

A Note on Eliza Orzeszkowa

Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910) is one of the most prolific and esteemed Polish prose writers of the nineteenth century. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1905 together with Leo Tolstoy and Henryk Sienkiewicz, who became the recipient of the prestigious award. Orzeszkowa began her writing career with her short story “Obrazek z lat głodnych” (A picture from the hungry years), published by the literary magazine *Tygodnik ilustrowany* (The illustrated weekly) in 1866. She wrote novels, short stories, and a series of articles and commentaries on education, class discrimination, anti-Semitism, and women’s emancipation, all within the frame of Polish literary Positivism.

Orzeszkowa achieved widespread fame at home and abroad with her famous roman-fleuve *Nad Niemnem* (*On the banks of the Niemen*, 1888), which dealt with traditional values of the Polish gentry, issues centering around marriage between members of different classes, and the effects of the January Uprising in Russian-occupied Poland. Throughout her lifetime Orzeszkowa fought for her personal independence by working as a writer; as a teacher at her house in Grodno, which she made available for girls who wanted to pursue their studies under her guidance; and as manager of her own bookstore, which was transformed into a publishing house in Wilno. Her novel *Marta* (1873) presents a widowed heroine facing a grim battle to earn a living in a time when employment opportunities for women were severely restricted; the book is representative of Orzeszkowa’s depiction of women and her skill at creating moving and powerful scenes in her fiction. *Marta* explores matters that were vital and close to its author’s heart, namely women’s education and women’s emancipation, which she also discussed in her earlier article “Kilka słów o kobietach” (A few words about women, 1870) and her later novella *Panna Antonina* (*Miss Antonina*, 1891). Orzeszkowa’s writings deal with crucial topics that are still at the centers of controversies in many corners of the world today.

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In her 1898 treatise, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), an American feminist writer and lecturer, clearly identified the differences between opportunities available to either young men or women entering adulthood:

To the young man confronting life the world lies wide. . . . What he wants to be, he may strive to be. What he wants to get, he may strive to get. . . .

To the young woman confronting life there is the same world beyond, there are the same human energies and human desires and ambition within. But all that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through a single channel and a single choice. Wealth, power, social distinction, fame,—not only these, but home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter,—all, must come to her through a small gold ring. This is a heavy pressure.¹

A quarter century earlier than Perkins Gilman, a Polish author and social reformer, Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910), placed the same issue at the center of her early novel, *Marta* (1873), which tells a story of a twenty-four-year-old widow and mother who gradually learns that the lack of the “small gold ring” makes her economic situation untenable. Orzeszkowa’s assessment of the condition of women in late-nineteenth-century patriarchal Poland is just as powerful as are the views expressed by Perkins Gilman. Orzeszkowa writes:

[A] woman is not a human being, a woman is an object. . . . A woman is a zero if a man does not stand next to her as a completive number. . . . If she does not find someone to buy her, or if she loses him, she is covered with the rust of

perpetual suffering and the taint of misery without remedy. She becomes a zero again, but a zero gaunt from hunger, trembling with cold, tearing at rags in a useless attempt to carry on and improve her lot. . . . There is no happiness for her or bread without a man.²

In her novel, Orzeszkowa argues for women's right to economic freedom, to successful and productive lives, to useful and serious education, and to equal employment opportunities. She extols the value of work not only as a means of financial support but also as a means of developing and strengthening character. *Marta* becomes Orzeszkowa's social manifesto. It is a novel of purpose that advances the author's worldview and illustrates it pointedly both with direct authorial commentary and with the story of her eponymous protagonist. This authorial commentary could seem heavy handed at times if it did not testify to the young author's deep engagement in and her passion for the topic. Even before the publication of *Marta*, Orzeszkowa came out with a pamphlet, "Kilka słów o kobietach" (A few words about women) (1870), in which she advocated for sensible education of girls that would prepare them not only for a domestic role as a wife and mother but also for a possible career in the public sphere. Edmund Jankowski in his monograph about Eliza Orzeszkowa argues convincingly that this pamphlet together with *Marta* placed the author in the forefront of the feminist movement in Poland and won her fame.³

Orzeszkowa's early life gave little indication of her later espousal of feminist views, fairly radical for traditional Polish society of the early 1870s. She spent her childhood on her father's estate in Milikowszczyzna near Grodno in eastern Poland.⁴ Even though her father died when she was only a toddler, his death did not substantively change the family's lifestyle, which was typical of a landed gentry home at the time. Both she and her older sister were educated at home by Polish and foreign-born live-in tutors. In her memoirs, she remembered fondly a Polish teacher who instilled in her and her sister great love for Polish literature and history, but also recalled their intense dislike for a German nanny. Eliza, obviously a precocious child, could not remember a time when she was not able to read both in Polish and in French. She entertained her frequently ailing sister with her own original tales and at the age of seven, she wrote her first novel—a melodrama of crime and guilt. But soon everything changed. By the time she turned ten, her sister died and she was sent to a boarding school in Warsaw where she would spend the next five years. Soon after finishing her formal

education, seventeen-year-old Eliza married Piotr Orzeszko, a man twice her age, who owned a neighboring estate. Her own assessment of this period in her life was quite harsh. She wrote, “I was thoughtless and irresponsible. . . . I was nothing but vanity. I was delighted with my beautifully furnished and decorated home, with my clothes, servants, constant visits from friends and young neighbors.”⁵ Yet it was also then that under the tutelage of several well-educated acquaintances, she began a slow process of self-education by reading voraciously. Her favorite books included classic works of French and Polish literature as well as English Romantics in French translation. She also rediscovered her passion for writing. However, this intense project of self-improvement had for Orzeszkowa some unanticipated results. Within only a couple of years of her marriage, even before she turned twenty, she realized that the lack of any intellectual or emotional connection to her husband made her deeply unhappy. Even though she understood very well that marriage protected her from financial concerns and secured for her a solid social position, she began to consider filing for divorce. What she possibly did not anticipate was that freeing herself from this failed relationship would take many years, would cost her a fortune in high legal expenses, and would expose her to considerable social censure.

Marta, one of Orzeszkowa’s early works, is certainly a novel of its times as well as an indirect reflection of the author’s life. She chose her protagonist carefully from the ranks of the landed gentry. She understood this class well and knew that many, like herself, were struggling at this difficult time in Polish national and social history. In 1795, almost eighty years before Orzeszkowa published her novel, Poland ceased to exist as an independent country and was partitioned by and absorbed into the three neighboring empires: Russia, Prussia, and Austria.⁶ Yet Polish patriots, many of whom hailed from the landed gentry, never accepted the status quo. They continued to fight for the country’s independence militarily through armed uprisings as well as culturally through numerous efforts to preserve Polish national identity when language and culture were threatened by the anti-Polish policies of the occupying powers. Orzeszkowa herself became actively involved in the tragic January Uprising of 1863/64 that erupted in the Russian-controlled territory of Poland.

