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Beyond the Madonna: The Woman Artist in Jagoda Truhelka's *Plein air*

At the end of the 19th century in Croatia, an increasing number of women entered the public sphere as artists and cultural workers. One such educated professional was Jagoda Truhelka (1864–1957), who worked as a teacher and predominantly wrote children's and young adult literature as well as pedagogical essays. Truhelka's main contribution to Croatian literary fiction is *Plein air* (1897), a novel featuring modernist narrative tendencies and a politically outspoken female protagonist, Zdenka Podravac (Nemec, Detoni Dujmić). *Plein air* is narrated from the point of view of Vlatko, a young man infatuated with Zdenka, a strong-willed and independent artist who supports herself and her elderly father by painting. As a woman artist, Zdenka experiences "anxiety of authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar) because of her social and economic position. She must also come to terms with masculine myths of femininity, learning to define herself beyond the stereotypical figures of "angel" and "monster". In this way, her story is strikingly similar to that of Helen Graham, the heroine of Anne Brontë's 1848 novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The novel's central tension between Zdenka's recognition of women's duties and her desire for freedom is not only crucial for her characterization but also for the construction of the plot, which resolves conventionally with Zdenka and Vlatko happily married. While Truhelka's choice of ending might appear forced, this specific combination of early modernist narration and popular romantic fiction nevertheless results in exposing the cracks in patriarchal ideology. The sacrifice necessary for the novel's happy ending reveals the limits of the romance plot because it demonstrates that the equality of independent heroines with men is still impossible, even unintelligible, in a society that may acknowledge their intelligence, strength, and other "masculine" qualities, but will regard them as "unfeminine" in a woman and an obstacle in attaining the ultimate feminine goal – marriage.

Keywords: Jagoda Truhelka, *Plein air*, women writers, images of women artists in 19th-century literature, anxiety of authorship, femininity, romance

At the end of the 19th century in Croatia, an increasing number of women entered the public sphere as artists and cultural workers. According to the historian Iskra Iveljić, "the public affirmation of women in the field of art and culture started during the Croatian National Revival" (2018: 44) when their role was mostly tied to the education of children "in the national spirit and in the native language" (2018: 11). However, after the National Revival, women's artistic and cultural pursuits were again deferred (Iveljić 2018: 44), and mostly relegated to the fields of children's, popular and didactic art. Iveljić explains that "[o]nly at the turn of the century does the debate on the emancipation of women intensify and, in some elements, dissociate from the national question, gradually evolving into an autonomously profiled complex" (2018: 44).

At the time, "women are educated to a greater extent" and are entering the public sphere in larger numbers as teachers and professors, journalists, editors, translators, critics, etc. (Iveljić 2018: 30). Iveljić therefore states that Croatian modernity is characterized by the undertakings of a "distinct group of educated artists and cultural workers […] educated professionals that increasingly inhabit positions and domains of activity hitherto inaccessible to women" (2018: 44).

One such educated professional is Jagoda Truhelka (1864–1957). Born in Osijek in 1864 in a family of Czech immigrants, Truhelka received her teacher's diploma in 1882. Throughout her life, she worked as a teacher, pedagogue, and sometimes principal in several secondary schools for girls in Croatia and Bosnia. She started publishing fiction in 1892 and predominantly wrote children's and young adult literature as well as pedagogical essays, often using the gender-neutral pseudonym A.M. Sandučić. Together with the influential educator Marija Jambrišak, Truhelka started one of the first Croatian magazines for women readers, *Domaće ognjište* ("The Home Hearth")[1]. Owing to her accomplishments, Truhelka was highly respected as a teacher. As Dunja Detoni Dujmić notes, Truhelka fought against prejudice towards educated women and was even able to audit several courses at the University of Zagreb (1998: 107). This was possible mainly due to changing economic and cultural circumstances in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the century, which have enabled progressive political ideas to enter the public discussion (Detoni Dujmić 1998: 108). The social status of women became an especially prominent and heated issue with the rising influence of new feminist ideas (Detoni Dujmić 1998: 108).

Jagoda Truhelka also contributed to the debate on the status of women with her essays as well as with her two novels with active heroines – *Plein air* (1897), a novel featuring modernist narrative tendencies and a politically outspoken female protagonist, and *Vojača* (1899), a historical novel about a 15th-century Bosnian queen. Both *Plein air* and *Vojača* were printed in serialized form in the literary journal *Nada* ("Hope"), published in Sarajevo. After the publication of these two novels, Truhelka continued to write short fiction featuring female characters, such as *Ika* and *Četvorka* ("The Quartet"), but mostly found recognition as an author of children's literature. Although Truhelka's work is characterized by a "thematic and stylistic dualism", Detoni Dujmić demonstrates that the "borders were not that rigid" (1997: 19). Her first novel *Tugomila*, published in 1894, was already aimed at younger readers, and she carried on writing for both audiences throughout her career (Detoni Dujmić 1997: 19). Nevertheless, her work can be roughly divided into two phases, the first including modernist fiction such as

Plein air, and the second predominantly dedicated to children's literature, such as her well-known *Zlatni danci* series ("Golden Days").

