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Effects Of Natural And Social Environments On Psychological Development Of Main Characters: A Study Of Three Nineteenth-Century German Novellen

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EFFECTS OF NATURAL AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MAIN CHARACTERS: A STUDY OF THREE NINETEENTH-CENTURY GERMAN NOVELLEN

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to address the underlying psychological influences on main characters in three German Novellen: Ludwig Tieck’s Der blonde Eckbert, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s Die Judenbuche, and Gerhart Hauptmann’s Bahnwärter Thiel. The motivation for my work comes from my deep interest in German as well as German literature. My many years studying in this field paired with a strong interest in the field of psychology have inspired me to write this thesis, which will more specifically address the environmental influences which shape behavior of main characters. While there is an innate, inherited aspect to an individual’s disposition, a large part of a person’s developed personality comes from the natural and social world. Furthermore, I will address the effects of active and passive social and natural environments to show their heavy influences on the development of the protagonists’ personalities. These influences will then be addressed in terms of how they determine the decisions made by the characters as well as their ultimate role in the subsequent actions taken by them.
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When addressing the psychological development of characters, we first have to
distinguish between two types of major environmental influence: natural and social.
These environments then have to be further sub-categorized by their passive and active
dispositions in order to fully comprehend their influences on the main characters in a lit-
erary work. Natural environments, in their passive role, serve to benefit or hinder charac-
ters due simply to their existence in a particular setting. In this case, the environments are
subject to the main characters’ perception of them and function as a tool, that characters
can use to their benefit. However, this passive role can also serve as a hindrance; an ob-
stacle which the protagonists must overcome. In its active role, the natural world is per-
sonified, presenting itself to the characters in a certain way and manipulating the behavior
of the protagonists. In the *Novellen* addressed in this thesis, the natural world often pre-
sents itself as menacing and leads the protagonists to make less-than-favorable decisions
or even commit crimes. With regards to social environment, the active nature of the
community influences the main characters through dialogue and actions. On the other
hand, passivity within social settings comes from the main characters and their inability
or unwillingness to interact with the society around them. Ultimately, the influence of
both the social and natural environments proves to be disastrous, as they lead our prog-
agonists to poor decision-making, psychological collapse, and even murder.

In this thesis I will look into three German *Novellen* which cover three literary
epochs: Early Romanticism (1795 - 1804), Biedermeier (1815 - 1848) and Naturalism
(1880 - 1900) respectively. The three *Novellen*, Ludwig Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert*
(1797), which can also be regarded as a *Kunstmärchen*, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s
Die Judenbuche (1842), and Gerhart Hauptmann’s Bahnwärter Thiel (1888) will be addressed to analyze and emphasize the social and natural influences on their main characters. I will focus on the influences on the protagonists’ behavior as a result of the world around them as well as the interpersonal interactions they have as well as addressing the role of natural and social stimuli in the ultimate outcome of their narratives. In regards to Ludwig Tieck’s Der blonde Eckbert I will discuss in particular the idea of unclear advice, starting from the setting of the protagonist’s childhood home as well as later in her life when she finds herself in isolation. The ambiguity from the social environment paired with a seemingly threatening natural world hinder the main character from growing out of her childish mindset and ultimately lead to psychological collapse. In Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s Die Judenbuche the social and natural environments in which the protagonist grows up are that of a disorganized community where individuals rely on their own perception of morals to make decisions, paired with a natural world which actively and passively shrouds illicit activity in darkness. The culmination of these two environments heavily weigh on the protagonist, causing him to ultimately fall victim to the negative influences around him, resulting in his questionable behavior. The third and final chapter will discuss Gerhart Hauptmann’s Bahnwärter Thiel, addressing the theme of a self-created isolation and the subsequent tragedy that follows. Further analyzed will be the roots of this isolation, which stem from a passive personality and the inability to interact with the surrounding environments.
I. DER BLONDE ECKBERT:

A Tragedy of Misguidance

In Ludwig Tieck’s Der blonde Eckbert (1797), from the Early Romantic period (1795 - 1804), the natural world presents itself actively and passively in a threatening manner, which affects the way in which the main character, Bertha, interacts with it. Combined with the menacing presence of the natural world is the existence of a negative social setting: the home in which Bertha grows up. This abusive home life causes the protagonist to flee her home and subsequently become subject to the natural fantasy world in which she finds herself. In this way, her social environment is the impetus for Bertha to run away and seek out a new life, while the natural world plays a role in Bertha’s transformation into a more productive individual. This same natural world, however, also proves to be instrumental in her ultimate collapse.

Beginning with the narrative frame of the story, the “Rahmengeschichte,” nature is personified and interacts with the characters in an unsettling way as Bertha, Eckbert, and Walther sit around the fireplace:

Die Flamme warf einen hellen Schein durch das Gemach und spielte oben an der Decke, die Nacht sah schwarz zu dem Fenster herein, und die Bäume draußen schüttelten sich vor nasser Kälte. (4)

“To this end, nature is personified and described as being emotive” (Kimpel, 177), as the dark night peers through the window and the trees shiver from the cold. Paired with the light from the flames dancing on the ceiling, this instills in us a sense of the unsettling, ominous relationship between the characters and the world around them. The personification of nature speaks to the active abilities it possesses and presents to us unknowingly the relationship between Bertha and the natural world she has experienced since child-
hood. Nature’s imposing, active presence is displayed just before Bertha’s depiction of her childhood: “Es war jetzt gerade Mitternacht, der Mond sah abwechselnd durch die vorüberflatternden Wolken” (4). In this case, the moon glares through the window when possible, almost as if it is watching Bertha carefully. In addition to this initial impression of the environment around these characters, nature returns with the same presence in Bertha’s explanation of her flight from home, which will be addressed later.

When looking at development from a social standpoint, the “Rahmengeschichte” first exposes us to the environment to which Bertha is accustomed: isolation. Although the story first addresses Eckbert, we understand that the two live together, and therefore Bertha resides in this particular setting as well:


In this introduction we see a theme which carries itself throughout the story, in that Bertha is often isolated from social interaction, with the exception of a few people from time to time. Even in the “Rahmengeschichte,” when she and Eckbert are visited by Walther, her direct interaction with their guest is limited and focuses more on Eckbert, who suggests that she tell the story of her childhood: “Eckbert [nahm] die Hand Walthers und sagte: ‘Freund, Ihr solltet Euch einmal von meiner Frau die Geschichte ihrer Jugend erzählen lassen…’” (4). The only interaction between Bertha and Walther is her preface to the story, asking that it not be taken as a fairy tale, although it may seem rather unusual.

Moving from the “Rahmengeschichte” into Bertha’s recounting of her childhood,
we start with her exposure to a social environment, which is that of her purported parents’ household, as we learn at the end of the tale that Bertha is the daughter of Eckbert. When analyzing Bertha’s character, it is easy to understand her social awkwardness and alienation as a result of an inherent unwillingness to adapt to her surroundings or integrate socially. While this approach has been taken by some who have interpreted the story, I will be looking outside of the character herself to focus on the environments to which she was exposed and the factors that played a role in forming her childish, egocentric personality.

“The behavior pattern underlying the story of her life is one of consistently unsuccessful adaptation to the role her society expects her to assume” (Rippere, 476), yet to understand this situation in its entirety, there are two questions that need answering: First, what is the role which society expects Bertha to fulfill, and second, what is the core cause of her maladaptation to this role?

In order to answer the first question, we must look first only at the social environment in which we see Bertha before her departure from her parents. The story begins with “…childhood recollections narrated by Bertha, beginning with the squalid poverty, parental discord, and humiliation which she had suffered at home” (Immerwahr, 111). In Bertha’s recounting of her tale, she immediately exposes her audience to a setting of poverty and social dysfunction:

Ich bin in einem Dorf geboren, mein Vater war ein armer Hirte. Die Haushaltung bei meinen Eltern war nicht zum Besten bestellt, sie wussten sehr oft nicht, wo sie das Brot hernehmen sollten. Was mich aber noch weit mehr jammerte, war, dass mein Vater und meine Mutter sich oft über ihre Armut entzweiten, und einer dem andern dann bittere Vorwürfe machte. (5)

Without any reference to the past, we are left to assume that this is the only social envi-
ronment in which Bertha has grown up, and without any mention of the society outside of the household, we are given the impression that her childhood home is the most important factor in the shaping of Bertha’s character in her adolescence.

Following her general description of her childhood household, she addresses her parents’ behavior towards her personally:


Not only do her parents display dysfunction through interactions with each other, but they project their dysfunction onto their daughter, instilling in her a sense of fault, despite doing nothing to deserve it.

In reference to the question of societal expectations, there is no direct, adequate answer given. While we can conclude that Bertha has not satisfactorily met her parents’ expectations, it is still very unclear as to what these expectations are. In answering the question of the source of her maladaptation to society, we can simply look at the environment created by her parents as the answer. Though some may attribute her lack of understanding to her simple-mindedness and childish behavior, there are things we have to analyze in order to gain a more complete understanding of the character. For example, Victoria Rippere, in her article “Der Blonde Eckbert: A Psychological Reading,” argues that

the latent story is of a narcissistic child’s psychosexual and social development. In the course of her narration, Bertha reveals herself as a person who, because of an inability or unwillingness to develop beyond the stage of her childish self-centeredness, is unwittingly punished in later life by an incestuous, childless marriage. (476)

While I agree that Bertha has her flaws, sluggishness and inability to integrate socially, I
disagree as to the source of these flaws. These attributes are not innate, but rather learned as a reaction to the parents and the hostile environment they have set forth, and therefore, the ultimate blame for these failings lies with the mother and father. While Bertha’s inability to grow affects her choices later in her narrative, we can’t simply write her behavior off as narcissism, as the narcissism had to develop over time, as a reaction to natural or social environmental stimuli, which play a role in forming her psychological make-up. The only verbal contact we know of between Bertha and her parents is that of severe criticism, without any support or encouragement:

   Mein Vater war immer sehr ergrimmt auf mich, dass ich eine so ganz unnütze Last des Hauswesens sei, er behandelte mich daher oft ziemlich grausam, und es war selten, dass ich ein freundliches Wort von ihm vernahm. (5)

As she says herself, the only thing that Bertha truly understands is the contempt they have for her, for each other, as well as the misery they feel due to their socioeconomic status. While this disdain for their personal situation is made very clear, both Bertha and the reader still lack a clear understanding of what can be expected from the child herself.

In addition to the unclarity set forth by her parents, Bertha is constantly exposed to two “functioning” members of society, and repeatedly sees how they interact with one another under difficult circumstances, namely by berating and threatening each other. While Bertha is expected to become an effective and productive member of society, the only two childhood role models she has give her a sense that misery and contempt go hand in hand with the integration that is demanded of her. Her parents, through their actions, display the outcome of not integrating into society.

The structure of the story also first mentions Bertha’s drifting into her own fantasy
world, followed by physical threats from her father. It reveals to us a child “repeatedly berated by her parents for her awkwardness and stupidity, [who] withdrew to a corner and indulged reveries of wealth and brilliant luxury, which led in turn to cruel punishments and threats by her father” (Immerwahr, 111). The way in which the series of events is presented to us leads us to believe that this punishment is the result of Bertha’s inability to break out of her self-made isolation, but by observing the environment in which she grew up, we can more successfully identify the cause of this isolation in the first place: her parents. As the only prominent representation of social integration for Bertha, they display the constant agony they experience as a result of their failed integration. While the mental disconnect of Bertha could have further exacerbated the situation with her father, the environment came first, leading to her stunted psychological development and disposition.

Whether or not the father thought she was simply sluggish or lazy also doesn’t address his response to her behavior. She was indeed sluggish and lazy, yet a nurturing environment could have provided her with the support she needed and would have slowly brought her out of her sluggish state, as is evidenced by her later time in the woods. Instead, we see a father who expects his daughter to inherently grasp the concepts which make a person a well-adjusted member of society, followed by constant berating and indescribable threats when she fails to do so. To add to his abhorrent behavior, he feels the need to punctuate his threats by telling Bertha that “diese Strafe mit jedem Tage wiederkehren sollte” (5). Due to the “indescribable” nature of the threats, we cannot understand what it was that Bertha went through, but we know that it could have been the cause of the break in her mental state and her retreat into fantasy as well as the catalyst
for future disengagement. If she fears punishment for failed action, she may resort to taking no action at all, which would ultimately be a failure in her parents’ eyes as well.

Another point that needs to be considered when analyzing Bertha is her age: “So war ich ungefähr acht Jahr alt geworden, und es wurden nun ernstliche Anstalten gemacht, dass ich etwas tun, oder lernen sollte” (5). At the young age of eight, both social and natural environments play a heavily influential role in Bertha’s development. She requires parental guidance and a positive atmosphere in which she can thrive, while isolation hinders her progress in becoming a functioning member of society. In order for a successful development into adulthood to occur, she first needs a basic understanding of social constructs, yet there is no indication that the parents have tried to teach her anything; rather, they scold her for not inherently knowing what is expected of her. In self-protective action against this scolding from her father, which she receives regularly, Bertha retreats into her fantasy world.

An additional aspect of Bertha’s personality which needs to be addressed is her naive disposition. Bertha consistently sees the world through an idealistic viewpoint, often misinterpreting situations and misidentifying solutions. A prominent example of this naive attitude is presented with the introduction of her parents, as she identifies their poverty as the sole issue in their home life: “…wie ich ihnen helfen wollte, wenn ich plötzlich reich würde, wie ich sie mit Gold und Silber überschütten und mich an ihrem Erstaunen laben möchte…” (5). In her desire to aid her parents financially, she fails to identify their underlying interpersonal inabilities, namely, an incapability to reasonably handle problems. Bertha’s identification of money as the core issue in her home life drastically affects her actions later in her narrative as well.
This naive disposition leads Bertha to seemingly drastic, polarized solutions to the problems which present themselves multiple times throughout her life. In reaction to her parents’ poverty, Bertha fantasizes about riches, rather than monetary stability, and in reaction to her clumsiness and incoordination she dreams of the utmost dexterity: “...ich wünschte mir alle mögliche Geschicklichkeit und konnte gar nicht begreifen, warum ich einfach’ sei…” (6). Both Bertha’s polarized solutions as well as her inability to understand her shortcomings stem once again from the stunting home environment constructed by her parents. Reprimand from her father for her clumsiness establishes a black and white perspective from which Bertha sees the world. In this instance, either Bertha does what is expected of her or she receives punishment. However, such naivety should be expected of eight-year-olds, and failed action on Bertha’s part simply results as the product of failed guidance from her parents.

The abandonment of reality and retreat into a fantasy world results as a defense mechanism against the environment in which she is growing up. In reaction to the berating from her parents Bertha states: “Oft saß ich dann im Winkel und füllte meine Vorstellungen damit an, wie ich ihnen helfen wollte…” (5). This passage reveals an important truth about the nature of Bertha: though she doesn’t possess the natural ability to do the things demanded by her parents, her intent to help is certainly present. This point is further supported by Bertha’s fear of daybreak: “Ich fürchtete den Anbruch des Tages, ich wusste durchaus nicht, was ich anfangen sollte…” (6). Rippere describes Bertha’s fear of daybreak as both a ‘manifest’ fear of the recurring daily punishment her father has threatened, but also ‘latent’ fear of the dawn of recognition” (Rippere, 476). Again, Bertha has flaws, yet the source of these flaws is debatable. As previously stated, these
flaws stem from a learned reaction to the parents, and therefore, the ultimate blame for these failings lies with them rather than Bertha. Furthermore, Rippere mentions the “re-treat into fantasy and perplexity” and asserts that they “both serve to keep repressed a recognition which, if allowed into awareness, would be too much for her to bear—insight into her own ‘Eigensinn und Trägheit’, which [would] forever prevent her from becoming a relatively normal, productive and happy member of her society” (Rippere, 476).

