

1994

'The Light-House Keeper' by Henryk Sienkiewicz: An Interpretation

Petko Ivanov

Connecticut College, pivanov@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/slavicfacpub>



Part of the [Folklore Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ivanov, Petko, "'The Light-House Keeper' by Henryk Sienkiewicz: An Interpretation" (1994). *Slavic Studies Faculty Publications*. 12. <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/slavicfacpub/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Slavic Studies Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Slavic Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

THE LIGHT-HOUSE KEEPER BY HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ
AN INTERPRETATION

Petko Ivanov

*Latarnik jest tym [...] momentem, w którym
dusza Sienkiewicza stopiła się z duszą narodu...*

Stanisław Brzozowski

The plot of *The Light-House Keeper* ("Latarnik," 1880) by Henryk Sienkiewicz, considered by many as one of the masterpieces of Polish literature, is ostensibly simple: a Polish immigrant, working as a light-house keeper is so engrossed in reading *Pan Tadeusz*, that he forgets to lit the light-house and is therefore fired. This trivial event, which as it has been pointed out repeatedly, has a direct counterpart in real life, is elaborated by Sienkiewicz into a multilayered metaphor that came to represent the invariant collective biography of the Poles in the nineteenth century. The novella belongs to the type of "realistic" literature, which conceals its literariness and the tendentiousness of its authorial standpoint by the declared ambition to provide objective, almost documentary account of concrete events. Sienkiewicz's text, displays behind its apparent simplicity such a richness of political allusions and multiplicity of ideological references, and such a high degree of intertextuality (direct and hidden quotations and reminiscences of other texts), that it requires repeated explications and commentaries and allows for rather diverse interpretations. In fact, *The Light-House Keeper* is among the most analyzed and commented upon texts in the entire Polish literature.¹ Its interpretative history offers a wide range of interpretative labels each of which implies a particular reading perspective: from "a sketch of the Polish immigrant's fate" (Krzyżanowski 1973) and "a biogram of the Polish soldier" (Wyka 1967) to "a drama of the loner without a

¹ A detailed historical review of the literary interpretations see in Bujnicki 1984.

homeland" (Baliński 1967), "a study of human old age" (Mokranowska & Skwarek 1984), and "a psychological opus" (Bujnicki 1992).²

My intention is not to offer yet another literary interpretation, but rather to try to reveal the novella's own encoded notion of literature as a factor in the constitution and the perpetuation of ethnic and national identities. In the first part of my paper I discuss briefly the historical and the political aspects of *The Light-House Keeper*, and in the second part I address the intertextual dialogue between Sienkiewicz and Mickiewicz, which I consider of primary importance for my particular purposes. In conclusion I attempt a formulation of a hypothesis about Sienkiewicz's novella as a programmatic text, which reflects its author's concept of literature in general.

Skawiński: A Biography of a Generation

Skawiński, the main character of *The Light-House Keeper*,³ was created by Sienkiewicz on the basis of a real prototype, some Mieczysław Siellawa (1838-1876), whose life of a Polish immigrant in North America is documented by the newspaper dispatches of Julian Horain and is described in one of Sienkiewicz's famous *Listy z podróży do Ameryki* (see Morley 1959: 241-242). Siellawa did work for a while as a light-house keeper on an island near Panama, and was indeed fired because he forgot to fulfill his obligations at work being absorbed in a book, the novel *Murdelio* (1853) by the second-rate Polish writer Zygmunt Kaczkowski, to be exact (see Szweykowski 1967). Afterwards Siellawa found a job as a drug-store accountant in New York City where he was found dead in November 1876, presumably after he poisoned himself by mistake (see Krzyżanowski 1973).⁴

Sienkiewicz's personage did not inherit much more than the Panama episode from his prototype. The remains of his biography is considerably different. Based on the

² In all the studies mentioned above *The Light-House Keeper* is evaluated as "a work which educates in patriotism." For decades the novella is among the mandatory high school readings in Poland.

³ I use the scholarly edition of Bujnicki 1992: 314-332; an English translation see in Gillon, Krzyżanowski & Oszler 1982: 48-61.