Plein air was not republished or published in book format until 1997, when Matica hrvatska reprinted it as part of its "Centuries of Croatian literature" edition. The fact that it took one hundred years for *Plein air* to be published as a book becomes even more thought-provoking considering Krešimir Nemec's claim that Truhelka's novel is "the first consistent autodiegetic position in our 19th-century novel!" as well as "an unfairly forgotten novel, an early example of Croatian 'women's writing'" (1994: 248). Dunja Detoni Dujmić expands Nemec's description, stating that Truhelka's fiction marks "the beginning of modern women's writing" in Croatia (1997: 12), but also of *all* Croatian modern writing (1997: 13). Detoni Dujmić accurately writes that Truhelka's novel "predates almost all of the most important literary events in Croatian modernity" (1997: 13). Therefore, *Plein air* should designate the beginning of Croatian modern fiction, together with texts customarily characterized as modern, such as Antun Gustav Matoš's short stories and Janko Leskovar's stories and novel *Propali dvori* ("The Fallen Manor", 1896). Instead, this novel was mostly forgotten until 1997, and Truhelka was largely remembered as an educator and writer of children's and young adult books.[2]

Both Krešimir Nemec and Dunja Detoni Dujmić describe Truhelka's fiction as "psychological", characterized by a heightened interest in portraying the inner lives of female characters (Detoni Dujmić 1998: 109) as well as relationships between men and women (Nemec 1994: 248). Nemec particularly emphasizes the fact that the heroine of *Plein air*, Zdenka Podravac, is "neither demonized nor idealized", as was mostly the case with women characters in 19th-century Croatian literature who were either celebrated as examples of female virtue or reviled as *femme fatales* (1994: 248). Zdenka, according to Nemec, is an "intellectually superior woman who gently pushes feminist ideas into the foreground" (1994: 248). Zdenka is therefore not constructed on the idealistic, black-and-white principles of popular romantic fiction dominant in Croatian literature in the 19th century. Her characterization is driven by a realist interest in her socioeconomic position and a modernist focus on the psychological motivation for her actions.

"Who Is, What Is This Girl"

The principal novelty *Plein air* introduces into Croatian literature is, as mentioned, a new type of woman character – its independent and politically outspoken heroine. Even though

the novel is narrated in the first person, the autodiegetic narrator is not Zdenka but Vlatko Urbanić, a kind but somewhat entitled young man with a romantic interest in her. Vlatko tells the story of his romance with Zdenka through retrospective narration but following closely and consistently the perspective of his younger self. The text is almost entirely focalized on Vlatko's narrated or experiential self in order to highlight Zdenka's difference from feminine roles and behaviors dominant at the time and to show Vlatko's gradual maturation and development when it comes to his relationship with women or, more precisely, with Zdenka.

Vlatko has never met a woman like her before: "Who is, what is this girl, whom I led by the arm and talked about strange things in an unusual way for almost half an hour!" (Truhelka 1997: 41).[3] Vlatko wonders who this unfamiliar girl is, but the answer he receives by the end of the novel is completely removed from the mystery he senses at the beginning. Through encounters and misunderstandings with this down-to-earth, sincere, and direct young woman, Vlatko will undergo a process of sentimental education which will change his culturally conditioned views on women and femininity. Zdenka will teach him that women should be able to freely choose their own path in life, express their will, demand the right to a profession and even consider the possibility of remaining unmarried.

Vlatko and Zdenka first meet in Vienna after a night at the Opera where they both attend a performance of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. She is first described through his eyes as "tall and slender", but at this point Vlatko is unable to determine her age or beauty. Later he notices that "her first youth no longer flourished" (Truhelka 1997: 38) and then, a day later, her face seemed to him "younger and more beautiful in daylight" (1997: 50). They meet after the opera when Vlatko saves Zdenka from an attack by a drunken mob. Zdenka thus enters the novel crying out for help in both German and Croatian. She thankfully accepts Vlatko's offer to walk her home, commenting right away on the unfair condition of women: "I can see that my bravery is of little use, a woman is an unfortunate creature, subjected to brutal force…" (Truhelka 1997: 38). Vlatko notes her "deep voice" and "longish slim fingers" (1997: 38) but is mostly taken aback by her conversation. Zdenka talks about the position of women, the importance of education for lower classes, the impact of Wagner's opera: "I have never heard an actual woman speak this way, so firmly, almost harshly but with such a poetic, artistic feeling, with such fervor that reveals a highly educated mind" (Truhelka 1997: 41).

The next day some of Vlatko's questions are answered when he chances upon Zdenka's brother Hinko Podravac, who was also his commanding officer during military service. At this point, Vlatko is not yet aware that the woman he met yesterday is Hinko's sister, but when Hinko starts to describe his sister as "an artist and moral philosopher to boot" (Truhelka 1997:

44) the reader can easily guess the direction of the plot. Vlatko soon learns that Zdenka is a painter and supports herself and her aging father, a retired colonel, by teaching drawing and painting to young girls as well as by doing commissioned paintings. Besides caring for her elderly father, she helps the other tenants in their building which is situated in a working-class neighborhood.

