

MYTHS ABOUT WOMAN IN THE SLOVENE MODERNA: MOTHER OR WHORE

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This article is concerned with images of women in the Slovene Moderna, a Slovene literary era that commenced in 1899 with publications by Oton Župančič and Ivan Cankar. The article focuses on two myths of female representation that were formed in Slovene literature and culture at the time: the divine, mystical woman and the evil, bewitching whore. Both archetypes show a crisis of identity during the Moderna as well as a complex relation to eroticism and the problems of depicting the human body in art. They reflect an uneasiness with eroticism in the strict Roman Catholic culture of Slovenia at the time, while the writers of the Moderna might be thought to have reflected the Catholic tradition of the erotic as eternal battle between spirit and the body. The erotic was the most disturbing, frustrating, and confusing topic for Slovene writers at that time.

Slovene society of this period was patriarchal, and the nascent feminist tendencies were simply directed at obtaining fundamental human rights. The picture of woman was a picture of the other, and the position of the other was problematic. It required philosophical and psychological understanding: the relation to the other and love was the search for an ideal woman, and for the one who attracts physically. That is not just a physical, erotic challenge—love had existential implications at this time. The dialogue with the woman meant suffering; it was also a source of jealousy. The idea of love was linked with that of death. The body has been associated with the feminine, the female, or woman, and denigrated as weak, immoral or decaying. A similar sensibility can be found in the painting of that period. Sensual and also symbolic types of women are found in the paintings of the Viennese secessionist artist Gustav Klimt, who was obsessed with portraits of women. The Czech secessionist painter Alfons Mucha painted several pictures of women in a special, ornamental atmosphere.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, artists were affected with a negative image of the female: woman and love lead to perdition, oscillating between good and evil, Madonna and Mary Magdalena. The Slovene Moderna developed on the background of changing popular views of the human psyche, signaled by the publication of Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (*The interpretation of dreams*, 1900). The unconscious mind was discovered and sexuality and sexual obsessions became a focus of psychoanalysis. Erotic longings were interpreted as the main demons of human existence.

Demythologizing female stereotypes requires historical and literary contextual understanding together with close readings of the texts concerned. The textual analysis in this article defines the myths in the relevant texts, wherein the problem of femininity and images of women and love operate as a central plank of their plots and themes. I shall focus on the poetry of four Slovene writers of the Moderna: Dragotin Kette (1876–99), Josip Murn Aleksandrov (1879–1901), Oton Župančič (1878–1949), and Ivan Cankar (1876–1918).

In its basic sense, a myth is a story, as Aristotle and the ancient Greeks explained. Mercea Eliade holds that myth is a recounting of the nature of the world, of the time of the beginning, connected with ceremonies and religions (Eliade 1965). Various theories of myth were developed during the twentieth century. There are two main meanings of myth: the myth as a sacred story (for example, stories from ancient and biblical mythology) and myth in the modern sense of a false representation. I take as my starting point the figurative sense and the modern understanding of the word. I see myth as a fabricated, false, and distorted picture of reality, a fictitious, idealized reality. From this perspective, woman appears to be a constructed figure that serves some function, a product of cultural ideas and an artist's value system. Myth, as such, is connected with the values, ideas, and even ideologies of writers. In his 1966 work on the omnipresence of myth, Leszek Kołakowski (1972) states that myths express a longing for permanent values and that myth, paradoxically, also means resignation and a denial of freedom because it is historically conditioned. In his opinion, myths are born, live and die like people. Similarly, in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1957) speaks about the historical conditionality of myth. According to Barthes, it is necessary to take note that myth involves the theft of language (“myth is a stolen language”) and hence deprives and deforms reality because it transforms a meaning into a form. Myth is an historical reality even though it presents a natural image of this reality. The relation that unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of deformation (Barthes 1988: 109–58).

² There are several interpretations of Cankar's *Lepa Vida*. For some cultural and philosophical aspects of the theme, see Hribar (1983), Pogačnik (1988), and Poniž (2006).

