

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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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

Lamport, 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."