Bertha has the inability “to develop beyond the stage of her childish self-centeredness” (Rippere, 476), but this developed self-centeredness doesn’t exist without a purpose. She clearly shows an interest in pleasing people, wanting to shower her parents with money so they can have a better life, yet lacks the skills or knowledge to do so. Bertha also fails to see or understand the things that we would recognize as fundamental for normal societal integration. Her developed self-centeredness can instead be seen and understood as a defense mechanism against the hostile environment in which she was raised. Rippere argues further that “her abrupt dismissal (genug) of [her father’s] attributions is confession-al in a negative way. Her quickness to deny them significance suggests that unconsciously she has not failed to recognize it but cannot admit the painful recognition to con-sciousness” (Rippere, 476). Rather than understanding this as confessional, we can see this as Bertha’s self-defense mechanism at work again, both in denial of her father’s attributions, for example Bertha being useless, as well as her unwillingness to bring these attributes to consciousness. In Bertha’s case, an admission of her shortcomings would prove to be nothing but devastating to an already emotionally and socially damaged child, especially when these shortcomings come as a result of a tyrant’s constant chastisement and lack of guidance. Even if she were to recognize her faults and bring them into con-
sciousness, she would still lack the skills to successfully integrate into society.

The ability to integrate herself into the society still wouldn’t result in Bertha’s happiness within that society. If her father and mother are to be understood as typical members of the social world, then it becomes apparent that unhappiness comes with this role. Although they may have integrated somewhat, they have proven that their integration hasn’t come hand in hand with a high quality of life.

This environment in which Bertha grows up teaches her that she must do the right thing or else get punished for it, while receiving no information from the people and role models in her life about what the correct action or behavior is:

Mein Vater glaubte, es wäre nur Eigensinn oder Trägheit von mir, um meine Tage in Müßiggang hinzubringen, genug, er setzte mir mit Drohungen unbeschreiblich zu, da diese aber doch nichts fruchten, züchtigte er mich auf die grausamste Art. (5)

Her father’s abusive demeanor, paired with his dismissal of his daughter’s failures as the product of obstinacy and laziness leaves Bertha to deduce on her own which actions are expected of her, a task which she evidently fails at repeatedly. An example of which, as previously addressed, is Bertha’s inability to sew or spin, which receives only chastisement, rather than direction from her parents. This dynamic ultimately leads Bertha to inaction and a retreat into her fantasies.

The fallout of these parental tactics and the environment which Bertha’s parents set up is evident after a night of misery and terror from Bertha: “Die ganze Nacht hindurch weinte ich herzlich, ich fühlte mich so außerordentlich verlassen, ich hatte ein solches Mitleid mit mir selber, dass ich zu sterben wünschte” (6). While we as readers can’t imagine the punishments Bertha had to endure, it has become very clear that they were se-
vere enough to implant into her head the idea of death as a release. Following this fearful night, Bertha sees only one option, and feels compelled to flee her home.

In this case, there are two salient forces driving Bertha’s almost subconscious compulsion to flee: the natural world and the cruelty of her father. Nature presents itself “as an active force which...draws or drives [her] from one world into another” (Kimpel, 177). In its passive role, the natural world acts as “a barrier or force separating various levels or realms” which Bertha has to conquer in order to move forward and achieve a better life for herself (Kimpel, 177). Nature’s role as an obstacle is seen in Bertha’s active relationship to it in which she “durch einen zwischen Felsen gewundenen Weg gehn...[und] an schwindlichten Abgründen vorbeigehn [musste]” (6-7). In these instances, nature doesn’t present itself in any particular way to Bertha, but serves as a hindrance in her journey through the wilderness.

Nature’s active role, however, must be further dissected into two subcategories: luring and driving forces. In its luring behavior, nature appears to transport Bertha seamlessly from one setting to another without Bertha’s awareness of it doing so:

Als der Tag graute, stand ich auf und eröffnete, fast ohne dass ich es wusste, die Tür unserer kleinen Hütte. Ich stand auf dem freien Felde, bald darauf war ich in einem Walde… (6)

The natural world draws Bertha to the edge of the door, and without any indication of a conscious decision to leave the cottage, she suddenly finds herself in the forest. “The semi-unconsciousness of her first escape, her first effective rebellion, establishes the dreamlike atmosphere of the [rest of the] story…” (Bidney, 49) and fortifies nature’s luring qualities which are once more apparent shortly after leaving the cottage: “Als ich aus dem Walde wieder heraustrat...[sah ich] jetzt etwas Dunkles vor mir liegen, welches
ein dichter Nebel bedeckte. Bald musste ich über Hügel klettern…” (6). The obscurity set forth by nature, the “dichter Nebel,” paired with the abrupt transition from the edge of the woods to the hills portrays the enticing, alluring disposition of the natural world. Further to its ability to draw Bertha from one natural environment to another is its capability to lure her out of a social environment:

Ich kam durch mehrere Dörfer und bettelte, weil ich jetzt Hunger und Durst empfand...So war ich ohngefähr vier Tage fortgewandert, als ich auf einen kleinen Fußsteig geriet, der mich von der großen Straße immer mehr entfernte. (7)

While conscious of her need for food and water, Bertha is still subject to a natural force, compelling her forward, out of the social setting in which she could satisfy these baser needs. Tieck’s use of passive language fortifies this luring quality as Bertha finds herself (geriet), on a path which actively distances her (entfernte), further from the social world and leads her back into nature.

In its driving qualities, the natural world, which presented itself in a threatening manner at the beginning of the narrative, repeats said behavior in an active way, scaring young Bertha and pushing her further along her journey:

...meine Angst trieb mich vorwärts; oft sah ich mich erschrocken um, wenn der Wind über mir weg durch die Bäume fuhr, oder ein ferner Holzschlag weit durch den stillen Morgen hintönte. (6)

While the alluded “Angst” which drives Bertha is attributed to her father’s threats, it is also accredited to nature’s menacing disposition. Nature’s threatening temperament, its attempt to push Bertha further through fear, is bolstered by the way in which it presents itself to her. As discussed in relation to the “Rahmengeschichte,” the natural world is personified, revealing an ability to present itself in a particular way to the characters: in this
case, menacingly. In Bertha’s journey through the wilderness, there is a “demonic aspect [emphasized]” as “…nature…is clouded in mystery and foreboding” (Kimpel, 178). This ominous disposition is portrayed as night approaches:

Die Felsen um mich her gewannen jetzt eine andre, seltsamere Gestalt. Es waren Klippen, so aufeinander gepackt, dass es das Ansehn hatte, als wenn sie der erste Windstoß durcheinander werfen würde. (7)

This is further exemplified by the “coming of the next day [which] cannot dispel this atmosphere of mystery: ‘alles war mit einem neblichten Duft überzogen, der Tag war grau und trübe’” (Kimpel, 179). Nature, as mirrored in the “Rahmengeschichte,” actively emerges as a sinister force, further frightening Bertha and pushing her along her journey through the wilderness.

As Raymond Immerwahr asserts, Bertha, in her perilous flight from home:

...sought complete escape from this family environment and set out on a journey through a dark forest, over steep mountain trails and terrifying precipices—a route which we may take as symbolical of the anxieties, emotional struggles, and agonies involved in a child’s withdrawal from reality to revery. (Immerwahr, 111)

This transition, while treacherous and difficult, speaks to the degree of the corrosive environment in which our protagonist grew up and the measures and action she will take to escape it. Immerwahr’s proposal can also be used in collaboration with that of Richard Kimpel, who argues that nature’s active quality, “…the demonic forms assumed by the cliffs which frighten Bertha…may be interpreted as an instrument used by the nature-spirit to make Bertha positively choose either to continue, or to turn back… [and] by pressing on further, she passes a type of test and is thus allowed to attain the natural paradise…” (Kimpel, 186). While this strenuous expedition mirrors and reveals the inner turmoil residing in Bertha, this test is ultimately rewarded by nature with admission into
the world of the old woman. As her peril ends and she emerges from the wilderness into
the world of “Waldeinsamkeit,” Bertha is overtaken by a sense of relief: “Mir war, als
wenn ich aus der Hölle in ein Paradies getreten wäre, die Einsamkeit und meine
Hülflosigkeit schienen mir nun gar nicht fürchterlich” (8).

While this flight can be viewed as a literal departure from a harsh reality, it can
also be argued that this journey through the forest into “Waldeinsamkeit” is representa-
tive of a break in Bertha’s psyche. If this world of fantasy is indeed a manifestation of a
psychological break, the isolation in the woods would serve the same purpose: escape as
a self-defense mechanism against an abusive home environment. The blame for Bertha’s
complete inward detachment from reality would then still befall the parents, who con-
structed an environment so mentally and physically damaging to the point that Bertha
suffers a psychological collapse. In this manner, Bertha’s retreat would symbolize a com-
fort found in her own psyche: a self-created fantasy world in which she can thrive with-
out the presence of her abusive parents.

Upon Bertha’s emergence from the woods, she makes first contact with the old
woman, which is the most positive experience she has had at this point in her narrative:
“Ich näherte mich ihr und bat um ihre Hilfe, sie ließ mich neben sich niedersitzen und
gab mir Brot und etwas Wein” (9). The initial interaction is paired with the “geistliches
Lied” that the old woman sings, which aids in setting a scene of serenity as well as initial-
ly portraying her as a positive, nurturing figure. Though gestural rather than verbal, a
stark shift can be seen in the tone set by both the natural and social environments. We can
see this shift not only in the actions of the old woman, but also in the reaction of Bertha
über diesen Antrag sehr erfreut, so wunderlich mir auch die Stimme und das Wesen der Alten vorkam” (9).

The constructive atmosphere set forth by the old woman leads to the beginning stages of Bertha’s progression into self-sufficiency: “Meine Neugier war außerordentlich gespannt; ohne dass ich auf den Befehl der Alten wartete, trat ich mit in die Hütte” (10). For the first time, her inquisitive side is exposed, as she takes action without the direct order or permission from others. It is clear that even through her initial, positive interaction outside of the constructed social environment of her parents and threatening natural influences, she makes progress towards more independent behavior. In this instance, it is not only the presence of a particular environment, but also the absence of a negative one, which plays an effective role in the development of Bertha’s character. Shortly after arriving at the old woman’s cottage, her growth becomes even more apparent:


Again we see the positive effects of a welcoming environment on the attitude of Bertha. With only simple instruction to spin and to take care of the animals, she is able to develop these skills on her own and even her physical environment becomes more known to her than before. Paired with the supportive environment in which she finds herself, the absence of verbal and physical abuse aids her in her progression towards normal behavior. “We can see here the development of a poetically gifted imagination which has escaped from the confining environment of the family” (Immerwahr, 112).

The difference between the two educational tactics from the old woman and Ber-
tha’s parents, and the effects thereof, become apparent through the trust of the old woman:

Oft ging die Alte aus und kam erst am Abend zurück, ich ging ihr dann mit dem Hunde entgegen, und sie nannte mich Kind und Tochter. Ich ward ihr endlich von Herzen gut, wie sich unser Sinn denn an alles, besonders in der Kindheit, gewöhnt. In den Abendstunden lehrte sie mich lesen, ich begriff es bald, und es ward nachher in meiner Einsamkeit eine Quelle von unendlichem Vergnügen… (11-12)

The only way the parents addressed their daughter was by constantly referring to her as an “einfältiges dummes Kind” (5), while the old woman addresses Bertha simply as child and daughter. This makes clear the effects of the affectionate, nurturing actions taken by the old woman and further emphasizes the brutal and “insufficiently motivated…cruelty of Bertha’s father” (Gellinek, 155).

However, there is a drawback to the pleasure which Bertha takes in reading, in that it reawakens and revitalizes a temptation towards reality:

Aus dem wenigen, was ich las, bildete ich mir ganz wunderliche Vorstellungen von der Welt und den Menschen…Ich dachte mir den schönsten Ritter von der Welt, ich schmükte ihn mit allen Vortrefflichkeiten aus…dann sagte ich lange rührende Reden in Gedanken her, zuweilen auch wohl laut, um ihn nur zu gewinnen. (13)

Being left alone, Bertha finds herself enveloped in fantasies of love and of the real world, and while she has learned many useful skills from the old woman, these aspects of her life are missing, which her readings constantly remind her of. In this way, there is disconnect in the education that Bertha receives from the old woman, in that she learns to be more self-reliant, yet never learns how to integrate this self-reliance into a social world, leaving her to try to connect these two worlds on her own.

Bertha is then presented with the encouraging and concurrently vague advice from
the old woman:

Du bist brav, mein Kind!…wenn du so fortfährst, wird es dir immer gut gehn: aber nie gedeiht es, wenn man von der rechten Bahn abweicht, die Strafe folgt nach, wenn auch noch so spät. (13)

While she may support Bertha’s success, her “warning to Bertha about being unfaithful…is entirely unjustified, coming at a time when Bertha is completely satisfied with her situation…” (Kimpel, 183). Due to her time in the woods, Bertha has been able to make great bounds from her sluggish, introverted behavior in the social world, but the old woman then presents her with something she’s never dealt with in either world: the idea of moral rights and wrongs. “It is only after the warning that Bertha first thinks about stealing the bird, and then becomes obsessed with the idea. In effect the ‘warning’ acts as an irresistible temptation to Bertha…” (Kimpel, 183). At this point, the woman can be interpreted as a witch, a malevolent embodiment of nature, which “causes Bertha to steal the bird and jewels and later punishes her for doing so” (Kimpel, 183). Whether or not the witch is an incarnation of the natural world, Bertha has thrived within this environment, proving the positive effects of nurturing surroundings. Yet when the witch presents her with a question of morality, the environment in which Bertha blossomed changes, forcing her to readjust her ways of thinking. While the behavior of the witch is rather ambiguous, we cannot rightfully say that she “caused” Bertha to steal anything, but it can be proposed that the witch was the force or agent in setting up a tempting environment in which Bertha could not resist the urge to steal the bird and jewels. While the witch is guilty of presenting the warning, which “acts as an irresistible temptation to Bertha” (Kimpel, 183), the decision to behave the way she did ultimately lies with Bertha.

Although the witch has provided a nurturing environment in which Bertha thrives,
Bertha is also never exposed to a world outside of nature where she can learn specific social constructs, such as morality. “Ironically, though [Bertha] first fails to comprehend what the old woman meant, once [she] becomes aware of the ability to choose between right and wrong, she is obsessed with the possibility of stealing the bird and jewels and going off to seek the ‘world,’ until she finally does so” (Gellinek, 157). When constantly in isolation, separated from interaction with normal members of society, she is forced into a position where her egocentricity thrives as she isn’t exposed to situations in which she has to care for others. This subsequently leads to the obsession to bring riches back to reality for which she seeks praise and admiration from her parents.

Additionally, this advice also serves to bring Bertha’s thoughts back to the one thing she knew in her childhood: chastisement for false or lacking action. Therefore the environment which has been set up provides Bertha with the notion that false action will be punished, which reciprocally implies that correct action will deter chastisement. This desire to avoid punishment instills in her an urgency for action: “Ich wusste nicht, was ich aus mir selber machen sollte…ich hatte die Empfindung, als wenn ich etwas sehr Eiliges zu tun hätte” (15). Again, we are presented with a role-model figure, who expects an adolescent to possess the ability to discern between right and wrong, without having been presented with verbal or active illustrations of what that might be. In this instance, it pushes Bertha to make a hasty decision to steal the bird and jewels, leaving the dog and her paradise behind.

In order to understand the old woman’s perplexing advice and behavior towards Bertha, we must first address her role in the narrative as a witch; the personification of the demonic natural world. “Diese Frau [ist] eine chthonische Macht, die den Geist und
The destruction of Bertha’s life, however, cannot be attributed to the active behavior of the old woman, but rather to the symbolic Adam and Eve situation she constructs. After Bertha has been with the old woman for four years, the secret of the magic bird is revealed to the then-12-year-old girl:

Der Vogel legte nämlich an jedem Tag ein Ei, in dem sich eine Perle oder Edelstein befand...Sie trug mir jetzt das Geschäft auf, in ihrer Abwesenheit diese Eier zu nehmen und in den fremdartigen Gefäßen wohl zu verwahren. (12)

After this secret is revealed to Bertha, the bird takes on new representative qualities, namely, temptation and responsibility. The newly acquired information regarding the bird, combined with the “warning of the old woman that...follows, not to depart from the right path, itself suggests to Bertha that she might exploit the pearls and precious stones of the bird to procure wealth and happiness in the world that she had deserted in early childhood” (Immerwahr, 114). In this way, the old woman creates a situation which awakens Bertha’s consciousness to the concept of morality and concurrently tests it. Due to her active role in the creation of such an environment, the witch “zeigt sich als schreckliche und abweisende Macht, oder aber, schlimmer noch: als ein unwiderstehlicher Drang, der die jugendlichen Helden mit erotischen Lockungen plagt” (Brittnacher and May, 62). Yet Bertha’s ultimate “wrongdoing is not the work of witches or any other diabolical outside force, but of her own mind” (Gellinek, 154). Two years later, after leaving Bertha with the advice, which she admittedly doesn’t understand, the witch then leaves the fourteen-year-old in charge for a longer period of time, further testing the strength of Bertha’s recently awakened sense of morality: “An einem Tag ging meine Wirtin fort, und sagte mir, dass sie diesmal länger als gewöhnlich ausbleiben
werde, ich solle ja auf alles ordentlich Acht geben” (14). At a time when Bertha is content, and proving herself to be adept in certain facets, the old woman presents her with unclear advice and leaves her to her own devices for a longer duration. After receiving the old woman’s vague advice not to stray from the right path, despite having thrived in the world of magic and “Waldeinsamkeit”, Bertha has a realization: “[es] fiel mir ein, dass [die] Perlen und Edelsteine wohl etwas Kostbares sein könnten” (14). It is in this moment that we see temptation start to take hold, as Bertha’s previous satisfaction with her readings and her company amongst the magical bird and the old woman’s dog become overshadowed by fantasies of returning to reality. In submitting to this temptation, Bertha begins to reject her conscience.