⁴ Cf. Anonymous 1876. A comparative analysis of the narrative manner in the "prototexts" of Horain and Sienkiewicz and the narrative structure of the novella itself see in Kłosiński 1984.

extensive retrospections of the novella it can be reconstructed that Skawiński, who at the time of the narrated events was seventy-year-old, was born circa 1800. In 1830-31 he participated in the November Uprising against the Russian occupation of Poland and after its savage suppression the wave of the so-called "Great Emigration" (Wielka Emigracja) took him to Paris. Shortly after that he was involved in the Spanish Civil War (1833-1840), in the crushing of Algerian Uprising against the French (1847), in the Spring of the Peoples in Hungary (1848-49). He became a mercenary in India, fought in Burma in 1852, and subsequently enlisted even in the American Civil War (1861-65). This incredible military career at all fronts of the world is complemented by a no less fantastic biography of a worker. Skawiński practiced almost all professions imaginable on all the five continents: from a gold-miner in Australia and a blue-color worker in India to a factory owner in Havana, to name just a few. His virility and stamina, his working capacity and adaptability are truly amazing, almost superhuman. And, we should add, all four of these qualities are traditionally listed as the representative characteristics of Polish economic immigrants around the globe. Skawiński simply exemplifies them with an intensity and scope that transcends the limitations of an ordinary human life.

Even a casual overlook at this remarkable life cannot fail to notice its generic traits of a generalized biography. Skawiński is presented as an epical persona, who synthesizes in his personal biography the destiny of an entire Polish generation from the time of the national liberation movements. In this Polish *zbiorowy biogram* (Wyka 1967: 73) Sienkiewicz delineates two representative behavioral models: of the soldier and of the immigrant. The Pole fights for freedom and works for a piece of bread all over in the world, pursuing everywhere a single unattainable dream: to find a home, security and peace, the simple components of happiness of which he has been deprived again and again. Using an Aesopian language, transparent for the initiated reader, Sienkiewicz reveals succinctly the source of Polish homelessness: the Polar Star, i.e. Russia, whose "vengeful arm" reaches on to Skawiński wherever he goes (cf. p. 319).⁵

⁵ About the "Aesopian language" of the Polish writers-positivists see Martuszevska 1977.

The idea about the consanguinity shared by Skawiński and oppressed people is reinforced again by Aesopian means in the same passage: Skawiński is patient as an American Indian, and like American Indians he has a unbreakable strength and resistance. This comparison is particularly notable in the context of yet another of Sienkiewicz's "American" novellas, *Sachem*, which amplifies the metaphorical parallel between the tragic destinies of Poland and the extinguished Indian race on a larger scale (see Sandler 1967). Such metaphorical references, and especially the mythical associations of Skawiński's image with Sisyphus⁶ and Ahasuerus (see below), add a universal dimension to Sienkiewicz's text and allow for its broader interpretation as a philosophical opus on the tragedy of human fate. In this sense Skawiński does not merely exemplify a particular generation of Poles, but also the history of all generations of humankind who struggled for hope against hope.

The Real Light-House Keeper: Mickiewicz

The biography of the main character serves only as an introduction into the central event of *The Light-House Keeper* -- the spiritual awakening (*przebudzenie*) of Skawiński after he receives the book. The radical change made by Sienkiewicz compared to the raw literary material is notable by itself: while the prototype Siellawa receives an entertaining novel, some light reading (*Murdelio*), Skawiński receives a "sacred" book -- *Pan Tadeusz*. The difference between the two books may be traced on still another level. While books like *Murdelio* put people to sleep, *Pan Tadeusz* wakes them up. Sienkiewicz evidently uses deliberately the well established Polish cultural metaphor of *Pan Tadeusz* as "the national Bible of Poland." An intertextual analysis of *The Light-House Keeper* and its *sui generis* sequel-commentary, the novella *Wspomnienie z Marypozy*.⁷ The leading character in the second novella is another Polish emigrant, Putrament, who constantly reads the only book he possesses, a Polish translation of the Bible, so that he

⁶ See p. 320: "Lazł pod górę tak pracowicie jak mrówka. Zepchnięty sto razy, rozpoczął spokojnie swoją podróż po raz setny pierwszy."