My point of analytical departure is French and Anglo-American theories in feminist literary studies of the 1960s and 1970s devoted to the myth of woman in literature. They analyze false, stereotypical depictions of women in creative writing. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, in *Le deuxième sexe* states that women are subject to myths created by men, which she demonstrates by considering the works of five different writers. Beauvoir claims that these writers posit man as transcendence, the Subject, the creative element, and woman as immanence, object, the Other, nature, and the passive element. Similarly, in her 1968 analysis of cultural stereotypes of women, Mary Ellman asserts that, in contrast to man, woman is shown to be passive, shapeless, unstable, compassionate, and connected with the material world and nature. In the context of cultural myths and the mythologizing of woman in literature, theorists find that stereotypes are usually based on binary oppositions: on the one hand, the ideal woman, as exemplified by mother or muse as an object of desire, and, on the other hand, the negative, physical woman connected with mystique and nature, as exemplified by a witch, prostitute, or femme fatale.

As the American theorist Shari L. Thurer (1994) has stated, the myth of mother has been associated mainly with the Madonna since the Middle Ages. The Romantics began to promote the cult of the mother in the service of the nation in the nineteenth century. Most Slavic nations in the nineteenth century created a strong ideology of the nation associated with the idea of Slavic patriotism, which was an indirect reflection of adverse historical conditions. According to popular ideological notions, the true, honorable, and ideal mother was also the mother of the nation. Twentieth-century writers assumed the cult of the mother of the nation from the Romantics. This myth was, of course, particularly emphasized in periods of crisis.

The Slovene Moderna began with poetry: with the publication of two anthologies in 1899—Ivan Cankar's *Erotika* (Eroticism) and Oton Župančič's *Čaša opojnosti* (The goblet of inebriation)—and ended with Cankar's death in 1918. In the period of the Slovene Moderna there was a syncretism of various currents and ideas, in particular Symbolism, Impressionism, and Decadence. The Slovene Moderna, like other Southern Slavonic literatures, was open to European literary currents and innovations, and was particularly influenced by Viennese modernism. Franc Zadravec refers to the work of the four representatives of The Slovene Moderna as "subjectivism," a term with which he tries to capture the change in the author's perspective from realistic descriptions of an external reality to the inner world, for which the writers themselves used a modern interpretation of the term soul (in love poetry the heart appears as a more-or-less identical term for soul). As in other Central European literatures, a psychological and philosophical view of mankind prevailed: the individual was of interest for his unique existential position as a complex being with a complicated

relationship to the Other and to reality. The theme of Woman and the related problem of gender came to the forefront in this poetry. Yet women were depicted antithetically: either as purely spiritual beings or as erotic objects. Frustrations were linked to the modern crisis of the subject and its relationship to the other gender; the concept of woman was, in the Slovene Moderna, still modulated by Christian morality.

The most characteristic love poet among the modernists was Dragotin Kette. He died young and his poems were published posthumously, in 1900. He was a poet who from a young age was fully aware of himself and of the other. On 27 July 1898, he wrote about this in a personal letter: “Če znamo misliti in čutiti, smo ljudje, sicer ali angeli ali hudiči” (If we can think and feel, we are people—that is angels or devils; Kette 1976, 1: 144). The obsession of his poetry is love, a fundamental category in his life. Some of his poems treat love generally, in a language redolent of folk poetry. With lightness of words, the poet conjures the figure of a woman and a girl in a rural environment, but usually she is depicted in a pub. These poems, with their conventional expression and traditional imagery, differ from his later works, where the object of desire, the specific beloved is depicted with tender expressions. The poet combines the various expressions of love and collages of amorous encounters with a philosophy of the moment: from moments of happiness to complete despair. Modern feelings of desire, unease, fleeting points in time are transferred to the object of love. The sensuous woman predominates in the mosaic of women, although love is the desire for an ideal woman. The beloved woman, “the innocent virgin,” is like the Madonna on the altar: “Okamenel sem klečal / pred oltarjem, / ki ga krasil kamenit je idol; / molil sem krasno, a hladno / obličje, molil celo kameniti prestol” (Kette 1976, 1: 89). In the most well known of his love poems, “Na trgu” (On the square), the confession of amorous desire rests on the acoustic elements in a magnificent architectonic form: “Vodice / šumé / in rosice / pršé / brez konca v broneno kotanjo; / brezdanj je / ta vir /, šepetanje, / nemir / brezkončna, kot misli so nanjo” (Kette 1976, 2: 52–53).

