection of Helena's internal discussions in her childhood and it constitutes an imagined crowning of the herstory covering an identity completion of Helena's phantasmatic figure of Brygida. Thus, young readers can feel some fulfilment as in the imagination plan there occurs a long-expected meeting of the two girls/women destined for each other and their listening to each other. However, in a broader perspective, the ending appears closer to endings that are characteristic of prose texts by female writers who write novels for adults, in which herstories do not conclude in an actual "finding of a satisfactory place within the social and metaphysical order."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, this might entail a conscious choice to be alienated, marginalised, and not rooted in the social order considered by the general public as normative.<sup>61</sup> If *Kotka Brygidy* were to be treated as a novel closer to the prose texts written by female writers for adult readers, what would primarily be of importance would be the psychologically complex protagonist, the dimension of the herstory focused on settling accounts; in Kraskowska's terminology – a regressive character, a focus on "analysing the past in the centre of which there is the specifically feminine negative experience".<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Maciej Wróblewski stated that:

In combination with the consistently constructed reality 'broken in two', or the one which consists of an area of lightness and an area of darkness, of culture and nature, of life and death, of immaturity/childishness and maturity / childishness, of good and evil, of consciousness and dream, and of reality and fantasy [the] simplicity of the means of artistic expression used by Rudniańska forms a text, dense with meaning which demands exceptional intellectual efforts from readers.<sup>63</sup>

Ryszard Waksmund has noted that the fable-like poetic and dark characters of the stories amplify their messages and make them more universal.<sup>64</sup> Thus, in terms of how they combine the fantastic, phantasmatic, oneiric, and realistic conventions with personal herstories, they prove extremely original when compared to other modern example of young adult

<sup>60</sup> M. Bednarek, *Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu*, p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Vide Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> E. Kraskowska, *Świat według Boguszewskiej i po kobiecemu*, [in:] eadem, *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Poznań 2003, p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Między baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 79.

<sup>64</sup> Vide R. Waksmund, *Zrozumienie przez utożsamienie. Wokół Roku Smoka Joanny Rudniańskiej*, "Orbis Linguraum" 1997, vol. 6, p. 55.

fiction. Due to an austere construction of the presented world, the selection of difficult topics, and the avoidance of euphemising them, Rudniańska enables readers to face various emanations of evil, which “constitute the core of the world she creates”.<sup>65</sup> “The resultant perspective of the world”, as Wróblewski argues, “being a modernised version of Manichæism, softened by the presence of child characters, enabled the writer to uncover not only universal matters (the fable nature), but also diagnose the modern condition of a human being: children and, indirectly, adults”.<sup>66</sup>

The factors indicated by Wróblewski and Waksmund are the reasons why – despite the fact that in both novels a major role is played by classical coming-of-age elements – readers do not have complete knowledge about their realistic layer. Therefore, they need to interpret them individually, especially so, since Rudniańska used the poetics of fantasies, visions, and metaphors which – due to the fluctuations of meaning – allow perceiving the discussed herstories in an ambivalent manner: they lack any final resolution concerning Sylwia’s success in identifying with her father, or Helena’s conviction about her father’s absolute fairness. Furthermore, the protagonists’ abandoning of their uncomfortable living space to try and find their own paths does not conclude in their finding what they are looking for. In the analysed works, bonds with mothers break and the metamorphoses of Sylwia and Helena within the fantasy perspectives of the novels constitute a metaphor of escapism from social enslavement towards a happy ending. The coming-of-age journey inside oneself does not ensure happiness and fulfilment for the protagonists.

The heroines remain relentlessly in a metaphorical movement, awaiting a change, a rise, a fall, or a journey to places of remembrance associated with their childhood and youth, which bring them back to them. In their identity maps, these are painful locations which resemble festering wounds which, constantly touched, cannot be healed. Sylwia and Helena, encapsulated in the “chambers of remembrance”, return to the beginnings of their herstories; they supplement forgotten/suppressed events, they fantasise about the past, break into primary elements the psychological portraits of their loved ones, seeking explanations and answers, yet they constantly need to rely on intuition. Even though they wish to distance themselves from ambivalent relatives thus leaving them in order to achieve catharsis and develop their independent lives, they cannot do that as they continue to be entangled in the past, and doomed to be recalling it. An argument might be presented that it is a kind of a herstory that offers no indications of how to overcome life’s problems or treat traumatic events, though such simple fictional solutions have already been proposed by many other modern writers of young adult fiction. Rudniańska herself thinks in a post-modern manner. She considers her works to be open, pointing to a multitude of interpretations and a personalised mode of selecting them. She notices the fact that both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are to be re-read. She wishes to leave in her readers

<sup>65</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Między baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 78.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

an emotional trace which, be it internalised or experienced, will persuade them to reflect on her existential questions, and help them realise a need to construct, supplement, decipher, or unremember their own 'stories' and 'cracks' in their identities.

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## SUMMARY

The paper discusses young adult fiction by Joanna Rudniańska, whose works belong to the stream of non-conformist coming-of-age novels marked by experiences of exclusively teenage girls/women, developing in Poland since the 1990s. Both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* emphasise the personal quality of teenage girls and women, and present their fates with a particular consideration of their fairly individualised processes of maturation and intentional development of their identities. The author of this paper employs feminist methodologies to emphasise the ambivalent, borderline, and negative female experiences in the analysed texts. She offers a detailed interpretation of how the protagonists of the above-mentioned novels experience the world; she applies a metaphorical and fantastic perspective of telling herstories, while searching for matrilineal traces, the phenomenon of sisterhood, drastic rituals inscribed in the feminine domain, and the special kind of coming-of-age which constitutes the starting point for personal and subjective herstories.

### Keywords

Joanna Rudniańska, herstory, young adult fiction, feminism, coming-of-age, phantasmatic

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