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Tailor-made Identities: Problem Illustrated with the Example of Stories of Selected Literary Characters Based on the Liquid Modernity Concept by Zygmunt Bauman

Referring to the concepts of liquid modernity by Bauman, in the text I will analyze the stories of selected characters of children's and teenagers' contemporary books who had to face the problems of happiness, consumption, responsibility and crisis of identity. To contrast the issue of getting rid of one's "self" in the contemporary culture, I analyze the attitudes of literary characters immersed in the war reality, i.e., in the time when it was really "hectic" and when hiding one's identity was absolutely necessary to survive.

Keywords: identity, Zygmunt Bauman, liquid modernity, nowadays literature for children and young, second world war

Tożsamości na zamówienie – rozważania na przykładzie losów wybranych postaci literackich w oparciu o koncepcję płynnej nowoczesności Zygmunta Baumana

„Poszukiwanie ucieczki, gdy robi się gorąco nie jest niczym nowym. Ludzie próbowali tego zawsze [...] nowością są bliźniacze wysiłki pozbycia się własnego «ja» i zapewnienie sobie «tożsamości na zamówienie»” – cytat pochodzi z książki Zygmunta Baumana *Sztuka życia (Art of Life)*. Cytowany fragment posłuży mi w tekście za myśl przewodnią rozważań nad sztuką życia w czasach najnowszych. Odwołując się do koncepcji płynnej nowoczesności Baumana, dokonam w tekście analizy losów wybranych dziecięcych i młodzieżowych postaci z literatury najnowszej, które mierzyły się z problemami szczęścia, konsumpcji, odpowiedzialności i kryzysu tożsamości. Dla skonstruowania zagadnienia pozbywania się własnego „ja” w kul-

turze współczesnej, analizuję postawy bohaterów literackich zanurzonych w rzeczywistości wojennej, kiedy było autentycznie „gorąco” i ukrywanie swojej tożsamości było absolutnym warunkiem przeżycia.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość, Zygmunt Bauman, płynna nowoczesność, literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży, II druga wojna światowa

Trying to flee when the situation gets hectic is nothing new. People have always tried to do so, with more or less success. What is new is the effort to get rid of your “self” and put on a “tailor-made identity” in the belief that you can succeed (Bauman, 2009, p. 31).

Introduction

The quotation above comes from Zygmunt Bauman’s book *The Art of Life*. The quoted passage stresses the moment of choice: what to do when the situation is hectic, i.e. dangerous or too hard to cope with. The author states we obviously flee, which, after all, is a natural defence mechanism. But in this case, the word “hectic” refers to difficult dilemmas of living in the time of postmodernity.

This fragment will be the motto of the discussion on the undoubtedly difficult art of life/survival in contemporary time (21st century). Zygmunt Bauman calls it the age of liquid modernity. He presented his concept of liquid life through works such as *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997) or *Liquid Modernity* (2000). In *The Art of Life*, he tries to explore the issue of how liquid reality affects people’s perception of happiness and establishment of relationships. Therefore, referring to the sociological concepts presented by Bauman, in the text, I will analyse the stories of selected literary characters from recent children’s and teenagers’ books (mostly in Polish) who had to face problems of happiness, consumption, responsibility and the crisis of identity highlighted in the quotation, naturally associated with all these problems. Several times in the text, I also refer to the behaviours of characters from other works of art, such as movie or drama, treating them as personality models for readers. Besides, I agree with the words by the neurologist Rosalind Ridley, who argues:

Literature and art have always been a primary source of psychological insight, and writers and painters frequently bring to our attention the way things can be, so that we come to understand the world differently (2016, p. 34).

To contrast the issue of getting rid of one's "self" in contemporary culture, I analyse the attitudes of literary characters immersed in the reality of war, i.e. in a time when the situation was really "hectic" and when hiding one's identity was necessary to literally survive.

In the analysis of the stories of many characters, I assume that belles-lettres, including some books for children and adolescents, is a mirror reflecting the socio-cultural reality. It is still an important source of knowledge, and it helps the reader open up to the world and other people, develop social competence and emotions. If it is discussed in the proper way with the help of a creative educator, it can help develop the youth's personality and values. Therefore, the books I analyse are recommended by the Association of the Polish Section of IBBY and the ABC 'All of Poland Reads to Kids' Foundation, i.e. institutions that grant the highest international and national awards in literature for young readers, i.a. *Book of the Year* or the *Hans Christian Andersen Award* (see: www.calapolskaczytadzieciom.pl/zlota-lista; www.ibby.pl) – books of the highest literary and artistic quality, with universal messages.

