

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GERMAN DRAMA

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Overview

The origins of German literature, unlike the origins of the Romance literatures, retreat into the margins of the Roman Empire. In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus provides us with our first extensive account of the German tribe, the Germani, and gives us the sense of a warlike but socially organized people, whose strength and virtues were in some ways to be emulated by the increasingly decadent Romans. From that first semi primitive exposure to the great world, to the first individual voices of German literature, would require a millenium of tribal jostling, linguistic development and branching out from the native Germanic tongues—which were totally foreign to the Latin language families—and arguably a synthesis of pagan with the gradually adopted Christian culture, from which would come the rich and original textures of the literature we now consider German.

The first genres to meet us, in this new literary world, are epic and lyric poetry. The epic tradition in Middle High German, the Classical period (1180-1250), is of two distinct kinds: court and popular. The court epic is written for the nobility—with noble patronage—and is accordingly polite and cultivated, frequently sprinkling French words; the tales that are told typically—as in the epic *Parzifal*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220)—concern chivalry, and the high honor and courtliness culture implied by chivalry. The popular epic tradition, exemplified by *The Niebelungenlied* (1200 A.D.), blends ancient Germanic tales of warfare, revenge, and court life, with an overlay of Christian values, which blend forcefully, providing a ‘folk epic’ closer to Homer’s work than was anything produced out of the court tradition. The traditions of lyric poetry, in mediaeval Germany, are preserved from two major groups: Minnesingers, ‘singers about love,’ who emulated French troubador poetry, and whose greatest exemplar was Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230 A.D.); and Mastersingers, who flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, were best represented by Hans Sachs, and who were an organized guild of professional traveling poets. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) will stand in here for the brilliance of the German mystical tradition, which expressed itself in a poetry that qualifies it as the highest literature.

16th Century German Literature

As we enter the sixteenth century we must note that while England, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy were by this stage moving vigorously into the rediscovery of the Classics, and the power of their Romanic tradition, the Germans—but one cannot refer to them as such, for they were still four centuries away from nationhood—were barely starting to harvest their cultural traditions. And yet, complexly enough, there was cultural movement, from with the ‘Germany’ of the sixteenth century, which was to have exceptionally far reaching effect on subsequent centuries throughout Europe, indeed throughout the world.

From the very first, the humanist movement took a unique direction in north-central Europe. In the first place the revival of classical literature, especially Latin, was for Italy—and to some extent for France and Spain—a revival of its own past glories, while for Germany the Renaissance was of foreign origin. Furthermore humanism appealed primarily to the intellectual elite in Germany, who could speak Greek and Latin, whereas it appealed to a far wider audience in the countries where the languages were derived from Latin. Instead of an Italianate Renaissance, it might be said, Germany turned with fervor toward a kind of religious Renaissance, the Reformation.

It should not, though, be assumed that humanism made no headway in Germany. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1455-1522) and others became great scholars of classical languages. The invention of the printing press, in the mid-15th century, did much to stimulate reading and learning, and at least fifteen universities were founded in Germany between 1538-1545 A.D. Martin Luther himself was a friend to classical learning, except where it clashed with his religious beliefs.

17th Century German Literature

The historical event of huge importance for Germany, in the seventeenth century, was the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which was brought on by the Hapsburgs' renewed attempts to stamp out Protestants—thus, by the continuing inter faith conflict opened up Martin Luther, and a century after the Reformation mired in power-turf issues which were decidedly not theological. The Protestants were aided in the war by Denmark, Sweden, and France, and once again they won freedom of worship. Such freedom, however, was dearly bought. Germany was so utterly devastated and so nearly depopulated (about two thirds of the population perished) that it was unable to recover for nearly a century.

The century was for the most part literarily barren, with important exceptions made for the religious/visionary poetries of Jacob Boehme and Angelus Silesius, and the fascinating novel *Simplicissimus* (1669) by Grimmelshausen.

18th century German Literature

The 18th century, especially the second half of it, is arguably the richest period in German cultural life, and the period of its influence over world wide culture, to this date. Although the country was still a hodgepodge of more or less independent states bounds together in a loose confederation, Prussia began to emerge as the dominant power, and glimmerings of a national consciousness began to appear. In the Seven Years War (1756-1763) the brilliant leadership of Frederick II (the Great, ruled 1740-1786) enabled Prussia, assisted by troops from Hanover and subsidies from England, to withstand the armies of France, Austria, and Russia.

In Germany, as in most of the other European countries, rationalism and deism were beginning to attract many adherents. These systems of belief were opposed first by pietism (a revival of simple piety, plus religious emotionalism) and later by Rousseauism. The theories of Diderot and Rousseau about democracy, the rights of man, and individual liberty led to no political upheaval in Germany—but in the social and intellectual realms Rousseauism imposed on rationalism helped to foster the indigenous movement known as *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) 'which had as its objectives a reform of political and social life and a regeneration of literature.' After mid century there was a burst of great writing—one thinks of this as the Classical Age of German literature—Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Herder, and from there, passing into the following century, the rich contributions of Germany to the Romantic movement, and to its philosophic drivers, Kant and a lineage of greats

Goethe

Goethe's Life. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was born in Frankfurt, to a prosperous and respected city family. His mother was the daughter of the city mayor, while his father, though living off his capital, was trained in the law—though perhaps never satisfied with what he himself had accomplished, thus ready to lavish any assistance on his young son. (Goethe himself was thus an unusual example, from among German writers, of both a privileged and fostering background.) After a traditional gymnasium education—with a strong start in a variety of languages, stretching from Greek to Hebrew—and upon matriculation Goethe rapidly took charge of his immense intellectual capacities—writing, reading, meeting people—and brought out the text which would make him an overnight celebrity. The Sorrows of Young Werther, published in 1775, touched a powerful sentimental and literary chord with the reading public, and drew attention on the highest levels to this young man of 25. The Duke of the small kingdom of Saxe-Weimar, who was himself only 18, ennobled the 25 year old Goethe, and made him a member of his Privy Council, where Goethe stayed for ten years—while off and on, for the rest of his life, he remained either close to the Weimar court or resident there.