However, it seems that Hinko does not fully understand why Zdenka needs to work and take care of their neighbors. He describes her to Vlatko as a talented painter who unfortunately does not have enough self-confidence to pursue art as a career and interprets her philanthropy as a kind of "surrogate" (Truhelka 1997: 46; 49). He also tries to assure Vlatko, a member of the Croatian landed gentry, that Zdenka does not work due to economic necessity and even confesses that their "father doesn't approve, he believes it to be beneath his standing, that his daughter, the daughter of a colonel, should earn money with her own hands" (Truhelka 1997: 46).

But even though Zdenka's story is typical, it is at the same time unique and tied to her strong character and moral convictions. Vlatko will later learn Zdenka's life story from lieutenant Nikolić, another male narrator who had courted her. The primary function of this hypodiegetic narrative is access to greater insight into Zdenka's character as well as her behavior towards Vlatko, which he finds strange and off-putting. To briefly summarize, on her wedding day, a young and still naïve Zdenka found out that her fiancé already has a child with another woman. Despite pleas from her family, and especially her father, Zdenka refuses to marry him. When her father finally confesses that he owes a large amount of money and that "only a rich son-in-law could save him from trouble", Zdenka protests the idea of marriage as a financial transaction but offers to work to pay off his debts (Truhelka 1997: 66).

In choosing her moral principles over social convention and economic security, Zdenka also has to give up her own artistic education. This is her main inner conflict: Zdenka has to relinquish her desire to become a "true" artist, but at the same time painting is the most convenient way for her to earn money and support her father. Both of these issues, her lack of confidence as an artist and the sacrifice she makes for her family's sake, are inextricably linked to the fact of Zdenka's gender.

Anxiety of Authorship

Although everyone claims that Zdenka is very talented, she is not confident in her artistic abilities, which is why she does not consider herself a "real" artist:

> An artist? No, that I am not, that was once my dream. That I possess talent, that I know how to skillfully imitate – this I know. But what makes an artist – a cheerful soul, an unrelenting faith in himself – this I do not have. Therefore, I will not be able to create something permanent. That is why I have long given up the idea of autonomous creation. These are copies, copies of nature, colors, forms, and the more faithfully they imitate reality the better they are. I don't wish for anything more!" (Truhelka 1997: 73)

Later in the novel, she responds similarly to another compliment, insisting:

> Because there is no more strength left in me – and to try to reach it through force and effort, I will not; I am afraid of struggle, I am afraid of myself, of the desire for glory arising in me. I want peace, peace and tranquility (Truhelka 1997: 130).

Zdenka's story is strikingly similar to that of Helen Graham, the heroine of Anne Brontë's 1848 novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.[4] Helen is also a painter as well as a serious and emotionally mature woman with more life experience than her new love interest, the privileged young farmer Gilbert Markham. While attempting to escape from an abusive marriage, Helen manages to support herself and her son by selling her paintings. In their feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar use Helen's character as one of the examples for their figure of the "madwoman", "the *author's* double, an image of her anxiety and rage" (2000: 78). Gilbert and Gubar explain that since Helen must hide her new identity from her abusive husband Arthur Huntingdon and his acquaintances, she signs the paintings she hopes to sell with false initials: "In short, she uses art both to express and to camouflage herself" (2000: 81). However, they add, Helen's approach to art has been "duplicitous" even before her marriage (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 81). Her paintings have always had two sides: the front is meant to display "genteel social accomplishments" appropriate for a young lady, but the reverse side of Helen's paintings and drawings harbors her "secret desires" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 81). When Arthur examines her work during their courtship, he discovers she had repeatedly sketched and then erased his likeness on the backs of her drawings.

In this behavior Gilbert and Gubar recognize "a wonderfully useful paradigm of the female artist" who "must in some sense deny or conceal her own art, or at least deny the self-assertion implicit in her art" (2000: 81). Her official paintings are "public masks" that "hide

her private dreams" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 81), but at the same time these paintings are her source of financial income and the basis of her hard-earned freedom and independence.

Therefore, both Helen and Zdenka experience Gilbert and Gubar's "anxiety of authorship" (2000: 49) in two connected ways: because their freedom of artistic expression is limited by their gender and by the commercial demands of their prospective clients. They both lack social and economic privilege Virginia Woolf deemed necessary for artistic expression untainted by the "poison of fear and bitterness" (2015: 28). They also work in isolation, without participating in an artistic community or even being aware of a female artistic tradition. Helen expresses a lack of confidence in her own work, at the same time wishing for some kind of artistic companionship or community: "I have often wished in vain for another's judgement to appeal to when I could scarcely trust the direction of my own eye and head […]" (Brontë 1998: 64).

As we have already seen, Zdenka similarly claims she does not have "an unrelenting faith in (her)self" that makes an artist (Truhelka 1997: 73). She fears her own desire for artistic recognition and even fame, which she confesses to Vlatko's younger sister Cvijeta linking this anxiety very clearly to her gender: "I am not an artist but only a human being, and an incomplete one at that, for I am only a girl" (Truhelka 1997: 131). Thus, Zdenka is afraid of the power of her art and does not express herself fully. There are only two exceptions to her calculated avoidance of authentic artistic expression: the portrait of Cvijeta on her wedding day and a "private" painting depicting the tragic events of her own wedding day, hidden on the back side of a copy of "The Madonna" by the Austrian painter Franz von Defregger. Like Anne Brontë's Helen Graham, Zdenka also conceals the image she truly wishes to paint on the reverse side of another painting, albeit in this case not her own. The fact that she inserts and hides her own painting representing the most difficult moment of her life (when she found out that the man she was preparing to marry has a child with another woman) behind the image of the Virgin Mary could not be more poignant. If the Madonna is the symbol of a perfect woman, passively and selflessly accepting her fate, Zdenka's own story is on the *reverse side* of the Madonna, it is *beyond* the Madonna.