⁷ About *Wspomnienie z Marypozy* as Sienkiewicz's autointerpretation of *The Light-House Keeper* see Mokranowska & Skwarek 1984: 151 ff.

may not forget his native tongue. The analogy between Putrament and Skawiński, on the one hand, and the Bible and *Pan Tadeusz*, on the other, are too pointed to miss.

The very act of receiving *Pan Tadeusz* is described in *The Light-House Keeper* as an event with distinct religious implications, as a "miracle" (p. 334). Only due to the rationalizing intervention of the omniscient narrator does the reader ever learn the logical explanation of the book's mysterious arrival. Within the inner psychological perspective of Skawiński, however, it seems as though the book has literally "fallen from the skies above".⁸ The behavior of Skawiński after his first contact with the book may also be read symbolically. His first conscious act after the "miracle" is to give all his (material) food to the birds, since it by implication has become useless after the arrival of the genuine, spiritual pabulum. This gesture, a propos, echoes numerous hagiographical texts and introduces additional religious connotations to the episode. The reading of the book itself acquires the characteristics of a (religious) ritual. To repeat Kłosiński's (1984: 105-106) apt phrasing, the communication of Skawiński with *Pan Tadeusz* becomes a communion. In the interpretation suggested by Sienkiewicz thus patriotism grows into a religious, cult-like sentiment, for the propagated "awakening for the fatherland," around which the entire novella is built, is in fact a patriotic reinterpretation of the Christian topos "awakening for the celestial fatherland."

Apart from the direct quotations from *Pan Tadeusz* (verses 1-15 and 17 from Book 1), Mickiewicz is present in *The Light-House Keeper* also by a number of hidden quotations and reminiscences.⁹ Especially significant is the reference to Mickiewicz at the structurally highly marked last sentence of the novella: "Na nowe zaś drogi życia [Skawiński] miał na piersiach swoją książkę, którą od czasu do czasu przyciskał ręką, jakby w obawie, by mu i ona nie zginęła..." Apart from the idea of *Pan Tadeusz* as "a guide (book)" and "a salvage light-house," this phrase also bears a distant echo of "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła" from the famous *Mazurka Dąbrowskiego* from the final scene of Mickiewicz's epopee. Characteristically enough, the scene recalled here by Sienkiewicz (Jankiel's concert) articulates also the two key-notions of *The Light-House*

⁸ Like the famous throughout the Catholic world *Epistula de die dominica*, an apocryphal letter, allegedly written by Christ Himself, which holds instructions for individual salvation.

⁹ Note that Paszek (1984: 131 ff.) points to *The Light-House Keeper's* encoded quotations not only from Mickiewicz, but also from *Beniowski* by J. Słowacki.

Keeper -- the soldier and the wanderer (*żołnierz tułacz*), which are reiterated time and again in Sienkiewicz's novella in a complex set of synonyms and paraphrases.¹⁰ This lexical leitmotif builds up an image of Skawiński (the almost eponymous Pole) as a wanderer, who, like his mythological ancestor, the Jewish Ahasuerus, has been deprived of a fatherland. The subtextual metaphor here is obviously "the Poles are the new Chosen People." Kłosińska (1984) suggests convincingly that Sienkiewicz was influenced in his implementation of *The Light-House Keeper* by the juxtaposition wandering (without an aim) *versus* pilgrimage (with an aim), which was first applied to Polish history again by Mickiewicz in his *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*. For Sienkiewicz, as for Mickiewicz before him, the ultimate aim of the Polish emigrants-wanderers, scattered around the world by the "vengeful arm" of Russia, is the return (the pilgrimage) to their homeland. That is why at the end of the novella Skawiński is transformed from a random wanderer (without an aim) into a pilgrim (with an aim), having recognized into *Pan Tadeusz* the reincarnation of his lost fatherland, and thus having regained it forever.¹¹

"The Light-House Keeper" as a Literary Manifesto

The dialogue between Sienkiewicz and Mickiewicz in *The Light-House Keeper* allows for still another reading of the novella as an expression of Sienkiewicz's views on literature. The representation of reading as a spiritual enlightenment (*przebudzenie*) of the reader, i.e. as a cathartic experience, apparently reflects the ambition of Sienkiewicz himself about the type of literature that he would like to create. His idea of literature is inseparable from the idea of national identity, which, on its turn, is unthinkable without literature conceived of as a decisive factor in the process of ethnic self-determination.

