A study prepared as part of the project:

The concept of marriage from the perspective of the theory of imperative requirement

Title of the study:

Family Life in a Country Erased From the Map.

Archetypes of Family Happiness in Nineteenth-Century Polish Literature, Illustrated by Selected Examples

(expert opinion)

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Scientific work subsidized by the state budget under the 'Science for Society' program of the Ministry of Education and Science, project number NdS/537637/2021/2021

In 1866, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, writing to Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, noted that in the Polish national masterpiece, *Pan Tadeusz,*

'[…] the only serious character is the JEW… The rest: troublemakers, oafs, fools, windbags, and two national women:

1. the first one – Telimena, a Moscow mistress,

2. the second one – Zosia: a school girl.'[1]

Later, these critical remarks were repeatedly complemented. Grażyna Borkowska was one of the last to address this issue in more detail, writing that, in fact, the master epic contains no idyllic vision of the family, as 'Tadeusz arrives at his uncle's house. Zosia is raised by Telimena, the grandparents' generation is represented by people not related […] by blood. But they (Gerwazy, Wojski) are the ones who preserve family stories in their memories.'[2]

It should be added that one of the main characters, Jacek Soplica, a husband and a father, never loved his wife and was not particularly concerned about his son Tadeusz, whom he entrusted to his brother's care. Impulsive and domineering Pantler Horeszko, who destroyed the happiness and life of his own child Ewa, was no role model either. The conclusions are obvious: the national epic suffers from a severe lack of women and other characters forming full and happy families.[3] If, therefore, the most prominent work of the era does not present an image of an exemplary, ideal family, one must ask whether such an image was presented on the pages of Polish literature in the 19th century at all.

Let us take a look at the most important and the most popular works that the contemporary reader of nineteenth-century literature should already be familiar with. In addition to Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, the reader surely knows his *Konrad Wallenrod*, has read *Nie-Boska komedia* by Zygmunt Krasiński, *Zemsta* by Aleksander Fredro, *Nad Niemnem* by Eliza Orzeszkowa, or *Moralność pani Dulskiej* by Gabriela Zapolska, the columns by Boy-Żeleński, and also probably

[1] C. Norwid. Pisma wszystkie, ed. J.W. Gomulicki, vol. 9: Listy 1862-1872, Warsaw 1971, p. 223.
[2] G. Borkowska, *Rodzina mityczna – archetypy rodzinne w literaturze polskiej XIX wieku*, [in:] *Rodzina, prywatność, intymność. Dzieje rodziny polskiej w kontekście europejskim. Zbiór studiów pod red. D. Kałwy, A. Wałaszka, A. Żarnowskiej*, Warsaw 2005, p. 128.
[3] With the exception of the Chamberlain and his wife, cf. M. Piechota, *Jeszcze o relacjach rodzinnych*, [in:] *Rodzina, prywatność, intymność*…, p. 14.

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some popular literature – just to name a few and the most widely read works.

Konrad Wallenrod, as Marek Piechota rightly pointed out when concluding his dissertation on family relations in this work,[4] employed one of the Romantic ideals claiming that love for the homeland always had priority over love for the family.[5] Family life is secondary to duties to the country, and the husband (later called Konrad Wallenrod), becomes a tragic hero who, with his decision to embark on the path of falsehood, rejects other values he used to cherish, such as honour, fidelity to his oath, conjugal love, or domestic happiness.

Domestic happiness was also beyond the reach of the protagonists of *Nie-Boska komedia* by Zygmunt Krasiński. Henryk and Maria's marriage was a sham from the beginning.[6] In creating the tragic story of Husband and Wife, Krasiński polemicised against the myths of his time. The ideal love praised by the Romantics as a kinship between two souls was contrasted in this play with earthly vows likened to a commercial contract. In the end, this perfect form of affection turns out to be an illusion, a lie, and a curse. When analysing the work, Maria Janion noted:

'[…] the author of *Nie-Boska komedia* […] suggests that it is possible to overcome an aversion to domestic life through love, by humbling oneself to the simple virtues of kindness, modesty, innocence'.

Having realised that he has become the victim of a satanic plan, Count Henryk seeks happiness at home, from which the researcher draws the following conclusion:

'[…] the painfully exposed ideal of the romantic lover [….] should step aside in the face of the morality of the closed family circle[7]'.