Although the atmosphere of the old woman’s hut provides Bertha with the appropriate surroundings to develop, there is one similarity between the old woman and her parents that is evident, as Janis Gellinek addresses:

> Despite the good actions of the old woman, there is one disquieting element in her relationship to Bertha, namely, her reserved and impersonal treatment of the child: ‘Übrigens, wenn ich meine Geschäfte tat, bekümmerte sich die Alte nicht weiter um mein Wesen.’ Like nature itself, she leaves Bertha to herself to develop according to her inner impulses and the few influences that are present. (Gellinek, 157)

The old woman has “recreated the circumstances of [Bertha’s] former life, but without its crushing poverty and [has assumed] the role of a benevolent parent” (Lillyman, 149). She further differentiates herself from Bertha’s parents by providing a nurturing environment in which Bertha can learn self-sufficiency, yet proves herself to be similar in the fact that she leaves the child to her own devices. “Eine kommunikative Wechselrelation findet nicht statt” (Sander, 124) which mirrors the one-sided communication dynamic of that
between Bertha and her parents. This familiar relationship dynamic is then followed by familiar behavior from Bertha: retreat back into fantasy due to the lack of human interaction.

The awakening of Bertha’s childhood thoughts, namely, wishing to provide her parents with wealth, leads to the extreme decision to steal the bird. After the concept of right and wrong is awakened, however, Bertha becomes conscious of the wrongdoing she is about to commit. New moral awareness plays an additional role in the abandonment of the old woman’s dog. As the witch progressively spends more time away from the cottage, the dog takes on a new representative role: trust and companionship. With the growing absence of the old woman, Bertha seeks further companionship in the dog. “Sein Verhältnis zu Bertha ist gekennzeichnet durch eine treue Anhänglichkeit, die von dem Mädchen selbst sogar als Liebe beschrieben wird” (Sander, 124): “Der Hund liebte mich sehr und tat alles was ich wollte...und so fühlte ich im Grunde nie einen Wunsch nach Veränderung” (13). The dog’s new role is accompanied by the symbolic trust which the old woman bestows upon Bertha, who is now also in charge of the animal’s well-being. Upon her departure from the fantasy world into reality, aware of the social contact that is to come, Bertha no longer requires the companionship of the dog. Consciousness of the trust which she is breaking therefore requires Bertha to abandon the dog at the cottage, as he serves only as a reminder of her betrayal:

Da der Vogel ein geschlechtliches Symbol ist (Fruchtbarkeit und Schöpferkraft), wird er der Bertha so wichtig, daß sie ihn mitnehmen muß...um geschlechtliche Liebe zu suchen. Der Hund, Strohmian, repräsentiert die Treue...[aber] sie konnte ihn nicht mitnehmen, weil er eben das symbolisiert, was Bertha verworfen hatte... (Hubbs, 690)

Bertha’s betrayal of the witch, of which she is fully aware, “[results in] guilt, a new prob-
lem to which she again reacts childishly” (Ewton, 418). This childish reaction comes with Bertha’s subsequent re-entrance into the world of reality, which reveals the naivety which still thrives in her as she “tries to carry magic into the real world and so to carry childhood into adulthood” (Ewton, 418). In attempting prove her growth by showering her mother and father with riches from the magical bird she also seeks to “remove guilt by securing her parents’ approval for the theft” (Ewton, 419). Upon hearing of her parents’ death, however, the guilt for stealing the bird grows, as she doesn’t receive the absolution she hopes for. In this action, Bertha reinforces her naivety, as once again “the mistake [exists] in childish problem solving” (Ewton, 418): attempting to resolve issues using extreme solutions, rather than using her newly acquired skills to improve the lives of those around her.

“Remorse and irrational fear fill her heart on her pilgrimage back into the world” (Gellinek, 153) as she fears an encounter with the witch and her subsequent reaction to Bertha’s misdeed. This irrational fear stems from the now prominent sense of guilt for her actions in the woods as well as from the relationship with her father, demonstrating her learned response to false action. “The effects of [this] guilt are particularly clear in the killing of the bird” (Gellinek, 153), who is a representative figure of Bertha’s time spent in “Waldeinsamkeit”: “...The bird now has changed its song to reflect Bertha’s own sense of lost security, the burning regret that she would rather suppress, and her sense of extreme culpability for her loss” (Bidney, 51). In killing the bird, Bertha attempts to rid herself of her guilty conscience and forget her sins.

After recounting the killing of the bird, Bertha ends her story, bringing the reader back into the framework of the *Kunstmärchen*. Upon the conclusion of her tale, a build-
Eckbert’s growing paranoia as a result of the story, however, leads the reader to wonder why he asks Bertha to recount her childhood in the first place. This irrational fear is bolstered when their guest, Walther, utters a psychologically devastating sentiment immediately following Bertha’s telling of her story: “Edle Frau, ich danke Euch, ich kann mir Euch recht vorstellen, mit dem seltsamen Vogel, und wie Ihr den kleinen Strohmian füttert” (18). Though initially a seemingly simple statement, it is the fact that Bertha has not revealed or remembered the name of the dog which perplexes her and which reinforces Eckbert’s irrational fears. Walther’s role can be understood “[as] a form of the old woman, an emissary from the rewarding and punishing forces of nature...He appears only to have waited until the spiritual unrest of Bertha and Eckbert created a situation in which their guilt could be reactivated to punish an old wrong” (Gellinek, 160). In this way, Walther’s previous knowledge of the dog’s name is explained as well as the timing with which he reveals said information. Upon the confession of sin, the retelling of the tale, the embodiment of the nature-spirit is able to exacerbate the pre-existing paranoia, sending Eckbert into a psychological break. As a result, Eckbert then kills Walther in an attempt at self-preservation and in an effort to quell further paranoia. However, Eckbert’s trust in Walther finds a new host in Hugo, “but Eckbert’s demonic mistrust, fear, and hatred is soon aroused against this friend as well. As he looks at Hugo, [his] identity suddenly changes to that of Walther” (Immerwahr, 116). The guilt residing in Eckbert, and
the irrational fear he experiences as a result, manifests itself in any individual in whom Eckbert bestows his trust.

At the end of the Novelle, after the death of Bertha:

Eckbert wanders to the site of the old woman’s cabin, recognizes her – not merely from a resemblance to his wife’s description but as an immediate part of his own experience – and hears the same dog bark and the same bird sing. (Immerwahr, 107)

This indicates that Eckbert and Bertha are rather “two personalities with one complex of memories and emotions” (Immerwahr, 107), the realization of which causes Eckbert’s complete mental collapse. The existence of multiple personalities within one individual is bolstered by the fact that “they share a single guilt [for stealing the pearls and for Eckbert benefitting from them] originating long before their marriage, [and] the same irrational fears,” alluding to subsequent punishment as a result of confession (Immerwahr, 107). The witch then reveals her identity in connection with those of Walther and Hugo and further reveals the incestuous nature of Eckbert’s marriage to his half-sister, Bertha. With the death of Bertha, Eckbert has been “deserted by his other self, [left] in hopeless insanity, on the point of death” (Immerwahr, 116). In this way, Eckbert has led to his own demise, just as Bertha’s decision to steal the bird and leave the dog for dead did indeed receive punishment in the end.

Ultimately, the construction of this dual-personality and the decisions made by our protagonist stem from the social and natural environments in which she finds herself. Bertha’s consistent maladaptation to the societal role she is expected to assume stems from an abusive home life and causes “flight – either into compensatory fantasy or physical retreat or hysterical illness – which makes her all the less able to develop ‘normally’”
Bertha’s stunted development hinders her ability to grow out of her childish mindset and prevents her from making rational decisions. When finding herself in a position of morality, this stunted psychological development leads her to make poor decisions, for which she is punished later in life.
II. DIE JUDENBUCHE: Friedrich Mergel:  

A Product of Societal Corruption

When looking into Ludwig Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797), we are presented with two prominent environmental influences on the main character, Bertha: natural and social. In comparison to this seemingly simple dynamic, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s *Die Judenbuche* (1842), from the Biedermeier period (1815-1848), requires us to not only dissect the most salient social forces driving the psychological development of the main character, Friedrich Mergel, but also to look further into the subcultures developed in his surroundings, which ultimately help to form his dishonest, prideful, and even murderous disposition. This can be further clarified through glimpses into personal conversations and behaviors between characters as well as Friedrich’s exposure to variable group dynamics, some successful and productive, some not. Along with the active social influence on the main character, Droste-Hülshoff also constructs a dark natural setting surrounding the village, in which the crooked behavior of less-than-reputable inhabitants can thrive. This darkness serves to heighten the recurring theme of obscurity found in the Novelle.

The combination of the rather complicated dynamic of the community with the veiling, mysterious presentation of the natural world plays the ultimate role in the development of the character of Friedrich Mergel, a character shaped almost solely by his environment.

While the prefatory poem plays no direct role in the development of the main character, it places a psychological burden on the reader, who is “…admonished not to judge, lest he be judged, thereby implying that the reader’s perspective plays a role in understanding the work…” (Wells, 477). Whether intentional or not, the challenge of Droste-Hülshoff “to preserve…unbiased integrity and enlightened moral status by not passing
judgment, presumably in the case of someone in the story to follow” (Wells, 478), inevitably changes the lens through which we will perceive the characters. This introduction instills in the reader a sense of suspense, awaiting the events to come, while also predisposing us to a sense of suspicion, forcing us to look at the characters and ensuing narrative with an investigatory mentality.

The story begins with a physical description of the surroundings in which the Novelle takes place:

…im Dorfe B., das, so schlecht gebaut und rauchig es sein mag, doch das Auge jedes Reisenden fesselt durch die überaus malerische Schönheit seiner Lage in der grünen Waldschlucht eines bedeutenden und geschichtlich merkwürdigen Gebirges. Das Ländchen, dem es angehörte, war damals einer jener abgeschlossenen Erdwinkel ohne Fabriken und Handel, ohne Heerstraßen, wo noch ein fremdes Gesicht Aufsehen erregte, und eine Reise von dreißig Meilen selbst den Vornehmeren zum Ulysses seiner Gegend machte — kurz, ein Fleck, wie es deren sonst so viele in Deutschland gab, mit all den Mängeln und Tugenden, all der Originalität und Beschränktheit, wie sie nur in solchen Zuständen gedeihen. (3)

This passage illustrates an important aspect of Friedrich’s surroundings: isolation. While described as having picturesque qualities, it is the town’s distance and separation from social contact which have the strongest impact on the society in which the main character grows up. This allows the characters within the village to act and judge on their own compulsions, while not having to answer to any higher social authority. Without any connection outside of his own village, Friedrich is left to develop his personal sense of morals based on the “representative par excellence of the region’s shortcomings…” (Wells, 478). The village is further described as “die hochmütigste, schlauste, und kühnste Gemeinde des Fürstentums. Seine Lage inmitten tiefer und stolzer Waldeinsamkeit mochte schon früh den angeborenen Starrsinn der Gemüter nähren…”
The familiar theme of “Waldeinsamkeit” makes an appearance in the *Novelle*, as it does in the case of Bertha in Tieck’s tale, but rather than playing a role in the development of the main character, it serves to shelter him, as well as the surrounding villagers, from outside influence, thus allowing their broken sense of justice and social conduct to thrive.

The negative impact of this isolated village is further strengthened by the social system which the inhabitants have established:

“Unter höchst einfachen und häufig unzulänglichen Gesetzen waren die Begriffe der Einwohner von Recht und Unrecht einigermaßen in Verwirrung geraten, oder vielmehr, es hatte sich neben dem gesetzlichen ein zweites Recht gebildet, ein Recht der öffentlichen Meinung, der Gewohnheit und der durch Vernachlässigung entstandenen Verjährung. (3-4)

Friedrich’s only sense of right and wrong comes from a village which “blatantly manifests the biases, mentality, and perverted sense of law and justice that enable its inhabitants to condone and secretly cheer thievery by wood poachers” (Wells, 478). In such an environment it cannot be expected that young Friedrich form a well-rounded and sensible personality, due to the lack of a moral base from which such a personality can develop. This base must not only clearly define right and wrong, but must be enforced in order to emphasize its importance. Without this system in place, Friedrich Mergel is exposed to “…the dubious moral ‘climate’ and the ‘working’ ethical code of the time and place into which he is cast: the ‘law’ of public opinion, of custom, of superannuation which has grown up like an indistinguishable weed beside the none too vigorous plant of legitimate law” (Silz, 47). He therefore, as a product of this environment, develops under the same mentality, which fosters the notion that “wrong-doing is accepted” and in some cases “re-
spectable” (Silz, 47).

Following the presentation of the tumultuous surroundings of Village B. we enter the individual world of Friedrich Mergel, starting with the description of the Mergel house “…indicated by its chimney and extra-large window-panes; its deterioration by the neglected fence, the damaged roof, and the unweeded garden with its woody, unpruned rosebushes” (Silz, 42). While the house, depicted prior to Friedrich’s birth, has no direct correlation to the development of an individual’s personality, the timing of its introduction immediately following the prefatory poem serves both as an immediate challenge to the reader not to judge, while also presenting to us a first glimpse of the disheveled environment in which Friedrich Mergel is forced to grow up. Additionally, this physical portrayal of Friedrich’s home serves to mirror the tumultuous social environment to which he is exposed right from the start.

Though we cannot know with certainty, due to the narrator’s limited scope of detailed knowledge of particular events, it appears that there thrived an atmosphere of abuse, alcoholism, and overall turmoil within the disheveled Mergel household prior to Friedrich’s birth. Friedrich’s father, Hermann, was an “ordentlicher Säufer”, who only drank on Sundays and holidays, yet on the first Sunday after his wedding, “[ging] die junge Frau schreiend und blutrünstig durchs Dorf zu den Ihrigen rennen…Das war freilich ein großer Skandal und Ärger für Mergel” (6). After this night eventually led to her death, the Mergel household fell into disarray until Hermann’s second marriage to Margreth Semmler, which, given a strong initial start, eventually also fell into turmoil and further rumors surrounding a questionable night:

…bald sah man ihn oft genug quer über die Gasse ins Haus taumeln, hörte
drinnen sein wüstes Lärmen und sah Margreth eilends Tür und Fenster schließen. An einem solchen Tage – keinem Sonntage mehr – sah man sie Abends aus dem Haus stürzen, ohne Haube und Halstuch, das Haar wild um den Kopf hängend, sich im Garten neben ein Krautbeet niederwerfen und die Erde mit den Händen aufwühlen, dann ängstlich um sich schauen, rasch ein Bündel Kräuter brechen und damit langsam wieder dem Hause zugehen… (7)

Rumors then swirled in the village of Margreth’s abuse at the hand of Hermann Mergel, yet as Friedrich had not been born at this time it begs the question: why is this particular night of importance? As Heinrich Henel asserts: “Wichtig für die Handlung wäre höchstens die Tatsache, daß der Vater die Mutter prügelt, denn das böse Beispiel könnte den Hang zur Gewalttätigkeit in dem Sohn erzeugt oder bestärkt haben” (153). A picture, albeit a cloudy one, is painted of a prominent figure in his coming life, who will play an influential hand in his upbringing. As Silz points out, “the boy naturally identifies with his father, yet has to hear [his] memory constantly aspersed by others” (48). This natural identification with his father foreshadows the type of individual Friedrich is likely to gravitate towards, namely, one with a less than upstanding reputation. Though the reputation of his father does not dictate the man Friedrich will become, Hermann Mergel’s history provides us with a premonition of the actions to which Friedrich might aspire later.