The mid-nineteenth-century political crisis in the Russian empire rekindled Polish hopes for regaining independence. Polish patriots organized numerous clandestine networks in the Russian-controlled Congress

Kingdom of Poland (1815–67)⁷ with its capital in Warsaw. The sole purpose of such organizations was to fight for freedom and liberate Poland from foreign domination. Beginning in 1860, a series of patriotic street demonstrations erupted in Warsaw and continued into the following year, when in February marchers were attacked and shot at by Russian troops. The funerals of the five fatally shot demonstrators became a spark for further patriotic actions. The Russian-appointed governor of the Congress Kingdom, concerned about the volatility of the situation, planned to preempt any organized Polish insurrection by announcing conscription to the tsarist army. Such forced military service would cripple the conspirators by removing all able-bodied Polish young men from their ranks. This decision achieved the opposite effect, forcing Polish underground organizations to call Poles to arms and announce on January 22, 1863, the commencement of a Polish armed uprising against Russia.

For more than a year and a half, Polish insurrectionists fought the Russian army.⁸ Unfortunately, even with the support of their compatriots from the other two partitions as well as help from Polish émigrés abroad, they were not able to construct a regular Polish army and defeat the Russians. Polish volunteer forces were outnumbered approximately two to one by the regular Russian army. The January Uprising was a valiant patriotic effort that mobilized the entire society, as both men and women of all classes bore arms. The Jewish population also joined in this military effort. In addition, the revolutionaries were supported by an even larger number of Poles in noncombatant roles who helped by supplying food and clothing for the soldiers, caring for the wounded, and burying the dead. Unfortunately, in the end Polish volunteer forces succumbed to the regular Russian army. In addition to the casualties incurred during the heroic but often hopeless battles, the Russian reprisals after the defeat of the uprising further devastated the country and exposed its population to redoubled Russification efforts. This led many Poles to reconsider the value of armed resistance in the existing geopolitical situation and to shift their goals. Rebuilding Poland's economy, strengthening its social structures, and preserving Polish culture became their premier objectives.

In her memoirs published posthumously in book form as *O sobie* (About myself, 1970), Orzeszkowa considered the effects of the trauma of the failed January Uprising on her and her generation. She described herself as a twenty-year-old witness to a national and social catastrophe:

I saw houses, which until recently brimmed with energy and activity, become swept clean of all signs of life as if during some deadly medieval plague. Deep in the woods, I saw mass graves hiding corpses of young men with whom I had so recently danced. I saw gallows, fear in the faces of the condemned . . . and the long lines of shackled prisoners on their way to Siberian exile being followed by their despairing families.⁹

Orzeszkowa understood very well that this national tragedy shook Polish social structure as well as gender balance. Thousands of women—wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and fiancées of the fallen or imprisoned heroes whose estates were confiscated by the occupying government—were reduced to poverty and left without means of support. The women, who had been trained exclusively for the domestic sphere, suddenly found themselves forced to seek employment for which they were sadly unprepared. In Orzeszkowa's novel, even though Marta loses her husband to an illness and not to the armed struggle, she shares the fate of these desperate genteel women whom she encounters in employment agencies and in garment sweatshops.

The immediate aftermath of the January Uprising marked also a personal turning point for Orzeszkowa and contributed to the development of her writing career. She invested heavily in this patriotic enterprise of Polish independence. She served the military cause by taking up the important and very dangerous job of a courier responsible for securing lines of communication between different clandestine cells. Understandably, after the failure of the uprising, her despair at the scope of the national tragedy and the realization of the hopelessness of the political situation led her to reassess her own life and mission in society. Even though she was spared punitive measures for her active participation in the uprising, her husband was sentenced to exile to a penal colony in Siberia. In a rash decision that she would regret for the rest of her life, she refused to follow him into exile and would eventually divorce him. She did not love Piotr, and as she explained later, she did not know then that she should have sacrificed her own happiness in order to support the man who suffered for Poland.

With her husband in exile, Orzeszkowa quickly learned about financial difficulties. The expensive and lengthy divorce proceedings cost her the estate she inherited from her parents. Even the personal happiness she dreamt of appeared elusive. Her romantic relationship with Dr. Zbigniew Świącicki became impossible due to social pressure. Such a complicated personal life increased her sensitivity to the situation of single women in a society that

neither respected nor provided a safety net for them. Likewise, she gained awareness of the constraints placed specifically on women of her social class and learned of the price women paid for breaking social rules and taboos. She, like her protagonist Marta, desired to work in order to support herself. She wrote in her memoirs that she dreamt of becoming a teacher or possibly a telegraph operator in Warsaw, the capital of Poland then under Russian occupation. Her fluency in several languages qualified her for a job at the telegraph office, yet her application was rejected because she was Polish. She recorded in her memoir, “After I returned home, every memory of this humiliation caused me to shake with anger. How was it possible that in Warsaw, we Polish women had no right to work.”¹⁰ She explained that at the time her attempts to find employment were not particularly rooted in the emancipation ideology, but instead were necessitated by economic reality. As a divorced woman without a steady income from a landed estate, she needed to work just to survive.

The ideological awareness came a little later, especially after the publication of *Marta*, when the reaction of her female readers made her realize that she had hit a nerve. The fictional situation of her protagonist was a reality for thousands of Polish genteel women, whose lives had been changed by the loss of estates due to punitive confiscation or poor management in the changing economy and who suddenly found themselves, like Marta, needing to earn a living. Orzeszkowa wrote,

For the first time I began receiving letters from women who were strangers, belonged to different social circles, were of different ages and talents, but they were all thanking me for this book and asking me for practical advice. Many readers told me that they reacted emotionally to this novel and became extremely fearful about their own future. Many began to seek education and work.¹¹

Orzeszkowa’s novel about a young Polish widow resonated with many women all across Europe. Shortly after its publication, *Marta* was translated into several languages including Russian, German, Czech, Swedish, Dutch, and even Esperanto.¹²

Eliza Orzeszkowa selected the city of Warsaw¹³ as the setting of her novel probably as a response to the social changes she observed, and especially to the growth of middle-class culture. She knew the city from the time she attended boarding school there. However, since the school was run by a women’s religious order exclusively for the daughters of the landed

gentry, students probably had limited opportunities to explore the entire city and very few occasions to interact with its inhabitants. Yet it was in Warsaw that Orzeszkowa solidified her devotion to Polish freedom and her involvement with the issues of social justice. The early 1860s marked significant political, social, and economic upheaval in Warsaw and in the entire Congress Kingdom, which became completely absorbed into the Russian empire after the failure of the January Uprising. Norman Davies argues that changes including population growth, urbanization, and industrialization in parts of the Russian partition were stimulated by the decree issued by the Tsar in 1864 granting emancipation to Polish peasants. Now free of serfdom and for the first time owners of the land they worked on, peasants became more prosperous, increased in number, and started migrating to urban centers, mainly to Warsaw, or abroad in search of employment, thus fueling the growth of the urban working class. In addition, because of the elimination of tariffs, “the products of Polish industry could penetrate the vast Russian market.”¹⁴ Warsaw grew in population and became a fairly important center of industry, and even though it could not compete with the economies of the Polish western cities under Prussian rule, Davies contends that the progress achieved by Polish urban economies far surpassed the development of Ukraine and central Russia.¹⁵ This modest progress notwithstanding, the Polish population remained generally resentful of the foreign rule.