The work covers yet another marital issue of the era. Count Henryk enters into a marriage arranged for the sake of the family's interests and, as we know full well, this was not just a fictional adventure but an actual constant in the life of a 19th century aristocrat. Krasiński explicitly showed how quickly a marriage contracted against the will of the spouses burns out, and how the interests of the

[4] M. Piechota, *Jeszcze o relacjach rodzinnych…*, pp. 13-26.
[5] Ibid., p. 26.
[6] K. Czeczot, *Nie-Boska rodzina. Komedia małżeńska*, [in:] *Inna scena. Konstelacje rodzinne*, ed. A. Adamiecka –Sitek, D. Buchwald, Warsaw 2009, p. 37.
[7] M. Janion, *Zygmunt Krasiński. Debiut i dojrzałość*, Warsaw 1962, pp. 87-92 and 204.

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community and loyalty to the family destroy their happiness.[8] Looking beyond Polish literature, an almost parallel picture of an unhappy marriage suffering for the same fate can be found in the pages of *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. The marriage between Anna Oblonskaya and Alexei Karenin was also a matrimonial contract, combining two prominent names and two fortunes. Similarly to *Nie-boska komedia*, there was no thread of understanding between the spouses and the only person close to Anna was her son, Seryozha, just like Orcio was close to Maria. Both wives paid with other misfortunes for their unhappy marriages – Maria with insanity and Anna with a departure from her husband.

Less dramatic family tales, triggered by the flaws in the characters of the protagonists, fuel the plot of Aleksander Fredro's comedy *Zemsta.* Here, as in most of the texts analysed, the fathers are in charge. Enraged by hatred, Notary Milczek, Wacław's father, is prepared to stand in the way of his son's happiness in order to prevent him from marrying the Cupbearer's daughter.

At the end of the 19th century, with the rise of the emancipation movements, strong female characters appeared more frequently in literature. One example of an empowered woman and despotic mother was the main character in Gabriela Zapolska's *Moralność pani Dulskiej*, a play that mercilessly revealed the dysfunctions of the traditional family of the time. The mother is a woman of extremely strong personality, ruthless and intolerant of opposition, who imposes her own standards (which have little to do with morality) on the family members, demanding total submission. She disregarded the fact that her ruthless behaviour was destroying her children's sensitivity and excluded her husband from family life. She hardly cared about them. The most important thing was appearances. This is why Zbyszko was confined to the four walls of the house in his romantic attempts. There are many similar examples. Portrayals of philistine, hypocritical and intellectually limited families fill the pages of Boy-Żeleński's columns (such as those collected in *Reflektorem przez mrok*).

The overview so far shows that marriages and families in nineteenth-century literature were not necessarily presented as structures ensuring happiness, caring or even striving for the proper formation of the human being growing up within them. Moreover, there are works – such as Stefan

[8] K. Czeczot, *Nie-Boska rodzina. Komedia małżeńska*…., pp. 39-40.

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Żeromski's *Ludzie bezdomni*, for example – which suggest that a family and a home may perhaps bring happiness but with a certain limitation. Doctor Judym, the protagonist of the aforementioned novel, feels that the family he otherwise dreams of will not allow him to fully engage in professional work and social activities. It will steal time that he should and would prefer to spend helping the most needy and the poorest among whom he was born.

A second conclusion – hardly original, by the way – comes to mind: that the literary family of the time was generally unhappy and incomplete. As mentioned above, that is not an original thought, because researchers[9] have already drawn attention to the 'chipped' nineteenth-century home long ago:

'The heroes and heroines of Polish prose of this period most often lack mothers, and in many cases fathers are also missing, necessitating the search for male authorities […].'[10]

The most famous nineteenth-century texts hardly offer any images of normal and peaceful family life. Frequently, there are families without a healthy, normal mother-child or father-child relationship. So what were nineteenth century parents, mothers, and fathers like?

