

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Heine

Life of Heinrich Heine. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a German poet, critic, satirist, and influential public critic. He was born in Duesseldorf, of a Jewish family, and although he would later convert to Christianity—largely for political reasons due to the anti-Jewish laws in Prussia, and to the lasting displeasure of Jewish readers of Heine—his Jewish fidelities remained a stalwart part of his life. (And an underlying spur to the critical, outsider view he regularly adopted, toward society and government.) His father was a textile merchant and his mother the daughter of a physician. The life that was to sweep up this young man was different from the University Professorship lives common to the major figures of Enlightenment and Early Romantic literature; although Heine was to be sent to the classic universities. He studied briefly at Jena, and later at Goettingen, for Law, in 1821. But his sensitivities were always more attuned to current cultural/political events than to scholarship. (Writing of course concerned him from early on, and as a young man he had had a turn (not very successful) at theater.)

Heine's concern with politics. Heine was from early in life consumed by the political life of his time, as were most of his creative contemporaries. The Napoleonic Revolution, and how it would play out in Germany, was on everyone's mind. This was noticeably so in Duesseldorf, which lay close to the border of Napoleonic France, and which, at Napoleon's defeat in 1815, was returned to Germany. (Heine had an intense attachment to French culture, with which he had been familiar from childhood; and was to pass the last twenty five years of his life in Paris, where he was better known, and more popular than in Germany.) He was ardently attracted to some aspects of the Napoleonic invasion—the introduction of the Code Napoleon as the new law code, and the institution of trial by jury—and was to remain, throughout his life, a friend to the anti-monarchist forces in Germany, who were fighting the persistence there of the culture of small and highly conservative monarchies. To be a participant in Junges Deutschland, the New Germany movement which swept up Heine and many of his contemporaries impatient with fossilized political forms, meant to follow events in France, where the Revolution of 1848 seemed a culmination of dissatisfaction with the Ancien Regime, which Napoleon had ultimately restored in a new form. In France, where Heine spent his last twenty five years, he was widely admired, had influential friends—like Gerard de Nerval and Hector Berlioz—and wrote criticism and poetry voluminously.

Heine's work. Heine was a brilliant satirist and a lyric poet with a wide range of skills. From 1820 he was a publishing fury, creative with lyrics of such diversity that one can only illustrate his genius by a single sample. 'Die schlesischen Weber' 'The Silesian Weavers,' is of typical power and subtlety. The voices speaking in this poem are almost entirely the common voice of the weavers themselves. It comes out that the cloth the weavers are weaving is the shroud of the German nation: into that shroud they are weaving a threefold curse, a curse on the god who has betrayed them, a curse on the king who has let them starve and be shot, a curse on their fake and corrupt fatherland. The brilliance of Heine's poetry is in the slow revelation by the weavers of the details of what they are weaving, a revelation which proceeds at exactly the speed of the prosody. Nietzsche said that only he and Heine knew how to write German. He was right.

Reading

Primary source reading

Heine: *Selected verse: Dual Language Edition*, trans. Peter Branscombe, 1987.

Secondary source reading

Sammons, Jeffrey, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography*, 1979. (The classic study in English.)

Further reading

Youens, Susan, Heinrich Heine and the Lied, 2011.

Original language reading

Hinck, Walter, *Von Heine zu Brecht: Lyrik im Geschichtsprozess*, 1978.

Suggested paper topics

To what especially do you attribute Heine's inclination to and gift for irony? Does it derive from his outsider status? From his dual French-German cultural background? From his lifelong oppositional stance in politics?

How does Heine deal with being Jewish? Does it bring a flavor of its own to his lyrics? Does he suffer racial inequities? Examine the question of Anti-Semitism in German literature. Has it deep historical roots there, or is German Anti-Semitism a by product of recent events in Germany?

Excerpt www.poemhunter.com/heinrich-heine/

E'en As A lovely Flower
E'en as a lovely flower,
So fair, so pure thou art;
I gaze on thee, and sadness
Comes stealing o'er my heart.

My hands I fain had folded
Upon thy soft brown hair,
Praying that God may keep thee
So lovely, pure and

.
A Palm-tree
A single fir-tree, lonely,
on a northern mountain height,
sleeps in a white blanket,
draped in snow and ice.

His dreams are of a palm-tree,
who, far in eastern lands,
weeps, all alone and silent,
among the burning sands.