

The Horrible Teutonic Knights

The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *The Horrible Teutonic Knights*.

In history of literature there is a term: the tendentious novel. The genre was popular in the 1860s and 70s, but later writers of the so-called Polish positivism movement (famous for raising social issues in their work) came to a conclusion that persuading the reader to their views has to be done slightly smarter than that. The tendentious novel was quite a blunt tool – the characters were either completely good or purely evil, the narrator openly favoured the former and the whole plot served only as means to prove the author's initial point.

To make the tendentious novel more palatable, some authors disguised it as a historical one – thus making room for more interesting plot. Protesting against germanisation of local population by the authorities in the Prussian Partition wouldn't have been done by referring to current events, like in *The Outpost* by Bolesław Prus; the writer could write about the past. And the historical events seemed much brighter than the dull present; historical themes also allowed introduction of adventure sub-plots that proved popular among the readers. Such assessment of the political and literary situation led Henryk Sienkiewicz to start publishing the serials of *The Knights of the Holy Cross* in 1897. The serials were published in *The Illustrated Weekly*.

The tendency of the novel is quite obvious, for it was published when the Polish state has not existed for many years already – and the story culminates with one of the largest battles in medieval Europe – the Battle of Grunwald, won on July 15th 1410 by the Polish-Lithuanian forces. The description of the battle was based on *The Annals* of Jan Długosz – certainly a reliable source, since both the father of the author and his immediate superior, bishop Zbigniew of Oleśnica, personally fought in the battle.

The military success referenced in Sienkiewicz's novel is supposed to develop the readers' patriotism. To make it more interesting for the reader, the political plot intertwines with a romantic and sensational one. That's where the author introduces most of his tendentious manipulations and propaganda. It shouldn't come as a surprise – as a historical novelist, Sienkiewicz had to step close to the proven facts; while building the fictional part, he could let his imagination loose. That's how literary theory of the time saw his role – in a historical novel, the author was supposed to use his imagination just to fill the blanks in current historical knowledge. The fact that the knowledge itself might have been biased was not taken into consideration back then.

Let's take a look at how Sienkiewicz refers to history. He describes the sides of the conflict adequately. He takes into account the fact that, despite personal union with the Kingdom of Poland, Lithuanian politics were still relatively independent. We learn about the sovereign country ruled by the Masovian Dukes of Piast dynasty. In the first chapter of the novel, he describes the Lithuanian-Teutonic conflict along with the propaganda that accompanied it (the Teutonic Knights claimed that Lithuania was only seemingly baptised, so they could christianise it themselves as they saw fit – i.e. using violence). He doesn't even omit the uncomfortable fact that duke Witold, Władysław Jagiełło's cousin, allied with the Teutonic Knights while fighting for power over Lithuania:

"You had plenty of fighting there!"



FUNDACJA
nowoczesna
Polska

"Because of Witold. The prince was with the Knights of the Cross, and every year they used to make an expedition against Lithuania, as far as Wilno."¹

We can see that duke Witold, Jagiełło's cousin, tried to ally with the Knights instead of working towards the Polish-Lithuanian alliance that is glorified in the novel. Witold did not keep his alliance. It's interesting that Witold is praised for exactly the same thing that the Teutonic Knights are criticised for throughout the novel – for breaking diplomatic promises. In the words of Macko of Bogdaniec:

„In craftiness he is unsurpassable. He is more crafty than all of them together. Those dog-brothers had him cornered once, the sword was over his head and he was about to perish, but, like a serpent, he slipped from their hands and bit them.... Be on your guard when he strikes, but be exceedingly careful when he is patting you."

"Is he so with everybody?"

"He is only so with the Knights of the Cross, but he is a kind and liberal prince with everybody else."