If there was a mother figure portrayed alongside the child in the first half of the 19th century, it was a mother sharing the suffering with the young Pole – an image so well remembered from Mickiewicz's poem *Do matki-Polki* or the third part of his *Dziady*. Some later works (including novels by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, such as *Dziecię Starego Miasta*) also cultivate the image of a mother sharing the suffering of her son committed to the national cause. In Kraszewski's work, the mother, Jędrzejowa, whose fundamental values were Catholic faith, love of the homeland, and the memory of her dead insurgent husband, was willing to do anything for her only son. The mother becomes a monumental figure, one of many literary women of valour.

This was also the vision of a woman and a mother, presented in a lyrical piece by one of the now more forgotten Romantics, Kornel Ujejski:

[9] See for example the above-mentioned study by G. Borkowska, *Rodzina mityczna…,* pp. 123-140, or the paper by K. Kralkowska-Gątkowska, *Męskość, dojrzałość, ojcostwo w powieści drugiej polowy XIX wieku*, [in:] *Rodzina, prywatność, intymność…,* pp. 28-38.
[10] K. Kralkowska-Gątkowska, *Męskość…*,. p. 33.

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Może indziej „puch marny", u nas ty aniołem,
Dusza twoja dusz naszych lepszą jest połową,
Korona naszych zasług nad twoim lśni czołem;
Nieraz w całej ojczyźnie ty prostujesz węgły,
Które nasza niedbałość lub krewność rozprzęgły,
I znów cicho, wytrwale, o! matko i żono,
Nici na nasze tkactwo snuje twe wrzeciono;
W radości tyś nam żaglem , w cierpieniu kotwicą,
Z potopu liść nadziei niesiesz gołębico!

[Though for some 'a thing of fluff', you are an angel to us,
Your soul is the better half of our souls,
The crown of our merits shines above your forehead;
In our homeland, you straighten the corners
Damaged by our carelessness and impulsiveness,
And again, silently, persistently, oh! mother and wife,
Your spindle weaves the threads for our fabric;
You are our sail in happiness, our anchor in suffering,
You carry a leaf of hope from the flood, you dove!]

Kornel Ujejski, Do kobiety[11]

The poem provides a glimpse into the way our history affected the lives of families during the Partitions. Mothers took responsibility for safeguarding Polish identity and national consciousness and preserving family and national memorabilia.[12] The spirit of the homeland was only to be felt at home, under the tender gaze of a patriotic mother who, despite the price she paid (the loss of her

[11] K. Ujejski, *Do kobiety*, [in:] *Wybór poezji i prozy*, ed. K. Poklewska, 3rd edition, Wrocław - Warsaw - Kraków 1992, BN I, 13, p. 8.
[12] Cf. M. Brzóstowicz, *Temat: Rodzina,* "Polonistyka" 1994, issue 4, p. 206.

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husband, child), wholeheartedly supported freedom movements and activities.

What else contributed to creating such an image of the nineteenth-century Polish woman? The author of this article believes that intimist works published as early as the mid-19th century presented the fates of non-fictional characters, neighbours who lived next door and walked the streets of Vilnius, Krzemieniec, and Warsaw. They had such an impact on the collective mythopoetic imagination because they carried the value of truthfulness and uniqueness in the presented stories of brave women and families living next door. One such woman, a valiant mother, was the heroine but also the author of *Pamiętniki z życia* i *Wspomnienia z podróży do Syberii* – Ewa Felińska. In describing her story, the Polish woman did not pose as a role model, as there were few women willing to share her fate. Instead, she prepared a testimony in the form of a description of her and her family's life. Was it a unique story? Certainly not. Similar dramatic stories took place in many Polish patriotic homes but were never attested. Felińska, however, left a mark.

Having married Gerard Feliński, who was not much older than her, Ewa Wendorff became a wife who possessed the virtues of patience and boundless love. Without a whimper, she endured the annoyances, inconveniences, and torments that often began with her husband's ill-advised decisions. The daily worries were compounded by the hardships of the years 1812-1813. The wife was also bothered by her husband's deteriorating health and every illness of their newborn children. As many as four of them brought little joy to their parents – the tragic death of their first-born, Stasio, preceded the passing of Emilia, Amilkar, and Gerardyna. The trials of the first years of married life were therefore a tough lesson of life. After the deaths of their four children, Ewa and Gerard Feliński's marriage suffered its greatest crisis. Fortunately, there was no break-up and the Felińskis were soon consoled with the happy births of Paulina and Alojzy, Zygmunt Szczęsny, Zofia, Julian, Gerardyna, and Wiktoria.[13] Soon (in 1833) Felińska had to survive the death of her husband and, as a