Like many fiction writers of her time, Eliza Orzeszkowa saw herself as both a student of the society and its mentor. It is not surprising, then, that in *Marta* she brings her protagonist into contact with several distinct strata of Polish society while at the same time Marta’s own social standing undergoes an important evolution. Like Orzeszkowa, she is born into the landed gentry. But both of them, Marta through her marriage and Orzeszkowa through her divorce, migrate to the Polish intelligentsia, an educated class for the most part descended from the gentry. However, while Orzeszkowa’s literary talent and the commercial success of her novels kept her well positioned within the intelligentsia, Marta eventually descends into the working class only to end up among the destitute. In her search for employment and in her daily struggles to survive, Marta’s encounters might point to the author’s sympathies and preferences. While the young woman meets many kind and generous representatives of her own class, the intelligentsia, and receives some support from a few sympathetic working-class characters, Orzeszkowa focuses her social critique on the bourgeoisie, represented in

the novel by the rapacious, and even cruel, owners of the garment shops and workrooms. Marta never interacts with any representatives of the Russian occupying forces, and readers might be hard pressed to realize that Warsaw at the time was not a free capital of a free country. It is possible that this was a deliberate decision on Orzeszkowa's part not only because of her single-minded focus on women's issues but also in an attempt to ensure the novel's open and legal circulation without any interference from Russian censors.

In general, Orzeszkowa pays very little attention to the uniqueness of her novel's setting. The city exists as a vague background to her protagonist's lonely struggle for survival. The reader's perception of urban spaces becomes limited to Marta's unhappy experiences. When the city is not mediated by her husband, it takes on a menacing quality. Its ever-present disquieting din intensifies Marta's yearning for the past by bringing back her memories of the idyllic childhood on her father's country estate and the blissful and carefree years of her marriage. At present, the streets of Warsaw seem to Marta at best indifferent, if not openly hostile. They are populated by servants, landlords, shop owners, sweatshop operators, shop assistants, artisans, men-about-town, intellectuals, and even high-class prostitutes who both individually and collectively fail Marta. To authenticate her novel's setting, Orzeszkowa names a few well-known Warsaw streets and some churches, but she takes care not to turn Marta's story into an exotic and uniquely Warsovian or even Polish plot. In this novel of purpose, Orzeszkowa's primary focus is to illuminate women's economic and sexual vulnerability and the failure of society to allow women equal participation in the economy.

Eliza Orzeszkowa introduces her protagonist at Marta's most vulnerable moment, soon after her husband's funeral, when she must move out of her comfortable upper-middle-class home to a substandard lodging in a poor neighborhood, and when she comes to a realization of her complete financial ruin. She is destitute. This young woman who must support both herself and her small daughter has absolutely no assets left after her husband's illness and death, she has no living relatives or friends who could offer help, and her father's estate has been lost to bankruptcy. Orzeszkowa uses this initial situation to highlight several social issues that stem from women's disempowerment. As a woman of her class, Marta has not been educated but rather has been groomed to fulfill the role of a wife and mother and thus perpetuate the patriarchal power structure. Her search for

employment reveals her total lack of any marketable skills and qualifications. Even though she is a natural artist and an intuitive writer, her skills were never developed through rigorous education. She can speak French, but not very well; she can draw, but not very well; and she can write, but not very well. She is not able to compete in a tight job market because she has not been prepared for an eventuality of not achieving her success through, as Perkins Gilman put it, “a small gold ring.” Even though she meets many kind individuals who are willing to provide charity, nobody can offer practical solutions to her situation because the problem is not unique to Marta but systemic.

Marta’s job search teaches her also about gender and class discrimination, social norms that women cannot transgress with impunity, prejudice against working mothers, the lack of good-quality child care, abominable working conditions and worker exploitation in sweatshops, cruelty in relationships with other women, and the double standard. She learns about the victimization of women by sexual predators who prey on the weak and vulnerable and shirk their responsibility for destroyed lives. She is shocked to realize that a young man will be admired for having numerous affairs or even keeping an expensive mistress, but a young woman’s reputation will be irreparably damaged by nothing more than being seen engaged in a conversation with a man in a public space.

Through Marta’s story and a detailed analysis of her changing emotional states and responses, Eliza Orzeszkowa traces a young woman’s journey of self-discovery from her carefree childlike persona controlled by her father and later her husband to independent, responsible adulthood. It is also a process that allows Marta to move beyond self and develop social consciousness. At first, she understands failure exclusively in personal terms—if only she had gained the skills required, she could have kept the job. But facing repeated disappointments leads her to recognize the restrictive power of social norms placed on women, especially on women of her class. Through this heart-wrenching process, Marta, originally so clearly identified with the upper classes of Polish society, begins to appreciate and understand the suffering of the economically dispossessed. She rages against the society that prevents her and many other women from fulfilling their sacred responsibility to themselves as well as to their children, from realizing their dreams of a fulfilled life and motherhood, and even from sustaining physical survival. How much more powerful this realization is than the

awakening Edna Pontellier experiences in Kate Chopin's feminist novel *The Awakening* (1899).¹⁶ After all, Edna's journey of self-discovery, no matter how emotionally draining, is not hindered by the real existential issues that Marta faces. Edna, who is financially secure, whose children are cared for by a dotting grandmother, and whose friends offer her emotional support, has the luxury to focus exclusively on her own psychological growth. Marta, a single and isolated mother, must find a job and earn a living to save her seriously ill child, for whom she cannot provide nutritious food, medicine, or even a warm bed. Orzeszkowa's message is driven home over and over again: Marta succeeds in gaining psychological and social maturity, but society destroys her. The tragic resolution of the novel suggests that Orzeszkowa cannot identify a safe social space for this changed Marta. She appears to pose too much of a threat to the patriarchal status quo.

During her lifetime, Eliza Orzeszkowa was a popular writer and a contender for the Nobel Prize in literature, and her literary legacy earned her a prominent place in the history of Polish literature. Together with such writers as Aleksander Świętochowski, Maria Konopnicka, and Bolesław Prus, she represents the Polish Positivist movement. Tracing their ideological roots back to the philosophy of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, Positivists asserted that by the mid-nineteenth century, the world entered a period of systematic and continuous growth evidenced by numerous scientific discoveries grounded in experiment and reason. They perceived societies as living organisms to be described and analyzed using the language of natural sciences. In Poland, such theories fell on fertile ground after yet another failure of armed struggle, the January Uprising, to regain independence. The Polish intellectual elite, the intelligentsia, found Positivist ideas very attractive as they justified the rejection of military actions in favor of refocusing attention on rebuilding Polish society and ensuring that cultural connections persisted in the nation split among three separate foreign empires. Positivists set their goal on organic work that involved using only legal means to achieve the cultural and economic growth of Polish society.