Goethe's achievement. It is hard to encompass, even in a profile survey, the many-sidedness and consistent brilliance of Goethe's long life of books, actions, and personal influences. Among the influences on him Herder should be highlighted, for from the time when they met, in Strasbourg in 1770, Goethe realized that an almost national-level literary responsibility was impending on him. Herder saw in Goethe the mind, and linguistic/creative genius, that could give voice to the German historical and now national consciousness, and so he brought Goethe to a specially high sense of his potential and responsibility. What Goethe did with this mandate in some sense satisfied Herder's hopes—Goethe listened carefully to the voices of German literature—writers like Hans Sachs and the 16th century voices that surrounded the Goetz, of his path-breaking early drama, *Goetz von Berlichingen* (1771), as well as to Shakespeare. And throughout his writing life, in poems and plays he reached back into his national traditions—most powerfully in his tragedy of *Faust* (worked and reworked intermittently between 1790-1830; and building from an image of the mediaeval German magus, Dr. Faustus.) But Goethe's achievement went beyond this response to Herder's mandate. So far did it go that one cannot imagine a modern writer with more claims to the achievement of a Renaissance genius.

Goethe in literature and science. In the most fragmentary way, we have hinted at the power of Goethe's literary achievement: plays; tales; unique novels like *Wilhelm Meister* (1821-1829), travel accounts like the *Italienische Reise* (1816-1817), which recounts the crossing of the Alps into that Italy which was a kind of artistic promised land; criticism, like *Literary Sansculottism* (1795), which calls on the German people to read and be educated by their own, instead of foreign, authors. The outpouring of powerful and fascinating imaginative works seems to have no end but death! What can we say of a man who has left us more than 10,000 letters, more than 3,000 often very detailed drawings, and who has contributed consequentially to the development of a number of branches of science: the theory of colors; the interpretation of cloud formations; the evolution and morphology of plant forms; the geology of volcanoes and tectonic plates. Nor is it as though Goethe was forever at work on his projects, for he had one period of serious illness, a heart problem, to deal with and rest from, and any number of romantic engagements, in the course of which he enriched his skill set with a keen sensitivity to the emotional tussles of the human condition.

Reading

Primary source reading

Boyle, Nicholas, Goethe: *The Poet and the Age*, 2 vols., (1991,2000).

Secondary source reading

Bruford, W.H., *Culture and Society in Classical Weimar, 1775-1806*, 1962.

Further reading

Reed, T.J., *The Classical Centre: Goethe and Weimar, 1775-1832*, 1986.

Original language reading

Chiarini, Paolo, ed. *Bausteine zu einem neuen Goethe*, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

Does Goethe's activity as a natural scientist seem to you to play a role in his creative work? What about the character of Faust himself, originally a kind of mediaeval magus? Does Faust display the traits of an early modern scientist? Read in Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, the journal of his journey over the Alps to Italy. Does Goethe have the observant eye of a scientist as he travels? Is the scientific eye consistent with the imaginative eye, in the same individual?

Goethe frequently deals with issues of the moral and cultural development of young people, from the unfortunate Werther to the more fortunate Wilhelm Meister. Goethe is also very interested in the evolution of the human being and in the developmental stages of plant life. Do you see a connection there? Does the Bildungsroman—check it again, please—seem to you close to the scientific perspective onto organic and human evolution?

Excerpt (from Werther, Book 1) <http://www.bartleby.com/315/1/11.html>

MAY 4.

HOW happy I am that I am gone! My dear friend, what a thing is the heart of man! To leave you, from whom I have been inseparable, whom I love so dearly, and yet to feel happy! I know you will forgive me. Have not other attachments been specially appointed by fate to torment a head like mine? Poor Leonora! and yet I was not to blame. Was it my fault, that, whilst the peculiar charms of her sister afforded me an agreeable entertainment, a passion for me was engendered in her feeble heart? And yet am I wholly blameless? Did I not encourage her emotions? Did I not feel charmed at those truly genuine expressions of nature, which, though but little mirthful in reality, so often amused us? Did I not—but oh! what is man, that he dares so to accuse himself? My dear friend, I promise you I will improve; I will no longer, as has ever been my habit, continue to ruminate on every petty vexation which fortune may dispense; I will enjoy the present, and the past shall be for me the past. No doubt you are right, my best of friends, there would be far less suffering amongst mankind, if men—and God knows why they are so fashioned—did not employ their imaginations so assiduously in recalling the memory of past sorrow, instead of bearing their present lot with equanimity.

Be kind enough to inform my mother that I shall attend to her business to the best of my ability, and shall attend her the earliest information about it. I have seen my aunt, and find that she is very far from being the disagreeable person our friends allege her to be. She is a lively, cheerful woman, with the best of hearts. I explained to her my mother's wrongs with regard to that part of her portion which has been withheld from her. She told me the motives and reasons of her own conduct, and the terms on which she is willing to give up the whole, and to do more than we have asked. In short, I cannot write further upon this subject at present; only assure my mother that all will go on well. And I have again observed, my dear friend, in this trifling affair, that misunderstandings and neglect occasion more mischief in the world than even malice and wickedness. At all events, the two latter are of less frequent occurrence.