After separating from his beloved Angela on 18 January 1899, he wrote in a personal letter about the emptiness of his soul: “Vidiš, jaz bom poslala Zvonu par verzov, ki naj označijo mojo prazno dušo, odkar je šla Angelica z vsem ‘cokompokom’ iz nje. Kakor raztolčen klavir je: če udariš po njem, dobiš same neharmonične glasove” (You see, I am going to send [Ljubljanski] Zvon a few verses that describe the emptiness of my soul since Angelica departed it with all her baggage. It is like a battered piano: if you strike it, you get just unharmonic sounds; Kette 1976, 2: 149). His love poetry from this period is tragic; an unfulfilled longing for his beloved Angela consumes the poet, who is haunted by his past love. He has lost the person who “kindled his soul”; grief and sorrow are crystallized in the traditional form of the sonnet (“Adrija”).

In the later period of his work, the concept of love is connected with Christian imagination and morality. Sensuous love becomes sinful: "Kako žari obrazek ji / kot v dnu pekla plamén / a jaz v tem plamenu gorim / na veke pogubljen /" (Kette 1976, 2: 32). Love is a poison, woman a snake. The poet is bound to the dark side of the world and is damned for eternity. In the poem "Laokoont," ancient Greek motifs merge with Christian notions of amorous coupling as a form of destruction within the embrace of a snake. The cycle of poems "Na molu San Carlo" (On Saint Charles Pier) features a remarkable narrative by the lyrical subject about sinful love and a decadent perception of woman. The lyrical subject expresses the "solitude of the infinite void" without love, a senseless life that is lived only with memories of the past. The end of love is connected with the motif of infidelity and betrayal. From his last love, the poet turns to the present: in the fifth poem the sea changes to a metaphor of passion, from which snakes hiss as the image of a new, purely sensual passion. In this context, the sin of Eve is recalled as the beginning of all evil: "Kjer se razkošné rože / valov dotikajo, / med njimi pisane kače / nakvišku sikajo. / Lepo zaznamovane / z znamenjem križa so, / potomke one kače / iz paradiža so" (Kette 1976, 2: 87). Such love "drinks life" and destroys the poet.

Similarly, in "Adrija," a cycle of eight poems written in traditional sonnet form, amorous elation is compared to the infinite flux of the sea; his heart is the high seas: "Da srce moje, ti si širno morje!" (Kette 1976, 2: 137). In the fourth poem, the imagined woman has a mystical, antithetical face, as the poet is consumed by the "demon of negation"; woman with her physicality is demonic and hellish, a snake hanging above, the mysterious Sphinx at the Egyptian court, an angel and a demon that entices men to the abyss, cold ice and destructive fire, she is everything and nothingness: "Povej mi, kaj si? Kača li na gori, / skrivnostna sfinga na egiptškem dvori, / li angel, demon li, vodeč v propast // li mrzli led, li ogenj končujoči, / li kamen, trs se vedno zibajoči, li morda vse, li morda nič, povej!" (Kette 1976, 2: 139).

Woman is the most important theme in his poetry. First, Kette concentrates on presenting ideal love; the pictures of women are generally situated in the context of nature and rural environment. Later in his work he mostly presents sinful, poisoned love, and mythologizes the woman as a decadent object. Dialogue with the woman opens the dialogue with the dark, decadent side of reality and these pictures of her are stylistically more nuanced. The sinful woman is expressed just as a body.

Josip Murn is the most impressionistic poet among the Slovene writers of this period. His work is structured largely around moments of the lyrical subject in nature, its timeless, ecstatic merging with the surrounding space. Murn is a poet with a modern sensibility imbued with anxiety and

estrangement. The theme of nature is the absolute of his poetry, even though it also contains, albeit infrequently, love poems where a beloved woman or girl is approached in the dialogue, as in other modernist works. His passion is not yet fateful or sensual; it is more a longing for timeless love than for a particular person, as if love was still merged with the landscape and with spring, part of a collage of sounds, color and light in the awakening spring landscape of the lyrical subject.

