

## *Bad habits of crime fiction characters – detectives and intoxicants*

### *Zgubne nawyki bohaterów literatury kryminalnej – detektywi a używki*

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#### **Keywords**

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#### **Słowa kluczowe**

literatura kryminalna, detektyw, powieść detektywistyczna, literatura współczesna, literatura polska

#### **Abstact**

The main aim of the present article is an attempt to determine a function of intoxicants in contemporary Polish crime fiction. On the basis of the selected book series by Katarzyna Bonda, Katarzyna Puzyńska, Marek Krajewski and Remigiusz Mróz, the author considers the importance of stimulants to outline the social background of the novel, to solve the puzzle, and for the creation of the characters and the narrative world.

#### **Abstrakt**

Nadrzędnym celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba określenia funkcji, jaką pełnią używki we współczesnej polskiej literaturze kryminalnej. W oparciu o wybrane cykle powieściowe autorstwa Katarzyny Bondy, Katarzyny Puzyńskiej, Marka Krajewskiego i Remigiusza Mroza, autorka rozpatruje znaczenie używek dla nakreślenia tła społecznego powieści, rozwikłania zagadki kryminalnej oraz kreacji bohaterów i świata przedstawionego.

### Bad habits of crime fiction characters – detectives and intoxicants

Lists of the bestselling books, the data from the annual report of the Polish Book Institute<sup>1</sup> and literary events programs leave no doubt as to the fact that the contemporary crime fiction has gained an increasingly growing popularity. Consequently, the genre in question has been dynamically developing, which results in new themes, non-standards solutions, varied plot twists, and well-drawn characters who are significantly different from the detectives present in the novels written by Poe, Christie and Conan-Doyle. However, it does not mean that the modern authors reject the classic motifs, which can be illustrated by an example of intoxicants discussed in the present article.

The association between the crime fiction and various kinds of stimulants has a long tradition dating back to the beginnings of the genre, more specifically to the 1840s<sup>2</sup>. For the aficionados of the detective novels, the image of Sherlock Holmes smoking his inseparable pipe is as familiar as the one of policemen constantly surrounded by the cigarette fumes or celebrating the successful completion of the investigation with some alcoholic beverages. However, despite the constant presence of various intoxicants in crime fiction, it is hard not to get an impression that in novels contemporarily appearing on the market, the role of stimulants more and more often goes beyond portraying the elements characteristic for a particular character or functioning as a detail which does not play a greater role for the story plot.

Aiming at the analysis of the role intoxicants play in the contemporary crime fiction, it is worth spotlighting on the changes occurring within the genre itself. Modern crime novels significantly differ from the classic detective novels, which Agatha Christie or Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle were famous for. The evolution of crime fiction covers a wide spectrum of transformations, but one of the most noticeable of them is the approach to the criminal mystery itself. In classic detective stories, the puzzle was in the centre of attention. It also functioned as a kind of an intellectual game with the reader<sup>3</sup>, where the win was to get the answer to the question “who killed?”. In the present form of the crime novel it is hard to find identical plot moves.

<sup>1</sup> The Polish Book Institute publishes annual reports dedicated to the book market in Poland; the first of the reports concerned the year 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allan Poe published in 1841 is considered to be the first detective story; see: W. J. Burszta & M. Czubaj, *Krwawa setka. 100 najważniejszych powieści kryminalnych*, Warsaw 2007, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of reading a crime novel as a kind of a strategic game is presented in detail in the following position: M. Kraska, *Prosta sztuka zabijania*, Gdansk 2013.