Identity, human and society in liquid modernity

In order to emphasise the intensification of changes in all the areas of social life, the inability to discover ultimate truths and answers and the lack of coherence and consistency in action, Zygmunt Bauman called the world we live in "liquid reality". In *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, he writes:

[...] our liquid modern world keeps surprising us: what seems certain and proper today may well appear futile, fanciful or a regrettable mistake tomorrow. We [...] need to be constantly ready to change... (2011, p. 5).

"... the bane of insufficient information that made our parents suffer has been replaced by the yet more awesome bane of a flood of information which threatens to drown us and makes swimming or diving [...] all but impossible" (ibid., p. 7), and modern technologies create a new type of human. According to Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska, this new type is an individual shaped by "media shows of mass distribution", a virtual reality that causes consumption ideology orientation (Cybal-Michalska, 2015, p. 17). In the world of "unrelated fragments" (Bogunia-Borowska, Śleboda, 2003, p. 68), "hyperreality" or the culture of "excess and waste" (Baudrillard, 2005), the human is called a consumer who tries to satisfy their culturally-driven hedonistic and narcissistic needs, an omnivorous

consumer ascertaining their uniqueness and superiority by consuming better and more originally than others (Melosik, 1995, p. 112). A person who lives in liquid reality is constantly tempted by new material goods or services, often not resulting from real human needs, but from needs that are superficial or artificially created. Well-known global companies try to persuade people all the time that the only way to happiness is constant acquisition of new objects. It is worth mentioning that qualities indispensably connected with consumption, such as greediness and envy, have always been present. They were the main motifs of many fairy tales, e.g. *Snow White* or *The Fisherman and His Wife*, and myths, e.g. about Sisyphus or King Midas, but nowadays they are more conspicuous and frantically fuelled. The postmodern human hears slogans such as “You deserve it!”, “Be the best version of yourself!” or “You must have it!” and believes that owning things with logos of particular companies will promote them to the privileged group of those who are “above” the rest of masses of transparent people. However, he or she will never be satisfied, because new desires are created all the time; and actually, satisfaction is not the goal. The consumer’s response to this mechanism can be the constant pursuit of new experiences. Bauman calls this phenomenon the process of “ephemeralisation”, stressing that

the treadmill we use to run towards happiness has no finish line. Thus, what is supposed to be the tool becomes the goal, and the only comfort and compensation for the elusiveness of the desired state of happiness is that we know we are still in the race. As long as we are running, until we feel exhausted and stop or are disqualified, the hope for ultimate victory is alive (Bauman, 2009, p. 22).

As a result of the constant pursuit of fashion, services or goods, many people, especially young ones, abandon their “self” so as to create a new identity compliant with the current trends – a tailor-made one. Since there are more and more trends which come and go, in liquid reality, the transition from one identity to another occurs fluently. Bauman points out: “Essentially, postmodern personality is characterised by the lack of identity. Its different versions change as quickly and thoroughly as images in a kaleidoscope” (Bauman, 1994, p. 16).

In the past, identity was a “life-long project”, whereas nowadays, it is momentary (Bauman, 2009, p. 28). So as to meet the challenges of our times, and not to lose the race for prestige and money (for many, a synonym of happiness), we need to learn to manipulate our image. The formed identity is perceived as a threat. Being attached to the models of behaviours, places and people becomes an unnecessary burden which prevents us from using more and more opportunities of the consumerist world.

**“Be a good liar, please. Give me a quick, nice lie” (Schmitt, 2009, p. 44)
– when hiding your identity means your survival**

Hiding one’s identity or origin was common during serious crises such as WWII or the Cold War and Stalin’s dictatorship in Eastern Europe (Sovietisation of Eastern Europe in the years 1949–1953) (Kramer, 2014; Ruggenthaler, 2015).

When the situation was “hectic”, when you were in danger and faced death, you had to flee. Totalitarian rule made people puppets in the hands of dictators. In an impossible situation, so as to save their own life or the lives of their family members, people used the tactic of concealment, hiding, pretending to be someone else or temporarily changing identities.