In other respects I am very well off here. Solitude in this terrestrial paradise is a genial balm to my mind, and the young spring cheers with its bounteous promises my oftentimes misgiving heart. Every tree, every bush, is full of flowers; and one might wish charming variety, and form the most lovely valleys. The garden is simple; and it is easy to perceive, even upon your first entrance, that the plan was not designed by a scientific gardener, but by a man who wished to give himself up here to the enjoyment of his own sensitive heart. Many a tear have I already shed to the memory of its departed master in a summer-house which is now reduced to ruins, but was his favourite resort, and now is mine. I shall soon be master of the place. The gardener has become attached to me within the last few days, and he will lose nothing thereby himself transformed into a butterfly, to float about in this ocean of perfume, and find his whole existence in it.

Schiller

Friedrich Schiller. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) was brought up in tightened financial circumstances, the only son of a military doctor—Schiller had five sisters—and obliged to move frequently during his youth. His father, however, favored him and took him along with him, on assignments and missions, and Schiller grew up well educated, with strong gymnasium training in the Classics. In his late teens he seemed destined for the ministry—which appealed to his imagination—but later he shifted these choices toward law and then medicine, finally ending up for a short time, as a military surgeon. (Throughout his brief life Schiller, who died at 45 of tuberculosis, remained fascinated with self-cures for the many ailments that plagued him.) After being fired from that post, he wandered for several years from city to city, relatively poverty stricken. (It is not to be imagined that ‘wandered’ means he was idle, for among other things, Schiller composed his Europe-awakening play, *The Robbers* (1781), during these years, not to mention several other overnight success dramas.) Thanks to his brilliant productivity during these years of no formal occupation, Schiller found himself offered a Professorship at the University of Jena—with Goethe’s assistance—and an annuity which helped him to restore his financial security. In 1794 Schiller received a significant salary to edit a new literary/intellectual journal, *Die Horen*, The Hours, to which he asked Goethe to contribute. That was the beginning of a close friendship between these two masters of ‘aesthetic humanism.’ In 1799 Schiller moved to Weimar to work more closely with Goethe. Schiller died there in 1805.

Schiller’s themes and masterpieces. Schiller remained concerned, throughout his writing, with the theme of freedom, and, as he matured in his self-awareness, in the deep relation between freedom and the aesthetic, as well as the ethical. Despite appearances, the fabric of Schiller’s work is more unified and completed than that of Goethe—who was forever undertaking lateral adventures in thought and writing. It should be noted that Schiller was a historian and essayist as well as a dramatist and lyric poet. As a Professor at Jena he wrote a History of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and a profusion of distinguished essays on topics of Greek art and society. (One of the finest, ‘*How the Ancients depicted Death*,’ characterizes the kinds of bas reliefs left by fifth century Athenian sculptors on the tombs of the departed, in the Kerameikos cemetery. Schiller penetrates deeply into the Greek compromise with death obtained by the Hellenes through beauty.) As a lyric poet, Schiller was prone to deal with ideas—especially ethical ideas—but to tweak them, so that the quality of the language forestalled any aridity in the thought. Schiller’s dramas, of which we mentioned only *The Robbers*, play boldly over events in German history, targeting clash areas where love, honor, and remorse are thrust into forceful interaction. (It may be said that these plays, like *Intrigue and Love* (1784) and *Wallenstein* (1798), are widely considered among his greatest achievements.)

Schiller and Kant. The culminating thought for Schiller is his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), in which he sums up many of the drivers of his whole body of expression, and especially his relation to the epoch shaping philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), profoundly dissected the interrelation between aesthetic and ethical judgments. (His complex and powerful argument is that the ethical is a far higher category than the aesthetic; which, in a word, is the point Schiller sets out to contest, in his Letters.) In contesting Kant’s position, Schiller develops the notion of the aesthetic as the realm of appearance as liberty, a condition in which we can penetrate to the ethical through the realm of the aesthetic.

Reading

Primary source reading

Sharpe, Leslie, *Friedrich Schiller: Drama, Thought, and Politics*, 1991.

Secondary source reading

Martinson, Steven, *A Companion to the Works of Friedrich Schiller*, 1982.

Further reading

Will, Frederic, *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic thought from Winckelmann to Victor Cousin*, 1958.

Original language reading

Riedel, Wolfgang, *Der Spaziergang. Aesthetik der Landschaft und Geschichtsphilosophie der Natur bei Schiller*, 1989.

Suggested paper topics

Does it seem a significant part of Schiller's skill set that he was both an academic historian—a scholar—and a creator of powerful dramas? Consider the fact that Schiller's plays—Don Carlos, Wallenstein—are almost entirely devoted to historical themes. Does Schiller write these plays with the eye of a 'scholar' of history, or does he transmute the raw materials of history into a vision we would call art?

As a student of Immanuel Kant, and of the Greek classics—both literature and sculpture—Schiller is deeply concerned to harmonize the claims of both the aesthetic and the moral dimensions of human nature. How does he attempt to do this, through the category of 'freedom'? Is he on the right track? Can the beautiful and the good co-exist in the same value system?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/columbus-2/>

Amalia

Angel-fair, Walhalla's charms displaying,
Fairer than all mortal youths was he;
Mild his look, as May-day sunbeams straying
Gently o'er the blue and glassy sea.

And his kisses!--what ecstatic feeling!
Like two flames that lovingly entwine,
Like the harp's soft tones together stealing
Into one sweet harmony divine,--

Soul and soul embraced, commingled, blended,
Lips and cheeks with trembling passion burned,
Heaven and earth, in pristine chaos ended,
Round the blissful lovers madly turn'd.