Of course, crime fiction would not be crime fiction without a puzzle that involves the reader in reading the story and provides entertainment for the brain, which is crucial for the lovers of the genre in question. Nevertheless, it can be observed that in the contemporary crime novels the mystery is not in the spotlight any more. Today's readers expect to know not only the identity of the murderer but also the motivations behind committing the crime. Therefore, the question "why?" often plays more important role than the question "who?". The modern form of the crime novel has an extensive socio-moral layer and the plot includes numerous non-criminal threads<sup>4</sup>. The authors create full-blooded characters with a deepened psychological profile. The protagonists are realistic and imperfect. They face uneasy life situations, such as – for example – marital crises, traumatic past, keeping shady secrets etc. The characters' creation of that kind has a direct impact on the above-mentioned themes remaining – often seemingly – without a close relationship with the puzzle. Moreover, the criminal intrigue is often a pretext to address the socially important issues, including domestic violence, ethnic discrimination or a polemics over the historical events<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the multitude of changes, in the genre in question, there are numerous constant components, such as – for instance – the presence of stimulants. M. Kraska describes the relationship between crime fiction and intoxicants in the following way:

it is a representation of the characteristic plate/film, the topical moment or the stereotype of the main protagonist [...] Attachment to drinking is today a permanent element of detective iconography, a component of the genre code characteristic also for other types of detective stories<sup>6</sup>.

Analysing the above words, it can be stated that intoxicants are a constant element of crime fiction and their position in this genre remains unwavering. However, taking into account evolution within the genre itself, as well as the

<sup>4</sup> J. Z. Lichański, *Współczesna powieść kryminalna: powieść sensacyjna czy powieść społeczno-obyczajowa? Próba opisu zjawiska (i ewolucji gatunku)*, [in:] *Literatura kryminalna. Śledztwo w sprawie gatunków*, (ed.) A. Gemra, Cracow 2014, p. 26–32.

<sup>5</sup> Domestic violence motif appears in *Gniew* by Zygmunt Miłoszewski and *Dom czwarty* by Katarzyna Puzyńska. The polemics with history and the motif of ethnic conflicts can be found in *Okularnik* by Katarzyna Bonda – the author uses the authentic story of the Orthodox population slaughter in the Zaleszany village by Romuald Rajs ("Bury"), one of the cursed soldiers, from 1946.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kraska, *op. cit.*, p.109–110.

changes occurring in society<sup>7</sup> and, consequently, also in readers<sup>8</sup>, it is worth examining how stimulants function in the latest crime fiction.

For the purposes of this article, I used novel series written by the following Polish authors: Katarzyna Bonda, Katarzyna Puzyńska, Marek Krajewski and Remigiusz Mroz<sup>9</sup>. All titles in the given series were released between the years 2010 and 2017. The analysis of the selected novels shows that nowadays, intoxicants play an important role in creating as well as authenticating socio-moral layer of the novels. It can be seen both in the details of the narrative world and in the characters' creation.

Stimulants often appear in crime novels as seemingly insignificant elements of the background. Nevertheless, in many cases their presence, even if subtle, carries more information than it might seem. The conversation between the protagonists of the novel by R. Mroz, Joanna Chyłka and Kordian Oryński, is an example of this kind of situation:

He pulled out his cigarettes, but Chyłka immediately protested, raising her hand.

– You are not allowed to smoke here.

– But you're smoking!

– Because I smoke Marlboro, and you pop up with some shit<sup>10</sup>.

In the above passage we deal with a relationship of power expressed in an indirect way. Chyłka is the promotor of Oryński's legal training. She is the one who dictates terms, which is perfectly illustrated by a seemingly trivial example of the cigarettes. Chyłka smokes Marlboro and believes that Davidoff – the brand preferred by her legal apprentice – cannot ever compare to it. The cigarette brand functions in this context as a means to indicate a place in the hierarchy.