Since 2011, books from the series *Wojny dorosłych – Historie Dzieci* [*Adults’ Wars – Children’s Stories*] have been systematically published in Poland (22 books have been published as of 2019, see: <https://www.wydawnictwoliteratura.pl/serie-wydawnicze/wojny-doroslych-historie-dzieci>). Most of them are based on real events and narrated by children: we learn “the truth” from the child’s perspective. The series received the honorary patronage of the Ombudsman for Children. The first books referred to WWII in Poland e.g. *Asiunia* [*Little Joanna*], *Mój tato szczęściarz* [*My Lucky Dad*] by Joanna Papuzińska or *Wszystkie moje mamy* [*All My Mothers*] by Renata Piątkowska. Others focused on issues such as deportations to Siberia (*Syberyjskie przygody Chmurki* [*Siberian Adventures of Chmurka*] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogal), martial law in Poland (*Wilczek* [*Little Wolf*] by Katarzyna Ryrych)¹ or women’s rights in Muslim countries (*Która to Malala?* [*Which One is Malala?*] by Renata Piątkowska). Since 2016, the series has also included several books presenting childhood marked with contemporary trauma: being a refugee. In the books, children run from war, e.g. from Syria, Erytrea or Damascus, and they look for new, safe places to live. This is so in *Kot Karima i obrazki* [*Karim’s Cat and Pictures*] by Liliana Bardijewska, *Hebanowe serce* [*The Ebony Heart*] by Renata Piątkowska, *Chłopiec z Lampedusy* [*The Boy from Lampedusa*] by Rafał Witek or *Teraz tu jest nasz dom* [*Now Here is Our Home*] by Barbara Gawryluk.

Books from the *Adults’ Wars – Children’s Stories* series, written for children and adolescents, touch upon the times of wars and armed conflicts, yet the stress in them is not on violence, but on noticing what is best in people, showing the

¹ Several important books about the period of the Polish People’s Republic, with special emphasis on attempts to indoctrinate children, have been published in Polish literature for young readers. Examples of good books are *Teatr niewidzialnych dzieci* [*The Theater of Invisible Children*] by Marcin Szczygielski (2016) or *Teatr Panny Nehemias* [*Mss Nehemias’ Theater*] by Zuzanna Orlińska (2017).

attitudes of courage, heroism and altruism, i.e. virtues that – as Bauman pointed out – are disappearing from contemporary culture.

In the first chapter of *The Art of Life*, the sociologist writes about the death of culture based on devotion, when all heroic attitudes are replaced by hedonistic ones, all expressions of disinterested generosity are nipped in the bud, when people grow indifferent to the common good unless it can be used to strengthen one's own ego (Bauman, 2009). A similar argumentation is presented by Katarzyna Olbrycht: "The awareness of meaningful self-actuation through a voluntary gift for someone else and perceiving society as a community based on solidarity for the common good is almost non-existent" (1997, p. 640).

Let me refer here to the story of a little Jewish boy named Szymon Bauman (a coincidence of surnames), who had five mothers during the war. *All my Mothers* is a novel by Renata Piątkowska (2013). The title is intriguing and causes anxiety, as, after all, you normally have only one mom, don't you? But war is not a normal time. It is a time of reversed order, lawlessness, chaos, crime, violence and hatred. In another novel, *Zakłęcie na "w"* [*Magical Word Beginning with "W"*] by Michał Rusinek, the protagonist sees that time like this:

... War is a magical word than makes us stop seeing colours. We can only see white and black people, friends and enemies, good and bad. We don't want to know what they are really like. We don't want to talk to them. We can't see how much they are like us. And that's why we lose. That's why war is always lost, for both sides (2001).

War deprived children of parents and irreversibly ended their childhood. As a result of war turbulence, little Szymon was cared for by five different "mothers". Why? Because he was a Jew, and to survive, he had to hide his identity. Like an object, he was transferred from one family to another, from home to home. He did not quite understand what was going on.

How many mothers can you have? I've counted. I already have four. I have my real mom, who remained in the ghetto. In Warsaw, I had mom Maria, now I have mom Anna, and also Irena, who was helping me all the time, and I promised to always listen to her. Four mothers is enough. [...] Well, they'd probably never find me but for a jar hidden in the ground under the apple tree. [...] Ms Irena Sendlerowa kept thin strips of tissue paper rolled up in that jar. She wrote on them the names of Jewish children, the real ones and the fake ones, together with the ciphered addresses of families that took care of them. Then ... she buried those notes to hide them from Germans. In the jar, there were almost two and a half thousand tiny papers. All these were the children she

managed to take out of the ghetto and save. She and all that helped her risked their lives every day for the children (Piątkowska, 2013, p. 41).

This situation is hard to imagine for a contemporary child living in the Western civilization of affluence. Five women were engaged in saving the life of a child, doing all they could not to allow the occupant learn the truth about the child's origin.

One of the mothers was Irena Sendlerowa, and the story of Szymon is a real one. He was one of the 2,500 kids Sendlerowa saved during the war, claiming that as you save one life, you save the whole world.

