

The Wedding – Secrets Unleashed

The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *The Wedding – Secrets Unleashed*.

There are a lot of symbolic interpretations of *The Wedding*. We are taught in school to try to decipher what the golden horn means or what is the secret of the Straw-man. It's only in the first act where we learn about the city vs. countryside conflict: we're shown all the comical misunderstandings among the guests of the peasant-intelligentsia wedding. We're taught about the peasant-mania phenomenon – intelligentsia's fascination with peasant vitality, picturesque village customs and traditional, close-to-nature way of life. Allegedly because of peasant-mania, Lucjan Rydel, depicted in the play as the Groom, stopped wearing underwear and boasted about it in elegant Cracovian society. In today's terms he would be labelled an exhibitionist. However, all such spicy details are treated as somewhat unimportant, which is indirectly encouraged by the stage directions. The Groom, the Host or Rachela are described as "personae", so they are only involved in personal stories. The Straw-man, Stańczyk (jester at the court of the last rulers of Jagiellonian dynasty) or Wernyhora (a legendary Cossack bard) are "dramatis personae" - the characters in the actual play. No wonder it comes so natural to focus the interpretative effort on them only.

It's impossible to deny the symbolic nature of *The Wedding*, of course. The play is, however, deeply rooted in reality. We would do it a disservice by treating it as just a riddle to be solved. It needs to be demystified – but not by getting rid of the mysteries and treating the drama as a comedy of manners, since it's not what Wyspiański wrote. Let's focus on the fact that mysterious and macabre elements exist on the same plane as the realistic ones. Let's systematically prove that *The Wedding* is one of the first and the best Polish horror stories.

A horror needs a good starting point. The theatrical form makes it impossible to use the simplest tools: presenting a story as memories of an unreliable person: a child or a madman; adopting an epistolary form, where a helpless recipient learns that horrible, unbelievable things happen to their friend far away, like in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; the author can't even mesmerise the reader with a sombre description of an abandoned house or a night in a forest. There is just one tool left for the playwright, but it's quite impressive: the author can show how the paranormal phenomena slowly, but relentlessly enter our reality. For that manoeuvre to work, the reader needs to believe in the reality described.

The Wedding meets that requirement all too well. If it was published today, the author would get sued for defamation multiple times. In March 1901, quite a few people in Cracow got spectacularly offended with the play. Helena Rydlowa, the Groom's mother, self-funded posters inviting for the play, on which she changed the names of characters in the play to something less obviously associated with real people¹. Despite all that, everyone knew that the Host is Włodzimierz Tetmajer, the Poet is his brother, Kazimierz, and Nose, the consistent drunkard, bears much similarity to the painter Tadeusz Noskowski, as well as the guru of Cracovian bohemians, Stanisław Przybyszewski. All this information can be found in *The Gossip on the Wedding* by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński; he wrote there: "the relationship with reality in *The Wedding* is different than usual: the anecdote is not just a starting point, it's the key creative material".

¹ http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,9266129,16_marca_1901_r__Tylko_bez_nazwisk_.html

What are the other similarities between *The Wedding* and a horror story? A good work of that genre often leaves two viable interpretations of the plot: realistic and paranormal. The longer the story can keep up that uncertainty, the higher the tension. In Polański's *Rosemary's Baby*, it's only in the last scene that we can exclude the realistic interpretation, i.e. the main character's madness. The double interpretation principle is introduced in *The Wedding*, in a different, but a very Polish, manner. Namely, the phantoms appearing during the wedding can be realistically interpreted as drunk hallucinations.

That would also explain why the visions fit the characters so closely. Each person sees something resonating with their soul, or something they deserve. To emphasise that effect, most visions are preceded by specific dialogue between characters or indicated in stage design.

It is generally a good practice to start analysing a theatre play by looking at stage design directions. They often contain information that will become important as the plot plays out. Just as the old theatre saying goes, a pistol hung on the wall in act one has to go off by the end of act three. The *Wedding's* stage directions also mention weapons:

Simple white wooden chairs around the table; a desk covered with papers in the room; A photograph of *Wernyhora* and a lithograph of *Raławice* by Matejko above the desk. In the background, by the wall – a dull-coloured sofa; crossed sabres, rifles, travel belts, a leather suitcase above the sofa. In the other corner – a white stove, fitting the room; by the stove – Empire-style table, with shiny, chipped bronze elements; an old clock on the table: alabaster columns hold a gold-plated face of the clock; above the clock: a portrait of a beautiful lady in a dark 1840-style dress, with a muslin veil by her young face with curly hair.

By the wedding door: a large, ornate peasant chest, painted in garish flowers and gaudy ornaments – already worn-down and faded.

We can already see *Wernyhora*, the legendary Ukrainian lyrist, who will appear to the Host, and Matejko's *Raławice*, which signals the anachronistic vision of a peasant uprising armed with scythes, as if infantry weapons didn't change between 1794 and 1900. Matejko's paintings inspired even more phantoms. Boy-Żeleński wrote: "To really comprehend the imagery of those phantoms: Stańczyk, Branicki, especially *Wernyhora*, you need to understand that Cracow was the area of Matejko's work, the city breathed in the spirit of the great painter".

There is also quite a lot of sociological information encoded in the interior design: a difficult symbiosis of bourgeois (a desk covered with papers, Empire-style table) and peasant furniture (the painted chest). All it takes now is to get those elements and combine them into a play.

