



## Polish Literature

by Alessandro Amenta

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

In recent years, Polish gay and lesbian authors have timidly begun to develop a "coming out" literature. In earlier eras, however, Polish literature created a poetics of camouflage and disguise to express desires that could not be communicated openly.

### **The First Half of the Twentieth Century**

Although many Polish writers of the earlier twentieth century were homosexual or bisexual, their sexual orientation generally was not clearly expressed or reflected in their literary texts. As modernists, they created texts that were allusive and sublimated rather than direct and open.

For example, much of the writings of Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz (1894-1980) is permeated with homoeroticism, but it is usually more atmospheric than specific. In his stories from the 1930s, "Zygryd" and "The Teacher" (*Nauczyciel*), sexual tensions clash with social repression to culminate in a tragic end. In the later work "The Fourth Symphony" (*Czwarta symfonia*), Iwaszkiewicz inserts homosexual motifs as part of the main theme, the relationship between art and life. The theme of homosexuality is important and autobiographically resonant in *The Gardens* (*Ogrody*, 1974).

Tadeusz Breza's (1905-1970) psychological novel *Adam Grywald* (1936) also pivots on homosexuality. Reflecting the contemporary medico-scientific theories, the writer attempts to delineate the psychology of his homosexual protagonist.

### **The Second Half of the Twentieth Century**

The question of sexual identity takes central place in the writings of one of the major authors of the twentieth century, Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1961). The homosexual theme is particularly evident in his *Diaries* (*Dzienniki*, 1953) and in the novel *The Transatlantic* (*Trans-Atlantyk*, 1953). The latter work presents the character of an eccentric Argentinean millionaire, Gonzales, who epitomizes the conflict of normality and diversity, tradition and innovation.

The theme of homosexuality often surfaces in the works of Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909-1993), including the grotesque pastiche *Pulp* (*Miazga*, 1969) and *A Sitter for a Satyr* (*Idzie skaczac po gorach*, 1973). Homosexuality is the central theme in *The Gates of Paradise* (*Bramy rajy*, 1960). This historical novel, set during the medieval children's crusade, uses interior dialogue as it considers the relationship between history and individuals caught up in historical forces that they do not understand. With desperation and hope, the young protagonists form homosexual relationships as they are propelled by the historical events and imposed ideals that contradict their personal motivations. Ultimately, they are saved by the purity of their sentiment; and in the novel's moral discourse love is revealed as the principal force behind human actions.

Although various novels of the Polish-Jewish writer Julian Strykowski (1905-1996) may be read from a

homoerotic perspective, only in *Silence (Milczenie, 1983)* is homosexuality presented openly and with clear autobiographical connotations. This novel explores love as an obsession and probes the difficulties of accepting sexual identity. It also reflects deeply on the relationship between Polish and Jewish culture. The writer also presents a homosexual theme in *Tommaso del cavaliere (1982)*, a book that focuses on the last years of the life of Michelangelo.

The first really explicitly homosexual novel in Polish literature is *Rudolf (1984)* by Marian Pankowski (b. 1929), a Pole who emigrated to Belgium. Using explicit and often graphic language, Pankowski introduces the topic of the sexualized body and presents the homosexual theme positively. The novel contrasts its Polish and German characters and explores the difficult relationship between sexual and national identity.

Marek Nowakowski (b. 1935) in the short story "Greek God" (*Grecki bozek, 1993*) presents a homosexual character as an outsider in the context of urban decay. The protagonist is a Jean Genet-like socially isolated figure who, of his own choice, lives quasi-legally in the slums of Warsaw. Although he is a symbolic figure--the homosexual as outsider--Jerzy Nasierowski nevertheless emerges as a real personality. Nowakowski's novels *Crime and . . . (Zbrodnia i . . . , 1988)* and *Not My Life (Nie moje życie, 2002)* are considered scandalous. They contain numerous autobiographical references.