[13] Z. Poniatowska noted: ‚Szczęsny was the bravest and wittiest, and Julek was the most serious ever since childhood. He, like Paulinka, seemed never to have been a child, and watched all things as though from outside this world, from the position that God and those liberated from their bodies take when watching. Their grandmother also loved the two of them more than all the others, and their parents were most hopeful about Szczęsny, although they sometimes punished him severely for his rebelliousness. I was closest in age with Julek, less than two years apart, and our love was unwavering. Although younger, he was more sensible' (Z. Poniatowska, *Ostatnie wspomnienia matki dla najlepszych dzieci* [*Pamiętnik Zofii Poniatowskiej – rodzonej siostry ks. arcbpa Zygmunta Szczęsnego Felińskiego*], Vilnius, 1881-1898 [Archiwum Zgrom. SS. Franc. Rodziny Maryi, ref. no F-g-9], p. 20).

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widow, face the necessity of raising and educating a bunch of her children. At the time of their father's death, Paulina was 12 years old, and Wiktoria a year old. But the woes did not end there either, as it suddenly became apparent that the children had also been 'orphaned' by their mother who, disregarding the consequences, joined Szymon Konarski's conspiracy and soon became his main collaborator. Arrested, she was taken to Vilnius, where the Commission of Inquiry[14] was to decide on her further fate. Felińska had to leave her paralysed grandmother and six children at home. In view of this, the eldest daughter, Paulina, whose only support was her mother's letters, stepped in to look after the family. The commission in Vilnius did not resolve the case, so Felińska was sent to Kiev. When the trial was concluded in February 1839, she heard a devastating sentence – indefinite exile. Felińska was to be administratively exiled 'for perpetual residence', without loss of state rights. This was the letter she addressed to her children before leaving the country:

'[…] I am getting on; I want to give my last moments to you, my dear children. I will not describe to you my grief at being separated from you, for this cannot be expressed in words. I will not write any words of comfort – may God send it to you. […] I am healthy, I need nothing, everything has been provided for me with motherly care: money, things, food. For God's sake, respect your health, this is one thing I ask of you; God will give you the rest. You will be looked after by: the Grocholskis,[15] the Modzelewskis,[16] the Rottermunds,[17] the Lithuanian family, as well as Pinińska[18] and Łepkowska,[19]

[14] Hereinafter: the Commission.

[15] This refers to the family of Franciszek Grocholski, owner of an estate in Oderady (Z. S. Feliński, *Paulina. Córka Ewy Felińskiej*, Lviv 1885, p. 134).

[16] Jan Modzelewski – resident of Kiev. Together with his wife (née Podhorodeńska), a neighbour of the Felińskis from Volhynia, he took care of the exile's children: Zygmunt Szczęsny and Wiktoria, who, thanks to their efforts, was sent to Michalina Stanzani, née Dziekońska. Ibid.

[17] The guardianship was to be exercised by Henrietta Błędowska, née Działyńska, who remarried to Celestyn Rottermund after the death of her first husband Aleksander. Ibid.

[18] Ludwika Pinińska, née Łepkowska, wife of Edward, participant in Konarski's conspiracy, exiled to Vologda[?], then Astrakhan. Ibid.

[19] Zofia Poniatowska's *Pamiętnik* included another form of the name: 'Łebkowska'. This is also where the would-be guardian of the Felińskis is characterised most fully: 'In Kiev, Paulinka met Mrs. Łebkowska, née Babińska, a young widow […]. This young and grieving widow became very fond of our Paulinka, and having no children of her own and no intention of remarrying, she wanted to take care of the two of us, me and my youngest brother Julek. […] Mrs Łebkowska (Klementyna) seemed very nice to me and I was very attached to her, but there was also a second proposal, very alluring to me, from the wife of Chairman Rottermund (the former wife of General Błędowski) and the mother of my beloved Wicia. She had asked her parents for us to be brought up together, but Paulinka, despite her heartfelt gratitude, firmly refused, thinking that being brought up a poor girl with a millionaire's only child […] could be disastrous for me. […] Paulinka travelled once more to Kiev to finally take Wiktusia to her guardian and Julek to the