A standard horror is a ghost story. Dear listeners, forget about the symbols for a moment and believe in the literal sense of the play. A ghost is a ghost, a phantom is a phantom, a vampire is a vampire, *Wernyhora's* horse really spits sparks, a bowl of blood is not just a prop. After all, Wyspiański wasn't just a writer, he was also a painter with quite a macabre imagination. Do you know the stained-glass windows he designed for Wawel cathedral? They depicted decomposing corpses of kings, and relatively realistic ones at that. The year Wyspiański was born (1869), the grave of Casimir the Great was opened and in 1890 the remains of Adam Mickiewicz were moved to the Wawel crypt. So, when the Poet – Kazimierz Tetmajer, who was at the time writing a poem about *Zawisza Czarny* – sees the Knight, and after he raises his visor he sees: "void, ash – night", the reader should imagine either an

empty armour, or an armour with a rotting body inside. The reader should realise that our character just made a pact with a corpse.

Summoning spirits is a dangerous task, especially if you do it wrong. The characters in *The Wedding* are certainly sensitive people: poets, painters, Rachela – a model reader of atmospheric symbolist poetry. However, nothing in the text suggests that they would possess any esoteric knowledge. They rather seem to be dangerously reckless. Rachela and the Poet summon the Straw-man, who later introduces a procession of phantoms to the wedding, in a decidedly incorrect manner: they're drunk and joking around, not really believing in the ritual they're performing.

POET

Oh, the groom! - you, the groom!
Listen, you're a poet
And you're getting wed today!

GROOM

I am happy; to this inn
I'd invite the whole wide world:
I'm so glad, I'm so glad.

POET

Then invite the Straw-man here;
One who hides in orchard there

GROOM

Ha ha ha – ha ha ha;
Come, you Straw-man
To the wedding,
I invite you, me, the groom,
To the wedding,
To the inn!

BRIDE

There is food and drink for all,
Come inside to play with us!

Summoned in such an incorrect way, Straw-man becomes a crippled phantom. He's the only one who can't properly communicate with the living. He's not even able to answer coherently, as exemplified by his last words to a small girl who expels him from the room:

ISIA

Get out, you cripple!

STRAW-MAN

You who called me,
What d'you want?...

ISIA

You straw deadbeat,
Out, you cripple!

STRAW-MAN

I put on what I could find,
Your dad put the cloth on me,

From that fragment we can see that the magic the characters of *The Wedding* are confronted with is somehow broken. As the play goes on, the wedding guests face the consequences of that. The final disaster doesn't just result from the fact that the characters are not mature enough for the moment demanding serious action; it's also an effect of a badly cast spell. Nobody knows how to control the powers they conjured. The weakness of certain characters afterwards is a direct consequence of that. Thus, the Groom is right when he generally describes this failure:

we reach out our hands in vain
to phantoms – yes, they're phantoms,
and my wits just all went dull,
'cause I tucked them in already
to sleep – in eerie forest.

Another interesting characteristic of *The Wedding* is its tendency to concentrate on the big picture, relying on reader's knowledge of historic events. It doesn't deal as much with history itself, as with its representation, the collective memory. It also shows how much such memory is fragmented. The Groom, who marries a peasant, recalls the Galician Slaughter of 1846: "my grandfather – cut with saw... We forgot it all [...] we dress up in peacock feathers". It gives peasant-mania, mocked so much by Wyspiański, a certain solemnity: in a way, it serves as a vessel of historical forgiveness. The author, however, signals the fact that the Groom is not free of class prejudice – he sees a phantom of hetman Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, a traitor, who took part in the notorious Targowica Confederation (1792) that summoned Russian army to overturn the 3rd of May Constitution. This uncomfortable ancestor shouts in the Groom's face: "You latched onto a serf girl!". If individual memory can refer to such contradictory traditions, how much more complicated does it have to be for national collective memory?

Let's go back to the Straw-man for a bit. Professor Ewa Miodońska-Brookes said that the character was doomed since the moment he entered the house. A straw-man is a straw contraption put around a rose plant, so that it doesn't freeze. If the Straw-man is in the house, there are two options: either the rose is left outside freezing, or the rose is still inside the Straw-man – pulled out of the ground or cut; anyway – dying. It dies literally – as the flower – first, but then also as a symbol of resurrection, mentioned in Rachel's too optimistic words:

won't get cold from sharpest freeze,
if the roses can be smelled;
will get wrapped in straw of crops,
in the spring will get unbound

– back to blossom.

Horror stories often describe mysteries of the past. That's the first point where *The Wedding* outgrows the genre characteristics. The mystery is not a crime against an individual or some other personal misfortune, but the existence of a nation dispossessed of its state. Presenting this fact as macabre is not Wyspiański's invention, of course – it was done first by the romanticist poets, such as Adam Mickiewicz. *The Wedding* rediscovers not only the metaphor itself, but also all the revulsion and – less obviously – fascination with macabre. The Poet, at the beginning of his conversation with the Knight, says the following about Poland:

The dead one claims her own.
With clamour, rumble, vertigo
she comes back to us;
Violence released from grave's gates,
I hear her call...

Those words make it obvious, what material the symbols of *The Wedding* are made of.

Why would we even try a risky interpretative strategy of reading *The Wedding* as a horror? The reasoning can be found in the subject matter of the play – it deals with Polish fears. It's difficult to be afraid of abstract interpretations, however sophisticated they might be. What is the function of that fear here? What is it warning us against? The spirits of patriotism have to be summoned wisely. Wyspiański knows that this task needs to be done – he does it himself in many of his works. However, the final scene of *The Wedding*, the circle dance with the Straw-man, shows us that a nation that does it immaturely, can only go round in circles.

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