The works of poet and journalist Grzegorz Musiał (b. 1952) also feature homosexual themes and motifs. They are minor and mostly implicit in his first novels, but more significant and more explicit in such later works as in *In the Aviary (W ptaszarni, 1989)*, *In the End (Al fine, 1997)*, and *Diary from Iowa (Dziennik z Iowa, 2000)*. Musiał investigates the relationship between Catholicism, homosexuality, and society. He analyzes the question of the body as the individual's prison and treats the theme of transvestism.

Homoerotic motifs also appear in the novels of Marek Jastrzebiec-Mosakowski (b. 1962). In *Footprints in the Sand (Ślady na piasku, 1994)* and *Four Seasons (Pory roku, 1996)*, set in eastern Prussia, the questions of sexual and national identities are intermingled.

## Lesbian Literature

Earlier Polish literature frequently presents love, friendship, and (implicitly) homoerotic relationships between women. Narcyza Zmichowska (1819-1876) in her romantic ballad *The Pagan Woman (Poganka, 1846)* portrays, obliquely and in disguise, her relationship with Paulina Zbyszewska. In the novel *The White Rose (Biała roza, 1861)*, one woman declares her love for another.

Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit (1859-1921), an early feminist writer, combines homoeroticism and the struggle for women's rights in the novel *Sisters (Siostry, 1908)*. The protagonist decides to rear an illegitimate son of her father with her partner, a female doctor.

Another early twentieth-century writer, Aniela Gruszecka (1884-1976), treats lesbianism as an option in the search for female identity in *An Adventure in an Unknown Country (Przygoda w nieznanym kraju, 1933)*.

However, lesbianism was not presented explicitly in Polish literature until the 1990s. The central figure of the new lesbian literature is Izabela Filipiak (b. 1961), author of the novels *Death and Spiral (Śmierć i spirala, 1992)* and *Absolute Amnesia (Absolutna amnezja, 1995)* and the book of poems *Madame Intuita (2002)*. Filipiak is the first openly lesbian literary figure in Poland.

Ewa Shiling's collection of short stories *The Mirror (Lustro, 1998)* is also an interesting contribution to the new lesbian literature. Shiling (b. 1963) reflects on the social difficulties lesbians experience as a result of their "differentness," and also considers how lesbians are oppressed doubly, first as women and then as lesbians.

Most recently, Magdalena Okoniewska (b. 1962) published *My World Is a Woman. Diary of a Lesbian (Moj*

*swiat jest kobieta. Dziennik lesbijki*, 2004).

## Conclusion

Although Polish literature is frequently homoerotic, homosexual motifs do not materialize as deliberate literary strategies until the twentieth century. Even then, they were most often coded or camouflaged, developed through literary allusions rather than stated directly or openly. Only during the last twenty years have Polish writers spoken explicitly about homosexuality, or indeed about sex and the body in general.

## Bibliography

Basiuk, Tomasz, Dominika Ferens, and Tomasz Sikora, eds. *A Queer Mixture: Gender Perspectives on Minority Sexual Identities / Odmiany odmienca: Mniejszosciowe orientacje seksualne w perspektywie gender*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Slask, 2002.

Cuber, Marta. "Les-silent-story. O polskiej prozie lesbijskiej." ("Less Silent Story. About Polish Lesbian Prose.") *Ha!art* n. 14 (2003).

Johlinga, Wolfgang, ed. *Dyskretne namietnosci. Antologia polskiej prozy homoerotycznej. (Discreet Passions. An Anthology of Polish Homoerotic Prose.)* Poznan: Softpress, 1992.

Ritz, German. *Nic w labirncie pozadania. Gender i plecew literaturze polskiej od romantyzmu do postmodernizmu. (A Thread in the Labyrinth of Desire. Gender and Sexuality in Polish Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism.)* Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 2002.

## About the Author

**Alessandro Amenta** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Milan. His areas of interest are gender studies, queer theory, and literary criticism in east European countries and cultures. He is writing a dissertation on the relationship between national and sexual identities in Polish literature.