Positivist ideals permeate Orzeszkowa's literary output. In addition to women's issues, Eliza Orzeszkowa focused on social improvement, education, and promoting self-fulfillment through hard work. Her interest in problems of her times led her to study the Jewish minority and resulted in two novels, *Eli Makower* (1875) and *Meir Ezofowicz* (1878). *Meir Ezofowicz* is especially interesting. Its title character, a young and sensitive Jew,

rebels against his narrow-minded community. Undoubtedly, her greatest literary achievement was the publication in 1888 of her masterpiece *Nad Niemnem* (*On the Banks of the Niemen*), a beautifully written family novel that outlined Orzeszkowa's Positivist social plans. The novel's heroine, a young but impoverished genteel woman, has the courage to break social barriers by marrying an uneducated yet naturally intelligent and patriotic farmer. Through this marriage, she will bring education and progress to the whole village community, thus building a strong Polish society, which will be ready for independence when the time comes. Published almost twenty-five years after the disastrous end of the January Uprising in 1864, this novel suggests ways of coming to terms with a national tragedy of such magnitude.

In her personal life, Eliza Orzeszkowa continued to search for love and happiness, with mixed results. After being rebuffed by a much younger man for whom she formed a decidedly one-sided attachment, she finally found fulfillment in a relationship with Stanisław Nahorski, a well-known lawyer. Yet even this relationship was not without heartache. Nahorski was already married when he met Orzeszkowa, and he was unwilling to divorce his seriously ill wife. Orzeszkowa and Nahorski married only after his wife's death. He was sixty-eight and she was fifty-three. Orzeszkowa continued writing and lecturing on social issues until her death in 1910. She devoted her entire life to the work for public good.¹⁷

Taking up a novel of social reform written almost 150 years ago, in a far-away country and in very different sociopolitical circumstances, we might be tempted to dismiss it as a quaint historical document replete with nineteenth-century melodrama. Yet the typical melodramatic tropes—the unambiguously drawn conflict between good and evil set on the stage of a “modern metropolis”;¹⁸ the effusive expressions of feelings; and the presence of stock characters who may not have deep “psychological complexity,”¹⁹ such as wealthy villains and beleaguered heroines whose virtue is constantly tested—should not to be discounted altogether. As argued eloquently by Kelleter and Mayer, “the melodramatic mode has always lent itself to stories of power struggles and to enactments of socio-cultural processes of marginalization and stratification.”²⁰ Thus, it is hardly surprising that in *Marta*, Eliza Orzeszkowa successfully links the realistic with the melodramatic²¹ and employs this strategy to critique patriarchal power relations that marginalize women. She does not allow us to easily file away

her ideas and concerns. While reading *Marta*, we are repeatedly struck by the author's approach to women's issues, which is decidedly contemporary—so much so, that we still struggle with many issues she outlined so long ago: the inequality in earnings between men and women, the lack of affordable child care, the educational difficulties that girls face in many countries, and the existence of the glass ceiling women still have not managed to shatter. Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Marta* still has a message for us and still calls us to action.

Notes

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), 71.

2. Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Marta*, transl. Anna Gąsienica Byrcyn and Stephanie Kraft, intro. by Grażyna J. Kozaczka (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), 000.

3. Edmund Jankowski, *Eliza Orzeszkowa* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1964), 150–51.

4. Now in Belarus.

5. Eliza Orzeszkowa, *O sobie* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1974), 43–44. All translations from Polish-language publications are provided by the author of this introduction.

6. Poland regained independence in 1918.

7. The date of the dissolution of the Congress Kingdom of Poland has been disputed.

8. The tragedy of the January Uprising was captured by the Polish painter Artur Grottger (1837–1867) in a series of nine black-and-white drawings titled “Polonia.” These illustrations are housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, Hungary, and can be easily viewed online (http://www.pinakoteka.zaszcianek.pl/Grottger/Grottger_Pol.htm).

9. Orzeszkowa, *O sobie*, 102.

10. *Ibid.*, 107.

11. *Ibid.*, 110.

12. Jankowski, 154.

13. Ignacy Aleksander Gierymski (1850–1901), also known as Aleksander Gierymski, a Polish artist of the late nineteenth century, painted contemporary urban views of Warsaw.

14. Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 170.

15. *Ibid.*, 171.

16. Both Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" can be useful companion texts to *Marta*, as all three illuminate powerful social forces restricting a woman's ability to construct an autonomous and fulfilled self. Each uses different narrative techniques to achieve a similar goal and to reach a strikingly similar conclusion. Perkins Gilman in her book *Women in Economics* suggests some solutions to the problem of women's economic disempowerment that could also provide interesting material for a comparison with Orzeszkowa's proposed solutions.

17. Further information about Orzeszkowa's life and work can be found in Józef Bachórz, introduction to Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1996); Grażyna Borkowska, *Pożytywisci i inni* (Warsaw: PWN, 1996); Grażyna Borkowska, *Alienated Women: A Study on Polish Women's Fiction, 1845–1918*, transl. Ursula Phillips (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001); Jan Detko, *Orzeszkowa wobec tradycji narodowo-wyzwolenczych* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1965).

18. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 13.

19. *Ibid.*, 16.

20. Frank Kelleter and Ruth Mayer, "The Melodramatic Mode Revisited: An Introduction," in *Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood*, ed. Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah, and Ruth Mayer (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 9.

21. More information about the connections between realism and melodrama can be found in Neil Hultgren, *Melodramatic Imperial Writing: From the Sepoy Rebellion to Cecil Rhodes* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

Questions for Further Discussion and Writing

1. What social, political, and familial forces shape Marta's character and life? Are they responsible for her tragic end?
2. How do some of the novel's episodic female characters manage to subvert male power and achieve substantial financial success? What do they sacrifice in pursuit of their success?
3. Orzeszkowa's *Marta* illustrates the oppressive power of patriarchy that is detrimental to a healthy development of all members of society. How does the author present the system of power relations between men and women and the disempowerment of women? What attitudes toward patriarchal oppression do her female characters represent?

4. Marta has a very keen moral sense, and the necessity to transgress her moral code causes her great anguish. What is the source of Marta's moral code, given that Orzeszkowa does not characterize her as a religious person?
5. Is Marta's tragic fate at the end of the novel a predictable and logical outcome of her story? What is the root cause of Marta's tragedy, and could it have been averted?
6. In her search for employment, Marta meets several kind men and women who attempt to help her, yet each time their efforts are in vain. Why? What prevents them from solving Marta's problem?
7. Marta's childhood friend Karolina uses men to secure a comfortable lifestyle for herself. What is Marta's view of such an arrangement, and does she pass a moral judgment on Karolina? What does the novel suggest about the sexual vulnerability of women?
8. What are Orzeszkowa's views on motherhood?
9. Orzeszkowa's passion for her topic influenced her narrative technique. She repeatedly interrupts the flow of her narrative by including authorial commentary and analysis. Does this technique still appeal to contemporary readers?
10. How does Orzeszkowa connect gender and class as two powerful forces oppressing Polish women in the late nineteenth century? Was this a specifically Polish intersection of oppression or a broader problem highlighted in other literatures?
11. What does Orzeszkowa's *Marta* contribute to the feminist conversation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?
12. Some literary critics analyze the tragic outcomes of such feminist texts as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in terms of the character's personal triumph. Could the ending of Orzeszkowa's *Marta* be described as Marta's victory? Why or why not?