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who assisted me on my departure and promised to look after you. So far I do not know where I am supposed to go, the decree will be read to me when I have boarded. Be well, be calm, rely on God… I am already being rushed.'[20]

The children ended up with strangers. Such were the Polish mothers… Therefore, any attempt to characterise families aiming at generalisations has always been a simplification. One of the more comprehensive efforts was made by Katarzyna Drąg. The researcher wrote:

'The portrayal of the family as a stronghold of Polish identity was dealt with in a number of ways in the history of nineteenth-century literature. It was particularly visible in literature exploring the January Uprising […].' The multi-generational family is portrayed as a school of patriotic behaviour, obedience, courage, and devotion to the national cause. Many works show the perfect harmony of such patriotic families, in which each member, depending on their gender, age, position and abilities, fulfils the duties towards their homeland.[21]

Felińska became an exile, and her son Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński became a saint.

In the second part of the century, the child was also often accompanied by the father, a man (according to the classification of masculinity scales adopted by Kazimierz Pospiszyl[22]) perceived as a Sage (experienced, empiricist) or King. It should be added that it was not always the biological parent but one who wished to step into such a role. The male characters described above were particularly common in the works of Bolesław Prus. In *Lalka*, the real father-figure for Stanisław Wokulski was not his biological parent, squandering the remnants of his money on unnecessary trials, but rather Dr Michał Szuman. In *Emancypantki*, Professor Dębicki became an authority figure for Stefan Solski; in *Faraon*, the priests Menes and Pentuer were role models for Ramzes.

It is also possible to identify texts in which the roles are completely reversed. The lost father

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gymnasium in Zhytomyr. It appears that Julek was placed there at the expense of Mrs. Łebkowska, who came to Krzemieniec with the returning Paulinka in order to meet me and take me with her. […] She pressed me close to her heart and I felt some warmth from that heart and clung to her in such a way that I have felt gratitude and affection to her all my life, even though the plans changed when my uncle sent money for my grandmother's journey and wrote that he would be happy to press all of us close to his heart' (ibid., pp. 56-59).

[20] Z. S. Feliński, *Paulina. Córka Ewy Felińskiej*, Lviv 1885, pp. 129-130.

[21] K. Drąg, *Tyle setek lat istniało nasze szlacheckie społeczeństwo stosunkami rodzinnymi, niech istnieje i dalej. Jak proza polska na przełomie XIX i XX wieku odzwierciedlała takie stwierdzenie [in:] Rodzina czasów przełomów. Literackie diagnozy od XIX do XX wieku*, ed. K. Kralkowska-Gątkowska, B. Nowacka, Katowice 2011, p. 92.

[22] See K. Pospiszyl, *Ojciec a wychowanie dziecka,* Warsaw 2007. Mainly passages on pp. 35-37 and 165.

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Benedykt Korczyński is guided through the new era by his son Witold, and Justyna by her future husband Jan.[23] In this novel, the marriages and whole families are mostly (as we would say today) highly dysfunctional. Benedykt has no time for his wife, being busy with the struggle to maintain his estate. He cannot, or perhaps does not try to, communicate with her. The husband's life revolves around the affairs of Korczyn, the wife's – around migraines, globuses, and low-quality romantic fiction. The children are brought up by a distant relative, Marta, who acts as the keeper of home life.[24] Representing the younger generation, Zygmunt Korczyński married for money. And while Benedykt could be accused of neglecting his wife, Zygmunt deserves to be charged with a far more serious crime – lack of love. He does not love Klotylda and constantly disrespects her. Kirło is immature. He pushed all his domestic responsibilities off onto his wife Maria and spent his life visiting local manors and chasing social gossip.

The Bohatyrowicz family is the only one that demonstrates love. Although their home is motherless, it is filled with mutual love, respect, and work. Anzelm is an authority figure, and not only for the household members.