Neither Angel nor Monster

Like so many women writers and artists Gilbert and Gubar studied, Zdenka must also grapple with masculine myths of femininity: "Specifically […], a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have

generated for her" (2000: 17). The Madonna is certainly one of the most powerful role-models for women in Western culture, and Zdenka's relationship with her is conflicted. On the one hand, she hangs a copy of Defregger in her room and even claims that she physically resembles the woman in the painting, which her brother mockingly dismisses but Vlatko finds true. On the other hand, Zdenka is the spokesperson for feminist ideas in *Plein air* and in this way differs from all the other female characters in Truhelka's novel as well as Croatian literature up to that point. Neither an "angel" nor a "monster", Zdenka is an active and independent character advocating equality between men and women. As her brother Hinko summarizes:

> People should not see in her a woman – but a human being. That's why she claims that she should be allowed to go anywhere be it day or night; she doesn't ask for courtesy, she doesn't ask for kindness just because she is a woman. If she could have it her way, she would erase all inequality between sexes, as well as between different classes. She doesn't want there to be men and women – let there only be 'people' (Truhelka 1997: 48).

This is why she insists on carrying her art supplies by herself, that is why she frequents the opera alone and openly expresses her thoughts and feelings. Vlatko observes that Zdenka has "more strength of spirit" than her father or brother (Truhelka 1997: 54) and even senses "her superiority" over himself (1997: 80). Furthermore, Zdenka is the one who takes initiative when she asks Vlatko to openly declare his feelings for her. At the start of their friendship, Vlatko is intrigued by this unusual woman and enjoys their modest flirtation without considering potential consequences. He finds "magic" in the "uncertainty between sweet hope and dark fear" and wishes for this "clair-obscure of [his] feelings" to last (Truhelka 1997: 77). At the same time, some of the language Vlatko uses to describe his feelings for Zdenka is alarmingly violent: he feels his power over her growing and plans to "conquer this proud creature completely, and with the strength of [his] love force her to reciprocate" (Truhelka 1997: 81).

On the other hand, after Vlatko goes out of his way to avoid introducing her to his other Viennese acquaintances, Zdenka demands to know about his intentions towards her. She believes that a woman has the right to know what a man wants from her:

> But let me tell you, I am not a woman who waits patiently for a man to deign to offer her his hand and heart. I likewise feel the freedom to show my feelings: I feel that it is

> my right to demand from a man to unequivocally confirm with his words what he has shown with his looks and demeanor, and I do not allow anyone to play and jest with me and my heart" (Truhelka 1997: 89).

Zdenka is well aware that her reaction completely contradicts Vlatko's ideals about femininity and proper feminine behavior. Even more, Vlatko is so shocked by Zdenka's conduct that he thinks of her as a "nonwoman" (Truhelka 1997: 89) and decides not to see her anymore:

> I felt like a child, whose favorite toy was broken by someone with a relentless hand. I couldn't find the words to answer. All my ideas, which I nurtured about femininity, about its fine feeling, about the meekness of women, about their beautiful obedience, all the fragile adornment with which tradition had clothed our ideal of femininity: all this crumbled before me, and I myself, seeing this deity collapse, felt that the ground beneath me was disappearing, the ground on which the self-government of my sex had placed me high, and from which it was only up to me to decide whether I will reach for that ideal and be proud of it – like royal spoils – at the same time as a happy man, or – leave it (Truhelka 1997: 88).

Although the novel is mostly focalized on the narrated or experiential self (the younger Vlatko) in order to emphasize the defamiliarizing effect Zdenka has on him, this paragraph contains some conclusions that could only belong to the narrating self (the older Vlatko), who is now conscious of his earlier prejudice. The older Vlatko writes about the cultural ideal of femininity as something learned and constructed, and he is also aware of his privileged position in the courtship ritual. He, as a man, is the one with the power to end the courtship either by proposing marriage or by moving on. Conversely, the same behavior in a woman is unacceptable to Vlatko, even unintelligible: in that moment, he does not see Zdenka as a woman anymore, therefore he has to end their acquaintance. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "assertiveness, aggressiveness […] are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (2000: 28).

Narration from the perspective of Vlatko's younger self is another similarity Truhelka's *Plein air* bears to Ann Brontë's novel. The first part of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is narrated in the form of letters Gilbert Markham writes to his brother-in-law Halford recounting the time he first met Helen twenty years ago. In order to tell Halford an engaging story, Gilbert decides

to tell the story precisely as it unfolded, revealing no retrospective knowledge of Helen's circumstances. Both novels employ this specific type of internal focalization, revealing only what the autodiegetic narrator knew when the events of the story were actually unfolding, for similar reasons. Firstly, the reader can witness Vlatko and Gilbert change, grow up and become more mature as a consequence of their relationship with an unusual woman. Secondly, both Zdenka and Helen are presented as mysteries at first because the narrators are unfamiliar with such independent and strong women. The mystery surrounding them is dispelled as soon as the narrators learn the truth about the social and economic circumstances of the women's lives. Thirdly, because of this, the readers can undergo their own sentimental education along with Vlatko and Gilbert and also come to understand and appreciate these seemingly strange and initially even off-putting women as autonomous individuals demanding equal treatment and pursuing a livable life.