Marta

A woman's life is an eternal burning flame of love, some people say.

A woman's life is renunciation, others claim.

A woman's life is motherhood, cry those who take that view.

A woman's life is pleasure and amusement, still others joke.

A woman's chief virtue is blind trust, all agree, speaking in chorus.

Women believe blindly, love, devote themselves to others, raise children, amuse themselves . . . hence they live up to everything the world demands of them. Yet the world looks at them awry and responds to them now and then with reproaches or admonitions:

"Things are not well with you!"

The more knowing, intelligent, or unhappy women look inside themselves or at the world around them and repeat:

"Things are not well with us!"

For every ill there must be a remedy. Some see it in one thing and some in another, but no prescription cures the sickness.

Not long ago, one of the most justly respected writers in our country (Mr. Zachariasiewicz in his novel *Albina*) stated publicly that women are morally and physically ill because there is a lack of great love among them (for men, naturally).

Heavens! What a great injustice!

May the rosy god Eros fly to our aid and affirm that our entire life is nothing more than incense burned incessantly in his honor!

Since we were knee-high, we have heard that our destiny is to love one of these lords of creation. As young girls we dream of this lord and master every evening when the moon shines or the stars twinkle; and every morning when snowy lilies open their fragrant goblets to the sun, we dream and sigh.

We sigh until the moment when we are free to turn, like lilies to the sun, toward the one who, in our imaginations, emerges from the misty morning clouds or the flood of moonlight as the figure of Adonis sleeping in secrecy. Then . . . what then? Adonis steps down from the clouds, he becomes a man,

we exchange rings with him and we marry. This is also an act of love, although the author mentioned above, in his nonetheless beautiful novels, insists that it is always and unalterably a mere act of calculation.

We do not entirely agree with him. It may be an act of calculation in exceptional circles and circumstances, but it is most commonly an act of love. What kind of love? This is a different and very delicate matter requiring much discussion, but it is enough to say that when we go to the altar, veiling our diffident faces in white muslin and coils of tulle, the charming Eros flies before us, brandishing a torch with rosy flames above our heads.

And then? What then? We love again . . . if not the lord of creation who revealed himself in a dream to a young girl and put a wedding ring on a virgin's finger, then a different one, and if we do not love anyone, then we long to love. We dry up, we develop consumption, we become termagants because of our desire to love.

And what comes of all that? Some of us indeed fly through our whole lives enfolded in the wings of the god of love, honest, virtuous, and happy. But others more numerous, by far more numerous, walk on earth with bleeding feet, struggling for bread, peace, and virtue, weeping copiously, suffering greatly, sinning sorely, falling into the abyss of shame, dying from hunger.

The remedy embodied in the word "l o v e," then, does not cure all illnesses.

It may be that one more ingredient should be added for the remedy to be effective.

What ingredient?

Perhaps a page from a woman's life will tell.



On a beautiful autumn day not many years ago, Graniczna Street, a lively street in Warsaw, was filled with people. They were walking and riding, hurrying as business or pleasure dictated, without glancing to the left or to the right—without paying any attention at all to what was happening in one of the adjacent courtyards.

The courtyard was clean and quite large, surrounded by high brick buildings on all four sides. The building farthest from the street was the smallest, yet its large windows and wide entrance, set off by a handsome

porch, suggested that the dwelling inside was comfortable and attractively decorated.

A young woman with a very pale face, dressed in mourning, stood on the porch. She was not wringing her hands, but they dangled helplessly, as if she were profoundly sad and distressed. A four-year-old girl, equally pale and also in mourning, clung to them.

Over the wide, clean stairs leading from the upper floor of the building, people in heavy clothes and heavy, dusty shoes descended continuously. They were porters carrying furnishings from a residence that was not large and elegant, but had been pleasant and tastefully appointed. There were mahogany beds, couches and armchairs covered in crimson woolen damask, graceful wardrobes and chests, even several consoles inlaid with marble, a few large mirrors, two enormous oleander trees in pots, and a datura on whose branches a few white blossoms still hung like chalices. The porters carried all these things down the stairs, passing the woman on the porch. They arranged them on the pavement of the courtyard, placed them on two wagons standing near the gate, or carried them out to the street.

The woman stood motionless, glancing at every piece of furniture that was being taken from her. It was clear that the objects she was leaving behind had not only material value for her; she was parting with them as with the still-visible signs of the vanished and irretrievable past, the mute witnesses of lost happiness. The pale, dark-eyed child pulled harder at her mother's dress.

"Mama!" she whispered. "Look! Papa's desk!"

The porters carried a large, masculine desk down the stairs and put it on a wagon. It was handsomely carved, adorned with a gallery back, and covered in green cloth. The woman in mourning looked at it for a long time and the child pointed to it with a thin finger.

"Mama!" whispered the girl. "Do you see that big black stain on Papa's desk? I remember how it got there. Papa was sitting in front of the desk holding me on his knees, and you, Mama, came in and wanted to take me away from him. He laughed and did not hand me to you. I was playing and spilled the ink. Papa was not angry. He was good. He was never angry at me or at you . . ."

The child whispered these words with her little face hidden in the folds of her mother's mourning dress and her tiny body huddling up to the woman's knees. It was evident that memories were exerting their

power over her childish heart, wrenching it with pain of which she was not fully aware.

Two large tears fell from the woman's eyes, which had been dry until now; her child's words had evoked the memory of a moment once lost among millions of similar everyday moments. Now she smiled at the unhappy child—smiled with a mixture of delight and bitterness at the thought of that lost paradise. It may even have occurred to her that the freedom and joy of that moment were being paid for today with the last bites of bread that were left for her and her child, and would be paid for tomorrow with hunger; the ink stain that had appeared amid the laughter of the child and the kisses of her parents would lower the value of the desk by more than a dozen zlotys.

After the desk, a Krall piano appeared in the courtyard, but the woman in mourning looked at it indifferently. Probably she was not a musician, and the instrument awakened the fewest regrets and memories. But when a small mahogany bed with a colorful yarn quilt was taken out of the house and put on a wagon, her eyes were riveted to it, and the child burst into tears.

"My bed, Mama!" she cried. "Those people are taking my bed and the coverlet you made for me! I do not want them to take it! Mama, take my bed and my coverlet back from them!"

The woman's only reply was to press the head of the crying child more firmly to her knees. Her beautiful black, deep-set eyes were dry again and her pale, delicate lips were pursed and silent.

The child's pretty bed was the last piece of furniture to be taken out. The gate was open wide; the wagons filled with furniture were driven out into the pleasant street, followed by porters carrying the remaining items on their shoulders. Behind the windows of the neighboring houses, the heads of people who had been looking curiously at the courtyard vanished.