He is gone--and, ah! with bitter anguish
Vainly now I breathe my mournful sighs;
He is gone--in hopeless grief I languish
Earthly joys I ne'er again can prize!

Columbus

Steer on, bold sailor--Wit may mock thy soul that sees the land,
And hopeless at the helm may droop the weak and weary hand,
Yet ever--ever to the West, for there the coast must lie,
And dim it dawns, and glimmering dawns before thy reason's eye;
Yea, trust the guiding God--and go along the floating grave,
Though hid till now--yet now behold the New World o'er the wave!
With genius Nature ever stands in solemn union still,
And ever what the one foretells the other shall fulfil.

19th century German Literature

The conquests of Napoleon Bonaparte dealt a severe blow to the hopes of the German patriots and those who were beginning to make Germany aware of herself as a nation. French domination lasted from 1803-1813. As usually is the case, military attacks did not extinguish nationalist zeal, but fanned the flames higher; and uniting against the common enemy helped to bring the loosely confederated states closer together. Some of the dramas and lyrics of the great poets—especially *Minna von Barnhelm* by Lessing, Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, and Goethe's *Faust (Part I)*; published 1808—gave the German speaking states an illustrious common heritage and emphasized the idea of a common fatherland.

The German armies that helped defeat Napoleon in 1813 had been promised various reforms, including more political liberty and a constitutional government. Their expectations were disappointed. A policy of reaction, inaugurated by Metternich in Austria, was adopted by most of the states; and participation in the government and freedom of the press and of speech were denied to the people. The period of reaction and absolutism continued for several decades, but popular discontent grew so strong that it became open rebellion in 1848. Then some steps toward constitutional government were taken, and some of the absolutist policies were abolished. In 1871 the German people were given quite modern social legislation, under Chancellor Otto Bismarck.

In the meantime, tremendous progress toward national unity was made. In 1815 Austria allied itself with some of the other states in the German confederation; in 1834 the formation of the Zollverein began real unification; and in 1866 the North German Confederation was formed. Finally Germany defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870), and William I was declared Emperor of the German Empire in 1871.

Heinrich von Kleist

The Life of Kleist. Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) was a German poet, dramatist, and novella writer who contributed richly to the formation of the new Romantic imagination. He was born in Frankfurt am Oder, showed very little interest in schooling, and in 1792, at the age of seventeen, he entered the Prussian army. He took part in the Rhein campaign (1796) and in 1799, at the age of twenty two, he retired from the Army. He went for a while to Viadrina University, to study law and philosophy, then took a minor functionary position with the Prussian Finance Ministry. From that position he requested and received a leave of absence, during which he began what we would have to describe as a fairly brief life full of wanderings. (As a young man he told his sister that 'life must be lived according to plan,' and yet Kleist's life seems, to the outsider anyhow, to be a vivid counter example to this maxim.) Kleist paid a visit to Paris, then went to Switzerland, where he stayed for a while. A trip to Weimar brought him acquaintance with Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland, and then, when he had returned to his regular post, he was sent on extended assignment to Koenigsberg. By this time his life, but not his writing, was nearly at an end. (His writing, we see below, was continuous throughout his career and wandering life.) The end of the life continues to haunt us. Captivated by the pessimism and cultural despair of his lover, Henriette Vogel, he joins her in a suicide pact, and carries through.

The Work of Kleist. The dramatist and novella writer, Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811), shares a deep psychological insight with his contemporary and fellow dramatist Franz Grillparzer, but unlike Grillparzer, who was interested in bourgeois psychological tragedy, Kleist develops his themes with an eye to their objective correlatives, in particular the workings of the law. *The Broken Jug* (1808) is a comedy with a serious twist. A local judge—who is clubfooted and resembles Sophocles' Oedipus-- has been harassing a pretty young girl. As he leaves her bedroom one evening he knocks off and breaks a treasured water jug belonging to the girl's mother. The tale involves the skein of events by which the judge finds himself in the position of trying the case of the 'broken water jug.' The comic/humiliating consequences, of this turn of events, turn the law on its head, and 'justify virtue' and the integrity of the young girl's fidelity to her fiancé. The novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1811), written toward the end of Kleist's life, takes a subtle look at the integrity of the law. Michael is a farmer who has been seriously mistreated by a local landowner. He turns to the law for redress, but does not receive it. Michael determines to take revenge into his own hands, and with the growing violence of his anger turns to means increasingly violent. The story is yours to interpret. Who is finally in the wrong? The indifference of the law to Michael's case has inspired him to take action against the law. In the end, but subtly, the law wins the case.

Kleist as Thinker. Heinrich von Kleist wrote a number of remarkable essays, in which he penetrated deeply into the issues of human consciousness, reflecting, as did all his major contemporaries, a concern with fundamental philosophical issues. Aside from his fascinating essay on the puppet theater, in which he bemoans the ills brought to humans by their self-consciousness, and according loss of grace, his most remarkable contribution, still in the same vein, is his '*On the gradual development of thought in the process of speaking*,' in which he presents a thoroughly modern analysis of the disadvantages of self-awareness in the thought and speech process.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Major Works of Heinrich von Kleist, ed./trans. Robert Helbling, 1975.

Secondary source reading

Brown Meldrum, Hilda, Heinrich von Kleist. *The Ambiguity of Art and the Necessity of Form*, 1998.

Further reading

Lampert, F. J., *German Classical Drama: Theatre, Humanity, Nation*, 1990.

Original language reading

Ohff, Heinz, *Heinrich von Kleist: ein preussisches Scicksal*, 2004.