While Friedrich’s connection to his deceased father plays a role in his social development, his interactions with his mother mirror many of the values of his surroundings, reinforcing what he experiences in the community and therefore playing a dominant role in his psychological development. Friedrich’s closeness to his father is revealed mainly via his disdain towards those who besmirch his memory, yet we get a clearer insight into the relationship he has developed with his mother through multiple dialogues between the two. The first dialogue presented is on the stormy night on which Hermann is at a wed-
ding and is not able to come home due to intoxication. The initial part of the conversation simply involves Margreth giving no heed to Friedrich’s assertions that someone is knocking at the door:

"Mutter — es pocht draußen!" — "Still, Fritzchen, das ist das lockere Brett im Giebel, das der Wind jagt." — "Nein, Mutter, an der Tür!" — "Sie schließt nicht; die Klinke ist zerbrochen. Gott, schlaf doch! bring mich nicht um das armselige bißchen Nachtruhe" (8)

The deflection of the boy’s concerns speaks to the mother’s indifference towards his feelings, punctuated by her need to get whatever sleep she can. Immediately following this conversation, Friedrich asks about the Devil: “Wo ist der Teufel, Mutter?’ — ‘Wart, du Unrast! er steht vor der Tür und will dich holen, wenn du nicht ruhig bist!’” (8). Margreth’s selfishness is reinforced by her desire to quell the boy’s curiosity, simply to get some peace and quiet. “[Her] bitter answers are typical of an impatient, almost desperate mother. She clearly wants to avoid becoming involved in an explanation of evil, and therefore she completely evades the simple, yet probing questions of her child” (Bernd, 70). Margreth’s words and actions do not simply reveal aspects of her frustrated character, but also play a role in forming the personality of a nine-year-old child. She unknowingly teaches young Friedrich to avoid any conversation or questions which are of discomfort to him, or simply to provide an answer which skirts the issue, never coming to a distinct resolution. Later in the Novelle, Margreth’s strategy of avoidance turns on her: “Fritzchen…willst du jetzt fromm sein, dass ich Freude an dir habe, oder willst du unartig sein und lügen, oder saufen und stehlen?’ — ‘Mutter, Hülsmeyer stiehlt’” (10). Margreth’s attempts to get her son to refrain from getting into trouble go unanswered, as Friedrich uses what he has learned from his mother to avoid providing a direct answer.
This theme of avoidance and spoken unclarity carry throughout the story, and while “we can say that the conversations of Friedrich…with his mother are without ulterior motives…they do end unsatisfactorily, in that the questions of both remain unanswered” (Bernd, 70).

Further to the aforementioned conversation, Margreth mirrors another attribute commonly found in the Village B.: prejudice. After the assertion that Hülsmeyer steals, Friedrich goes on to mention Hülsmeyer’s theft from Aaron, the Jew: “‘Er hat neulich den Aaron geprügelt und ihm sechs Groschen genommen.’ — ‘Hat er dem Aaron Geld genommen, so hat ihn der verfluchte Jude gewiss zuvor darum betrogen. Hülsmeyer ist ein ordentlicher, angesessener Mann, und die Juden sind alle Schelme’” (10). Her blatant prejudice towards the Jews and her quick disregard of unwanted information regarding a man she views as honorable, speak to the general viewpoint of the village itself and to the psychological ideals that she continues to impart upon her son. Not only are her prejudice and circumvention exposed in this dialogue, but also her tendency to think in black and white terms, as revealed when Friedrich continues to address Brandis’ witnessing of the crime: “‘Aber, Mutter, Brandis sagt auch, dass er Holz und Rehe stiehlt.’ — ‘Kind, Brandis ist ein Förster.’ — ‘Mutter, lügen die Förster?’” (10). Margreth clearly shows her belief that foresters are dishonorable men. When Friedrich questions her about their honesty, calling into question her black-and-white predisposition, he once more receives an unsatisfactory answer: “‘Höre, Fritz, das Holz lässt unser Herrgott frei wachsen und das Wild wechselt aus eines Herren Lande in das andere; die können Niemand angehören. Doch das verstehst du noch nicht…’” (10-11). Friedrich’s mother quickly deflects and refers to God and his creations as a way to absolve any possible crimes committed by
those she sees as favorable members of society. The dialogues between the mother and son paint a clear picture of Margreth’s character, but, as one of the two most prominent role models in Friedrich’s young life, Margreth’s prejudice and art of deflection weigh heavily on the psychological development of her child. These developed attributes become very clear in Friedrich’s character as the plot moves forward.

Though Margreth and Hermann play a dominant role in the early development of Friedrich, it is the introduction of his uncle, Simon Semmler, which steers the already negatively influenced child further from the path of moral and societal normalcy. Following the death of the child’s father, the presence of a strong male role model would most likely have proven beneficial, yet “the uncle, who might have supplied a salutary male influence, is anything but a desirable mentor” (Silz, 48). “With the introduction of Simon we can begin to speak of ulterior motives” within various conversations (Bernd, 71).

While Simon speaks with Margreth, we see the same deflective tactics from both characters, yet Simon’s tactics are used to lure information from the other, as is made clear in his interrogation about Friedrich:

Simon schien dies zu überhören; er reckte den Hals zur Türe hinaus. "Ei, da kommt der Gesell!” (13).

This serves two purposes: first, to imply Simon’s involvement in the illicit activity within the community, as shown by his questioning, which would appear to test “whether Friedrich would be a good scout for the wood poachers” (Bernd, 71). Second, his deflection of Margreth’s question mirrors the behavior of his sister, showing the negative habits the two siblings most likely learned together earlier in their lives.
Immediately following the interrogative conversation between Friedrich’s mother and uncle, Margreth sends her son along with his uncle; the error of which is made clear through Droste-Hülshoff’s depiction of Simon as a damned soul:

…Und bald sah Margreth den Beiden nach, wie sie fortschritten, Simon voran, mit seinem Gesicht die Luft durchschneidend, während ihm die Schöße des roten Rocks wie Feuerflammen nachzogen. So hatte er ziemlich das Ansehen eines feurigen Mannes, der unter dem gestohlenen Sacke bußt…” (14)

Droste-Hülshoff uses this passage as an obvious indication of Friedrich’s separation from what could have potentially been a positive, nurturing environment, accompanied by his entrance into the underbelly of society, with Simon being described as the devil.

The departure of Simon and Friedrich from the latter’s childhood home then brings them to the edge of the “Brederholz”, where the ensuing conversation between the two reveals the boy’s learned behavior: “‘Trinkst du gern Branntwein?’ — Der Knabe antwortete nicht…’Ich frage, trinkst du gern Branntwein? gibt dir die Mutter zuweilen welchen?’ — ‘Die Mutter hat selbst keinen’, sagte Friedrich” (15). Immediately exemplified is Friedrich’s ability to avoid directly answering questions by diverting the conversation with unclear answers. Though “direct questions still aren’t asked of the child…[Friedrich] has grown to be more clever in his dealings with his uncle” (Bernd, 71). While the blood connection and physical similarity of Simon and Friedrich is at times argued as a possible result of incest, the similarity in their actions can simply be attributed to learned behavior. Simon and Margreth, coming from the same family, were exposed to certain behavioral patterns, which the latter eventually passed on to her child. Although receiving some resistance and avoidance from Friedrich in his line of questioning, Simon’s ultimate influence over the child is undeniable, as is evidenced later in the
Novelle.

Simon’s dominant influence over the child is epitomized through their later conversation addressing Friedrich’s intention to go to confession:

“…geh in Gottes Namen, aber beichte wie ein guter Christ…Denk an die zehn Gebote: du sollst kein Zeugnis ablegen gegen deinen Nächsten.” — "Kein falsches!” — "Nein, gar keines; du bist schlecht unterrichtet; wer einen andern in der Beichte anklagt, der empfängt das Sakrament unwürdig". (34)

This passage further accentuates Simon’s role as a devil figure in that he manipulates religion to fit the narrative which suits him best. In this particular instance, Friedrich’s confession of sin would unveil his uncle’s status with the “Blaukittel,” as well as any other accomplices he may have had. Friedrich, being familiar enough with biblical verses, challenges Simon, and even implies the latter’s involvement in the murder of Brandis:

“‘Ihr habt mich belogen…Wo ist Eure Axt?…Habt Ihr einen neuen Stiel hinein gemacht? wo ist der alte?’” (34). Immediately following, Simon asserts that he had been home for a long period of time, and while Friedrich still remains highly skeptical, he ultimately accepts the symbolic devil’s words, and instead confesses to personal guilt: ‘Ich habe schwere Schuld…dass ich ihn den unrechten Weg geschickt — obgleich — doch, dies hab ich nicht gedacht, nein, gewiss nicht. Ohm, ich habe Euch ein schweres Gewissen zu danken’ (34). While able to recognize the source of his guilty conscience, Friedrich still bows to the will of Simon. In this facet, Friedrich also confesses his sin to someone representative of the devil: a figure that neither wishes to nor could absolve him of any wrongdoings he may have committed. The solidification of Simon’s ultimate influence over the boy becomes clear when Friedrich fails to go to confession: “Friedrich ging an diesem Morgen nicht zur Beichte” (34), effectively dismissing the opportunity to relieve
himself of the guilt, which eventually leads to his demise. In this moment, Friedrich turns himself over completely to the criminal side of society.

Two defining influences in Friedrich’s personality arise after the death of his father. Firstly, Friedrich struggles between an innate connection to the deceased, while also trying to deal with the negative social reputation that has formed itself around his father:

Überhaupt hatte die Erinnerung an seinen Vater eine mit Grausen gemischte Zärtlichkeit in ihm zurückgelassen, wie denn nichts so fesselt, wie die Liebe und Sorgfalt eines Wesens, das gegen alles Übrige verhärtet scheint, und bei Friedrich wuchs dieses Gefühl mit den Jahren, durch das Gefühl mancher Zurücksetzung von Seiten Anderer. (11)

Friedrich identifies with his father, yet having to defend his bad reputation “marks the beginning of an anti-social resentment and aggressiveness in him” (Silz, 48). This resentment can be seen in the physical altercations with other children: “Friedrich musste von andern Knaben Vieles darüber hören; dann heulte er, schlug um sich, stach auch einmal mit seinem Messerchen und wurde bei dieser Gelegenheit jämmerlich geprügelt” (11). The emotional side of the boy is untamed, and he lashes out as result of his defensiveness, furthering his isolation opposite the community. This uncontrollable attribute in the face of criticism and damaged pride not only causes him to be physically violent in his youth, but also ultimately drives him to murder later in his life.

The second defining influence, his mother, in a rather hasty manner allows the boy to be adopted in some fashion by his uncle: “So kam es denn dahin, dass nach einer halbstündigen Unterredung Simon eine Art Adoption des Knaben in Vorschlag brachte…” (13), after which Friedrich would spend a majority of his time under his tutelage. Margreth, in response to this suggestion, “schwie und gab sich in Alles. Nur bat sie den Bruder, streng, doch nicht hart gegen den Knaben zu sein” (14). At a time when Friedrich
could use a central pillar of support to help handle the death of his father, he gets pushed away by the only seemingly close member of his family. While the connection between the boy and his mother is not depicted in a positive light, she is still the closest living connection he has remaining. Her abrupt dismissal of the child into his uncle’s care shows a neglectful side of Margreth, and further reinforces her inability and unwillingness to deal with any difficult circumstance. Not only does the mother at least partially relinquish her duties as a role model, she passes these duties on to a figure whom she herself doesn’t trust, as is made clear after her encounter with Johannes Niemand, in which she curses Simon for a broken oath: “Ein falscher Eid, ein falscher Eid!”; stöhnte sie. ‘Simon, Simon, wie willst du vor Gott bestehen!’” (19-20). The false oath of which she speaks stems from her belief that Simon may be the father of Johannes: “Die Vermutung liegt nahe, dass es sich bei Johannes um ein uneheliches Kind Simons handelt, [und] Simon die Vaterschaft jedoch abgeschworen hat” (Freund, 44). If Johannes is indeed her brother’s son, it speaks to Simon’s neglectful disposition and attitude towards parental obligations. The neglect of Johannes is evidenced through Margreth’s brief conversation with Johannes: “Sprich, wer sorgt für dich?’ – ‘Niemand’, stotterte das Kind” (19). Johannes’ role “as the novella’s mobile icon of human commodification [is then exemplified]: exploited by Simon for all manner of work, yet improperly cared for…” (Donahue, 335). Her distrust in Simon is then justified and further brought to light when Friedrich speaks of returning to his uncle for additional work:

“Ich soll Montag wieder zum Ohm und ihm bei der Einsaat helfen.” — “Du wieder zu ihm? nein, nein, nimmermehr!” — Sie umfasste ihr Kind mit Heftigkeit. — “Doch”, fügte sie hinzu, und ein Tränenstrom stürzte ihr plötzlich über die eingefallenen Wangen; “geh, er ist mein einziger Bruder, und die Verleumdung ist groß!” (20)
Further reinforced is Margreth’s unwillingness to deal with the child in any capacity, to the point of entrusting him to Simon, whom she clearly doesn’t trust. This speaks volumes to the uncle’s character, considering his own sister cannot show any consistent faith in him. Margreth’s inconsistencies and internal conflicts also come to light through the dialogue between her and Friedrich, as she cannot stand firm in any decision she makes. In this case, she allows her blood connection to Simon to override her reasonable mind, which tells her that the two shouldn’t see each other again. Instead, Margreth lets her son go and implores Friedrich not to forget God: “geh...aber halt Gott vor Augen und vergiss das tägliche Gebet nicht!” (20). Due to her inability and unwillingness to deal with her son, Margreth relies on religion as a way to circumvent her parenting responsibilities and exonerate herself from any guilt. Comparable to Tieck’s *Der Blonde Eckbert*, there exists a home environment without direction, leaving the young main characters to make moral decisions based solely on what they perceive to be right or wrong.

Paired with the heavy societal influence which weighs upon young Friedrich is the earlier referenced seclusion of the natural world in which he grows up, which fosters the criminal attitudes of those involved in the darker side of society. This environment helps to shroud criminality in darkness, helping it to thrive in isolation and further “[inciting] the characters to those actions they would not attempt in sunlight — murder and wood-poaching as examples” (Bernd, 72).

Though addressed in the introductory pages of the *Novelle*, our first intimate experience with the natural world comes later, following Simon and Friedrich’s conversation at the edge of the forest, as they enter into the darkness:
Es war jetzt ganz finster; das erste Mondviertel stand am Himmel, aber seine schwachen Schimmer dienten nur dazu, den Gegenständen, die sie zuweilen durch eine Lücke der Zweige berührten, ein fremdartiges Ansehen zu geben. (15)

Nature presents itself in an active manner to the characters: the sky, reaching through the openings among the trees, instills a sense of eeriness and mystery in this setting. This initial description is followed by Simon and Friedrich’s trek through the woods:

So schritten Beide rüstig voran, Simon mit dem festen Schritt des abgehärteten Wanderers, Friedrich schwankend und wie im Traum. Es kam ihm vor, als ob Alles sich bewegte und die Bäume in den einzelnen Mondstrahlen bald zusammen, bald von einander schwankten. Baumwurzeln und schlüpfrige Stellen, wo sich das Wegwasser gesammelt, machten seinen Schritt unsicher; er war einigemal nahe daran, zu fallen. (15-16)

This passage serves two purposes: to emphasize nature’s active role in relation to the characters within it, and to illustrate Friedrich’s passage from normal society into the mysterious world of crime, which plagues the people of Village B. In contrast to Simon, who treads through this world in a sure-footed, confident manner, Friedrich seems to be tested by the surrounding forest, whose trees appear to sway, whose roots make his footing unsteady, and whose slippery terrain almost causes him to fall multiple times. The boy’s clumsiness reveals his amateur status in this world, following in the footsteps of his uncle, who proves to be an expert, comfortably maneuvering in a familiar setting.