When it comes to authenticating the world presented with stimulants, it can be done in a variety of ways. One of them is the attention to details of tobacco, coffee, drugs or drinks popular at a given time, in the location of

<sup>7</sup> V. Wróblewska, *Gatunkowy synkretyzm czy eklektyzm? O nowej formule polskiego kryminału po 1989 roku*, [in:] *Literatura kryminalna. Śledztwo w sprawie gatunków*, (ed.) A. Gemra, Cracow 2014, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> M. Czubałaj, *Etnolog w Mieście Grzechu. Powieść kryminalna jako świadectwo antropologiczne*, Gdansk, 2010, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Considering the fact that some of the mentioned authors have written more than one series of criminal novels, I clarify which of them have been analyzed: Katarzyna Bonda – the series with a criminal profiler Sasza Załuska, Katarzyna Puzyńska – the Lipowo village, Marek Krajewski – the series with Eberhard Mock and Edward Popielski, Zygmunt Szacki – the cycle with a prosecutor Teodor Szacki, Remigiusz Mróz – the cycle with a lawyer Joanna Chyłka.

<sup>10</sup> R. Mróz, *Kasacja*, Poznan 2015, p. 24.

the novel. It is worth paying attention to the fact that the development of the socio-moral layer of the work, typical of the latest crime novels, often force the authors to scrupulously prepare themselves before starting to write novels, for example, in terms of historical facts. M. Krajewski, a popular author of retro detective stories, came to perfection in recreating the details of the interwar Lviv, as evidenced by the following fragment of *Głowa Minotaura*:

Popielski slumped into a chair. Mock took out a cigarette, lit it and handed it to the commissar. Professor Kasprzak was spluttering in the bathtub. Mock wiped sweat from his forehead. It's about time we drank vodka, don't you think? – he gasped [...] They knocked on their glasses, swallowed Baczewski's caraway vodka with pleasure; Mock noshed a Rolmop, Popielski some pâté with blueberries<sup>11</sup>.

The action of the novel takes place in 1937 in Lviv. In the above-described scene, the readers' attention may be drawn to Baczewski's caraway vodka, commonly drunk during the interwar period in those territories. It may seem to be something trivial, nevertheless, Krajewski – using such details – makes the historical background of his novels credible. In the presented extract, one can also notice the theme of stimulants functioning as an inseparable element of the celebration. Eberhard Mock and Edward Popielski obtained information that allowed them to move their investigation in a new direction. This is a great opportunity to celebrate, hence Mock offers his companion alcohol consumption, to which Popielski acquiesce so they both enjoy the feast.

Intoxicants accompany crime fiction heroes and heroines not only in the joyful moments, but also when the problems, helplessness and difficult emotions make them want to escape from the everyday life. State of being under the influence of alcohol is desirable for numerous crime fiction characters, including Joanna Chyłka, Daniel Podgórski and Eberhard Mock, as it gives them relief from painful reality. The attorney is overwhelmed by a sense of failure, the guardian of the law from Lipowo by problems in his personal life, while the policeman from Krajewski's book series<sup>12</sup> by chronic nightmares:

Mock ran up to his father, touched his hand and said:

– Let's move out of here. I am bothered by nightmares in this place. From the very beginning, when we inherited this flat after the death of my uncle Eduard, I've been haunted by hallucinations, from the very first night in this lousy butcher shop... That's why I drink, do you understand me, father? When I am as fool as a boot, I stop dreaming<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> M. Krajewski, *Głowa Minotaura*, Warszawa 2012, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Joanna Chyłka – the cycle by R. Mróz, Daniel Podgórski – the cycle by K. Puzyńska, Eberhard Mock – the cycle by M. Krajewski

<sup>13</sup> M. Krajewski, *Widma w mieście Breslau*, Cracow 2013, p. 114.