A young woman in a coat and hat came down the stairs and stood in front of the person in mourning.

"Madam," she said, "I have taken care of everything. I paid those who were supposed to be paid. Here is the rest of the money." And she handed the woman a small roll of banknotes.

The woman slowly turned her head toward her.

"Thank you, Zofia," she said quietly. "You have been very good to me."

"Madame, you were always good to me!" the girl cried. "I have worked for you for four years and no place was ever better, or ever will be better, than with you."

She rubbed her wet eyes with a hand on which the marks of the needle and the iron were visible, but the woman seized her rough hand and pressed it firmly between her own small white ones.

“And now, Zofia,” she said, “be well.”

“Madame, I will go with you to the new apartment,” the girl exclaimed. “I will call a cab.”

A quarter of an hour later the two women and the child got out of the cab in front of a building on Piwna Street. The four-story tenement was narrow in front, but tall. It looked old and sad. Little Jasia stared at its walls and windows with wide eyes.

“Mama, will we live here?”

“Here, my child,” the woman in mourning replied in a voice that was always quiet. She turned to the concierge who was standing in the gateway.

“Please give me the key to the apartment that I rented two days ago.”

“Ah! In the attic, surely,” the concierge replied. “Please follow me upstairs, madame. I will open it right away.”

The small, square courtyard was surrounded by a blind wall of brick red on two sides and, on the other two, by old woodsheds and granaries. The women and the child went into the building and started up the narrow, dark, dirty stairs. The younger woman took the child in her arms and went ahead; the woman in mourning followed her.

The room whose door the concierge opened was quite large, but low and dark, and poorly lit by one small window that opened onto the roof. The walls, which smelled of dampness from a fresh covering of whitewash, seemed to contract under the slanted ceiling.

In the corner next to the simple brick cooking stove was a small hearth. Across the room a wardrobe of modest size stood in front of one wall. There was a bed without a frame, a couch covered with torn calico, and a table painted black. There were several yellow chairs with sagging rush seats that were partly ripped away.

The woman in mourning stopped for a moment on the threshold, surveyed the room with a long, slow glance, then took a few steps forward and sank down on the couch. The child stood still and pale next to her mother and gazed around with surprise and fear in her eyes.

The younger woman dismissed the driver, who had brought two small leather bags from the carriage. She bustled about, taking things out of the bags and arranging them. There were not many things, and it took only a short time

to put them in order. Without taking off her coat and hat, she put a few very small dresses and some underclothing in one of the bags, then moved the other one, which was empty, to the corner of the room. She made the bed with two pillows and a woolen coverlet and hung a white curtain in the window. She put several plates and cups, a clay water pitcher and a large bowl, a brass candleholder and a small samovar into a cupboard. Then she took a bundle of wood from behind the stove and made a cheerful fire in the fireplace.

“Ah, yes,” she said, rising from her knees and turning her face, which was rosy from blowing on the fire, to the motionless woman. “I have made the fire and you will soon have warmth and light in here. Behind the stove you will find enough wood for about two weeks. The dresses and underclothes are in the bag. The kitchen crockery and dining dishes are in the cupboard, and a candle in a holder is there as well.”

The honest servant forced herself to speak cheerfully, but the smile was vanishing from her lips and her eyes were filling with tears.

“And now”—she said more quietly, folding her hands—“and now, my dear lady, I must go!”

The woman in mourning lifted her head.

“You must go, Zofia,” she repeated. “Indeed you must.” Glancing through the window, she added, “It is growing dark. You will be afraid to walk through the city at night.”

“Oh, no, my dear lady!” the girl exclaimed. “I would walk to the end of the world in the darkest night for you. But my new employers leave Warsaw very early in the morning, and they have ordered me to return before nightfall. I have to go because they will need me this evening.”

With those words the young servant bent down, took the woman’s pale hand and would have raised it to her lips. But the woman suddenly rose and threw both her arms around the girl’s neck. They wept. The child also burst into tears and seized the servant’s linen coat.

“Do not go, Zofia!” she wailed. “Do not go! It is so horrible here! It is so dreary!”

The girl kissed her former employer’s hands and pressed the child to her bosom.

“I must go. I must!” she repeated, sobbing. “My mother is poor and I have little sisters. I have to work for them . . .”

The woman in mourning raised her white face and held her thin figure erect.

“Zofia, I will also work,” she said in a more assured voice than before. “I have a child and I should work for her.”

“May God not abandon you, and may He bless you, my dear, kind lady!” the servant girl cried, once again kissing the hands of the mother and the tearful face of the child. She ran out of the room without looking back.

After the girl’s departure, a deep silence filled the room. It was interrupted only by the crackling of the fire and the dull, indistinct street noise that reached the attic. The woman in mourning sat on the couch. The child cried at first, then nestled quietly on the mother’s bosom and fell asleep. The woman rested her head on her hand; her arm embraced the tiny figure sleeping on her knees and her eyes stared unswervingly at the flickering firelight.

Now that her faithful, devoted servant was gone, she would not see again the face of the last human being who had been a witness to her past—the last support that had remained for her after the disappearance of everything that had helped and sustained her. Now she was alone, subject to the power of fate and the hardships of a lonely destiny, dependent on the strength of her own hands and brain. Her only companion was this small, weak being who found rest on no bosom but hers, demanded kisses from her lips, and expected nourishment from her hand. Her house, which her loving husband had once provided for her and which she had now been forced to abandon, was welcoming new residents within its walls. The kind, beloved man who had surrounded her with love and prosperity was resting in his grave.

Everything had passed: love, prosperity, peace, the joy of life. The only traces of this unhappy woman’s past, now vanishing like a dream, were her painful memories and this pale, thin child who now opened her eyes after a short sleep, threw her arms around the woman’s neck and, touching her face with her little lips, whispered:

“Mama! Give me something to eat!”

Her request did not yet arouse fear or sadness in the mother’s heart. The widow reached into her pocket and took out a purse containing several banknotes—the only fortune left to her and her daughter. She threw a shawl around her shoulders, told the child to wait calmly for her return, and left the room.

Halfway down the stairs she met the concierge, who was carrying a bundle of wood to one of the apartments on the second floor.

“Dear sir,” the widow said politely and timidly, “could you bring some milk and rolls for my child from a nearby shop?”

The concierge listened without stopping, then turned his head and replied with barely concealed unwillingness:

“And who has the time now to go for milk and rolls? It’s not my job here to bring food to the tenants.”

He vanished behind the curve of the wall. The widow made her way down the stairs.

“He did not want to help me,” she thought, “because he thinks I am poor. He was carrying a heavy load of wood to those he expected to pay him for it.”

She went to the courtyard and glanced around.

“And why is madame looking around?” someone said in a hoarse, unpleasant voice very near her.

The widow saw a woman standing before a low door near the gate. She could not recognize her in the darkness. A short skirt, a large linen cap, and a thick scarf thrown askew on her back, together with the sound of her voice and the tone of her speech, showed that she was a woman from the countryside. The widow guessed that she was the concierge’s wife.