While *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* offers Helen's own story in the form of her diary in the second part of the novel, *Plein air* is told exclusively from Vlatko's perspective. Although Zdenka does not narrate her own story and her words are related by Vlatko, his perspective is still valuable because it demonstrates that culturally constructed ideals of femininity can be challenged and that strongly held beliefs about gender roles can be changed. It will take time for Vlatko to come to understand that his attraction to Zdenka stems largely from her difference from the young women around him who successfully perform conventional femininity. What attracts him to Zdenka is "a sharp mind, audacious honesty and love of the truth, and the pursuit of individual, human freedom of thought and action, which ultimately despises all those artificial means, occasionally even adopted by common folk, by which women so successfully charm men" (Truhelka 1997: 111).

Between duty and freedom

This is also where the title of the novel comes from. *Plein air* is, of course, the act of painting outdoors which was especially relevant to impressionist painters such as Zdenka, but likewise stands for Zdenka's appearance and manner of communication. Art certainly plays an important role in Truhelka's choice of title. Besides being a painter, Zdenka is also an accomplished musician, and the two first meet in Vienna after a performance of Wagner's *Parsifal*. Wagner does not appear here by chance either, because his concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* can serve as a model for the fusion of visual arts, music, and literature in the text (Detoni Dujmić 1998: 112).

Throughout the novel, the phrase "plein air" is used repeatedly to describe Zdenka's behavior towards others, but especially Vlatko. She strives to make her thoughts and feelings transparent to those who wish to know her, while Vlatko seeks "magic, poetry" (Truhelka 1997: 113) in relationships between men and women, and in this way invokes the idea of a woman as a mysterious creature that cannot be represented or understood. Zdenka's desire for clarity and honesty is also emphasized by her simple, classic style of dress, without any adornment, jewelry, or makeup. Additionally, her insistence on sartorial simplicity can also be attributed to Zdenka's class and economic position: while Vlatko comes from the upper class and will inherit his father's estate, Zdenka's family is impoverished by debt and therefore frugal out of necessity.[5]

At first, Vlatko has conflicted feelings towards her refusal to perform femininity in culturally expected terms. As the narrative progresses, he gradually comes to understand and accept Zdenka's wish to show herself and be seen exactly as she is, but when he notices her in a white dress at Cvijeta and Hinko's wedding she strikes him as especially beautiful and her skillful piano playing additionally enhances the impression. Zdenka ironically tells him that she is still the same person even under those "rags" and scolds him for being affected by such "external stimuli" (Truhelka 1997: 149).

In this way, Zdenka is portrayed as being unlike other young women. Her difference is largely motivated by her previous negative experience with men. This explains why her demeanor is "repulsive and brusque" (Truhelka 1997: 46) and, as we have seen, "unfeminine" (1997: 163). At the same time, she is characterized by a "strength of spirit" (Truhelka 1997: 54) and an "audacious will", which even compels her brother to lament: "[…] a pity she is not a man, she could have achieved something" (1997: 46). However, while *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* includes characters like Eliza Millward and Jane Wilson, superficial, spoiled, and envious scandalmongers, *Plein air* discusses the flaws of more conventional young women mostly in general terms. The only other significant female character besides Zdenka is Vlatko's younger sister Cvijeta, a sweet, naïve, and inexperienced girl who is nevertheless presented as smart, kind, deeply honest, and utterly fascinated by Zdenka. Other young women are mostly criticized for "their emptiness, vanity, their lives without a true purpose, their thoughts which are only concerned with marrying as profitably as possible" (Truhelka 1997: 55). To be fair, Vlatko is later also critical of his own education as a young upper-class man which supplied him with a false sense of entitlement and superiority over women. He blames this on "our artificial way of living", explaining that most young men are brought up to seek enjoyment and therefore resent having to take care of their wives and children: "We put all the worries and all

the responsibility for the success of married and family life on the woman, and only want life's comforts for ourselves" (Truhelka 1997: 112).

Zdenka is likewise critical of young women's unpreparedness to enter the institution of marriage due to their lack of education but does not lay blame on individual women for this failure:

> She is not even a complete human being at the age of seventeen, and already wants to give birth, raise children, still uneducated herself. A fully grown person is needed for this difficult service, as men usually are when they get married. But then instead of bringing a young woman up – instead of educating their minds, they mock their every attempt at thought. They seek a wife, a mother, a housewife, but do not ask if she has acquired sufficient skills for this. And when the ship of marriage falls apart, they wholly blame the woman… (Truhelka 1997: 128).

In this context, Zdenka's "they" refers to men, but can be interpreted in even wider terms to include the whole patriarchal society which requires young girls to perform tasks that they are not prepared for primarily due to a lack of appropriate education. Vlatko, in his reflection, correspondingly admits men are largely to blame for the poor state of the institution of marriage because of their sense of entitlement.