Numerous examples could be given, but there is no such need. Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska regretfully stated as follows: 'The later the worse. Young Poland prose brings a striking degeneration of male characters. […] And many of these modifications and enforced by realistic mimesis'.[25] It may therefore be surprising to read such generalisations as the following:

'The examples presented […] warrant the conclusion that traditional depictions of the family in the prose of the Partitions period were associated with important and very specific functions. […] Families become the cradles of Polish identity and patriotism, the strongholds of culture and morality, a value in themselves. The families from the novels are a sort of reflection of social and national consciousness. Perhaps one should discuss the missionary nature of these families and the parenetic function of such portrayals. […] Literary portrayals seem to confirm the opinions of historians or sociologists dealing with the issue of the family who emphasise that the traditional

[23] More on fatherhood: Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, *Męskość*… pp. 28-37.
[24] The aforementioned Grażyna Borkowska raised questions about other issues: 'Is Emilia really a useless, aloof, sickly doll? Is there nothing to explain the growing resentment towards her husband? Is Benedykt's frigidness unquestionably justified?' Ibid., *op. cit*., p. 125.
[25] K. Kralkowska-Gątkowska, *Męskość*… p. 37.

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family was based on a sense of permanence and stability, and that the young generation was taught the principles of obedience, diligence, respect for family traditions, and the everlasting hierarchy of values.'[26]

This opinion is only partly true. The author was aware of this, because she analysed SELECTED works by

'[…] Kajetan Abgarowicz, Wojciech Dzieduszycki, Wilhelm Feldman and Artur Gruszecki. These papers do not, of course, allow a comprehensive reconstruction of the literary portrayal of the family of the time and place, but they do allow several conclusions to be drawn about the way in which noble landed gentry families functioned; they provide a glimpse into the missions ascribed to them – the mission of upholding the traditional family model.'[27]

Texts selected to suit the theme. If one does not make such a selection, not to write a manipulation, pointing to the most well-known ones, almost from the compulsory reading list, it turns out that 'traditional' families, providing a sense of stability, were scarcely to be found, and the young generation was not always 'taught the principles of obedience, diligence, respect for family traditions, and the everlasting hierarchy of values'. The 19th century (as every century) offered both, somewhat idyllic and highly dysfunctional depictions of families.

It is time to ask the fundamental question: why is it that when we think or write about the 19th century, we almost immediately picture that ideal, loving family, one ready to make the greatest sacrifices for an equally beloved homeland, suffused with the spirit of Polish identity, which was inseparably linked to the Catholic faith, respect for ancestors, and national mementos? Why do we fail to see, or refuse to see (as readers of fiction) its flaws? Its incompleteness and imperfection? Probably because the family is among the most important values in the culture. Especially in European culture, marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood are a kind of social sacredness Readers of nineteenth-century literature sought and continue to seek this sacredness, as if unwilling to see the blemishes that have appeared on it. It should also be added that our perception of the family at the time was built not only on literature but also on popular cultural myths. Readers remember images of mothers blessing their sons, husbands setting off for the uprising; they recall young cadets whose

[26] K. Drąg, *Tyle setek lat*…, pp. 93-94.
[27] Ibid., p. 87.

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moral backbone was shaped by their patriotic homes. The history is linked to literary fiction, as the author of this paper attempted to show using the example of Ewa Felińska. Images of such mothers were, admittedly, preserved in such titles as Adam Mickiewicz's *Do matki Polki*, which foretells humiliation, defeat, and oblivion as indispensable components of a young Pole's fate, or the third part of *Dziady*, which portrays the suffering Mrs. Rollison. We owe the archetype of the nineteenth-century family to the canvases of Artur Grottger or Aleksander Sochaczewski. Thus, the image, in which the family of that time is the cradle, the haven of Polish identity and faith, is eagerly maintained. A place where a young man is prepared for his role as an insurgent, a conspirator, a patriot who loves his country above all else, a role he consciously takes on. The question of who shapes such a youngster and what roles the parents take on is less important. They teach faith, mutual affection, the love of freedom, and the longing for the rebirth of a free Poland. Literature initially promoted this image, but by the second half of the 19th century, when it did not shy away from mimicry, there were already plenty of depictions of dysfunctional families in which the aforementioned values did not constitute the basis on which the new generation was to build its own and its country's future.

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