However, the incidents that took place before the events of the plot are omitted if they don't fit the novel's ideology. For example, the Treaty of Dawidyszki (1380) is never mentioned. In that treaty, Jagiełło ensured neutrality of the Teutonic Order when he fought for the Grand Duke of Lithuania title. Emphasising such facts would build a vastly different type of story – one of brutal and cynical politics, where everyone can ally with anyone, and all such alliances can be broken – namely, a medieval, Lithuanian *Game of Thrones*.

For Sienkiewicz, however, manipulating or omitting important historical events is out of the question. Hence, criticism of the Teutonic Knights is mostly contained to the romantic/sensational part of the plot. It all starts with giving the despised antagonists at least an appearance of a righteous motivation. A young man, Zbyszko of Bogdaniec, soon after promising Danuska peacock feathers from the Teutonic Knights' helmets (hardly achievable while the owner is still alive), attacks Kuno von Lichtenstein, an emissary to the King of Poland. So, to recap: a young knight attacks a diplomat. That wouldn't end well even today. We can see that Sienkiewicz needs a very stupid deed on the part of a Pole to set off the plot. Von Lichtenstein is admittedly a vengeful man, but he needs a reason for vengeance first. It's quite understandable that he wants Zbyszko to be sentenced to death, especially given brutality of the world painted in the novel.

Only later the brutality and senseless violence in the novel escalate dramatically. Falsification of Jurand's letter, kidnapping of Danuska, murder of de Fourcy (a foreign knight, the Order's guest, who learned about the malicious plot), luring Jurand to Szczytno, only to catch him and blind him later – all that looks like the plot of a novel about a sinister and powerful organization. If it wasn't for the medieval setting, it could have been written by Robert Ludlum.

That's not enough for Sienkiewicz, though. In the novel, the Knights of the Holy Cross are accused of satanism, no less. And not just once, either. The accusation is worded plainly when Arnold, who is

1 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Knights of the Cross, or, Krzyzacy: Historical Romance*, translated by Samuel A. Binion, available on Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9473>. Unless stated otherwise, all quotes in this text come from this translation.

held captive by the knights of Bogdaniec, recalls rumors about the Teutonic Order colluding with the devil. At one point in the novel, the Teutonic Knights have the following conversation:

“In the name of the Spirit of Light, this is a bad night,” remarked the old Teuton.
“A night of unclean powers,” answered Rotgier. “But why, instead of In the name of God, you say “In the name of the Spirit of Light”?”
“The Spirit of Light is God” said the old man.²

Despite the beautiful name, the Spirit of Light is most probably Lucifer – his name means “the one who brings light” in Latin. At another point in the novel, a squire called Hlawa mentions dead Rotgier acting like a vampire – but the story is not first-hand, so it’s not as convincing as the previous two mentions.

You can’t build a positive example on just badmouthing the antagonist, though. More importantly, defeating a villain who is just evil, cowardly and cunning is not exactly an impressive feat. But the novel climaxes with winning the battle of Grunwald. It evens out the historical injustices and lets the personal vengeance be fulfilled, when Macko of Bogdaniec duels Kuno von Lichtenstein and kills him. Thus, while Sienkiewicz heavily criticises the Order, for faults both real and imaginary (such as the previously mentioned satanism, which seems to be a stray fire aimed at the notorious Templar Order), he never suggests a lack of military skill or courage on their part. The most exalted passages of the novel are the deaths of Teutonic Knights at Grunwald. A general description sounds like this:

The Germans were cut down like a forest – and they died silent, solemn, great, fearless.³

We also have a close-up (if you allow a bit of cinematic vocabulary) on Arnold von Baden’s mad attack on Zawisza Czarny. If we weigh in all the previous remarks on the military power of the Teutonic Order, we get an image of a deeply flawed, but mortally dangerous enemy.

It’s impossible, however, to build a positive image of Poland and Poles just by comparing them to the antagonist. Let’s see how the nation is described in Sienkiewicz’s novel, then. Firstly, he presents Jagiełło’s reign as a golden age in Polish history, especially when it comes to social relations:

The hatred, which during the time of King Lokietek had separated the city and the knighthood, had been very much quenched, and the burghers were prouder than in the following centuries. [...] they appreciated their readiness *_ad concessionem pecuniarum_*; therefore one would very often see in the inns, the merchants drinking with the noblemen like brothers.