Oton Župančič was active longer than any of the other representatives of the Moderna. Love poems and verse about women appear very often in his first two anthologies. Župančič wrote love poems throughout his life but did not publish them (Mahnič 1979: 107–12). Like Ivan Cankar, Župančič started out with a collection of erotic, decadent poems, *Čaša opojnosti* (1899). The goblet of inebriation is the goblet of amorous elation, where woman is symbolized as “roža mogota”—i.e., a mystical, magical, healing flower. “Ti skrivnostni moj cvet, ti roža mogota, / jaz sem te iskal, / mimo tebe sem šel in pogledal sem te / in sem ves vztrepetal” (Župančič 1899, 1977: 23). Župančič’s poems are mostly a dialogue with a woman and are structured around cycles with characteristic titles: “Albertina,” “Zimski žarki” (Winter rays), “Steze brez cilja” (Paths without destinations), “Seguidille,” “Bolne rože” (Sick flowers), and “Jutro” (Morning). The first cycle, “Albertina,” contains a declaration of love for a single woman. The lyrical subject places the beloved in the context of flowers, night, and dreams. Love is a symbol of the greatest passion, a mystery and a coupling of two souls; woman is a Madonna: “Ti gizada devojka Julijana! / Nocoj, nocoj me poslušaj, nocoj govori moja duša/ s teboj...” (Župančič 1899, 1977: 19). The poet focuses mainly on his soul, expressing the tenderest movements of his spirit and of fleeting moments. Here, too, the soul is a stormy sea and a wild, infinite field. Antithetical images of woman appear: on the one hand, woman is shown as a non-physical, mystical, ideal object of desire and dreams (“their souls embrace in an embrace”), on the other a physical, sensual being who mainly entices. Love is, in the anthology *Čaša opojnosti*, blasphemously connected with Christian motifs: love is the mystical rose goblet and appears as a mass in nature; the poet also encircles the girl with white lilies and puts her in the church in the middle of a mass. In the poem “Moje barke” (My boats), the poet even renounces his affiliation with Christian faith and morality and its ceremonies “in Gothic cathedrals,” which destroy humanity, and rejects the Christian notion of sin, because, as a modern individualist, he wants absolute freedom.

In his later anthologies, where the poetic expression is further perfected in a typical rhythm, the love poems are no longer as important; they are only one of various themes. The amorous couple are framed with nature and compared to birds. Nature exists as an impression or as a comparison. Sometimes nature motifs function as metaphors. Dialogue with

a woman fills the lyrical subject with unknown, modern feelings of pain and parting. The interpretation of felicitous love as a fulfillment of the principle of desire is given another dimension: the poet is an artist and woman is presented as a beautiful, sensual being, but one who does not touch the poet in his spiritual ascent (“Umetnik in ženska” [Artist and woman]). It is characteristic that this poem is written as a dialogue between a woman and a man: “... zato, glej, vedno se bojim, / da te v daljave ne zgubim, / glej, ker ne morem za teboj ...vem, sam se na skrivaj bojiš, / da svojih dalj ne izzgrešiš / in da ostaneš sam z menoj / brez svojih daljnih, tajnih zvezd...” (Župančič 1957, 2.: 16). The dialogue form between lyrical subject and a woman underlines the antithetical fact that the artist belongs to the stars—because he is connected with the distant sky—and the woman, his muse, is a terrestrial being. The superiority of the spiritual world is the poet’s superiority.

Ivan Cankar was the most prominent literary figure in Slovenia at the beginning of the twentieth century. He shaped the foundations of Slovene prose and drama. Many types of female figures appear in his works. Positive characters are mostly semi-childlike, and the physicality of women tends to be problematic precisely in his perception of the philosophy of symbolism.

Early in his career Cankar also wrote poetry that conveys a mystical and sensual perception of woman. His first collection of poems, *Erotika* (1899), caused an uproar in Slovene society due to the daring nature of the language. The reaction from the Catholic Bishop Jeglič was violent: he bought all the available copies of the entire collection and burnt them. In this collection, Cankar, more radically than any other Slovene poet, presents a dialogue with a woman in the context of the fin-de-siècle atmosphere. Precisely in this work, Cankar shows all the contours of the new picture of woman, fluctuating between the pseudo-Romantic ideal of the Madonna and the sinful Mary Magdalene.