The Light-House Keeper acquires the significance of a literary manifesto specifically against the background of Sienkiewicz's retreat from the hitherto supported ideas of literary positivism. According to his own declaration, by means of works like

¹⁰ More about the motif "soldier-wanderer" in Polish folklore and literature see in Hrycyk 1972 and Leśniak 1972.

¹¹ About the incarnations of homeland into a book see Bujnicki 1988.

The Light-House Keeper he gave up "the characters-lilliputs" typical of the positivist novel in a new quest for the modern reincarnations of the Romantic hero and for a contemporary reinterpretation of the legacy of the Polish literary Romanticism.¹²

REFERENCES

- Anonymous 1876 A Drug Clerk's Death: A Pharmacist Who Was Anxious to Return to Poland. *New York Times*, Nov. 23, p. 8, col. 2.
- Baliński, Stanisław 1967 Czytać "Latarnika". In *Sienkiewicz żywy*, ed. Wł. Günther, pp. 43-48. Londyn: Gryf.
- Bujnicki, Tadeusz 1984 Nota historycznoliteracka o "Latarniku". In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 7-10. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- _____ 1988 Ojczyzna w księżce zamknięta: O "Latarniku" Henryka Sienkiewicza. In *Arcydzieła literatury polskiej: Interpretacje*, eds. St. Grzeszczuk & A. Niewolak-Krzywda. Vol. 2, pp. 149-164. Rzeszów: Krajowa Agencja.
- _____ (ed.) 1992 *Henryk Sienkiewicz: Wybór nowel i opowiadań*. [4 wyd.] Wrocław: Ossolineum.
- Bursztyńska, Halina 1984 "Latarnik": "danina" na rzecz romantyzmu. In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 59-69. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- Gillon, Adam, Ludwik Krzyżanowski & Krystyna Olszer, eds. 1982 *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*. [2 ed.] New York: Hippocrene Books.
- Hrycyk, Krystyna 1972 "Pieśń o żołnierzu tułaczem": Fragment monografii folklorystycznej. *Prace literackie* 14 [=Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis, no. 177]: 115-153.
- Kłosińska, Krystyna 1984 Żołnierz - tułacz - pielgrzym. In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 70-87. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.

¹² The phrase "the characters-lilliputs" is quoted here by Paszek 1984: 137. About *The Light-House Keeper* as a tribute to Romanticism see Bursztyńska 1984.

- Kłosiński, Krzysztof 1984 Konteksty fabuły o latarniku z Aspinwall. In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 88-107. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- Krzyżanowski, Julian 1973 [1950] O "Latarniku". In his *Pokłosie Sienkiewiczowskie: szkice literackie*, pp. 186-194. Warszawa: PIW.
- Leśniak, Władysław 1972 "Pieśń żołnierza" Adama Mickiewicza. *Prace literackie* 14 [=Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis, no. 177]: 155-176.
- Martuszevska, A. 1977 Porozumienie z czytelnikiem: o "ezopowym" języku powieści pozytywistycznej. In *Problemy odbioru i odbiorcy*, eds. T. Bujnicki & J. Sławiński, pp. 197-214. Wrocław: Ossolineum.
- Mokranowska, Zdzisława & Irena Skwarek 1984 "Latarnik": "odczytania na nowo" ciąg dalszy. In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 138-161. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- Morley, Charles, ed. 1959 *Portrait of America: Letters of Henry Sienkiewicz*. New York: Columbia University.
- Paszek, Jerzy 1984 ABC semantyki tekstu "Latarnika". In *"Latarnik" Henryka Sienkiewicza: interpretacje*, eds. T. Bujnicki & Halina Bursztyńska, pp. 120-137. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- Sandler, Samuel 1967 *Indiańska przygoda Henryka Sienkiewicza*. Warszawa: PIW.
- Szwejkowski, Zygmunt 1967 "Murdelio" Zygmunta Kaczkowskiego. In his *Nie tylko o Prusie: Szkice*, pp. 125-138. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Wyka, Kazimierz 1967 "Latarnik" na nowo odczytany. In *Ossolineum: Księga pamiątkowa w 150-lecie Zakładu Narodowego imienia Ossolińskich*, pp. 71-82. Wrocław: Ossolineum.