Friedrich passes this test, as the uncle and nephew eventually reach their destination at the opening in the woods: “Jetzt schien sich in einiger Entfernung das Dunkel zu brechen, und bald traten Beide in eine ziemlich große Lichtung. Der Mond schien klar hinein und zeigte, dass hier noch vor Kurzem die Axt unbarmerzig gewütet hatte” (16). Upon their arrival “a decided change of light occurs…[and] all the objects emerge into clarity…”
symbolizing Friedrich’s successful transition into his new environment. This clarity, however, does not simply represent the boy’s introduction into this new world; it also provides insight into nature’s disposition. From the standpoint of Village B., nature serves simply to shroud the criminal activity of those involved, but in this instance, when accompanied by Simon, someone already familiar with such a world, Friedrich is allowed by nature to peer behind the veil it has created.

Another aspect of the natural world’s active disposition which has to be accounted for is its use of light and dark “to reveal its secrets...according to a will of its own” (Bernd, 75). While the forest passively encourages the unlawful behavior of the villagers by providing cover, it also plays an active role as it “seems to guard its [secrets] for a time; then at a certain point it chooses to reveal the evidence to the eye of man” (Bernd, 75). An example of such active qualities comes from the death of Brandis, as nature takes a role in revealing the location of his body, which is “found because the bushes happen to catch on a forester’s ‘Flaschenschnur’” (Bernd, 75). The discovery of bodies throughout the story doesn’t come with the recognition of somebody’s absence followed by an investigation, but rather the bodies are discovered by chance when the natural world decides to reveal them to the villagers.

With Friedrich’s transition through the forest comes a recurring theme which arises in numerous instances throughout the story: the notion of proving and preserving self-worth. This particular scene plays a role in forming part of Friedrich’s learned personality, as he feels the need to balance a weakness in pride and emotional strength by proving his physical prowess. This insecurity stems from his relationship with his uncle and the precedent that was set upon their arrival at the clearing in the woods, when Simon insists
the boy see the location of his father’s death: “‘Friedrich, kennst du den Baum? Das ist die breite Eiche… hier haben Ohm Franz und der Hülsmeyer deinen Vater gefunden, als er in der Betrunkenheit ohne Buße und Ölung zum Teufel gefahren war’” (16). In such an instance, in which a father figure presents a young boy with a potentially traumatizing scene, it can be expected that the child will react in an emotional way. These emotions, when validated by a father figure, can show the child the acceptable nature of said feelings. Yet Simon’s approach to the boy’s reaction was that of dismissal: “‘Ohm, Ohm!’, keuchte Friedrich. — ‘Was fällt dir ein? Du wirst dich doch nicht fürchten? Satan von einem Jungen, du kneipst mir den Arm! lass los, los!’” (16). Following this brief interaction Friedrich releases the grip on his uncle’s arm and the two proceed silently out of the forest. The dismissal of Friedrich’s emotional reaction to the graphic description of his father’s death causes the subsequent silence in the child, as he learns that expressing his emotions will not be met with any sense of understanding or comfort, but rather disgust and rejection. This interaction between Simon and Friedrich shapes the boy’s perception of what is acceptable when dealing with emotion, namely, that outward expression of feelings will not be validated. Although these feelings may be suppressed, they do find an eventual outlet: anger, as we will soon see.

The aftermath of the interaction between Friedrich and Simon in the forest is seen later through Friedrich’s vanity: “Der Knabe war seitdem wie verwandelt, das träumerische Wesen gänzlich von ihm gewichen, er trat fest auf, fing an, sein Äußeres zu beachten und bald in den Ruf eines hübschen, gewandten Burschen zu kommen” (21).

While an initial interest in one’s appearance doesn’t dictate a flaw in personality, we see these superficial obsessions building in Friedrich’s character. This vanity goes hand in
hand with an arrogance, or “Hochmut”, “[ein] unmißverständliches Zeichen für Friedrichs Paktieren mit dem Bösen, und dieser Hochmut ist durchaus die Basis seiner späteren Verbrechen” (Rölleke, 410). The progression of his vanity is further fueled by the environment around him, most prominently seen in his mother, who, simultaneously to her son’s growth, shows a notable shift in her disposition towards Friedrich from simply innate, motherly love to admiration:

Margreth hatte bisher ihren Sohn nur geliebt, jetzt fing sie an, stolz auf ihn zu werden und sogar eine Art Hochachtung vor ihm zu fühlen, da sie den jungen Menschen so ganz ohne ihr Zutun sich entwickeln sah, sogar ohne ihren Rat… (21)

This passage presents Margreth’s further validation of Friedrich’s superficial appearance, as well as his physical prowess. In this way, Margreth personifies the environment in which the boy has grown up, from which he may receive partial affection, but where he cannot feel truly validated by others until he has in some way proven himself worthy. The problem which arises as a result of such an environment is that the self-reaffirmation which Friedrich receives is short-term, so that he constantly seeks new challenges in order to bolster his ego. This issue is depicted as the boy grows older:

In seinem achtzehnten Jahre hatte Friedrich sich bereits einen bedeutenden Ruf in der jungen Dorfwelt gesichert, durch den Ausgang einer Wette, in Folge deren er einen erlegten Eber über zwei Meilen weit auf seinem Rücken trug, ohne abzusetzen. (21)

While young Friedrich is able to secure a name for himself in his community, it is solely on the basis of a bet, which provides the character with a fleeting sense of glory, while simultaneously fueling the fire of his vanity. The notion of short-lived prestige is further solidified with his interest in short, albeit difficult tasks, while rejecting longer-term, ongoing projects, which would not provide him with the necessary reaffirmation in a time
frame suitable to his inflated ego: “…zu Hause schien ihm, ganz im Widerspiel mit seinem sonstigen Rufe, jede anhaltende Beschäftigung lästig, und er unterzog sich lieber einer harten, aber kurzen Anstrengung…” (22). Friedrich, through his behavior and the constant validation of his actions, develops a prideful, yet delicate personality. His fragile nature is exposed through his violent reaction to ridicule from others for continuing to tend to cows: “was bereits begann, seinem Alter unpassen zu werden, und ihm gelegentlichen Spott zuzog vor dem er sich aber durch ein paar derbe Zurechtweisungen mit der Faust Ruhe verschaffte” (22). Violence appears, in this instance, to be Friedrich’s most reasonable solution to any criticism or damaging words that threaten his prideful disposition. This reactionary physical violence to bolster a damaged ego, however, proves to be deeply ingrained in the character, as it reoccurs on multiple occasions throughout Friedrich’s tale. Ultimately, by this point in the boy’s life, his personality has been formed by numerous influences, paired with the social acceptance of violence and physical prowess as character-building attributes. These learned behaviors are prominent factors which deeply affect Friedrich’s future actions. As Larry D. Wells argues:

…the strong back with which he establishes his superficial reputation among village contemporaries…suggests the proverbial weak mind. Such predominance of the external Glanz at the expense of a diminishing inner being is accentuated by the ostensibly external perspective of the narrative, in which signs of thwarted inner growth are manifested through external actions of pride and vanity. (Wells, 113)

While the theme of obscurity has already been discussed in relation to the natural world and its tendency to shroud the uninitiated from illicit actions, this theme occurs once again in the social setting through the character of Johannes Niemand. The figure of Johannes Niemand serves as a “Doppelgänger” motif, in order to cast physical confusion
and doubt between himself and Friedrich, while also presenting the issue of social- and self-awareness, which are lacking in some of the characters.

Our initial contact with the character of Johannes Niemand comes with Margreth’s failing to recognize her son. After Margreth addresses the child, “Das Kind sah zu ihr auf…Margreth stand still; ihre Blicke wurden ängstlich…das war ihr Kind nicht!” (17). While falsely mistaking Johannes for Friedrich exemplifies the “Doppelgänger” motif, it also “suggests that the mother who cannot recognize her own son externally has little hope of grasping his inner being. Thus Margreth does not detect Friedrich’s stunted spiritual growth…” (Wells, 112). Yet, despite her inability to recognize his lack of inner development, she continues to validate his physical prowess, which also serves to console her conscience with regard to her minimal participation in the boy’s upbringing. The concept of awareness is not only absent in the mother, but also in Friedrich himself, who is unable to recognize his own faults and shortcomings. In this case, “Johannes represents…the Somebody [Friedrich] cannot see. This Somebody is Friedrich himself, a Somebody blind to his own inner identity” (Wells, 113). Further to this scene, after Margreth finally recognizes the boy as a stranger in her household, Friedrich enters to dispel the confusion and to present Johannes with a violin from his childhood as a gift. The gifting of the violin has great significance for Friedrich: “In dem Augenblick, als Friedrich ihm das Spielzeug seiner Kindheit…schenkt, löst er sich von dieser Kindheit ab und tritt in den gefährlichen Raum der Eitelkeit und Großmannssucht” (B. Wiese, 163). Abandonment of his youth symbolizes his now complete transition into his newly formed personality as well as his immersion into the world of criminality, leaving the innocence of his childhood behind.
Aside from the extensive influence of individual relationships surrounding Friedrich’s childhood are the heavily influential group dynamics to which he is exposed in his community, namely: the village of B. and the “Blaukittel.” The characters within Village B. are constantly addressed in terms of their individual status or actions, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of their unique influences on Friedrich’s childhood. This separation of characters also serves to show the divided nature of the society, in which individuals act on their own behalves, yet seldom for the common good of the village as a whole, with religion being a prominent example. As previously addressed, Margreth uses religion to avoid parental responsibilities, and Simon uses religion to manipulate those around him. The isolated use of religion for personal use is further intensified by the lack of group religion in Village B., as it is never addressed as an entity which serves to bring the community together.

In contrast to the individually focused lens used by Droste-Hülshoff on the villagers, is the shrouded image of the “Blaukittel”: “eine Bande von Holzfrevlern, die…alle ihre Vorgänger so weit an List und Frechheit übertraf, dass es dem Langmüsigsten zu viel werden musste” (22). Attention in Village B. is immediately drawn to these newcomers due to their exceptionally cunning nature, presenting the villagers with an exceedingly difficult challenge to tackle. Yet, while their cunning surpasses that of previous groups, it is their unity which raises a substantial problem. This unification serves two purposes in the Novelle; to further cast a veil of uncertainty on both the reader and the characters involved, and to provide Friedrich with a highly functional group dynamic, which is something he hadn’t seen before, and which he can aspire to join.
Through the use of identical dress, the “Blaukittel” show a physical uniformity, which not only represents the group’s ability to work together in their illicit activities; it also casts confusion and doubt upon those who attempt to hunt them: “Ihre Benennung erhielten sie von der ganz gleichförmigen Tracht, durch die sie das Erkennen erschwerten, wenn etwa ein Förster noch einzelne Nachzügler im Dickicht verschwinden sah” (22). This uniformity, paired with the natural veil of darkness set forth by the woods, compound the pre-existing problems faced by the village of B.:

Ganz gegen den gewöhnlichen Stand der Dinge, wo man die stärksten Böcke der Herde mit dem Finger bezeichnen konnte, war es hier trotz aller Wachsamkeit bisher nicht möglich gewesen, auch nur ein Individuum namhaft zu machen. (22)

Due to the group’s highly organized nature, the community which it ravages has little to no opportunity to identify, let alone capture, any of its members. However, while this group causes nothing but grief for the villagers, it offers something to young Friedrich: success. Though never joining the group, the boy sees an ideal opportunity to prove his worth to a successful band of thieves, which ultimately feeds into his drive for validation and his egotistical disposition. While Simon plays his role in ushering the boy into a world of lawlessness, he also exposes him to a crowning example of what the band of criminals can do, leading him to the clearing where his father was killed: “Überall ragten Baumstümpfe hervor, manche mehrere Fuß über der Erde, wie sie gerade in der Eile am bequemsten zu durchschneiden gewesen waren; [aber] die verpönte Arbeit musste unversehens unterbrochen worden sein…” (16). The exposure to the undertakings of the bandits impresses upon the 12-year-old boy exactly what it is that they do, while the indication that the work was interrupted clearly presents the group’s ability to achieve its
goals without capture or identification, as none of them were apprehended as a result. In this sense, the group is successful, and the validation of their achievements comes through the foresters’ inability to apprehend the “Blaukittel.”

While Friedrich has found a group dynamic that seemingly suits him, it is still his egocentric, prideful disposition which ultimately controls his actions, as displayed through his interaction with the forester Brandis. Shortly after the introduction of the “Blaukittel,” we find Friedrich, enveloped in his antisocial behavior, lying alone in the grass in solitude, whittling a stick, his dog lying not far from him. Upon hearing the approaching Brandis, “schob [Friedrich] schnell zwei Finger in den Mund und pfiff gellend und anhaltend” (24). This whistling, followed promptly by the throwing of a stone at the dog, provides the reader with the strong implication of his connection with the “Blaukittel.” During questioning from Brandis about his actions, Friedrich simply claims that he wanted obedience from the animal, yet this “is only a pretext for Friedrich’s loud whistling - which in turn must [be] a prearranged signal…which would alert the poachers” (Bernd, 72) of the foresters’ approach.

Through the interaction with Brandis, we see Friedrich’s learned childhood behavior exemplified, as he exercises his talents in avoidance and ambiguity:


Brandis’ command for Friedrich not to behave like a “Narr,” indicates his already skeptical disposition in relation to the boy. Friedrich then proceeds to provide answers to the forester’s questions, which serve solely to provoke and irritate the man, implying that the only “Holzfäller” in the woods must undeniably belong to Brandis. Following this provo-
cation, Brandis sends his fellow foresters forth, as he remains behind to speak with the boy:

“Friedrich…meine Geduld ist zu Ende; ich möchte dich prügeln wie einen Hund, und mehr seid ihr auch nicht wert. Ihr Lumpenpack, dem kein Ziegel auf dem Dach gehört! Bis zum Betteln habt ihr es, Gottlob, bald gebracht, und an meiner Tür soll deine Mutter, die alte Hexe, keine verschimmelte Brotrinde bekommen. Aber vorher sollt ihr mir noch Beide ins Hundeloch!” (25)

In response to the forester’s harsh words, Friedrich becomes “totenbleich und seine Augen schienen wie Krystallkugeln aus dem Kopf schießen zu wollen” (25), but he manages to compose himself enough to speak disingenuously to Brandis, and provide him with the information he seeks: “wenn Ihr zu den andern Förstern wollt, die sind dort an der Buche hinaufgegangen” (26). While Brandis questions the boy’s instructions, Friedrich insists that his company departed in the direction of the ever-symbolic beech tree. The following day it is revealed to both Margreth and the reader that the forester Brandis was found dead, “von den Blaukitteln erschlagen” (28). While Friedrich didn’t play a direct part in the death of the forester, his fragile sense of self came into focus once more after being affronted by Brandis, causing his subsequent behavior in providing false information. As Pongs argues, it is not murder, which Friedrich commits, but “Beihilfe zum Mord…[und] der Impuls, den Förster zu verderben, kommt aus Friedrichs Eigenem” (Pongs, 211). In this case, we see an escalation in his reactions to those who pose a threat to his fragile ego, and while he is able to compose himself to an extent, it serves only to lead the forester to his death. While not physically lashing out, as we have seen in his childhood, Friedrich has a strong understanding that Brandis will be harmed in some way when encountering the “Blaukittel.” Though he may not have known this would lead to
Brandis’ ultimate demise, Friedrich’s associative role still does not absolve him of guilt.

This guilt finds immediate physical manifestation in Friedrich, following his encounter with Brandis and preceding his knowledge of his untimely death: “Friedrich war krank heimgekommen, er klagte über heftige Kopfschmerzen und hatte...[erzählt], wie er sich schwer geärgert über den Förster” (27). Pongs, in reaction to this scene, states: “Auch in diesem wichtigsten Querschnitt der Erzählung gibt die Dichterin keinen Einblick in den Charakter Friedrichs, in den Kampf der Gefühle” (Pongs, 212). Although we aren’t presented with any direct exposure to the inner workings of his mind or feelings, Friedrich provides us with an initial glimpse of the guilt which will continue to grow in his character, parallel to his prideful, resentful disposition. The physical representation of a guilty conscience also shows a resistance to his learned childhood behavior: a deep-seated understanding of right and wrong, bursting forth in more extreme circumstances.