The same noble attitude to another person was displayed by Father Pons from the novel by E.E. Schmitt, *Noah's Child*. Schmitt's book is based on real events and is dedicated to the memory of Father Andre and all the Righteous Among the Nations. Just like Irena Sendlerowa, during the war, this Catholic priest saved the lives, data and the national identity of dozens of Jewish and Gypsy children, hidden in his parish like in Noah's Ark (hence the book title: *Noah's Child*). Father Pons was also a collector of works of art, books and other goods belonging to Jews. He wanted to save them for those who would survive the "flood", as he called war, for their rightful owners. What is more, he intended to bring up his charges in the tradition, religion and culture of their ancestors. He taught them how to speak Hebrew, read the Torah, but also how to overcome barriers between the two monotheistic religions. By saving their heritage, he acted like the Biblical Noah. He used to say: "If the flood continues, if no Hebrew-speaking Jew survives in the whole universe, I will be able to teach you this language. And you will teach it to others" (Schmitt, 2009, p. 69).

This fragment is similar to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, who claimed that showing others respect, first of all, means referring to their views (Levinas, 1991, p. 254). In his conversations with Joseph, Father Pons stressed that the boy should never forget that he was a representative of the chosen nation, and that the differences between Jews and Christians are quite easy to accept. Extremely moving is the scene of respecting the difference between the two religions and, at the same time, building a bridge between them.

In December, Father Pons played a double game, so that we could celebrate both Christmas and Jewish Hanukkah. Only the Jewish kids guessed this duality. On the one hand, we celebrated the birth of Jesus, prepared nativity scenes and participated in church services. On the other hand, we worked in a candle manufacture workshop, where we learnt how to make wicks, melt the wax, dye it and form candles. In the evening, we would light up our candles and put them in the windows. This way, the Christian kids were rewarded for their

effort, and us, the Jews, could secretly celebrate the Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, the time of play and gifts (Schmitt, 2009, p. 72).

Hiding his real identity, Joseph lived this double life in “Villa Jaune”. Of course, he was not the only one. Each kid under the protection of Father Pons had to “act out” a Belgian, a Christian, not revealing his Jewishness. Their lives were at stake. In the case of Joseph and Rudi, the game began like this:

“Are there any Jews here?”

He stiffened.

“Jews? At Villa Jaune? Not a single one! Never! Why do you ask me?”

He took me by the arms and looked at me carefully.

“Are you a Jew, Joseph?”

He was looking at me coldly. I knew he was checking if I could keep a stiff upper lip. His harsh look was laced with pleading “Be a good liar, please. Give me a quick, nice lie.”

“No, I’m not a Jew.”

He loosened the grip, calmer. I went on:

“I don’t even know what a Jew is.”

“We’ll have to check it,” said Rudi. “Anyway, now a Jew is someone to hunt for and arrest. It’s good you’re not a Jew, Joseph.”

“Good you’re not one, either, Rudi. But you should stop speaking Yiddish.”

He shivered. I smiled. Each of us learnt the secret of the other one. Now we could work as partners” (ibid., pp. 44–45).

This was the beginning of friendship between the two boys, and the reasons for it were really “hectic”: the secret was “burning” and destroying the identity.

Noah’s Child also reminds the reader of the ever-present cultural problem: easily forgetting the experiences of war and death, though they should root deeply in human awareness and prevent history from repeating. Years later, adult Joseph visits Rudi in Israel and cannot come to terms with the Israeli-Palestinian war going on there. He decides to follow the example of Father Pons and become another Noah. He chooses the pacifistic solution, corresponding to the philosophy of Bernard Russel, who – seeing the effects of WWI – asked why civilised nations still engaged in destructive armed conflicts. Russel was convinced that changes in education (but also in the economic structure, law and moral values), as well as establishing relevant institutions, would be most important in creating good conditions for pacifistic societies. He was also sure that wars mostly broke out as a result of an impulse, not reason or desire, so he thought that the impulse should be reoriented towards creative pursuits, not destructive activities such as war (Russell, 1920, p. 14). Collecting works of art or being an artist (see another

great novel by Schmitt, *The Alternative Hypothesis (La Part de l'autre)* is Schmitt's way to discharge the original energy, enthusiasm and strength that in itself can be used for various purposes. The authors of wise literature for young readers show how to direct this impulse toward life and development.

If we focus on a quotation from another book, *The Boy from Lampedusa* by Rafał Witek (from the *Adults' Wars – Children's Stories* series), concerning the current war in the Middle East, we can be proud of the attitude of the girl who defended the dignity of her peer, called by the police "an illegal immigrant". The little girl refused to thoughtlessly label people, which is very close to racial segregation. "What does it mean 'illegal immigrant'?", she yelled at the carabineer. ... "He's my friend. And everything he has is legal! What can be illegal in him? Are arms illegal? Or legs? ..." (Witek, 2016, p. 56).

The girl's emotional reaction makes us reflect upon this. Someone's stay in the country can be illegal, but not the person. The way we speak about migrants, refugees or people of other nations living away from their countries can, in the future, translate into the way they will be treated by society and what masks they will have to wear.