In the first cycle of poems, “Helena,” woman is perceived mainly as an unattainable ideal, a picture that shines in the poet’s soul. The dream-like atmosphere and the many parallels with nature are characteristic of a sentimental confession. The poet’s soul, in which he presents his slightest doubts, is a raging sea of passion. In the next poem, the poet sits alone on a seat below a fairytale castle, which is a metaphor for unfulfilled love. Love exists as part of the strangely decadent atmosphere of an evening that is framed by the moon with the music of light in the darkness. There are recurring motifs of dance, music, night, visions of kisses and of a sensuous female body, along which rapture: “Samó nocoj, nocoj me ljubi, / Poljubi me enkrat samó, / da na gorečih tvojih ustnih/ nebesa meni se prično” (Cankar 1899, 1968: 10).

In the sixth poem, Cankar depicts a woman in the middle of a Catholic mass; love appears to him as the antithesis of Christian restraint, prayer and suffering, as the fire of passion. Love is now associated with a typically decadent notion of death: in the penultimate poem in this cycle, Helena lies on her death bed: “Tam zunaj noč hladná, temná, Pri nji pa luč gori svetlá; Ob postelji stojé ljudjé / Pobožno sklepajo roké / Zaspano v njen obrazek zró / In šepetajo tó in tó...” (Cankar 1968: 20).

Likewise in the next cycle “Iz lepših časov” (From better times) which is written in two brief strophic forms, as if the short form emphasizes the transience of love. This cycle is replete with sentimental confession; the poet’s former lover causes nothing but pain, the motifs of parting, jealousy and lover’s betrayal are emphasized, love is buried, the past rises from the grave: “Lepa ljubica mi je nezvesta, / V srcu mojem pa je hladna smrt” (Cankar 1968: 11). Even here love needs adornment with the typical symbols of love: flowers, white lilies, a nightingale.

The most interesting and most controversial cycle is “Dunajski večeri” (Vienna evenings), which was written during a stay in Vienna. At the forefront is passionate, sinful love and suffering, the dance of two bodies, sensuous kisses with a random lover, prostitute-sinner. This is a new type of loose woman, one that sells her body: a woman attracts a man with her physical beauty and destroys his soul. Her physicality brings pain and suffering to the poet, as he associates it with sin and even fears her. Her body is emphasized in a very real sensual picture of a woman; she is a dark beauty with dark eyes and “darkness in her heart.” The attribute of darkness characterizes a modern “Venus and Madonna” who is marked by evil and sin. The poet lets the woman speak: she also finds herself in a vacuum, shamed and full of sin. Her realm is the kingdom of sin: talk is of tired passion and lust of the lips; the woman has avid eyes and avid lips, her eye is a sharpened knife that sucks into the soul and heart. “Na obrazu trepeče, kot lunin žar / Greha, starosti nebeška krasota, / In trpljenje, brezupa zaduhla noč / Iz uvelega diha života. // In srce se mi širi, okó strmi- / kakor plašč te Madonin ovija / Veličanstvo pregrehe, propalosti kras, / Tvoje duše temna tragedije” (Cankar 1968; 59). In these poems the woman is no more than the sinful body, interpreted with metaphors, the perception of the poet is simply erotic because he presumes that her soul is lost. The prostitute, however, does not change in the myth of negative woman. That type of woman for Cankar also belongs to a social context. A loose woman in the ecstasy of the senses is also the mother of a small child and the wife of a drunkard, a woman who dreams of her mother.

In his first book of poems, Cankar mythologizes women in an ornamental, decadent atmosphere. In *Dunajski večeri*, the lyrical subject is usually attracted to a sinful woman, a woman as a female body. The love is sinful and decadent. Woman is an attractive and immoral creature, her

material body is ideal “for signification”: for cultural interpretations and metaphors.