Simon’s control over the boy is also exemplified in the aftermath of Brandis’ death as Friedrich lies ill in bed. Unable and unwilling to address the tragic fate of the forester, Friedrich demands that his mother leave the room, claiming that he simply needs to rest. Immediately afterwards, with Margreth still present, Johannes Niemand enters, relaying the uncle’s request for Friedrich’s presence: “‘Friedrich...du sollst sogleich zum Ohm kommen, er hat Arbeit für dich; aber sogleich.’” (29). Though initially denying the request made by his uncle, “‘Ich komme nicht...ich bin krank’” (29), a brief, undisclosed conversation between Friedrich and Johannes clearly changes the former’s mind. As Margreth reenters the room, Friedrich is “bereits angekleidet” (30) and in his elusive nature, obscurely justifies his decision to leave with the proverb: “‘Was sein muss, schickt
sich wohl’” (30). In this instance, Simon’s influence is emphasized through his absence, showing control over the adolescent in an indirect manner. Through the growing authority of the uncle, we also see the increasing inferiority of the mother opposite her brother, in that her growing concern about her son goes unacknowledged.

Friedrich’s guilt is further compounded when the community holds a trial in the hopes of identifying Brandis’ murderer. After being called to testify, Friedrich answers all questions “offen und bestimmt und erzählte den Vorgang zwischen ihm und dem Oberförster ziemlich der Wahrheit gemäß, bis auf das Ende, das er geratener fand, für sich zu behalten” (32). Withholding the ending of his encounter with Brandis deeply implies the presence of Friedrich’s bad conscience; the suppression of which, along with the absence of confession, further increases the pressure of the guilt building under the surface of his proud, outward constitution.

The physical manifestation of Friedrich’s guilt becomes more severe with the knowledge of the forester’s death. Though the conversation takes place between Margreth and the “Amtsschreiber,” it is at the moment of Margreth’s and the reader’s enlightenment to Brandis’ death that Friedrich’s physical ailments seem to reach their apex: “Friedrich saß aufrecht im Bette, das Gesicht in die Hände gedrückt, und ächzte wie ein Sterbender” (29). Parallel to his poor physical state, resulting from a guilty conscience, are his learned behaviors of avoidance and resistance: “‘Friedrich, wie ist dir?…hast du wohl gehört?’…‘Mutter, Mutter, um Gotteswillen lass mich schlafen; ich kann nicht mehr!’” (29). Friedrich mirrors his mother’s actions from his childhood, in which he abruptly distances himself from any potentially complicated situation. While the mother portrayed an inability to address complex circumstances with her child, Friedrich shows
an inability to address his inner moral compass, rejecting any conversation that would challenge his actions. However, through denial of his conscience, his feelings of guilt build over time, eventually manifesting themselves in the ultimate physical retribution: his suicide.

The culmination of Friedrich’s superficial interests and fragile ego comes to a head at a wedding celebration several years after the death of the forester Brandis. Prefacing this occasion, Droste-Hülshoff provides the reader with an updated status of Friedrich’s developed personality:

Friedrich war desto lauter; er versäumte keine Kirchweih oder Hochzeit, und da ein sehr empfindliches Ehrgefühl ihn die geheime Missbilligung Mancher nicht übersehen ließ, war er gleichsam immer unter Waffen, der öffentlichen Meinung nicht sowohl Trotz zu bieten, als sie den Weg zu leiten, der ihm gefiel. (35)

Friedrich’s learned behavior to seek superficial validation has grown to the point that he becomes “ein Mensch, an dem Niemand Freude haben konnte” (35). Due to his developed status as a resented individual “…he ‘puts on’ as a defense against societal disapproval. His sensitive egoism makes him aware of the covert opposition of the important people, so he is always under arms…” (Silz, 49). Within Friedrich we see the severity of his shortcomings, and the effects thereof, growing under this societal pressure. Given his boisterous facade, he still remains a mystery to his peers: “…das um so mehr anerkannt wurde, je mehr man sich bewusst war, ihn nicht zu kennen und nicht berechnen zu können, wessen er am Ende fähig sei” (35). Immediately following these passages, Droste-Hülshoff cleverly alludes to Wilm Hülsmeyer, “…ein Bursch im Dorfe…[der] wagte im Bewusstsein seiner Kraft und guter Verhältnisse ihm die Spitze zu bieten…[und] der Einzige, mit dem Friedrich ungern zusammentraf” (35-36). In this
manner, the author prefaces the events to come, presenting the reader with the growth of Friedrich’s prideful personality, while afterwards reminding us of its fragility when faced with those who threaten his social status. The displeasure in encountering Hülsmeyer shows a desire for self-preservation on the part of Friedrich. We can see that “…he [has developed], again, under social pressure, a new side to his nature: a sense of inferiority, a desire for public acceptance…[which leads] him to ostentation in clothes and behavior” (Silz, 48).

As previously mentioned, it is at a local wedding where this ostentatious, yet fragile disposition is challenged and ultimately shattered by Friedrich’s fellow villagers. The assault to Friedrich’s ego begins with the social embarrassment of his other half, Johannes Niemand, “[der hatte] versucht, sich ein halbes Pfündchen Butter für die kommende Dürre zu sichern…[war ans] Küchenfeuer getreten und nun [rennt] das Fett schmählich die Rockschoße entlang” (38). Upon hearing this, Friedrich verbally and physically berates his rejected half, calling him a “Lumpenhund”, and afterwards “ein paar derbe Maulschellen trafen den geduldigen Schützling” (38). This further strengthens the argument of Johannes Niemand as the neglected part of Friedrich, rejected due to the unruly development of the latter’s narcissism. While it is Johannes who should solely feel the shame for his actions, “[Friedrichs] Würde war verletzt, das allgemeine Gelächter schnitt ihm durch die Seele” (38), implying the deep connection of the former to our main character. Friedrich seeks to suppress his neglected self swiftly, leading to the physical and verbal assault. Yet his shame still remains, as he attempts, through his abrasive outward manner “einen tapfern Juchheschrei wieder in den Gang zu bringen…”, but to no avail (38).
With Friedrich’s pride already damaged, it is the entrance of Wilm Hülsmeyer that acts in the further destruction of Friedrich’s fragile facade, putting him in the spotlight for failed payment to the Jew Aaron for the silver watch, which he flaunts: “‘Eine prächtige Uhr!’…”’Willst du sie bezahlen??’, fragte Friedrich. — ‘Hast du sie bezahlt?’, antwortete Wilm” (38). Upon this insult, Friedrich retreats into silence, and in a further attempt at self-preservation, avoids any further conversation with Hülsmeyer. In an effort to distract the villagers, he rallies the violins to play once more. While initially it seems he has successfully skirted the issue surrounding the watch, it is noticed shortly afterward that Friedrich has vanished, due to a final blow to his ego, which had been delivered by Aaron the Jew:

Friedrich war nicht mehr dort. Eine große, unerträgliche Schmach hatte ihn getroffen, da der Jude Aaron…plötzlich erschienen war, und nach einem kurzen, unbefriedigenden Zwiegespräch ihn laut vor allen Leuten um den Betrag von zehn Talern für eine schon um Ostern gelieferte Uhr gemahnt hatte. (39)

In comparison to the private incident with Brandis, after which Friedrich had some control over the content of their interaction, Aaron calls Friedrich out publicly, leaving him with no means of avoidance or self-preservation. Aggravating the situation, Aaron continues his disparagement as Friedrich leaves in shame:

Friedrich war wie vernichtet fortgegangen und der Jude ihm gefolgt, immer schreiend: "O weh mir! warum hab ich nicht gehört auf vernüftige Leute! Haben sie mir nicht hundertmal gesagt, Ihr hättest all Eu’r Gut am Leibe und kein Brot im Schranke!" — Die Tene tobte von Gelächter… (39)

Aaron’s actions receive support from the laughter of those around him, yet to Friedrich this laughter serves as an affirmation of the sense of inferiority which broods deep beneath the surface. This presents a new situation to Friedrich, as he feels the inability to
escape this shame.

In the aftermath of Friedrich’s social devastation comes the death of Aaron, “der…durch einen Schlag an die Schläfe mit einem stumpfen Instrumente…sein Leben verloren hatte, durch einen einzigen Schlag” (41). Upon his death, the natural world once again exercises its active qualities by revealing the body. Nature’s use of lightning illuminates Aaron’s staff, catching the eye of his wife:

Mit einemmale sieht die Frau beim Leuchten des Blitzes etwas weißes neben sich im Moose. Es ist der Stab ihres Mannes...Nicht lange, so ist in einem mit dürrem Laube gefüllten Graben der Leichnam des Juden gefunden. (42)

After receiving news of the murder, the immediate call for the apprehension of Friedrich is made, yet when entering the house, he has already vanished: “Er war nicht da, aber das Bett noch warm” (43). The disappearance of Friedrich provides us not only with the belief that he was the culprit, but also appears to reveal a morality which resides within him, causing the flight from his home. We can also see the product and progression of Friedrich’s developed personality, starting at a young age with physical altercations with other children, followed by an association with the murder of Brandis, and finally reaching its peak with the murder of Aaron. Throughout the Novelle, these altercations with his fellow villagers grow more severe as Friedrich’s inner strength dwindles.

In terms of the social ramifications of Friedrich’s actions, “[his] community suffered under an inadequate legal system with resultant confusion between statutory law and the disparate extra-legal code of public opinion” (King, 350); this calls into question Friedrich’s perceived need to flee. As seen in the legal proceedings involving the death of Brandis, uncertainty in any facet can lead to the release of any possible culprits in this
community. In this sense “Droste-Hülshoff has depicted a situation where the hero’s worst conceivable behavior would go unpunished by both external forms of judgment extant at the time” (King, 352). Yet, given the flawed legal code, under which he may have avoided any persecution for his crime, “Friedrich cannot escape…his own consciousness of wrongdoing, and his conviction of moral responsibility” (King, 352) which he had, until this point, been able to suppress. The culmination of his guilt, due to involvement in Brandis’ murder, combined with his likely involvement in the death of Aaron, simply defies his personal threshold of right and wrong, causing his subsequent flight.

The effects of Friedrich’s flight, however, cannot be understood until either his or Johannes’ return after twenty-eight years; the “villagers take him to be Johannes Niemand, and he does nothing to dispel this false impression…” (Wells 116). Shortly after the return to Village B., the man presumed to be Johannes is found hanging in a tree: “…in der Judenbuche hänge ein Mensch” (57), yet after the identification of a scar on the body, Herr von S. proclaims “‘der da…war Friedrich Mergel’” (58). However, the intended ambiguity of the Doppelgänger motif prevents us from truly knowing the individual’s identity. Without any previous allusion to the scar, there is no true indication that the deceased is Johannes or Friedrich.

...Diese Ungewißheit ist nur eine unter vielen. Ob Mord oder Totschlag vorliegt, wer der Mörder ist, wer nach [28] Jahren an dem Ort der Tat erhängt gefunden wird und durch wessen Hand er uns Leben gekommen ist — das alles sind Fragen, die nur mit mehr oder weniger gut begründeten Vermutungen zu beantworten sind. (Henel, 146)

Before the suicide, however, upon the disappearance of him whom they presumed to be Johannes, they had received an eye-witness account: “Ein Kind hatte ihn gesehen,
wie er am Rande des Brederholzes saß und an einem Löffel schnitzelte; ‘er schnitt ihn aber ganz entzwei’, sagte das kleine Mädchen” (55). If the individual identified in the tree were Johannes, we could presume that his suicide would be out of disgrace as the result of a wasted life “[weil] er keinen Frieden mit sich selbst und seiner Welt machen kann” (Freund, 86). However, if the corpse were indeed Friedrich, then the imagery of the spoon being split in two would be representative of the then-altered mentality of Friedrich upon his return to his childhood community. After having abandoned this poisonous social atmosphere and ventured out into the world, he returns with a sense of self and a tremendous amount of guilt for what he has done. This speaks strongly to the community’s negative influence on Friedrich, in that only after separating himself from it could he see the error of his ways. As Larry D. Wells writes:

Friedrich has now refused to take refuge behind the external laws…Instead he has pursued justice in the only way left to him; he has taken his own life. This acknowledgement of guilt and the decision to atone for it can only ensue from self-recognition. Thus Friedrich has become…an entity expatiating his crimes. (118)

In his decision to atone for his own sins, he concurrently rejects the chaotic community’s sense of morals, finding his own means to right the wrongs which he is now able to recognize.

The inscribed beech tree, under which they find the body of Aaron and in which Friedrich has hanged himself, becomes a symbol of justice for his crimes. However, this retribution for murder and release of a guilty conscience could only be achieved once he severed ties with the toxic community in which he grew up. Friedrich is born into a tumultuous home environment and yet the negative, seemingly backwards ideals of the community around him were only bolstered by a natural world, whose active and passive
qualities nurture further depravity. “In him the shortcomings, dubious virtues, prejudices, and spiritual limitations of the area’s inhabitants find ultimate personification. As product of upbringing and milieu…” (Wells, 115), Friedrich Mergel “is presented not merely as an individual but as a representative of the community in which he lives…” (Thomas, 62). Born into this environment, his psychological development lies at the mercy of both the social and natural environments around him.
III. BAHNWÄRTER THIEL:

A Self-Created Insanity of Isolation

While the first two Novellen, from the Early Romantic and Biedermeier eras, addressed main characters who fall victim to the natural and social environments in which they develop, Gerhart Hauptmann’s Bahnwärter Thiel (1888), from the Naturalism era (1880 - 1900), portrays a character who actively constructs his social and natural isolation. This construction of the environments around him stems from the routine in which Thiel’s life is deeply rooted and causes his ultimate psychological collapse. After disruption of said routine, with the death of his first wife, Minna, he desperately seeks to return to normalcy, causing hasty decisions which impede his ability to cope with loss and cloud his judgement. As a result, Thiel separates from the world around him in an effort to escape the consequences of his poor decision-making and return to an unobtainable life in the past. This series of events calls into question the extent of Thiel’s role in the death of his son, Tobias, which is the impetus for his eventual violent outburst, resulting in the murder of his second wife, Lene, as well as their child.

Hauptmann’s accelerated, dense introduction of the character of Thiel provides us with a multifaceted base from which we can better comprehend the driving forces behind his actions. The first aspect of his personality introduced is one of rigidity and adherence to religion and work: “Allsonntäglich saß der Bahnwärter Thiel in der Kirche...ausgenommen die Tage, an denen er Dienst hatte oder krank war...” (3). This initial passage offers us the first glimpse into Thiel’s personality, depicting an austere character who is deeply based in routine and profoundly impacted by a religious environment in which he has grown up. Additionally it provides us with an understanding of
his everyday conduct as well as his ultimate collapse.

As referenced, one of the most prominent social influences on Thiel is the religious community, to which he is deeply dedicated.

Regular attendance at church services…[is] secondary only in its importance for Thiel to his service to the railways. Only sickness or the requirement to work a Sunday shift can keep him away. Such religious observance was the rule rather than the exception…[at] that time. (Horrocks & Rock, xvi)

This routine for Thiel not only indicates the personal importance of religion for him, but also provides a large social foundation from which his behavior stems. As “...reference to ‘das uralte Gesangbuch’ indicates, Thiel is steeped in an age-old Protestant tradition. In his youth he will have been required to learn hymns and passages from the bible by heart…” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii). This prolonged exposure to religious traditions and community establishes the moral groundwork from which Thiel’s actions derive. However, internal conflict inevitably arises when elemental sexual urges surface, causing him to abandon what he perceives as morally acceptable behavior.

In Hauptmanns Novelle wird Thiels Inneres zum Schauplatz eines Kampfes zwischen unkontrollierbarem Sexualtrieb und seiner Moralität. Diese Mächte des Unbewussten sowie die Konflikte zwischen ihnen und dem bewussten Ich spielen sich in einer Person ab, die in ihrer Ich-Schwäche nur hilflos reagieren kann. Diese unbewussten Prozesse können von triebsamer, primär weiblicher Sexualität ausgehen, die tabuisiert bzw. verdrängt und vom Mann als untergründige Bedrohung empfunden wird. (L. Wiese, 18)

While this conflict between morality and sexual drive is at the forefront of Thiel’s narrative, it is the acknowledgement of the one and suppression of the other which exacerbates the dilemma. As Lothar Wiese addresses, Thiel suppresses, “verdrängt” (18), his sexual desires, yet simple recognition of their existence parallels recognition of basic human
needs. Admission of such cravings, as Lothar Wiese also mentions, is “tabuisiert” (18) in Thiel’s world, which has been shaped by the rigidity of a religious upbringing.