In the movie *La vita è bella* (1997), Roberto Benigni shows the sense of fighting to saving a child's belief in a good and just world. In the absurd reality of war, the protagonist – the father – must do so by pretending, acting, putting on more and more masks and ridiculing the cruel reality. Thanks to this game, he manages to save his son's childhood, trust in people and faith in tales, play and dreams. The movie was received as one of the most important and brave voices in contemporary reflection on the Holocaust. The son won because he believed the story told by his father – a constant optimist, the story of life that is or can be beautiful. For me, this attitude of the father is the greatest heroism. This is the absolute fulfilment of Korczak's educational ideas, the absolute understanding of how to love a child.

Children and teenagers should be reminded of these stories. We should look for difficult situations in literature and other arts so as to help them diagnose the world, make them sensitive to harm and allow for participation in experience. Reconstructing the experience of war from the perspective of individual biographies, not school textbooks, we show a more familiar, everyday dimension of suffering. As Maria Nikolajeva argues with reference to recent research on the brain, engaging in literary fiction strengthens empathy and our ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of real and fictitious people. "We can claim that reading fiction is beneficial, because it enhances our cognitive, emotional and social skills. Children's literature, then, might be a good implement for training children to become responsible and empathetic members of society" (Nikolajeva, 2018).

These books (and one movie) do not only have an information/report function (providing basic knowledge on what happened and is happening during wars), but first of all, they stress the expressions of heroism – not flagship acts of soldiers, but heroic acts of ordinary people. Janusz Korczak (the children's book by Beata Ostrowicka *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku* [A Story of Janusz Korczak] deals with an orphanage run by a great Polish pedagogue), Irena Sendlerowa, Father Andre or the father from Benigni's movie saved humanity through their daily struggle for the life of the children they cared for, as well as their education, upbringing, preservation of their identities and dignity. They saved their hope for the existence of humanity and good will when very little seemed to confirm it.

These biographies should especially be remembered in contemporary times, when the media sells war as a medial show, teenagers “kill” others in video games, and even the youngest kids bring plastic toy guns to the playgrounds and use them in play. Let me share one experience here. In the youngest preschool group in my son's kindergarten, I once saw two actual-size toy guns in the cloakroom locker. I was really terrified. My question concerns what this situation shows. Is it the “painless morality” as described by Bauman? What may the result of the unawareness and ignorance of that boy's parents be in a few years? And first of all, taking into account the context of past wars and present armed conflicts all over the world, why are children allowed to play war and fake killing? This situation shows that many people do not reflect upon the cruelty of real armed conflicts and the value of human life; they do not know or do not want to know the difference between heroism, valour and aggression.

In an interview, Wanda Traczyk-Stawska (the Chairperson of the Social Committee for the Warsaw Insurgents' Cemetery) expressed her despair about the current misunderstanding of what heroism and valour are and mistaking them for aggression or nationalism. “Now the Uprising is fashionable, young people wear T-shirts, set off flares... For me it's extremely sad, because they all want to be heroes and fight, but they have no idea what price we paid. Our youths are great, only many of them are confused. They believe in God, but they deny Christianity. The anti-Semitic banners on stadiums, the slogans against foreigners or burning the effigy of a Jew in Wrocław are something horrible. You must not hate a stranger just because he's strange.” When asked by the journalist whether she was able to forgive Germans, she said: “I wouldn't be able to live without it.” She then proceeded to tell how she fought with the enemy, but still saw Germans as humans.

I saw what my grenades did to them. I started crying, but I went on throwing the grenades, because I knew that if I stopped, they would murder all of us. Since then, I've been a pacifist. I hate war, because it destroys everybody. If you kill others, you hurt yourself, too (Traczyk-Stawska, 2018, pp. 34–37).

Although the analysed books for young people refer to the dramatic times of war, they do not shock the readers with cruelty. The characters remind us that cultures are not better or worse, that having to hide because of your origin, religion or beliefs should be unacceptable (unless, of course, the beliefs derogate others). One clear message from the novels is stressing the value of human life and highlighting what is worth fighting for (good, love, truth, beauty). But do contemporary humans really know this?

“I was furious at this twisted world where you can never be sure if what you see is really what it seems” (Beręsewicz, 2018, p. 143) – how we juggle identities

In the 21st century, people immersed in liquid reality juggle their identities. In the time of war discussed previously, the dangers, poverty and starvation often made people become someone else. Currently, the affluence and excess in the Western world contribute to getting lost in the creations of “self”. We have become puppets in the hands of marketing specialists. By collecting things, we still create more and more needs and new professions, e.g. image specialists, various advisors and specialists in more and more narrow fields (e.g. finance, public relations, health, appearance, visage, etc.).