Suggested paper topics

Read and review Kleist's essay on the puppet theater. Consider what he is trying to report, concerning the problem of self-consciousness. Does he see value in self-consciousness, which is often considered a hallmark of the human condition? Does he want us to become like puppets?

In *The Broken Jug*, Kleist introduces a mixture of humor, irony, and tragedy. Do you see this mixture, which also appears in the work and thought of Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffman, and Friedrich Schlegel, as characteristic of the imaginative enterprise of Romantic literature?

Excerpt https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/54427.Heinrich_von_Kleist

“The kiss and the bite are such close cousins that in the heat of love they are too readily confounded.”

“We see that in the organic world, to the same degree that reflection gets darker and weaker, grace grows ever more radiant and dominant. But just as two lines intersect on one side of a point, and after passing through infinity, suddenly come together again on the other side; or the image in a concave mirror suddenly reappears before us after drawing away into the infinite distance, so too, does grace return once perception, as it were, has traversed the infinite--such that it simultaneously appears the purest in human bodily structures that are either devoid of consciousness or which possess an infinite consciousness, such as in the jointed manikin or the god.”

“Misconceptions are unavoidable now that we've eaten of the Tree of Knowledge. But Paradise is locked and bolted, and the cherubim stands behind us. We have to go on and make the journey round the world to see if it is perhaps open somewhere at the back.”

“In M---, an important town in northern Italy, the widowed Marquise of O---, a lady of unblemished reputation and the mother of several well-brought-up children, inserted the following announcement in the newspapers: that she had, without knowledge of the cause, come to find herself in a certain situation; that she would like the father of the child she was expecting to disclose his identity to her; that she was resolved, out of consideration to her family, to marry him.”

“Does that mean”, I said in some bewilderment, “that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?”

“Of course”, he said, “but that's the final chapter in the history of the world.”

Grillparzer

The life of Grillparzer. Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872), was an Austrian playwright, born in Vienna. He is particularly famed for his on the whole very popular tragedies, and for having given the funeral oration for the composer Ludwig Beethoven. His father was a serious pedant and a lawyer of some standing in Vienna, and his mother came from a distinguished musical family in the city. Franz entered the University of Vienna as a law student in 1807, then passed some years in the usual transitional occupation, tutoring for private families, then went on to assume a Civil Servant post. For the remainder of his work life he remained a middle grade civil servant, concluding his work tenure with the post of Director of Archives at the Hofkammer, the court council. Grillparzer loved to travel, never married—some found him ‘cold and distant-- and led a quiet life until celebrity forced him into the open in his later years. While effectively employed, throughout his life, Grillparzer was known to suffer from periods of depression.

The Historical Position of the Work of Grillparzer. Grillparzer like Schiller, Lessing, and Goethe, turned to the stage for his most serious work. (He published some other work, of interest: an autobiography, completed in 1853, and recounting his life through 1836; many fragments of political and social commentary, noteworthy for their insightful remarks on society and politics; some remarkable prose work, such as *The Poor Fiddler* (1847). But there is a difference between Grillparzer and these other classicist dramatists, who preceded him by at least two generations, and who wrote in fervently different times and from cultural perspectives that by Grillparzer’s time were to be beginning to seem outdated, as well as inescapably powerful. There is a psychological modernity, in many of Grillparzer’s plays—say in *Sappho* (1818) or *The Waves of Love and of the Ocean* (1831)—that contributes a ‘realistic’ tone to what is in fact a ‘Romantic’ production. (The closest parallel to Grillparzer’s work would be that of Heinrich von Kleist.)

The character of Grillparzer’s work. Grillparzer’s sense of tragedy is grounded in the individual person’s tragic sense and its tragic consequences; a state of affairs frequently driven by the conflict between duty and personal desire. (This is the Romantic dilemma, laid across an inheritance of brilliant classical achievements, in Goethe and Schiller, but aspiring to represent the new zones of passion and personal drive ushered in by the nineteenth century.) The short, classically formed play, *Sappho* (1818), illustrates Grillparzer’s power. Sappho, who is already an ideal of poetic genius, on Lesbos, returns to the island with a younger man, with whom she has fallen in love, longing at last to ‘live life to the fullest,’ to be an ordinary woman around the house. That is the drive of her personal longing. But she finds her goal unrealizable. She is valued and reified as the poetess on a pedestal, the ultimate in her craft, and to her horror she discovers that Phaon, her lover, has fallen for one of Sappho’s maids, happier to love a simple woman than an image. Sappho throws herself off a cliff and drowns, an example of the woman whose role conflicts tragically with her desires.

Romantic tragedy. In *The Waves of Love and of the Ocean* (1831) Grillparzere again picks up a classical Greek theme and gives it his own twist, the duty desire conflict. Hero, temple priestess separated by the Bosphorus Strait from her impetuous lover, Leander, plans to flash him a signal, which will guide him across the water to her. However Hero’s superior, the Head Priestess of the temple, gets wind of the plan and realizes that Hero is in the process of losing her ‘composure,’ her *Sammlung*, and extinguishes the lamp that is to guide Leander. Hero dies of a broken heart.

Reading

Primary source reading

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Secondary source reading

Bernd, Clifford, ed., *Der arme Spielmann: New Directions in Criticism*, 1988.

Further reading

Nemoianu, Virgil, *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the age of Biedermeier*, 1984.

Original language reading

Lorenz, Dagmar, *Franz Grillparzer: Dichter des sozialen Konflikts*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Grillparzer's '*Der arme Spielmann*,' 'The Poor Fiddler,' is as fatalistic and psychologically inexorable as are his plays. Review that text closely, to see what kind of discord is set up between the narrator of the story, and the counter narration carried on, within the story, by the Fiddler himself. What kind of special depth is achieved by this technique? Does the technique seem startling 'modern' to you?