“My good lady,” she said, “will I find anyone here who would bring me milk and rolls?”

The woman thought for a moment.

“Which floor do you live on?” she asked. “Somehow I do not know you.”

“I moved to the attic today.”

“To the attic! Then why is my ladybird babbling about bringing her something? Can you not go to town yourself?”

“I would pay someone for the trouble,” whispered the widow, but the concierge’s wife did not hear, or pretended not to. She wrapped her scarf more snugly around her and vanished behind the small door.

The widow stood motionless for a moment, not knowing what to do or whom to turn to. She sighed and let her hands fall helplessly. After a while, however, she raised her head, approached the gateway, and opened the wicket leading to the street.

It was not late evening yet, but it was quite dark. The narrow thoroughfare, filled with crowds of people, was poorly lit by a few streetlamps. Wide spaces on the sidewalks lay in total darkness.

A wave of chilly autumn wind blew into the gateway through the open wicket, flying into the widow’s face and rippling the ends of her black shawl.

The rumble of carriages and the clamor of mingled conversations deafened her; the shadows filling the sidewalks frightened her. She took a few steps back in through the gate and stood there for a while with her head down.

Suddenly she stood up straight and walked forward. Perhaps she remembered her child, who was waiting for the food; perhaps she was conscious that she must now muster her will and courage to obtain what previously had been freely available to her every day and hour. She threw her scarf over her head and walked through the gate. She did not know which direction to take to find a grocer's shop. She walked a long way, looking carefully at window displays; she passed a few cigar stores, a café, and a fabric store, and then turned back, not daring to go further or ask for information.

She turned and went in a different direction. After a quarter of an hour she returned, carrying several rolls in a white handkerchief. She brought no milk, for there was none at the store where she found the rolls. She did not want to go on searching; she could not look for a shop any longer. She was worried about her child. She returned quickly, almost running. She was a few steps from the gate when she heard a man's voice behind her, singing a song:

"Stop, wait, my dear—from where have you marched on your pretty little feet?"

She tried to convince herself that he was not singing to her. She walked faster and her hand was on the gate when the singing changed to speaking:

"Where are you going so quickly? Where to? The evening is so lovely! Perhaps we could go for a stroll!"

Breathless and shaking with fear and indignation, the young widow darted through the gate and slammed the wicket behind her. A few minutes later Jasia saw her entering the room. She ran toward her and nestled in her embrace.

"You did not return for so long, Mama!" she cried. Suddenly she went quiet and looked at her mother. "Mama," she said, "you are crying again, and you look the way you looked when they carried Papa out of our house in the coffin."

Indeed the young woman was trembling all over, and large tears were running down her flushed cheeks. She was shaken deeply by her fifteen-minute excursion into town—by her struggle with her own fear, her rapid walk over slippery streets amid crowds and cold winds, and, above all, the insult of being accosted by an unknown man for the first time in her life.

But she evidently made up her mind to overcome her feelings, for she quickly calmed down, wiped away her tears, and kissed the child. As she stirred up the fire, she said:

“I have brought you some rolls, Jasia, and now I will set out the samovar and make some tea.”

She took the clay pitcher from the cabinet and, ordering the child to be careful of the fire, went down to the well in the courtyard. Soon she returned, breathless and exhausted, with one arm bent from the weight of the pitcher filled with water. But without resting even for a moment, she began to set out the samovar.

She was doing this for the first time in her life, and with difficulty. In less than an hour, however, the tea was drunk and Jasia was undressed and asleep. Her quiet, even breathing showed that she was sleeping peacefully. The traces of tears shed abundantly all day had vanished from her pale little face.

But the young mother did not sleep. She sat in front of the fading fire in her mourning dress, still as a statue, her hair falling in loose black braids. She was resting her head on her hand, thinking.

At first, her white forehead was wrinkled deeply with pain. Her eyes were filled with tears and her chest rose with a heavy sigh. After a while, however, she shook her head as if to push away the sorrows and fears that had overwhelmed her. She rose, stood erect, and said quietly:

“A new life!”

Indeed, this woman, young, beautiful, with white hands and a slender waist, was entering a new life. For her this day was the beginning of a future as yet unknown.

What had her past been like?

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Marta Świcka’s past had been short because of her age and simple because it was uneventful.

Marta was born in a manor house that was neither splendid nor very affluent, but charming and comfortable.

Her father’s estate a few miles from Warsaw comprised several hundred acres of fertile land, large, flowery meadows, a lovely birch grove that furnished wood for the winter and space for romantic strolls during the

summer, a large orchard full of fruit trees, and an attractive house with six front windows looking out on a circular lawn. It had cheerful-looking green blinds and a porch with lavender morning glories and beans with scarlet blossoms entwined around its four columns.

Nightingales sang over Marta's cradle, and old lindens waved with dignified gravity. Roses blossomed and ripening wheat formed waves of gold. The lovely face of her mother leaned over her, and her little head, with its black hair, was covered with kisses.

Marta's mother was a beautiful, kind woman and her father was a good man with a fine education. She grew up as an only child among loving, doting people.

The first pain that darkened the cloudless life of the beautiful, cheerful, blooming girl was the loss of her mother. Marta was sixteen years old at that time. She despaired for a while; she yearned for her mother for a long time; but youth placed a healing balm on her heart's first wound, her face regained its rosy color, and joy, hope, and dreams returned.

But other calamities soon followed. Marta's father, partly because of his own imprudence but mainly owing to economic changes that had taken place in the country, found himself in danger of losing his estate. His health weakened; he saw that he was facing both the collapse of his fortune and the rapid approach of death. At that moment, however, Marta's future seemed to be secure: she loved and was loved.

Jan Świcki, a young official occupying a high position in a government office in Warsaw, fell in love with the beautiful dark-eyed girl, and awakened in her similar feelings of respect and love. Marta's wedding took place only a few weeks before her father's death. The ruined aristocrat, who perhaps once dreamed of a grander future for his only daughter, joyfully placed her hand in that of a man with no fortune but with a capacity for hard work. He died peacefully, believing that at the altar Marta's future had been thoroughly safeguarded from the unhappiness of a lonely life and the danger of poverty.

For the second time in her life Marta experienced great pain. But this time it was assuaged not only by her youth but by her affection for her husband and, in time, their child. Her beautiful family estate had been lost forever and passed into the hands of strangers, but her beloved and loving husband created a soft, warm, comfortable nest amid the hubbub of the city. In this home soon sounded the silvery voice of a child.

Five years passed happily and quickly for the young woman amid the comforts and duties of family life.

Jan Świcki was a conscientious, capable worker. He received a good salary, sufficient to surround the wife he loved with everything she had been accustomed to from her childhood, everything that lent charm to every moment and peace to each new day. To each? No, only to the next. Jan Świcki did not have the foresight to think of the distant future at the expense of the present.

Young, strong, hard-working, he counted on his youth, strength, and industriousness, never dreaming that these riches would be depleted. But they were, and too quickly. He was taken with a sudden, serious illness from which neither his doctors' advice nor his frantic wife's efforts could save him. He died. His death not only put an end to Marta's domestic happiness but pulled from under her the base of her material welfare.