Jerzy Nikitorowicz writes:

In 2018, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence. WWII ended more than 70 years ago, and now we have a generation of people who have not experienced the great trauma of war, starvation, humiliation, the loss of dignity, fears about members of family or dismay. They have not suffered, seen the terrible damage or been indoctrinated by the communist regime (2018).

What is becoming characteristic of young people now, in the age of neoliberalism and consumption, is the development of Narcissistic thinking, a huge craving for money (which, after all, enables us to participate in mass culture and to consume), being unprepared for prolonged, regular effort and work in many areas of life, expecting results instantly and demanding them. Further, Jerzy

Nikitorowicz points out: “It is nothing new. It happens in liberal-democratic societies, when people are not taught how to reflect, experience oneself directly, have an internal dialogue and develop sensitivity and humility” (Nikitorowicz, 2018).

Zygmunt Bauman also argued that “without hard work, our life will never be valuable” (2009, p. 232). Is a value like this mentioned in fiction for young people? Are the topics connected with the management of our identity and changes of our image and lifestyle resulting from functioning in a consumerist community present in books? If so, how are they discussed? What authorities do young people have nowadays?

There is a saying that can be modified depending on the context. In this case, I want it to be: Show me who your authority is, and I will tell you who you are. Zbyszko Melosik points to the phenomenon of socialisation shift, i.e. reducing the role of traditional institutions and significant adults (parents, teachers) in the process of socialisation of adolescents. The old authorities are being replaced inter alia by pop culture icons or idols and peer groups (Melosik, 2015, p. 32). Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik refers to the examples of the Barbie doll and contemporary American singer Taylor Swift being pop culture icons and idols. She shows how pop culture affects the development of teenagers’ identities (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015, pp. 43–53).

Both Barbie and Taylor Swift can be whoever they want: they juggle identities, from a shy classmate to a sex bomb or vamp. Because of her strength, ruthless forward pressing through seduction with a new outfit and a new “self” and the ability to adapt to reality like a chameleon, Swift is an authority for young people.

Orientation at carnality, reducing the image of a person to the picture of a young, beautiful and slender body clad in fashionable clothes, smelling of expensive perfumes and pampered with sophisticated cosmetics is a problem present even in literature for children. Agnieszka Suchowierska, in the book titled *Milenka*, shows a girl who temporarily loses her “self” in the futile dream of looking like the iconic Barbie doll (in the novel, the doll’s name is Rita). Milenka is disoriented with the images shown through media and in commercials, promoting the canon of beauty reduced to physical attractiveness. The girl no longer likes her appearance, has more and more complexes (she feels that her hair has an ugly colour and that she is too fat). What counts is the illusive belief that if they look like their idols, their world will change for the better. Milenka, in time, begins to understand that “... without beauty, Rita wouldn’t be the most famous doll in the world. That’s all she had” (Suchowierska, 2018, p. 72). The girl’s grandma shows her women who changed the world and became part of history not because of their appearance, but thanks to their passion and engagement in work (e.g. Maria Skłodowska-Curie, Walentyna Tiereszkowa, Maria Konopnicka).

In another novel, *Mat i świat* [*Mat and the World*], Agnieszka Suchowierska (2015) equally strongly exposes the problems of children immersed in a consumerist reality. Mat the teddy bear, manufactured in a Chinese factory, goes to children from different families, and the young reader participates in his journey and sees a world that is full of contrasts, social inequalities and poverty coexisting with wealth. He can see scared children working at the Chinese factory and children in rich Western countries for whom even a tiny spot on the teddy's body is enough to dump him and buy a new one. The travelling teddy bear is a symbol of objectivisation, a product which suits the consumerist vision of the contemporary world.

Polish author Paweł Beręsewicz, in most his novels for young readers, ruthlessly criticises postmodern reality which promotes behaviours full of hypocrisy, calculation and pride. He exposes the mechanisms of advertising and media reality. In *Noskawery* [*Nose Covers*], he asks whether one's value really depends on how others perceive you, whether having a specific thing really makes one better. Zuzia Majda, a girl focused on celebrity glamour, had to face such dilemmas: before she got used to her new image (wearing a "necessary" gadget – a nose cover), this fad was forgotten, and a new fashion came. The book shows advertising as an effective tool to create "artificial needs" (the completely unnecessary and useless but fashionable nose covers) and manipulate people so as to stir the desire to own things because of a recognisable label or a logo, without which the object is just a fake. The fact that owning something fashionable becomes the measure of your social position and group belonging is dangerous for the developing identity of a teenager. Zuzia needs more and more fashionable gadgets to feel part of the group and be accepted. She creates herself through having material things that are desired by the majority at the moment. In this frenzy of trying to be like her friends (the crowd), she is unable to accept the truth shared by her grandma: "people are liked for what they have inside, not for what they wear" (Beręsewicz, 2016, p. 19). In addition, by jumping from one "self" to another, from one fad to a newer one, she does not understand yet that "the treadmill we use to run towards happiness has no finish line" (Bauman, 2009, p. 22).