What kinds of tragedy does Grillparzer write into Hero and Leander and Sappho? Would you call this psychological tragedy, generated in the minds of the tragic losers? Or is the fate the driver of these bitter outcomes? Pay especially close attention to the mindset of Hero herself, as she vacillates in her mind between desire and duty. Does she have it in her power to negate her desire?

Excerpt en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Franz_Grillparzer

- "Human life, old and young, takes place between hope and remembrance. The young man sees all the gates to his desires open, and the old man remembers—his hopes."
- "They are miserly, the princes of Austria, you need not grieve about it; they may not donate anything, but they allow themselves to be fleeced, the good lords."
- "What raises great poetry above all else—it is the entire person and also the entire world."

Hebbel

Hebbel's Life. Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863) was born at Ditmarsch, in Holstein. He was brought up in poverty—the son of a bricklayer, yet despite hindrances proved unusually studious, and made his way to the University of Hamburg. From that University, in the typical fashion of German University students, who tend to follow Professors from one institution to another, he moved on to the University of Munich, where he studied philosophy, literature, and history. In 1839 he left Munich to return to Hamburg—he walked the distance, to be again with the woman who loved him—and in that year saw the publication of his first drama, *Judith*, which like most of his subsequent plays—is set either in Biblical times or in the German Age of Knights. For the next two years he traveled in Italy and France, on a stipend from King Christian of Denmark, then made his way to Vienna, where he was to find a new life—a glamorous and wealthy change for him—and a future in Austrian comfort and high society. Only one regret continued to eat at this complicated man, that he had left the faithful-to-the-end woman whom at one point he had walked from Munich to Hamburg to be with.

Hebbel's drama. Hebbel picked up the theme of bourgeois drama which had been growing in Germany from the time of Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* and Schillers *Kabale and Liebe*. (It took an eighteenth century of middle class development, before this literary genre would be possible, a genre which we might say would culminate in the great work of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). Cultural/social developments plunging back into early modern Europe were the prerequisites of the kind of searing social dramas Hebbel wrote—such developments as the self-conscious family unit, the availability of urban work in the professions, and the domestic conflicts, even tragedies, brought on by the conflict of the old class system with the newer forms of individualist democracy.)

Maria Magdalena. *Maria Magdalena* (1844) is the only play of Hebbel's to be set in the present, and arguably the play where his power and sense of social complexity are most forceful. That may be because it is the play in which he most ripely conceives the larger meaning of his work. In the Preface to the play he argues that drama is the highest art, because it reflects the dialectical growth of mankind through ascending stages of culture, a notion he understands in terms of Hegel's philosophy of dialectical history. (He references Greek drama and Shakespeare as earlier examples of the way new levels of human consciousness are virtually worked through to in great drama.) In the present play Hebbel plunges us into a moment of crisis in the family of Meister Anton, an illiterate carpenter, who though fallen in class clings hard to such old fashioned class values as 'honor,' 'family honor.' The clinging to old values is fatal. In the first place Anton's wife, who hears that her son is a thief—the report is later proven false--kills herself for shame. Then Anton's daughter, believing she has been forgotten by a certain secretary she loves, ends up pregnant with a child of a man she scorns, an opportunistic clerk, yet marries him, for only so, she thinks, can she maintain her father's honor. (There is the outdated category of honor again.) As it turns out, her impregnator proves unsatisfied with the dowry she offers him, and abandons her, whereupon she does in fact drown herself, to ensure her father's honor. At the end of the play we see the world through Anton's eyes, a man dazed and confused by the new world around him, in which values he relied on are being transformed.

Reading

Primary source reading

Gubelman, A., *Studies in the Lyric Poems of Friedrich Hebbel: the sensuous in his lyric poetry*, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Schwarz, E., ed. *Nineteenth Century German Plays*, 1990.

Further reading

Garland, Mary, *Hebbel's Prose Tragedies*, 1973.

Original language reading

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe, *Literarische kultur im Zeitalter des Liberalismus 1830-1870*, 1985.

Suggested paper topics

Hebbel believed that drama is the highest art, because it embodies new and upward developing stages of culture—as had been the case in Ancient Greece and now in the work of Shakespeare. Do you find this a plausible account of the importance and greatness of drama? Can you add examples, of cases in which drama seems to play the historical role Hebbel attributes to it?

The middle class family drama became prominent and popular in 18th century Germany. (Lessing and Schiller were creative in this direction.) What reason would you give for the development of this form? What is necessary to raise this form above the level of popular amusement concerning middle class families? Where does the tragic element enter in this kind of drama—for it does enter, regularly—to give depth and meaning to the genre?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13030/13030-8.txt>

MOTHER. When one is very sick, as I was, and does not know whether one is going to get well again or not, a great many things revolve in one's head. Death is more terrible than you think--oh, it is awful! It casts a shadow over the world; one after the other it blows out all the lights that shine with such cheerful brightness all around us, the kindly eyes of husband and children cease to sparkle, and it grows dark everywhere. But deep in the heart it strikes a light, which burns brightly and reveals a great deal one does not care to see. I am not conscious of ever having done a wrong; I have walked in God's ways, I have done my best about the home, I have brought you and your brother up to fear God, and I have kept together the fruits of your father's hard work. I have always managed to lay aside an extra penny for the poor, and if now and then I have turned somebody away, because I felt out of sorts or because too many came, it wasn't a very great misfortune for him, because I was sure to call him back and give him twice as much. Oh, what does it all amount to? People dread the last hour when it threatens to come, writhe like a worm over it, and implore God to let them live, just as a servant implores his master to let him do something over again that he has done poorly, so that he may not come short in his wages on pay-day. CLARA. Don't talk in that way, dear mother! It weakens you. MOTHER. No, child, it does me good! Am I not well and strong again now? Did not the Lord call me merely to let me know that my festal robe was not yet pure and spotless? And did he not permit me to come back from the very edge of the grave, and grant me time to prepare myself for the heavenly wedding? He was not as kind as that to those five Virgins in the Gospel, about whom I had you read to me last night. And that is the reason why today, when I am going to the Holy Communion, I put this dress on. I wore it the day I made the best and most pious resolutions of my life; I want it to remind me of those which I have not yet carried out.