So the marriage altar did not render the young woman forever immune to the misery of loneliness and the hazards of poverty. The axiom, old as the world, which states that nothing on earth is permanent proved itself as true in her case as it ever is. For it is not completely true. Everything that comes to a person from the outside passes, changing around him under the influence of thousands of currents that become entangled as they move forward, currents in which social relationships and laws take form. All these are subject to the frequent intervention of what is the most terrible force of all, because it is unpredictable and impossible to figure into one's calculations: blind chance. Yet a man's destiny in this world would indeed be regrettable if all his strength, his inner riches and his truth resided only in those external elements, which are mutable and fleeting as waves governed by wind.

Indeed, there is nothing permanent on earth besides what a man possesses in his heart and head: knowledge that shows him his paths and how to walk in them, work that brightens solitude and keeps poverty at bay, experience that tutors him, and elevated feelings that shelter him from evil. This permanence is only relative; it is broken by the sullen, unyielding power of illness and death. But as long the process of movement, thought, and feeling called life continues, and develops soundly and durably, a man does not lose himself but provides for himself, helps himself, supports himself with what he managed to accumulate in the past. It serves him as a weapon in his struggle with the complications of life, the fickleness of fate, and the cruelty of chance.

All the external forces that had befriended and sheltered Marta until now had failed her, leaving her abandoned. But her fate was not at all exceptional. Her misfortune was not caused by some bizarre adventure or astonishing disaster rare in the annals of human history. Financial ruin and death had destroyed her peace and happiness. What is more common everywhere in our society than the first? What is more inevitable, more frequent and inescapable, than the second?

Marta had found herself face to face with what happens to millions of people, millions of women. Who has not met, many times in life, people weeping by the rivers of Babylon in which the ruins of a lost fortune are floating? Who counts how many times he has seen widows' mourning clothes, pale faces, and orphans' eyes wearied with tears?

Everything that had been part of the young woman's life had been taken from her, had slipped away, but she still had herself. What could she be only for herself? What had she managed to accumulate for herself in the past? What tools of knowledge, willpower, and experience could serve her in the struggle with complicated social issues, poverty, chance, and loneliness? Among these questions lay the enigma of her future, the issue of her life and death—and not only hers, but her child's.

The young mother had no material wealth, or almost none. Her entire fortune consisted of a few hundred zlotys from the sale of her furniture after the payment of some small debts and the costs of her husband's funeral, some underlinen, and two dresses. She had never had any expensive jewelry, and what she had had she had sold during her husband's illness to pay for worthless medical advice and equally worthless medicines. Even the cheap furniture that filled her new residence did not belong to her. She had rented it together with the room in the attic, and was obliged to pay for it on the first of each month.

That was the sad, unvarnished reality of the present, but it was clearly defined. The future remained undefined. One had to take possession of it—almost to create it.

Did the young, beautiful woman with the slim waist, white hands, and silky raven hair flowing over her shapely head have the strength for conquest? Had she taken anything from her past that would enable her to create her future? She thought about this as she sat on a low wooden stool by the glowing coals in the fire. Her eyes, filled with a look of unspeakable love, were fixed on the face of her child, who was sleeping peacefully among white pillows.

“For her,” she said after a while, “for myself, for bread, peace, and a roof over our heads, I will work!”

She stood in front of the window. The night was dark. She did not see anything: neither the steep roofs bristling below the high attic with all its stairs and landings, nor the dark smoke-stained chimneys above the roofs, nor the streetlamps whose blurred light did not reach her little window. She did not even see the sky because it was covered with clouds and no star was shining. But the noise of the great city reached her ears incessantly; even the nocturnal noise was deafening, though it was muffled by distance. It was not late; on the wide, splendid boulevards as in the narrow, dark alleys, people still walked, drove, and ran about in the pursuit of pleasure or the search for profit—ran where curiosity, some desire of the heart, or the hope of gain called them.

Marta lowered her head onto her clasped hands and closed her eyes. She listened to the thousand voices merged into one enormous voice that was unclear and monotonous and yet full of feverish outbursts, sudden silences, dull shouts, and mysterious murmurs. In her imagination the great city assumed the form of a huge hive in which a multitude of human beings moved, surging with life and joining in a race. Each one had his own place for work and for rest, his own goals to reach, and his own tools to forge a way through the crowd. What sort of place for work and rest would there be for her, a woman who was poor and cast into a boundless sea of loneliness? In which direction should she proceed? Where would tools be found to pave a way for a penniless, abandoned woman?

How would those human beings treat her, those people who chatted endlessly on the streets, who exuded this feverish murmur, rising and falling like a wave, in which she immersed her hearing? Would they be just or cruel to her, compassionate or charitable? Would those tightly closed phalanxes that were crowding toward happiness and wealth open before her? Or would they shut even more tightly, so the newcomer’s arrival would not leave less room for others, would not forestall them in this strenuous race?

Which laws and customs would be favorable to her, and which would be adverse? Would there be more of the former or the latter? Above all, would she be able to overcome hostile elements and exploit friendly ones every moment, with every heartbeat, with every passing thought? Would she be able to consolidate every vibrant fiber of her being into wise,

persevering, unwearied strength, strength that would ward off poverty, preserve her dignity in the face of humiliation, and shield her from fruitless pain, despair, and starvation?

Marta's entire soul was fixed on these questions. Memories that were both delightful and agonizing, memories of a woman who had once been a carefree, radiant girl walking lightly through the fresh grass and colorful flowers of her family's country home, then spent joyful days, free of worry and sadness, at her beloved husband's side, and now stood in a widow's gown near a small window in this attic with her pale forehead lowered onto her tightly clasped hands—through all this day these memories had been swarming around her like phantoms that lured her, only to leave her torn and bleeding. Now they flew away before the stern, mysterious, but tangible reality of the present.

This reality absorbed her thoughts but did not seem to frighten her. Did she draw courage from the maternal love that filled her heart? Did she have the pride that despises fear? Or was she ignorant of the world and herself?

She was not afraid. When she lifted her face, there were traces of tears shed profusely for several days, and there was a look of sorrow and longing, but there was no fear or doubt.



The day after her move into the attic, Marta was in town at ten in the morning.

It was crucial for her to reach her destination. A burning thought, an anxious hope must have been driving her forward, because she walked quickly and slowed her steps only when she reached Długa Street. Here she walked more and more slowly, a weak blush covered her pale cheeks, and her breath came more quickly, as it usually does when an eagerly anticipated but somewhat frightening moment draws near. Such a moment demands all one's powers of thought and will, while awakening hope, timidity and—who knows?—perhaps a feeling of inadequacy when the habits of one's entire life collide with the daunting strangeness of a new situation.

She stopped in front of the gate of one of the most ostentatious town-houses and looked at the number. It was apparently a number that she remembered, because after taking a long, deep breath she began slowly to approach the wide, sunlit entrance.