Joanna Kot

Northern Illinois University

NON-RECOGNITION AND MOURNING:

A MEANS OF CHANGE IN A FEW POLISH INTER-WAR DRAMAS

In her recent books *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence* Judith Butler takes a more socio-political approach to “relationality.” In these works Butler stresses that recognition depends on cultural and societal norms. These norms sometimes exclude certain categories of people and make them “unrecognizable” and “less than human”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Her emphasis on ethics leads to a desire to change norms, so as to make them more inclusive, and thus make life “liveable” for all those who are excluded.[[2]](#footnote-2) On a more existential level Butler takes up the topic of the role of mourning in “relationality.” She writes that it is at the moment when the “enmeshment” with the “Other” is broken, and the subject is mourning the breakup of a relationship, that the subject realizes that it is losing not only the “Other,” but also part of its own identity. [[3]](#footnote-3) Interestingly enough, “non-recognition”, as well as grief over broken relationships function as stimuli for change and development in a number of plays written by women in Poland during the inter-war period. Though the philosophical basis in Zofia Nałkowska is certainly not Butler, nevertheless, in her play *House of Women*, the author propounds the idea that mourning after the disintegration of a relationship – be it due to death or divorce – brings into relief the reliance of a character’s identity on the “Other,” as well as the ethical aspects of male/female relationships. [[4]](#footnote-4) Grief sharpens our sensibilities and allows us to see relationships and ourselves more clearly. The situation is somewhat different in Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska’s *Monika’s Case*. Here grief functions only as the initial impulse to change; it is not the means of change. Rather the means is through education, which teaches logical reasoning, which in turn makes women more like men, in other words, more intelligent, less emotional. Nevertheless, the heroine’s initial reaction to the news of her husband’s unfaithfulness is one of utter grief: she attempts suicide and experiences a raw, emotional outburst

Non-recognition and grief make their appearance in Marcelina Grabowska’s *“Justice”*. Number 14 grieves and repents genuinely for the child she has killed. Moreover, the author presents her as one of the “non-recognized”: a poor, uneducated servant girl, treated as an idiot-child by the educated men in power. Grief is what makes Number 14 want to keep her second child, an act which she sees as a form of expiation. Meanwhile, her social situation has sharpened her perspective, given her a sense of irony and developed her moral fiber. In Zofia Rylska’s *The Deep at Zimna* it is a man who experiences grief and above all repentance. The old fisherman, Łuka genuinely believes in God and yet long ago he committed a murder. Ever since then, he has lived in a state of grief and repentance, a state that has made him more sensitive to the emotional condition of others. In short, the paper traces how Butler’s social/existential conditions of “non-recognition” and mourning appear in a number of Polish inter-war women’s plays. In all of the works, “non-recognition” and grief play an important role in helping a character or characters change and develop.

1. Judith Butler. 2004. *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London/New York: Verso, p. 33 and Judith Butler. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Butler, 2004b, 224-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Butler, 2004b, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ewa Kraskowska. 1999. *Zofia Nałkowska*. Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, pp. 50-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)