As we can see from both perspectives, neither men nor women achieve happiness and fulfillment in such an unfair system. As Krešimir Nemec observes, Zdenka is "torn between the desire for freedom on the one hand and a longing for happiness in love on the other" (1994: 248). She claims that she is happy because she has "[her] calling, [her] duties", but at the same agrees with Cvijeta's opinion that "a girl's true calling" is marriage and children (Truhelka 1997: 126). But when Cvijeta insists that "a woman must always be gentler and give in", Zdenka believes this should not be done in "the holiest" matters: "If I am obliged to be faithful to my husband, so is he; if he breaks his faith, I no longer want to know anything about him, just as he would have the right to punish me if I violated my faith towards him" (Truhelka 1997: 128).

One way in which Zdenka attempts to reconcile her desire for freedom with her "feminine duties" is through philanthropy. As we have seen earlier, her brother interprets this pursuit as a kind of "surrogate for that which, according to her own belief, must remain unattainable to her" (Truhelka 1997: 49). Here Hinko alludes to Zdenka's lack of confidence in her artistic abilities, but since her philanthropic "mission" (Truhelka 1997: 49) mostly

consists of performing different types of care work, it could be interpreted as a "surrogate" for marital duties, which have also remained beyond her reach.

Zdenka thus cooks, babysits, takes care of the sick, and offers moral support to her working-class neighbors. Vlatko imagines her as a "fairy godmother of her whole neighborhood, of the arduous work of the dispossessed brothers – workers, proletarians, day-laborers" (Truhelka 1997: 55). Although unmarried, Zdenka's "mission" still seems to be perfectly aligned with the demands made upon women by the state. According to political theorist Carole Pateman, these demands "have always taken a form suited to those held to have their own private tasks and whose status as citizens is thus ambiguous and contradictory" (1989: 10). "Women's 'contribution'" to the state, Pateman continues, "is not seen as part of, or even relevant to, their citizenship, but as a necessary part of the private tasks proper to their sex" (1989: 10). Indeed, this "'contribution' exacted from women by the state has reflected the political significance given to sexual difference," meaning that the "welfare in question is the private, unpaid 'welfare' provided by women in their homes for the young, the aged, the sick and the infirm, and for their husbands" (Pateman 1989: 10).

Pateman argues that, according to the social contract, "men are born free and equal, or self-governing" and must therefore "consent to be governed by other men – but women are subordinate to men by nature" (1989: 11). She explains that the "terms of the fraternal pact and the patriarchal criteria for participation in the public world have been embodied in the structure of the workplace and in the structure of the state" (1989: 9). In this way, women were regarded "as dependents of men, as private beings" (1989: 12) and therefore relegated to "their proper place […] in the private, domestic sphere" (1989: 120). Even today, the public sphere is coded masculine and considered separately from the private sphere: "Theoretical and practical attention became fixed exclusively on the public area, on civil society – on 'the social' or on 'the economy' – and domestic life was assumed irrelevant to the social and political theory or the concerns of affairs" (Pateman 1989: 123).[6]

In a more contemporary context, social reproduction theorists Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser still consider the gender division of labor as the root of gender oppression in capitalist societies: "Its key move was to separate the making of people from the making of profit, to assign the first job to women, and to subordinate it to the second" (2019: 20–21). In this way, women's "reproductive" work, unlike the "productive" work traditionally performed by men, typically takes place in the private, domestic sphere, it is mostly unpaid and does not bring direct profit to the state, and it is therefore considered less valuable than paid work from the perspective of the public sphere.

Zdenka's philanthropic care work puts her firmly within the private sphere, but the necessity to help pay off her father's debts pushes her into the public sphere where she is then confronted with the precarious status of the woman artist. Her situation demonstrates that the divide between the private and the public was not impenetrable, but that women attempting to cross it were often considered "unfeminine". Within the private sphere, Zdenka's contribution to the welfare state is considerable, but this is also where she demands an equal status to that of her potential husband. Conversely, she enters the public sphere through her art, but then refuses to publicly call herself an artist.

Conclusion: A Happy Ending?

As we have seen, the central tension between women's duties and their desire for freedom is not only crucial for Zdenka's characterization but also for the construction of the plot, which resolves conventionally with Zdenka and Vlatko happily married. After a series of misunderstandings, rejections, and separations, they are finally united as a result of an unfortunate event. Namely, Vlatko, furious and hurt because she keeps refusing to accept his renewed advances, drives his carriage too fast and causes an accident in which Zdenka breaks her right arm, the very one she uses to paint. When Vlatko apologizes and openly declares his love to her, she answers: "I am still weak […] I cannot resist, but I would have a lot to answer to your words" (Truhelka 1997: 157). To this she adds: "I can't hold back anymore […] my strength has weakened, my wings are broken; what used to be my pride – my independence – my self-reliance – it is now broken" (Truhelka 1997: 157–158). Later, when he comes to Vienna to formally propose to her, she repeats: "My mind seems exhausted; I have no thoughts, my imagination has dried up, in a word, I can't imagine anything new, since..." (Truhelka 1997: 164).