Actually, it is hard to be surprised by teenagers' confusion and uncertainty in the world around them, since we hear all the time that the only way to happiness is by multiplying the things that can give us comfort. According to Z. Bauman, it is not really the young people who

choose what is temporary, liquid, ephemeral, what is like a happening or a short-lived artistic installation. Actually, all this is imposed on them and enforced by the reality they are functioning in (Bauman, 2009, p. 101).

Jacek Pyżalski observes in the introduction to the book he is the editor of, *Wychowawcze i społeczno-kulturowe kompetencje współczesnych nauczycieli* [*Educational and Socio-cultural Competence of Contemporary Teachers*]:

Young people, especially teenagers, are offered a much wider range of opportunities in this complex, multicultural and technicised world than the generation of their parents or grandparents had. Many of the offered ways only give an appearance of choice; instead, they are a flight from freedom, and sometimes even slavery. The key question is how to differentiate between good and bad, what to accept, what to reject, and what to contest? And what should this choice be based on? Finding answers to all these questions will not only help form the biographies of young individuals, but also – in a broader perspective – will allow them to predict what the world will be in the future (2015, p. 5).

Therefore, a serious dilemma of the 21st century is to look for the balance between ‘to have’ and ‘to be’, getting rid of one’s self and creating a new tailor-made identity again and again. These are the challenges for contemporary education. It is no coincidence that solutions are sought in literature, on the assumption that education can occur through reading (Kozłowska, Olszewska, 2011). The books for young readers that I have chosen for analysis look for solutions and try to help young people find their place in this postmodern, ambivalent reality, in the age of masks and edited versions of yourself.

Marcin Szczygielski, who has many times won the Book of the Year award and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, an author dealing with important, controversial and often omitted subjects (e.g. an orphanage in the time of the Polish People’s Republic in the book *Teatr niewidzialnych dzieci* [*The Theater of Invisible Children*] 2016), in his newest novel, *Weronika i Zombie* [*Weronika and the Zombie*] (2018), warns the reader about getting “tailor-made identities”, to paraphrase Bauman’s words, and about wasting time on persuading themselves that those efforts can be successful (Bauman, 2009, p. 31).

Before she actually faces adversities (i.e. rejection by the group, disappointed love, hunger for friendship, decomposition of family and helplessness in the face of old age and disability), teenage Weronika will try to put on a number of masks, tell many lies and use the anonymity on the Internet, but all this, instead of solving her problems, will only multiply them. Paradoxically, it is not technologies but time spent with an elderly person and peering inside (the girl’s imagination) that will help her reflect upon her life and change her attitude. The old man, Jan, told Weronika to look for strong points in herself, not to be afraid to go upstream or to be “outstanding”. “Don’t do what others want you to do. Don’t try to go with

the crowd and adjust. Although this will make you feel safe in a way, you will never be happy” (Szczygielski, 2018, p. 316).

Weronika learns this difficult art of reflecting upon her life, which can be regarded as an extra message of the book.

Moral dilemmas in the ‘twisted world where you can never be sure if what you see is really what it seems’ (Beręsewicz, 2018, p. 143) are the subject of a book by Paweł Beręsewicz called *Szeptane* [*Whispered*]. The author presents the world we are living in, the world in which it is more and more difficult to recognise what is true and what is not, where people send rubbish, toxic words to virtual space without taking the responsibility for them, because they act incognito, hiding their real identity or manipulating it. A lot of time passes before the protagonist realises that he is taking part in pretending, creating appearances and contributing to the “twisting” of the world.

In *Whispered*, Beręsewicz shows the power of advertising, using modern technologies to influence the opinions of people connected with consumption. A teenage boy, Filip, engages in various marketing activities so as to earn money. He begins with simply handing out leaflets and ends up pretending to be an online advisor, using many fake accounts, which is called “whispering”. His activity is simply deception and manipulation. From more than a dozen of accounts he has made on the Internet, assuming fake identities, he argues fiercely, sometimes using completely false arguments, just to dish dirt on competitors. The book shows how the media can appropriate each space, public or private, blur the boundaries between the global and local dimensions of reality, force people to manipulate identities and create several versions of themselves, as pointed out by Anthony Giddens (2001). Reading *Whispered* can prevent a young person from absolutely believing media messages, as online anonymity promotes deception. According to Bauman, it is easy to “... sail under false colours and pretend that you are someone else. But how can you differentiate between the truth and falsehood then? We can ask what it really means that «it is really you»”. (Bauman, 1994, p. 8).