The above extract emphasizes one more function of the stimulants, namely bringing the reader closer to the characters of the novel. Those individuals – endowed with outstanding abilities of deduction, exceptional intuition and perceptiveness – become in a way more human and less “superheroic” because of the fact that they are not perfect. Each of them has some weaknesses, which can be illustrated by, for instance, their fondness for alcoholic beverages. A similar artistic move involving stimulants is used by Katarzyna Bonda. The protagonist of the author’s cycle, Sasza Załuska, is a highly-trained criminal profiler with an extremely penetrating, acute mind, a single mother and a sober alcoholic. Staying sober is not easy for the woman. The reader has an opportunity to observe her constant struggle with herself and the temptation to drink. Every time Sasza wants to escape everyday LIFE by consuming alcohol, she reminds an event from the past when her addiction contributed to the death of an innocent person:

When the bottle showed its bottom, and she did not have another one, she lost ground and was able to do anything to get another full bottle. And that’s how it happened then, in Cracow, during her last action at the Central Investigation Bureau. She went for vodka, while she should have been sitting on her ass and waiting for orders from her bosses [...] An innocent girl died because of her. Another victim exposed to a honey trap, whom she promised security herself. It all happened because she had left to bring half a litre of vodka<sup>14</sup>.

As Umberto Eco points out, popular literature – including crime fiction – “cannot be revolutionary, because otherwise it would break down the narrative model in which the reader recognizes oneself and which provides him or her with a pleasant consolation”<sup>15</sup>. Hence – although contemporary crime novel writers reach for various solutions to catch the attention of the recipients (e.g. by using cruelty in presenting crimes, moving controversial topics, touching the taboos or embedding realities which are distant to the readers in the plot) – the tendency common to the most authors associated with criminal literature is to create full-blooded characters who play a key role in constructing a socio-moral layer of a novel. Complications in the personal lives of the heroes expand the literary works with additional threads beyond crime, and thanks to the fact that the characters are not flawless, the reader can more easily identify with them<sup>16</sup>. On the one hand, we have protagonists with an amazing intuition and a number of character traits and skills that

<sup>14</sup> K. Bonda, *Pochłaniacz*, Warsaw 2015, p. 477.

<sup>15</sup> U. Eco, *Superman w literaturze masowej. Powieść popularna: między retoryką a ideologią*, Warsaw 1996, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> R. Mróz, *Rewizja*, Poznan 2016. – this part of the series ends with a scene in which Chylka – the protagonist so far known for her reliability and strength of character

seem beyond the reach of the ordinary mortals, and on the other hand – due to their weaknesses and imperfections – they are still credible. Cegielski reminds that the constitutive feature of crime fiction is a constant dialogue with reality, which is why “the plot of the novel must be credible when it comes to the details presented; protagonists and their surroundings verifiable, to some extent common and typical so that the reader can identify oneself with them”<sup>17</sup>.

Contemporary authors are aware of the power of the characters created by them<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, seemingly trivial issues, such as the fact that the literary heroes smoke the same cigarettes as we do, drink the alcohol known by us and visit the places existing in reality, are not without significance. These artistic moves are also aimed at making the characters closer to the recipients.

While determining the functions of stimulants in crime fiction, it is worth noticing that not only who but also with what and why is intoxicated. Moreover, the fact of how the given person does it matters as well. An example that illustrates the legitimacy of paying attention to such issues is the bar description from *Widma w mieście Braslau* by M. Krajewski:

Buzzy men would sit at heavy tables. They would knock with their beer mugs against wet oak tops, snap their fingers at the ober and mute each other [...] Small merchants, restaurateurs and officials would cling to the side [...] They drank less, but would release the biggest smoke bombs from their pipes<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore, stimulants can also be used to assign characters to a specific social layer. Additionally, in the case of alcohol, the company in which the liquor is consumed is of a considerable importance, as evidenced by the following dialogue between the heroes of *Pochłaniacz* written by K. Bonda:

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– almost drinks herself to death, because her psyche cannot deal both with the pressure associated with the case she is currently involved in and the heroine’s past.