Zdenka is trying to tell Vlatko that her broken arm signifies the loss of her independence because she cannot paint and therefore cannot support herself financially anymore, but it also seems that she has lost some of her strength of spirit, which impressed and intimidated Vlatko so much. However, he does not fully understand the gravity of her words, but only tells her that "love will cure everything" (Truhelka 1997: 158) and that "the arm will certainly have enough strength to bend around [his] neck and bind [him] to life" (1997: 164). In the end, it is disappointing that Vlatko does not consider Zdenka's calling to be very important, even joking that "it is not such a great misfortune" if she is not able to paint anymore (Truhelka 1997: 164). In this context, Vlatko's statement "I came to claim what is mine" (Truhelka 1997: 162) as

well as his opinion that "freedom is a dangerous weapon" in the hands of women who are not as "strong and clear-headed" as Zdenka (1997: 163) have an ominous overtone.

To be sure, Zdenka's marriage to Vlatko seems to be happy. The novel ends ten years after their wedding with an idyllic scene of the couple celebrating Christmas Eve with their three children and their extended family. Zdenka's painting depicting her first, failed wedding day hangs above Vlatko's desk just as he is finishing a manuscript telling the story of their love. The title of Vlatko's story is "Plein air", dedicated to Zdenka's "manner" of painting and communication, thereby metatextually linking Vlatko's narrative to Truhelka's own novel (1997: 168). Although Zdenka's most accomplished artwork is mentioned in the last chapter, she is not shown painting again, but instead teaches her children how to draw animals (Truhelka 1997: 166–167). Her eldest son Vlatko has inherited his mother's artistic talent and one day might succeed in becoming a professional artist, which Zdenka was not able to achieve mainly due to her gender.

Many critics have commented on Truhelka's choice of ending. Dunja Detoni Dujmić writes that "Truhelka often accommodatingly directs this drama of the sexes towards strained marital happiness" (1997: 12). Katarina Ivon and Josipa Blažević conclude that

> [e]ven though the focus of the entire novelistic structure is precisely on the gradual formation of self-reliance and independence of the central female character […], Truhelka remains within the given traditional Christian framework in which the woman figures as a wife and a mother, which is a significant determinant of Truhelka's women's writing (2016: 68).

Iskra Iveljić also calls this solution "a compromise", and states that the novel cannot be considered to convey a "distinctly feminist idea" (2018: 37). Its message is more "moderate", since Zdenka is "depicted partly in accordance with the traditional feminine stereotype" (Iveljić 2018: 37). Iveljić goes even further, suggesting that

> from a feminist point of view, it would be most interesting to see the continuation of Zdenka's life story, which would offer an answer to the question of whether, as a mother and wife, she managed to resist the gender stereotype and whether her husband supported her in this (2018: 37).

While the ending appears forced, this is not the only instance in the novel where the tension between complex psychological characterization signaling modernist aesthetics and a simpler, more traditional narrative becomes obvious. In the latter, Detoni Dujmić accurately recognizes aspects of popular fiction, which she describes as "the remnants of trivial narration" (1997: 14). *Plein air* is indeed structured as a romance plot and makes liberal use of popular tropes such as coincidental meetings, accidents, and various signs suggesting Zdenka and Vlatko's relationship was meant to be, such as being born on the same day and even living in the same building as children (Truhelka 1997: 75). Detoni Dujmić also emphasizes the novel's didactic tendencies reflected in "adopting and systematically expressing feminist ideas" (1997: 14), which she analyzes as another factor that sets the novel apart from the emerging impressionistic aesthetic in Croatian literature. To be fair, in 1897, when *Plein air* was published, the Croatian novel was still very much popular and utilitarian, and Truhelka's work is no exception (Nemec 1994). The novelty *Plein air* introduces into Croatian literature is therefore a new type of female character who, although she does seem to be pushed into marriage in the end, openly voices her explicitly feminist beliefs throughout the novel (Nemec 1994: 248; Detoni Dujmić 1997: 13–14).[7]

Additionally, while discussing the ending of the novel, it might be useful to keep in mind Zdenka's stance towards her own artistic profession. As we have seen, borrowing from Gilbert and Gubar, Zdenka tries very hard to avoid thinking about herself as a true artist and mostly produces paintings that will sell easily. This type of compromise parallels Truhelka's choice of ending, which is a more popular as well as a more commercial choice, especially when there is no further mention of Zdenka's freedom and independence. But just as the reproduction of Defregger's "Madonna" drops from the wall to reveal Zdenka's authentic artwork, the sacrifice necessary for the novel's happy ending also exposes the limits of the romance plot because it clearly shows that the equality of independent, androgynous heroines with men is still impossible, even unintelligible, in a society that may acknowledge their intelligence, strength, and other "masculine" qualities, but will regard them as "unfeminine" in a woman, a useless surplus, and an obstacle in attaining the ultimate feminine goal – marriage.

Gilbert and Gubar conclude their analysis of Ann Brontë's character Helen Graham in a similar tone, writing about Helen but referring more generally to women artists in the 19th century: "Tracing subversive pictures behind socially acceptable facades, they managed to appear to dissociate themselves from their own revolutionary impulses even while passionately enacting such impulses" (2000: 82). While such compromises seem disappointing from a contemporary perspective, they nevertheless expose the cracks in patriarchal ideology. As

Laura Mulvey writes in the context of melodrama, the strength of these narratives "lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (1987: 76).