Another novel by Paweł Beręsewicz, *Wszystkie lajki Marczuka* [*All the Likes of Marczuk*], discusses the problem of juggling identities. The plot is developed on two planes: in our times and in the times of war. On the one hand, we learn a moving story of a brave boy, Janek, who saved a Jewish family during WWII; thus, we read about a fight for the highest value – human life. On the other hand, we find out that the story is false; it was made up on Facebook. The figure of Marczuk was created, showing how powerful the Internet is, how it can be used to create an alternative reality and how relative the truth in it is. Even more dilemmas are shown: is it OK to invent a figure with a specific identity and use that

figure to play upon the emotions of society if you do so in good faith, in order to sensitise people to the good and remember noble attitudes?

The analysed books by Suchowierska and Beręsewicz refer to all the post-modern morality discussed by Bauman in *Two Sketches on Postmodern Morality*:

nobody is able to stop the expansion of things; fashions are short-lived and can only appear for a moment if they are supported by louder, stronger and more vivid messages; the fights for attention in the public sphere and on the Internet are fierce, cruel and ruthless; they involve getting rid of your “self”, since existence in this world means being seen, no matter the cost (Bauman, 1994, p. 19).

As a conclusion – can a contemporary human be happy?

Zygmunt Bauman claims it is impossible. He or she must juggle identities all the time, put on different masks to comply with changes occurring in the uncertain, liquid world, and this is more likely to cause a sense of confusion, frustration and, finally, even aggression. In *The Art of Life*, Bauman writes:

So as to perform the art of life in our liquid modern world, so as to transform our life into a ‘work of art’, we need to change constantly, to define our identity still anew, becoming someone else than before. However, to become “someone else”, we must stop being the person we used to be, abandon the previous form, like a snake that sheds its skin; we must reject the used “public images” that are no longer attractive in the context of a constant inflow of new, improved ones (2009, p. 131).

Nearly a century ago, Aldous Huxley wrote about a new, better world in his *Brave New World* (1932). He predicted we were progressing toward a culture of banality. During the war, camps were the trap; nowadays, it is the sweetness of consumption, the choice that terrorises us. People I consider to be great heroes, such as J. Korczak, I. Sendlerowa or Father Pons, saved people disinterestedly, and not to show off. They regretted they could not do more. Nowadays, the virtue of repentance is not regarded as valuable. The desire to be noticed, to show off and to use entertainment destroys the person. This can be proven by what Bauman states in *The Art of Life*:

In rich societies, there is no relationship between the growing affluence, regarded as the main component of a happy life, and declared higher happiness level.

As we grow rich, neither our well-being nor the sense of happiness increase. What increases is the level of crime (1994, p. 14).

Moreover, can a person who is forced to continuously make choices, try something on, create and edit new versions of themselves and their identity be really happy? Barry Schwartz, in the book *The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less*, argues that we have become slaves of choices, because the multiplicity and excess around us cannot be ignored.

Autonomy and freedom of choice are critical to our well being. [...] but as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded (Schwartz, 2013).

According to him, benefits of choice are evident in each decision we need to make, while the costs are initially low and later increase. In other words, the problem is not the particular choice itself, but all the choices together.

Bauman (in *The Art of Life*) shares with the readers several reflections concerning attempts to be happy in the contemporary world. He begins with stating that most goods that make a person happy cannot be bought in a shop, since they naturally have no price (2009, p. 14). He means, e.g., living in accordance with moral principles and with your conscience, guided by the principle “I exist if I do something for others” (p. 213). Erich Fromm wrote that to love means, first of all, to give, not to take (1994, p. 29).

In *The Art of Life*, Zygmunt Bauman also recommends contemporary people to slow down, to apply mindfulness, to overcome egoism, to develop relationships, to remember love and to create and recreate it every day. As I reflect on the sociologist's words: “In our time, it is much more difficult to uphold virtues such as compassion or responsibility for others than «concentric» virtues such as «I deserve it»” (2009, p. 231), scenes from *The Little Prince* come to my mind. The message of *The Little Prince* is based on realising the process of development, which will never occur unless we learn to “leave” our own planet (to overcome egocentricism) and start noticing others. During the journey, the boy converses not only with others, but also with himself; he grows to take responsibility and become disinterested, to understand the importance of time devoted to himself and to others, to learn friendship, trust, sensitivity, understanding and cooperation. I think the ability to perform such an examination of conscience is actually the art of life.

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