The act of suppression, however, permeates other aspects of Thiel’s character, as can be seen after the passing of his first wife, Minna: “An dem Wärter hatte man, wie die Leute versicherten, kaum eine Veränderung wahrgenommen” (4). Thiel’s almost imperceivable reaction to his loss leaves us with only two possible explanations: either the marriage was loveless in nature or he is working fervently to repress a deep inner turmoil, the latter of which proves to be true. Minna’s passing is also the first major disruption in Thiel’s life of routine, and despite lacking a noticeable indication of mourning or coping, this interruption proves to be extremely difficult for him to handle. Said repression is used in an effort to convey an air of strength, which can be seen through Hauptmann’s subsequent depiction of Thiel: “Die Knöpfe seiner sauberen Sonntagsuniform waren so blank geputzt als je zuvor, seine roten Haare so wohl geölt und militärisch gescheitelt wie immer…” (4). Given the lack of control over the passing of his wife, Thiel seeks order in his appearance. His precise, military exterior augments his stoicism in the face of tragedy, while his buttons being “so blank geputzt als je zuvor” implies the additional measures which he is taking in order to bolster this image. This external portrayal of stability also speaks to Thiel’s desire to adhere to a routine and suppress any indicator of instability or weakness.

These steps taken to display outward strength and stability provide great insight into “…Thiel’s character, [which] in addition to being shaped by his job and social environment, is determined to a significant extent by his physical nature” (Horrocks & Rock, xviii). Thiel works to display a personality fitting to his “herkulischen Gestalt” (3), which
proves successful in the community: “es war die allgemeine Ansicht, dass ihm der Tod seiner Frau nicht sehr nahegegangen sei…” (4). This conservative attitude stems from an inability to reveal vulnerability, which, as with his baser sexual needs, leads to its suppression. In what is presumably one of the most somber moments in an individual’s life, Thiel shows the utmost dedication to his stalwart facade, which trumps any willingness to appear mournful. The problem Thiel inevitably faces with these values is that his emotions still thrive within him whether he has the ability to acknowledge their existence or not. Eventual lapse into delusion results from the neglect of said emotions, causing an inner turmoil which builds to a breaking point, leading to their subsequent release in the form of Thiel’s violent outburst.

The perception of Thiel as unaffected by his wife’s passing “erhielt eine Bekräftigung, als sich Thiel nach Verlauf eines Jahres zum zweiten Male, und zwar mit einem dicken und starken Frauenzimmer, einer Kuhmagd aus Alte-Grund, verheiratete” (4). With the introduction of Thiel’s second wife, Lene, come a multitude of complications, both directly pertaining to her character and others indirectly referring to Thiel’s actions as a result of her presence.

Thiel’s decision to marry Lene just one year after the loss of Minna shows a strong desire to regain some sense of routine in his life. This overpowering need to return to normalcy is evidenced by the hastiness of his marriage to Lene, which gives us additional insight into the workings of Thiel’s mind and personality. Thiel’s traditional and religious values are of the utmost importance, yet he also states his need to offer his son a more reliable care giver:
This hasty decision is, however, challenged by a representative figure from the same social environment. Through Thiel’s dialogue with the preacher we are given a glimpse of the attitude of those around him and how they perceive his hasty marriage to Lene:

“Ihr wollt also schon wieder heiraten?”
“Mit der Toten kann ich nicht wirtschaften, Herr Prediger!”
“Nun ja wohl. Aber ich meine - Ihr eilt ein wenig.”
“Der Junge geht mir drauf, Herr Prediger.”

(4)

Within this passage we see two conflicting emotional viewpoints. The preacher, a representative figure of Thiel’s religious social environment, shows hesitance and displays a sense of empathy. Thiel, on the other hand, has reinforced his stoicism, stating that he cannot do anything practical with those who have passed. “…Thiel explains that he urgently needs, not so much a new partner for himself, which he remains silent about, but rather a substitute mother who will take care of Tobias” (Horrocks & Rock, xviii). Even with recognition from others that he may still be reeling from the loss of his first wife, he is unable to address arguments that don’t stem from rationality. His words don’t exhibit any emotional uncertainty or sense of mourning, rather they address a practical approach to marriage, which stems from the vow made to his wife to care for the welfare of their son. While Thiel’s emotional suppression is clear at this point, his disingenuous nature, failing to disclose any personal motive for marrying, also reveals to the reader an inability to admit to basic human desires. Due to Thiel’s religious background, he will not concede to marrying to fulfill any sexual or personal desires, yet this failure to admit to their existence causes them to manifest themselves as guilt, a hidden shame, which contributes
to his ultimate psychological break.

Compounding the problems presented by a hasty marriage is Thiel’s choice in a brash, domineering mother figure for his son, for which he also receives the sympathy of the community around him: “Nach Verlauf eines halben Jahres war es ortsbekannt, wer in dem Häuschen des Wärters das Regiment führte. Man bedauerte den Wärter” (5). This passage alludes to the dominance of Lene and the relationship dynamic, both of which both replay throughout Thiel’s narrative. His decision to marry a woman of this nature is ultimately influenced by the vow to his dead wife to have someone who “für die Wohlfahrt des Jungen zu jeder Zeit ausgiebig Sorge...tragen [könnte]” (5). In terms of her physical stature “[schien sie] für den Wärter wie geschaffen. Sie war kaum einen halben Kopf kleiner als er und übertraf ihn an Gliederfülle” (5). Not only does she match Thiel in stature: “ihr Gesicht [war] ganz so grob geschnitten wie das seine, nur dass ihm im Gegensatz zu dem des Wärters die Seele abging” (5). From the initial description of Lene we can see the stark contrast between her and Thiel’s first wife, Minna, whose appearance was “schmächtig,” “kränklich,” “zu seiner herkulischen Gestalt wenig gepasst hatte,” and had a “hohlwangiges, feines Gesicht” (3). While Lene’s physical stature and appearance is more fitting to Thiel, the strong emotional connection between Thiel and his physically disparate first wife implies the emotional incompatibility awaiting him in his most recent marriage.

Physical disparities, however, are merely one of the many differences between the two wives, as “Der Erzähler lenkt in den einleitenden Passagen deutlich und stellt die beiden Frauen [auch] wertend gegenüber” (L. Wiese, 22). Paired with Lene’s large stature and coarse face come a “herrschsüchtige Gemütsart, Zanksucht und brutale Lei-
denschaftlichkeit” (5), which overpower Thiel. These attributes, along with her face, which “im Gegensatz zu dem des Wärters die Seele abging” indicate the brash, overbearing, seemingly emotionless nature of her personality, which lies in opposition to the nurturing nature of the deceased. This fact further supports the idea of primitive drives, as this rough, combative personality not only affects Thiel, but his son as well. This dynamic creates a “neue Spannung...den Kampf zwischen den Mächten des Spirituellen und des Treibhaften, der von nun an als Grundkonflikt die ganze Novelle durchzieht” (Zimmerman, 71).

Lene’s overbearing personality is further intensified by Thiel’s passive reaction to it:

An einem Junimorgen gegen sieben Uhr kam Thiel aus dem Dienst. Seine Frau hatte nicht so bald ihre Begrüßung beendet, als sie schon in gewohnter Weise zu lamentieren begann...Thiel brummte nur und begab sich, Lenens Reden wenig Beachtung schenkend, sogleich an das Bett seines Ältesten... (10)

The “gewohnter Weise” of such events speaks not only to Lene’s continual dominance, but also to the invariable passive reaction on Thiel’s part. Furthermore this passivity makes him complicit in the construction of the caustic environment at home, which takes an especially heavy toll on Tobias after the birth of a second child: “Von da ab begann für Tobias eine schlimme Zeit. Er wurde besonders in Abwesenheit des Vaters unaufhörlich geplagt…” (9). This speaks to Lene’s overwhelming control over Thiel, as he fails to adjust the environment at home, even for the benefit of the one person he cares for most, Tobias. Thiel’s submissive disposition towards Lene is particularly evident when she makes the decision to accompany Thiel, along with the children, to the “Eisenbahnstrecke” to work on their newly acquired land. We once again see Thiel’s discontent, as
“Missbehagen war sein erstes Gefühl beim Anblick all der getroffenen Vorbereitungen” (28). At a time when his obsession with Minna is growing and he displays a clear aversion towards his wife, “[hätte er] wohl gern ein Wort dagegen gesagt, aber er wusste nicht, womit beginnen” (28). This passivity is further demonstrated in their interaction involving the acquired plot of land: “Thiel beobachtete [Lene] gespannt: ‘Nun, wie ist er?’ ‘Reichlich so gut wie die Spree-Ecke!’ Dem Wärter fiel eine Last von der Seele. Er hatte gefürchtet, sie würde unzufrieden sein, und kratzte beruhigt seine Bartstoppeln” (28). In his inability to recognize his sole possession of the property, to which Lene has no claim, Thiel exemplifies his true submission to his wife and fortifies his passive disposition. This act further shifts the balance of power within their relationship and bolsters Lene’s already imperious character.

Lene’s presence also leads Thiel to separate himself from the social world in both a physical and non-physical manner upon gradual, perhaps subconscious realization that his interpersonal connection with Lene pales in comparison to that between himself and Minna. Recognition of an absent emotional connection causes full immersion into his workplace, isolated in nature, where he can reflect on his loss and disappear into a world of reminiscence.

Initial signs of Thiel’s mental separation from social contact can be seen shortly after his second marriage, in reaction to his new wife’s domineering ways:

Die endlosen Predigten seiner Frau ließ er gewöhnlich wortlos über sich ergehen, und wenn er einmal antwortete, so stand das schleppende Zeitmaß sowie der leise, kühle Ton seiner Rede in seltsamstem Gegensatz zu dem krieschenden Gekeif seiner Frau. Die Außenwelt schien ihm wenig anhaben zu können: es war, als trüge er etwas in sich, wodurch er alles Böse, was sie ihm antat, reichlich mit Gutem aufgewogen erhielt. (6)
This passage reveals to us an initial strength within Thiel to cope with Lene’s aggressive behavior towards him personally, namely due to an alluded counterbalance within him, Minna, which allows him to simply let any beratement wash over him. This restraint, bolstered by thoughts of his deceased wife, allows him to mentally separate from the world around him. This reaches its limits, however, when Lene’s behavior has a negative effect on his son, Tobias:

Trotz seines unverwüstlichen Phlegmas hatte er doch Augenblicke, in denen er nicht mit sich spaßen ließ. Es war dies immer anlässlich solcher Dinge, die Tobiaschen betrafen. (6)

Thiel is able to exercise his stoicism and outward strength when interacting with Lene personally, yet the involvement of his son complicates the dynamic. Without Tobias present, Thiel would be able to deal with Lene in a very passive, submissive manner, simply retreating to work as an escape from her overbearing personality. However, his close relationship to his son muddles what would have been a simple solution to a seemingly unhealthy marriage.

Subsequently, Thiel begins to take more pleasure in his physical absence from the community and Lene in the solace of the “[Eisenbahnstrecke, die] im Mittelpunkt des ganzen Geschehens steht...die zu einem gleichnishaften Ort wird, an dem sich der Einbruch des Unsichtbaren in das Sichtbare und die Auflösung einer realen und geordneten Welt ins Geisterhafte und Chaotische vollzieht” (B. Wiese, 271). The natural world in which Thiel finds himself, “die Eisenbahnstrecke,” is comparable to those in Ludwig Tieck’s Der Blonde Eckbert and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s Die Judenbuche in that it offers “Waldeinsamkeit” to the protagonist. This setting Thiel is in has to be analyzed using a two-pronged approach: First, we have to look at how this environment
presents itself to both the reader and to our protagonist and secondly we have to understand Thiel’s motives for actively withdrawing into seemingly threatening and disruptive surroundings.

From the first passage, Thiel’s place of work presents itself in a threatening manner, a disruptive force in the “einförmigen Leben des Bahnwärters” (B. Wiese, 272). His 10-year routine of work and church is interrupted only twice, both due to incidents directly involving his line of tracks:

das eine Mal infolge eines vom Tender einer Maschine während des Vorbeifahrens herabgefallenen Stückes Kohle, welches ihn getroffen und mit zerschmettertem Bein in den Bahngraben geschleudert hatte; das andere Mal einer Weinflasche wegen, die aus dem vorüberrasenden Schnellzuge mitten auf seine Brust geflogen war. (3)

This active, disruptive nature of the “Eisenbahnstrecke” is also accompanied by Hauptmann’s characterization of Thiel’s isolated environment. “Telegraphenstangen...tönten summende Akkorde,” “Drähten, die sich wie das Gewebe einer Riesenspinne von Stange zu Stange fortrankten,” and “Geleise” depicted as “feurigen Schlangen” (19). The depiction of Thiel’s station as a web indicates the entrapping nature of his work surroundings.

While not physically caught in this location, the representative spider-web quality reflects his mental state in this “spiritual home [in] the little booth on the lonely stretch of track” (Silz, 144) in which he is mentally bound to Minna. Both the physical and tonal description of Thiel’s surroundings, combined with disruptive past events, depict an atmosphere in which darkness thrives. The initial portrayal of the isolated work environment near sundown is shortly followed by the arrival of a passing train:

Ein dunkler Punkt am Horizont, da wo die Geleise sich trafen, vergrößerte sich. Von Sekunde zu Sekunde wachsend, schien er doch auf seiner Stelle zu stehen. Plötzlich bekam er Bewegung und näherte sich. Durch die

As Benno von Wiese asserts, it is “künstlerische Absicht, wenn gerade an dieser Stelle der herabrausende Zug zum ersten Male wie ein fast mythisches Ungeheur eingeführt wird” (274). The detailed, threatening description of the train passing foreshadows the progression of both external events and internal despair, gradually evolving from a small, distant object to a raging beast which violently disrupts the immediate world around it. The depiction of the train’s swelling, powerful presence paired with its rapid disappearance mirrors the abrupt and monumental manner in which Thiel’s life changes and parallels his subsequent actions.

Given the way in which this natural environment presents itself to Thiel, it begs the question, why would our protagonist seek isolation in a place which has only served to disturb the routine which he desperately desires in his life? The answer lies within Thiel’s caustic home life with Lene, which unfortunately ties in with his fatherly obligations towards his son, requiring Thiel to abandon his post to care for Tobias. The “Wärterhaus und Bahnstrecke sind in ihrer Abgelegenheit ein Ort der Zuflucht, wo sich Thiel vor seiner lauten und zänkischen Frau sicher weiß und fast nur jene Abwechslungen kennt, die das Wetter und die Jahreszeiten bringen” (B. Wiese, 273). The post along the railroad offers Thiel the sense of control and routine which he critically needs, and despite its previous disruptions offers familiarity. Additionally, Thiel’s pursuit
of routine at his post elucidates the unpredictability and disruptive nature he senses when at home with Lene. This new environment of volatility, compared with the previous sense of stability felt with Minna, ultimately causes Thiel’s retreat into isolation along the railroad tracks.