In his next work, too, he frequently wrote about women with great understanding and sympathy. In some of his works, the narrator of his prose is female. He created two myths about the ideal woman: in 1902 he wrote the novel *Na klancu*, which constructed the myth of the ideal mother. The myth of the mother and motherhood may be taken as the dominant metaphor of European civilization, as Julie Kristeva suggests (1983). In 1910–11, Cankar wrote the drama *Lepa Vida*, in which, on the basis of a folk motif, he encoded the myth of an ideal woman who symbolizes the principle of desire:² the myth of the ideal, abstract, non-physical lover and femme fatale.³ Her physicality is in doubt, her face is childlike, and characteristically she is first seen returning from a masked dance, her figure moves in the realm of dreams. Like Župančič in his poems, Cankar in this play compares woman to a mystical, enchanting flower. On the other hand Ivan Cankar was the first who wrote openly of eroticism, even of prostitution, pedophilia, and lesbianism in the novel *Hiša Marije Pomočnice* (*The ward of Our Lady Mercy* 1904).

Conclusion

In the context of cultural myths and the mythologizing of women in literature, theorists find that myths are usually created within binary oppositions: on the one hand the ideal woman, as exemplified by the mother, a muse as an object of desire, on the other a negative, physical woman, connected with mystique and nature, as exemplified by a witch, prostitute or femme fatale. The mythologizing of women in Slovene literature was shaped mainly in the period of the Moderna, a period that began with poetry. Love as a dialogue with woman as the other became an important theme in Slovene poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The period of Moderna was a period of mythologization. The works of the four poets pictured woman in a new, controversial, and mythical way within the two value perspectives of good and evil, and within the semiotic system of the Christian religion. Mostly the love poems are a dialogue between the poet and the woman, or are just addressed to the other. The image of love and woman is put in the cultural context of a particular time and place: love is softened in the atmosphere of the night, varied with music and colors. A typical metaphor for love is the sea. The images of

³ The stereotype of the femme fatale was also characteristic for some Slovene dramatists of this time: Stanko Majcen and his drama *Kasija*, Alojz Kreiger and his drama *Školjka*.

women are very often connected with floral motifs, as in Secessionist paintings. Flowers also have a symbolic function; they suggest a metaphysical understanding of love. In their picture of woman as an object of desire, the poets still drew on the Romantic notion and emphasized the metaphysical dimension of love—particularly in the case of Ivan Cankar—in line with the philosophy of the Symbolist movement. Above all, on the one side they presented woman as an ideal, as an object of desire in the context of symbolist philosophy.

Yet love as sensual elation problematized the question of physicality. Such love still belonged to the Christian province of sinfulness, a realm of evil and damnation. Often, too, Christian motifs connected with love were reinterpreted, treated with irony, and demeaned. A woman was pictured just as a body and the body signified sin.

The myth of a negative, destructive female was also present in poetry of the Moderna. There was the picture of femme fatale, the prostitute. The motive of prostitute was not further developed in Slovene literature. On the contrary, the key figure of The Slovene Moderna, Ivan Cankar, in his later work idealized women. These positive myths about women, in particular, influenced Slovene literature more than negative ones and became very important in Slovene culture. Cultural myths wander: they move from literature to culture and vice versa. The myth of the mother and the myth of the Fair Vida as a symbol of desire moved from literature into the general consciousness of Slovene and began to live a separate life as cultural paradigms, as part of the national identity.

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POVZETEK

MITI O ŹENSKI V SLOVENSKI MODERNI: MATI ALI PROSTITUTKA

V prispevku se tematizira podoba Źenske v slovenski poeziji na začetku 20. stoletja. V obdobju moderne se je Źenska podoba mitologizirala. V poeziji je poleg motivov iz narave pomembno mesto zavzemal prav dialog z Źensko ter njena upodobitev. V okviru bipolarnih podob so slovenski pesniki oblikovali dva mita o Źenski: mit idealne Źenske (matere, muze) na eni strani in na drugi strani mit lahke Źenske (prostitutke). Avtorji I. Cankar, D.

Kette in O. Župančič so v mitologizaciji izhajali iz filozofskih idej fin de siecla, iz problematike spolov in tradicije krščanskega imaginarija. Frustrativna tema telesnosti in načini upodobitve nasprotnega spola so tudi izražali novo senzibilnost v moderni. Nova estetika ustvarjanja je izražala subjektivni pesniški prostor, poln novih čutnih podob. Pesniki so upodobljali žensko s slikarskim dojemanjem in v dekorativni maniri: vedno v stiliziranem kulturnem kontekstu ali v tipični scenografiji pokrajine.