<sup>17</sup> T. Cegielski, *Detektyw w krainie cudów. Powieść kryminalna i narodziny nowoczesności (1841 – 1941)*, Warsaw 2015, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Nowadays, social media give the authors a chance to have a direct contact with the readers. All authors of the novels analyzed in this article have their fanpages on Facebook. Using this medium, they share information concerning their work life (e.g. upcoming premieres, literary events etc.) as well as the private life (e.g. pictures from holiday or a list of favorite books). An interesting proof of the impact of social media is the event organized on Facebook by the fans of Katarzyna Puzyńska (i.e. “Katarzyna Puzyńska’s novels footsteps”), which was joined by the author herself. Informal initiative came wide and willingness to participate was declared by nearly 200 people.

<sup>19</sup> M. Krajewski, *Widma w mieście Breslau*, Cracow 2013, p. 126.

- Wait by the huts until I come. And get a gun. A real one.
- Where from? – Marcin hesitated. – Maybe it's better to go to the police?
- He drinks with the police, idiot – Przemek croaked<sup>20</sup>.

The above-mentioned dialogue shows the role that alcohol plays in the indirect presentation of links between characters. The sentence “He drinks with the police” tells us that the person who Marcin and Przemek talk about has a close relationship with the police and, therefore, when the boys feel threatened, he cannot be trusted. The insulting term “idiot” strengthens the message, emphasizing its kind of obviousness, i.e. “since he drinks with them, he likes them and will keep their side regardless of anything”.

Interestingly, the function of intoxicants in crime fiction is not limited to the creation of the narrative world and its characters. Stimulants are also important for the plot itself, often being helpful in unraveling the mystery. This happens, inter alia, when – as the Latin proverb says: *In vino veritas* (“in wine lies the truth”) – a person under the influence of alcohol is more likely to speak their hidden thoughts or even reveal the secret. Alcohol makes the interlocutor more eager to confess sincerely, which, if skillfully used, may bring the investigator to explain some issues pertaining to the case<sup>21</sup>. Edward Popielski particularly liked this form of interrogation. He knows “the institution of a witness in informal conversations with the criminal underground” and he knows that “such conversations have always taken place in a crowded pub, and the witnesses were the most dumb and principled bandits who never lied to their buddies”<sup>22</sup>. Eberhard Mock, in turn, while dealing with difficult cases, in alcohol sees hope for the improvement of thinking and simultaneous approximation to the solution. It seems to him that this high-percentage liquor has the power of “a crystalline breeze that dispels fog and streaks that envelop causal relationships”<sup>23</sup>.

The authors sometimes use intoxicants in their novels also as elements of the plot, which in an unusual way lead to the unraveling of the criminal mystery. It can be done in a variety of ways – starting from the introduction of the scene containing the description of a cigarette butt with biological marks, through the smell of alcohol, which triggers in a witness memories actually

<sup>20</sup> K. Bonda, *Pochłaniacz*, Warsaw 2015, p. 337.

<sup>21</sup> Puzyńska uses such plot move in the second volume of Lipowo series (K. Puzyńska, *Więcej czerwieni*, Warsaw 2014). The information crucial for the investigation comes from an alcoholic, who notices something interesting accidentally, while participation in the libation next to the local shop.

<sup>22</sup> M. Krajewski, *Głowa Minotaura*, Warsaw 2012, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> M. Krajewski, *Widma w mieście Breslau*, Cracow 2013, p. 153.

important for the investigation, and ending with a condition of the deceased's liver<sup>24</sup>. Similar examples can be multiplied.

Intoxicants have always been present in the crime fiction. However, the analysis carried out for the purposes of this article proves that now, stimulants play a noticeably more important role than they once used to. Currently, their introduction to the crime novel remains in a close relationship with both the creation of the characters and the narrative world, as well as with the crime mystery itself. Considering the dynamic development of the genre in question and the changes that have occurred so far, it can be assumed that in the future, crime fiction will surprise its recipients many times. Hence, it is possible that the re-analysis of the functions of intoxicants in detective novels conducted a few years from now might lead to new conclusions.

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<sup>24</sup> K. Puzyńska, *Motylek*, Warsaw 2014.