

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who wrote in fervently different times and from cultural perspectives that by Grillparzer’s time were to begin to seem outdated, as well as inescapably powerful.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

Franz Grillparzer, *The poor Musician*, trans. Remy, ed. Andrew Moore.

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."