Richard Wagner

The achievement of Richard Wagner. Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was a great composer, poet (of the librettos of his own operas), scenographer and dramaturge, publicist, political voice, and autobiographer. It is no wonder that his creative brilliance made of opera (the Gesamtkunstwerk, the Total Art Work) the consummate statement of 19th century Romanticism, with its overtones (in Germany) of apocalypse and violence. German literature is multiply intertwined with the work of Wagner: the themes of his greatest work, like *Parzifal* and the *Ring of the Niebelungen*, are drawn from the earliest classics of German literature; Wagner himself proved to be the consummate wordsmith, in creating the librettos for his operas; and the literary climate of early 20th century German literature is unthinkable without Wagner's looming shadow over it.

The Life of Richard Wagner. Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig. His father was a police department clerk, while his mother was the daughter of a baker. His father died shortly after Richard's birth, and his mother, remarrying one of the Father's friends, moved the family to Dresden, near to which the young Wagner went to a pastor's school at Possendorf. At the age of nine, while still in elementary school, Wagner registered his extreme delight at hearing Karl Maria von Weber's *Die Freischuetz*; at the same stage he wrote his first play. (Wagner was quick to pick up on driving new forces in the German art world: in 1825 he heard Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and was taken with a fit of demonic excitement.) In 1831 Wagner entered the University of Leipzig, and at the age of 20 he composed his first opera, *The Fairies*. In 1836 Wagner fell in love—for the first of many recorded times—and married. (The next year the lady left him for another man, only to reappear, reconciled then fighting, many times in Wagner's later life, all the while he was accumulating new romantic encumbrances. Romantic confusion and constant debt were the two constants of Wagner's personal life.) The following years, as Wagner composed unremittingly, were to find him making his way by luck and prayer through the labyrinth of higher culture elements on whom he was dependent for his livelihood, and, even in his later years, when he had settled in Bayreuth, and established a performance for his operatic achievement, for the funding of an appropriate Grand Hall for the staging of his works.

The Work of Richard Wagner. You will be able to trace, in any of Wagner's major operas, the combination of skills which marks his originality: his bringing together of all the elements of the opera—from costume and gesture to the highest singing roles—to a firm unity; tonal experimentation and chromaticism that bespeaks the advent of the 'modern music' lying not far ahead into the next century. Wagner recapitulates (in his invariably fresh and socially alert manner) many of the greatest early Germanic narrative themes: *Lohengrin* and *Parzifal* (Wolfram's *Parzifal*); *Tannhauser* (the *Meistersingers*); *The Ring of the Niebelungen*; *Tristan und Isolde* (Gottfried von Strassburg, 12th century). Wagner's perspective, throughout his reworking of this narrative material, is romantic-tragic in mode; in world view he is both celebratory of the origins of German literature, and scornful of the fallen state of commercial middle class Germany, at its worst exemplified by the Jews, whom Wagner regularly excoriates. Wagner's powerful written lyrics, and sublime (at best) music, which he was to help enshrine in a national festival at Bayreuth (1872), mark one of the high points of German cultural self-awareness. It must be mentioned that Adolf Hitler promoted his own cult of Wagnerian music, which he considered the highest testimony to German national supremacy. But it has been frequently observed, that Wagner was, instead of a nationalist, a creator employing the treasures of German culture to focus an unrelenting critique of German society.

Reading

Primary source reading

Wagner, Richard, *My Life*, trans. Gray, 1992.

Secondary source reading

Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, ed. Spencer and Millington, 1987.

Further reading

Spett, Frederic, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, 1994.

Original language reading

Callico, J, 'Fuer eine neue deutsche Nationaloper,' in Applegate, *Music and German National Identity*, 2002.

Suggested paper topics

What connection do you see between Wagner's conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the work of creative imagination in literature? While it is true that Wagner composed the lyrics for his own operas, and that he was a genius at creating lyrics for the operatic production, does this kind of work constitute literary creation?

What kinds of transformation of early German literature do you see in Wagner's operas? How has Wagner's *The Ring of the Niebelungen* modified the *Niebelungenlied*? How has Wagner's *Parzifal* refashioned the epic of Wolfram von Eschenbach? Answer with the view to the kinds of radical transformation the Gesamtkunstwerk makes when it assembles literary material into a new whole.

Excerpt en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Richard_Wagner

- I believe in God, Mozart, and Beethoven.
- The error in the art-genre of Opera consists herein: a Means of expression (Music) has been made the end, while the End of expression (the Drama) has been made a means.
- The oldest, truest, most beautiful organ of music, the origin to which alone our music owes its being, is the human voice.
- A political man is disgusting, but a political wife, horrible.
- From its first faint glimmerings, History shews Man's constant progress as a beast of prey. As such he conquers every land, subdues the fruit-fed races, founds mighty realms by subjugating other subjugators, forms states and sets up civilisations, to enjoy his prey at rest.
- Attack and defence, want and war, victory and defeat, lordship and thralldom, all sealed with the seal of blood: this from henceforth is the History of Man.