The sentence above is interesting, because it’s the first of many critical remarks that appear in the novel, despite it being written to lift the national spirits. The vision of a bond between social strata is anachronistic, too – such way of describing the national consciousness appeared in 19th century. However, since Sienkiewicz promotes the national consciousness, he emphasises the role of peasant infantry in the battle of Grunwald. It fits the hypotheses of 19th century historians, but was debunked by contemporary experts.

2 Translated by Monika Grzelak

3 Translated by Monika Grzelak

The novel at numerous points focuses on the physical strength of Poles, usually contrasted with the luxurious western civilisation. When Zbyszko duels Rotgier, a certain commentary appears:

The western knights were already accustomed to comforts and luxuries, while the landowners in Little Poland and Great Poland, as also in Mazowsze, led a rigorous and hardy life, wherefore they awoke admiration by their bodily strength and endurance of all hardships, whether constant or occasional, even among strangers and foes.

We can also find a lot of senseless violence in the novel. We already mentioned, what the author made Zbyszko of Bogdaniec do to start off the plot. He reacts in such manner several times. At the beginning of the novel, Macko of Bogdaniec proudly describes an incident when Zbyszko, feeling insulted by a foreigner, tore off his mustache. Later, Macko stops Zbyszko from killing a Teutonic captive. However, as time passes, Zbyszko learns to tame his temper by respecting the chivalric code. That's the basic moral code in the novel. The Teutonic knights are not evil because they plunder and kill; all the characters in the novel do – or want to do – that. The Knights of the Holy Cross are the villains, because they don't obey the medieval rules of honourable killing.

Everyone who has read *The Knights of the Holy Cross* knows that the book is full of violence. Let's see who was harmed the worst in the novel. Was it Jurand of Spychów, who was blinded or Danuska, lead to madness? I would pick someone else: a Teutonic knight, brother Marquand von Salzbach – the one Jurand was threatened with. In the novel, he tortured Grand Duke Witold's children and was a potential "caretaker" of kidnapped Danuska.

The historical facts are more complicated, though. Can you still remember the alliance between Grand Duke Witold and the Teutonic Knights? Even in the Middle Ages diplomacy was not done single-handedly – you needed trustworthy personnel. That's where brother Marquand comes into the picture. He was held captive at first, but then he became an advisor to Grand Duke Witold between 1384 and 1389. Later, their relationship was quite complicated: at one point, von Salzbach lead a Teutonic military campaign against Samogithia, at another – he assisted Witold in an attack against the Tatars. He even saved Witold's life after a lost battle of Worskla (1399).

Later, during another Samogithia uprising and peace negotiations in Raciąż, they started arguing. The whole story ended quite dramatically. Marquand took part in the battle of Grunwald, he was captured and tried by Witold. He sentenced Marquand to death by beheading, on the pretext of insulting his late wife, Biruta. The real reason for the execution was probably different – brother Marquand knew too much about the affairs between Witold and the Teutonic Order.



The podcast was produced as a part of the “Listen everywhere” project of The Modern Poland Foundation. The recording is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0. license; that means it can be legally played, downloaded, shared or quoted for free. All podcasts are available on our website: wolnelektury.pl.

The podcasts were co-funded by the Polish History Museum, as part of the “Patriotism of Tomorrow” programme. The media partners of the project are: Bookeriada, eLib.pl, Nie czytasz? Nie idę z Tobą do łóżka!, Lubimyczytac.pl, Link to Poland, culture.pl, Koalicja Otwartej Edukacji, Artifex, Galeria przy automacie, Wydawnictwa Drugie, Radio Pryzmat, Radio Wolna Kultura.

Written by Paweł Koziół, translated by Monika Grzelak, directed by Borys Kozielski, read by Jarosław Kozielski.