[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[2] The case of Truhelka's early modernist novel is a poignant example of the ways in which the dominant literary history remembers or, more precisely, does not remember women writers. I have argued elsewhere that two best-known Croatian women writers, Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, are remembered as authors of popular literature and children's literature respectively, but as such do not have access to the literary canon (Grdešić 2021). At the same time, many other women writers are left out of literary history because they are considered minor, not modernist enough, or too interested in writing about issues culturally considered feminine such as love, marriage, and relationships. When it comes to Truhelka, this erasure can only partly be attributed to the fact that her nationalist and religious views, moderate and widespread at the time, were considered unwelcome in socialist Yugoslavia. Even after 1990, most of the scholarly work on Truhelka is dedicated to her books for children and pedagogical treatises, while there are still very few articles on *Plein air*.

[3] Since *Plein air* is not translated into English, all translations are my own.

[4] At the time of writing, I have no evidence that Truhelka read or even knew of Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In her pedagogical treatise *U carstvu duše* ("In the Empire of the Soul"), written in the form of letters addressed to her student and published in 1910, Truhelka recommends several British authors that she considers appropriate for a young woman's education, such as Shakespeare, Defoe, Dickens, and George Eliot (whom she considers to be a man), but there is no mention of Anne Brontë (Truhelka 2010: 238).

[5] Iskra Iveljić explains Vlatko's class position and adds that one of Truhelka's "subtle social" messages in the novel implies the need for "cooperation between nobility and non-nobility" (2018: 37).

[6] Writing about Rousseau's *Émile*, Sara Ahmed comments on the education of Sophy, Émile's future wife. Her duty is "to be a good wife to Émile" and this duty is inextricably tied to her own happiness as well as his (2010: 55). A woman "aligns her happiness with the happiness of others", whether her parents or her husband (55). A woman's happiness is "conditional", it depends on the happiness of others, writes Ahmed, and proves it by quoting Rousseau: "A good girl finds her own happiness in the happiness of a good man" (as cited in Ahmed 2010: 58).

[7] This contradiction is thoroughly explored in Janice Radway's influential book *Reading the Romance*. One of her conclusions is that the happy end of a romance "might be said to reproduce the 'real', not because all women actually find perfect fulfillment in romantic love" but because this type of ending "parallels a situation women find difficult to avoid in actuality" (1991: 208). Even in the second half of the 20th century in the United States, through socialization and education, "the culture persuades women to view femininity solely in terms of a social and institutional role that is essential to the maintenance of the current organization of life" (Radway 1991: 208).

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S onu stranu Madone: lik umjetnice u *Plein airu* Jagode Truhelke

U Hrvatskoj je na prijelazu iz 19. u 20. stoljeće sve veći broj žena ulazio u javnu sferu u ulozi umjetnica i kulturnih radnica. Primjer jedne takve obrazovane žene prisutne u javnosti jest Jagoda Truhelka (1864–1957), učiteljica i pedagoginja koja je danas većinom poznata po svojim knjigama za djecu i pedagoškim esejima. Truhelkin je glavni doprinos hrvatskoj književnoj prozi *Plein air* (1897), roman s modernističkim pripovjednim tendencijama i protagonistkinjom Zdenkom koja otvoreno iskazuje feminističke stavove (Nemec, Detoni Dujmić). *Plein air* ispripovijedan je iz perspektive Vlatka, mladića fasciniranog Zdenkom, snažnom i neovisnom mladom umjetnicom koja uzdržava sebe i svog oca prodajom vlastitih umjetničkih slika. Zdenkin je umjetnički rad obilježen „tjeskobom autorstva" zbog njezine društvene i ekonomske pozicije te ona također pokušava izaći na kraj s maskulinim mitovima o ženstvenosti, tražeći svoje mjesto s onu stranu stereotipnih ženskih figura „anđela" i „čudovišta". U tom smislu, njezina je priča iznimno slična priči Helen Graham, junakinji romana *Stanarka napuštene kuće* britanske autorice Anne Brontë (1848).

Središnja pripovjedna napetost između Zdenkina priznavanja „ženskih dužnosti" i njezine žudnje za slobodom ključna je ne samo za karakterizaciju njezina lika već i za konstrukciju zapleta. Truhelkin izbor konvencionalnog kraja sa Zdenkom i Vlatkom u sretnom braku može se činiti forsiranim, no ta specifična kombinacija ranoga modernističkog pripovijedanja i popularne romantične fikcije ipak donekle uspijeva razotkriti napukline u patrijarhalnoj ideologiji tog doba. Zdenkina žrtva nužna za sretan kraj romana upućuje na granice romantičnog zapleta jer pokazuje da je jednakost neovisnih junakinja s muškarcima još uvijek nemoguća, pa čak i neshvatljiva, u društvu koje može priznati njihovu inteligenciju, snagu i druge „maskuline" kvalitete, ali će te kvalitete i dalje smatrati „neženstvenima" kod žena, kao i preprekom u postizanju konačnoga ženskog cilja – braka.

Ključne riječi: Jagoda Truhelka, *Plein air*, spisateljice, reprezentacija umjetnica u književnosti 19. stoljeća, tjeskoba autorstva, ženstvenost, romansa

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