20th Century German Literature

The political and military history of Germany during the first half of the 20th century, is so well known that only the briefest outline should suffice. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II Germany began WW I in 1914. Decisively defeated by the Allies in 1918, she lost all her colonies, Alsace-Lorraine, and some frontier territory. The Republic of Germany (Weimar Republic) was proclaimed in 1919. For fourteen years the nation remained in a deplorable condition: her economy was severely damaged; the government was highly unstable and the people were under a cloud of war guilt. Already as early as 1923 Adolf Hitler made a bid for power in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich; although this attempt proved abortive, Hitler continued to gain power, and by 1933 he was able to seize complete control of the country. He abolished the Weimar Republic, set up the so called Third Reich, with himself as dictator, repudiated the Versailles Treaty which had ended WW I, carried out a campaign of racial purification, annexed Austria (1937), and part of Czechoslovakia (1938), and began WWII by attacking Poland in 1939. Germany was defeated again in 1945. The division of Germany into East and West, during the Cold War between the United States and Russia, consumed much of the German spirit for the remainder of the 20th century.

Brecht

The Achievement of Berthold Brecht. Berthold Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet, dramatist, theater producer, and adherent of Marxism, who put his political insights to work in new visions of the nature of theater, and of its relation to the audience.

The Life of Berthold Brecht. Berthold Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria. At the time of Brecht's birth, his father worked for a paper mill, of which he was to become managing director in 1914. (Thus despite Brecht's later claims to have been brought up in Marxist appropriate working class conditions, Brecht was a child of the middle class.) Brecht's mother was pious and supportive, and importantly responsible for Berthold's intimate knowledge of the Bible, which supported him in many ways throughout his life. While other great German writers of the modern period typically carved out their thought paths in the course of advanced University study, Brecht found events projecting him into the world, where he was to discover life, and the social setting for his literary work. Brecht's first sense of WWI was the desire to participate with his fellow countrymen, but he changed his mind as he saw the ravages of the war, and on the advice of his father, who urged him to enroll in a medical course which would qualify him for exempt status. At the same time, while the War raged, Brecht was finding his social theatrical milieu, starting with his lifetime friendship with Caspar Neher, who was to be the set-design collaborator for many of Brecht's finest stage works. Not only was Brecht positioning himself, in Berlin theater life, as a designer, producer and adapter—in addition to much collaborative work he was into the creation of such 'epic theater' as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Woman of Szechuan*—but he was creating startlingly original socially observant poems, as in the volume *Domestic Breviary* (1927). He was an avid consumer of popular Berlin theater, vaudeville, slapstick—a great admirer of Chaplin, and of the music hall creations of Franz Wedekind—and from life on the Berlin streets he was forging both a dramatic genius and a sense for the drama of the times. As so many of his most gifted German colleagues, the twenties were a period during which great creativity and great anxiety were blended. That crisis on the horizon, which George had anticipated, was the daily bread of Brecht, whose own Marxism—he had been educating himself in Marx and Lenin--was fed by the mounting struggle against Nazism.

Exile and after. In 1935, knowing he was tightly pursued by the Nazis, Brecht moved to Denmark, then, in 1939, went to Sweden, preparatory to following one branch of the exile tribe to America. In America, like many self-exiled Germans, Brecht came under suspicion for Communist sympathies, and was called before the House Un American Affairs Committee, by which he was set free of all charges. In 1947 he returned to East Germany, where he was to receive the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954, and to spend the remainder of his life.

Brecht's Work. As a lyric poet, but especially as a dramatist, Brecht was from start to finish socially involved. His work as a dramatist was also work as a member of society, setting up actions within the citizenry; thus Brecht regularly incorporates, in his plays, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, Alienation Effect, designed to make the drama itself seem like a social action, and not a piece of literature. The societal impulse, at work here, took large scale form in Brecht's commitment to Communism. This playwright long allied himself to the East German and East European political perspective instituted during the Cold War. The finest of his plays, like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* or *The Good Woman of Sechuan* throw light on social organizations still unrealized, but part (possibly) of social shapes that will extend out beyond the social period we inhabit in this Encyclopedia.

Reading

Primary source reading

Brecht, Berthold, *Letters, 1913-1956*, trans. John Willett.

Secondary source reading

Benjamin, Walter, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Bostock, 1983.

Further reading

Fuegi, John, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*, 2002.

Original language reading

Mittenzwei, Werner, *Das Leben des Berthold Brecht*, 2 vol., 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Review some Brecht plays—The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Good Woman of Szechuan—to see what in effect he means by a theater of alienation, in which the audience is to be forbidden the Aristotelian pleasure of catharsis. Can you see a good case for this innovative view of theater?

Brecht emerges as a collaborative playwright, performing many roles himself, and working with many fellow producers. Was the same kind of collaborative production at play in the dramatic work of Goethe and Schiller? Lessing?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

- People remain what they are even if their faces fall apart.
- But something's missing (Aber etwas fehlt).
- A man who strains himself on the stage is bound, if he is any good, to strain all the people sitting in the stalls.
- The theater-goer in conventional dramatic theater says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art — Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh. But the theater-goer in the epic theater says: I would never have thought that. You can't do that. That's very strange, practically unbelievable. That has to stop. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is an escape for him. That's great art — nothing is self-evident. I am made to laugh about those who cry, and cry about those who laugh.
- Let nothing be called natural
In an age of bloody confusion,
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things
Be held unalterable!
- Literary works cannot be taken over like factories, or literary forms of expression like industrial methods. Realist writing, of which history offers many widely varying examples, is likewise conditioned by the question of how, when and for what class it is made use of.
- Do not rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again.