Thiel’s devotion to his routine away from home is accentuated by the remoteness of his workplace:

His stretch of line deep in the pine forests is extremely isolated. As well as using the compound noun “Waldeinsamkeit”, Hauptmann twice refers to Thiel’s workplace as “Einöde”, a term that combines associations of solitude with the literal meaning of “desert” or “wilderness.” (Horrocks & Rock, xvi)

As presented in Tieck’s Der blonde Eckbert (1797) and Droste-Hülshoff’s Die Judenbuche (1842), extreme isolation or “Waldeinsamkeit” can be a destructive force, and therefore its role in the inevitable downfall of Thiel is foreshadowed. This extreme isolation not only allows Thiel to escape the overbearing, at times tyrannical nature of his wife, but also makes complete withdrawal from society possible. His solitude even offers escape from chance encounters, as “im Sommer vergingen Tage, im Winter Wochen, ohne dass ein menschlicher Fuß, außer denen des Wärters und seines Kollegen, die Strecke passierte” (8). While positive in offering Thiel an escape from the oppressive environment at home, his “[Einöde] fehlt...die Verbindung zur gesellschaftlichen Umwelt. Allein von der Natur umgeben...bleibt er sich völlig selbst überlassen” (Heerdeggen, 351), which fosters a world of fantasy, an obsession with the deceased, and causes him to neglect his obligations as a father. This extreme physical isolation also reflects an inner isolation Thiel experiences after the loss of Minna, as Fritz Martini addresses: “Er lebt nicht nur durch Beruf und Armut in einer von der Welt isolierten, sondern auch
innerlich in einer hilflos vereinsamten Existenz” (63). The emotional isolation Thiel feels further deepens his spiritual connection with Minna in which he can experience some solace. Thiel’s enjoyment in his escape comes after “ein gewisser leidender Widerstand, den er der Herrschsucht Lenes während des ersten Jahres entgegengesetzt...sich ebenfalls im zweiten [verlor]” (6). Dwindling in Thiel’s resistance triggers him to seek a more definitive separation from her presence, and “nicht wie sonst mehr war ihm sein einsamer Posten inmitten des märkischen Kiefernforstes sein liebster Aufenthalt” (6).

Seeking solace in separation proves temporarily effective until physical urges overpower his reminiscent thoughts of Minna, fueling an already overt imbalance in his relationship with Lene. Said imbalance derives from the necessity to fulfill sexual needs on Thiel’s part, creating a “struggle between spirituality and bestiality” (Ordon, 225). While he can initially occupy his time with thoughts of Minna in a tranquil environment, his thoughts “wurden von denen an die Lebende durchkreuzt” (6). Although he had a “mehr vergeistige Liebe” with Minna “geriet [er] durch die Macht roher Triebe in die Gewalt seiner zweiten Frau und wurde zuletzt in allem fast unbedingt von ihr abhängig” (6,7). This unspoken sexual dependency forfeits much of his control in his marriage, as can be seen in later circumstances. Additionally, it debases his sense of self and subsequently exacerbates the guilt residing within Thiel. Again, this guilt stems from practical motives for bringing Lene into his and Tobias’ lives which clouded his judgement when seeking a mother figure for his son.

His place of solace, however, eventually becomes not only an escape from Lene, but a place of dedication to his first wife upon declaring it a holy land, a sanctuary, in which he can completely separate from the reality of his home situation.
So erklärte er sein Wärterhäuschen und die Bahnstrecke, die er zu besorgen hatte, insgeheim gleichsam für geheiligtes Land, welches ausschließlich den Manen der Toten gewidmet sein sollte. (7)

The conversion of his workplace into holy land also serves to obscure the line between religious fantasy and the reality which he wishes to escape. “Only after the marriage to Lene does his devotion take on more extreme forms” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii), as is made clear during his night shift: “Im Dunkel...wurde das Wärterhäuschen zur Kapelle. Eine verblichene Photographie der Verstorbenen vor sich auf dem Tisch, Gesangbuch und Bibel aufgeschlagen…” (7). Within the setting of his isolation, Thiel is able to engage in a mystical life with Minna. Additionally, through the construction of his chapel, he expresses a newly formed dissatisfaction with the church, which finds its roots in his most recent marriage. Minna’s role in what was once the joyous routine of attending church has now been replaced by Lene, an embodiment of Thiel’s guilty conscience. It is this sanctuary to which “Thiel comes in the attempt to compensate for the growing loss of spiritual existence which is brought about by his intensely sexual contact with Lene” (Driver & Francke, 48), whose presence causes dissonance within him, as two conflicting aspects of his consciousness overlap. Thiel begins to lead a dual existence with the conversion of his workplace into a religious haven from which he can compartmentalize his life; his haven in the woods is becoming a shrine to Minna and a representation of the pure, mystical existence he wishes to revel in, while he is able to fulfill his fatherly role at home with Tobias. In this way Thiel is able to hold onto the two most prominent figures from his life before marrying Lene. “These tendencies...towards his stretch of line as sacred ground and to his hut as a kind of shrine dedicated to the memory of his first wife Minna...have their roots in Thiel’s social environment” (Horrocks & Rock, xvi). Given a
deeply religious upbringing, Thiel still requires a place of worship; he therefore uproots his ties to the social-religious atmosphere and re-plants his religious life in his seclusion, where their roots can grow deeper in the absence of his current wife. “Dieses Leben in zwei Welten scheint so lange zu gelingen, bis Minna sich ihm im Traum entzieht und Lene in seinen Schutzraum eindringt” (L. Wiese, 14).

As a result of the construction of his religious bastion, “Minna takes on an almost saintlike character for Thiel, but this is his subjective vision, and whether the influence she exerts upon him from beyond the grave is a healthy one, is debatable” (Horrocks & Rock, xx). Her exaltation intensifies the importance of the “Einöde” for Thiel and “[verschmilzt] seine religiösen Vorstellungen mit den Erinnerungen an die geliebte Tote” (Heerdegen, 354). This fusion of memory and religion serves to intensify Thiel’s fantasies and further sever any connection with reality. Additionally, his haven in the natural world becoming of the utmost importance to him heightens his emotions over its disturbance through Lene.

Minna’s new status as a mystical figure plays a significant role in Thiel’s isolation directly, but also further strengthens an existing, loving relationship with his son, Tobias, as he is the only tangible connection remaining between himself and the deceased. “Dem Vater bewies er eine ganze besondere Zuneigung. Wie erverständiger wurde, erwachte auch die alte Liebe des Vaters wieder” (9). As Thiel’s son grows, so does his love for him, which simultaneously intensifies the obsession with Minna. Inversely, as Thiel’s mental occupation with the deceased strengthens, so does his love for his son. Tobias’ presence, along with Thiel’s retreat into his “Einöde” work hand in hand to constantly reawaken Thiel’s love for Minna. While his son plays a passive role in preserving these
emotions, Thiel’s active devotion at work doesn’t allow him any reprieve from his obsession with the past, ultimately preventing him from confronting a tragic event.

In order to preserve this created dual existence, Thiel takes on an “abnormal strategy]...to make of his workplace a quite separate sphere, from which all thought of Lene is banished, and which is devoted to spiritual intercourse...with Minna” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii). While he already has extreme isolation in his position in the forest, he works hard to keep his location unknown, considering himself successful, “seiné Frau davon abzuhalten, ihn dahin zu begleiten” (7). Yet even in his success, he still feels that his “Einöde” isn’t enough: “Er hoffte es auch fernerhin tun zu können. Sie hätte nicht gewusst, welche Richtung sie einschlagen sollte, um seine ‘Bude’...aufzufinden” (7). This extreme desire to remain disengaged from Lene further accentuates the lack of emotional connection and “abject [physical] dependence on his new wife” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii). Upon reflection on his current situation in comparison to that with his first wife, Thiel finds himself “filled with disgust – ‘Ekel’” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii). This feeling is both self-inflicted due to his hasty decision to enter into an ill-functioning marriage, yet also stems from “a religious upbringing which has led him to associate erotic desires with depravity” (Horrocks & Rock, xvii). The purpose of Thiel’s workplace, in this regard, is twofold: It serves as a location for him to bask in fantasy and memory, yet in doing so also sheds light on the less-than-optimal reality of what his life has become.

Reflection on the past is further supported by the presence of Tobias, who plays a pivotal role in both Thiel’s obsession with his previous marriage to Minna and as a central figure in Thiel’s present; someone to whom he fully dedicates himself. The “besondere Zuneigung” he has for Tobias is evidenced both in his actions directly pertaining
to his son as well as his developed anger towards Lene in reaction to her mistreatment of the boy in his absence. The degree of love for Tobias can be seen strongly through Thiel’s actions:


This passage exemplifies a love for his son, which he carries with him at all times. His monetary investment in his son’s future is clear, yet having the savings book with him, even when sleeping, signifies an intense emotional connection. The passage also indicates an ability in Thiel to express emotion through action, as is also done amongst the children of the community, “die...besonders [an ihm hingen], nannten ihn ‘Vater Thiel’, und wurden von ihm in mancherlei Spielen unterrichtet” (12). While he has a seemingly positive connection with most children of the community, his attention and affection ultimately lie with Tobias, for whom he would also carve “Fitschepfeile” and “Weidenpfeifchen” (12). Thiel’s kindness shows no bounds, and his actions both with his son and the children of Neu-Zittau reveal, in some capacity, a nonverbal capability to express emotion. However, this approach to the expression of kindness carries over to other emotions residing in Thiel, foreshadowing a dangerous outlet of anger, resentment and sadness.

Tobias, however, also serves as a conflict among Thiel’s self-created isolation, his realm of fantasy, and reality. His existence overlaps both parts of Thiel’s dual existence; his physical being resides in the reality of his home life, yet his connection to Minna
keeps him in the forefront of Thiel’s mind in his “Waldeinsamkeit.” Without Tobias, Thiel could be complacent within his dual existence, but fatherly duties force him to withdraw from his sanctuary to the caustic home environment. In addition, Thiel’s separation from community heightens the importance of an already prominent figure in his life, creating an emotional dependence on his son as well as Minna. Any residual emotion, unaddressed sadness as a result of his loss, is abated through his connection with his son. Due to this Tobias plays a key role of stabilizing Thiel, balancing out the negativity coming from Lene and keeping his rage at bay. “In seinen Gedanken an Minna und an seine erste Ehe, die durch den gemeinsamen Sohn täglich neu belebt werden, wird das Böse mit dem Guten...kompensiert” (L. Wiese, 19). Upon Tobias’ death, due to the neglectful actions of Lene, the levy for Thiel’s anger breaks, releasing pent up emotions and causing his downward spiral, driving him to murder.

While devoting his work station to the memory of Minna, Thiel also plays an active role in trying to keep others away from his self-created isolation. “An diesen Ort darf ihn Lene nicht begleiten, [denn] seine Zeit kann er nun zwischen der Lebenden und der Toten teilen” (Bernhardt, 42). This compartmentalization proves disastrous when his sanctuary inevitably becomes disturbed and his dual existence, as well as his sanity, collapse. This disruption of Thiel’s constructed isolation, however, is a multifaceted issue, in which his realm of devotion becomes both physically and mentally infringed upon. Mental disruption of his “Waldeinsamkeit” comes after the construction of his sanctuary dedicated to Minna. His temple, which normally allows him to drift into fantasies comprised solely of memories of the deceased, now becomes mixed with the reality which he wishes to escape.
Disruption of his routine and isolation also comes after forgetting his “Butterbrot” and subsequently returning home to retrieve it at an abnormal time of day. Upon approaching the house he hears the “kreischende Stimme” of his wife, and when nearing the house can make out Lene’s verbal beratement of his son, followed by a sound “wie wenn Kleidungsstücke ausgeklopft würden” (15). The verbal and physical abuse of Tobias by Lene pushes the limits of Thiel’s patience, which he had previously been able to exercise in their one-on-one encounters, and begins to unearth the deep-seated anger in Thiel, as manifested in his physical behavior:

Der Wärter fühlte, wie sein Herz in schweren, unregelmäßigen Schlägen ging. Er begann leise zu zittern...Einen Augenblick drohte es ihm zu überwältigen. Es war ein Krampf, der die Muskeln schwellen machte und die Finger der Hand zur Faust zusammenzog. (15)

The magnitude of Thiel’s anger is palpable and reveals itself to be almost uncontrollable in nature, while the subconscious formation of a fist represents the physical nature in which his anger will inevitably find its outlet.

The subsequent entrance into the house to a shocked wife and a bawling son presents a crossroads for Thiel in his relationship with both Lene and Tobias. The opportunity presents itself to break from the established physical dependency on Lene and be a protective father figure for Tobias. Lene, in her deflection from the issue, presumably understands the error of her actions and weakens her position, giving Thiel the upper hand and the chance to express his frustration towards her: “[sie] ermannnte sich endlich so weit, ihren Mann heftig anzulassen: was es denn heißen solle, dass er um diese ungewöhnliche Zeit nach Hause käme, er würde sie doch nicht etwa gar belauschen wollen” (16). After this assertion, the physical manifestation of Thiel’s anger quickly
resurfaces, “als müsse er gewaltsam etwas Furchtbares zurückhalten, was in ihm aufstieg…” (17), yet his opportunity to take control is missed due to both his inability to express emotion, combined with the overwhelming sexuality of Lene:

Ihre vollen, halbnackten Brüste blähten sich vor Erregung und drohten das Mieder zu sprengen, und ihre aufgerafften Röcke ließen die breiten Hüften noch breiter erscheinen. Eine Kraft schien von dem Weibe auszugehen, unbezwingbar, unentrinnbar, der Thiel sich nicht gewachsen fühlte. (17)

Her overpowering presence fortifies his weakness and the inability to verbally express emotion: “Er hätte in diesem Zustand überhaupt kein Wort an sie zu richten vermocht” (17). Thiel, therefore, burns the candle at both ends, fortifying his submissive role in his relationship with Lene, while bolstering her domineering disposition. “[He] falls under Lene’s physical spell…so completely that he is utterly unnerved and callously ignores [Tobias’] sufferings” (Silz, 147) and as a result, “…musste Tobias, der in Tränen gebadet und verängstet in einer Ecke hockte, sehen, wie der Vater…wieder verschwand” (17).

Thiel’s distancing fuels the already overt imbalance in his relationship with Lene, providing her with an ever-growing sense of dominance at home. In this way, he effectively “verliert seine Autorität und vernachlässigt seine Vaterrolle” (B. Wiese, 14).

A catalyst for Lene’s physical intrusion on his isolation, however, comes from the plot of land which they need for growing vegetables. Thiel reveals to Lene that the “Bahnmeister” had given him the piece of land along the tracks, which sparks her interest and leads to her presence along the railroad:

Als Lene beim Frühstück mit vegrößertem Eifer auf vorberegte Wirtschaftsangelegenheit zurückkam, schnitt er ihr das Wort ab mit der Nachricht, dass ihm der Bahnmeister ein Stück Land längs des Bahndammes in unmittelbarer Nähe des Wärterhauses umsonst überlassen habe… (11)
Though Thiel has constructed his own “Waldeinsamkeit,” its ultimate disturbance comes from the necessity for farmland, which draws Lene into his self-constructed isolation, eventually leading to the horrific event which takes place there. After the loss of Tobias, associative guilt burdens the already repressed, caustic inner turmoil, fueling the violent and deadly reaction from Thiel. Recognition of his own culpability in passively allowing the series of events to unfold causes consequent exposure of the resentment building within him, which once again manifests itself in a constrained physical manner:

...die Aussicht, Lene ganze Tage lang bei sich im Dienst zu haben, wurde ihm, sosehr er auch versuchte, sich damit zu versöhnen, immer unerträglich. Es kam ihm vor, als habe er etwas ihm Wertes zu verteidigen, als versuchte jemand, sein Heiligstes anzutasten, und unwillkürlich spannten sich seine Muskeln in gelindem Krampfe, während ein kurzes, herausforderndes Lachen seinen Lippen entfuhr. (21)

The mere thoughts of Lene impeding on his sanctuary causes not only the physical reaction from Thiel, but also reinforces his mental severance from the world around him, as the line between reality and fantasy blurs more intensely with her progressive encroachment on his haven. This is evidenced by Thiel’s now deeper descent into fantasy once again, paired with the more frequent utterance of his first wife’s name, which serves to both plunge Thiel deep into his fantasies as well as awaken him from them: “…und so entschlief er…als er mit erstickter Stimme mehrmals den Namen ‘Minna’ rief” (22). At this, the natural environment in which Thiel finds himself emerges in his fantasy as an active, threatening force: “Der Wald draußen rauschte…der Wind warf Hagel und Regen gegen die Fenster des Häuschens…[und] der Donner am fernsten Saume des märkischen Nachthimmels [erwachte]” (23). Thiel then immerses himself in this ominous environment, only to see visions of his beloved Minna, who, as the savior he has exalted her to
be, serves to awaken Thiel and in essence acts as a beacon of light within the darkness: “Er hatte sie gerufen: ‘Minna, Minna’, und davon war er erwacht” (25). Even the gravity of the incident involving Lene’s mistreatment of Tobias is lessened, as Benno von Wiese addresses: “Die Mißhandlung des kleinen Tobias wird zum unklaren, entsetzlichen Traum, während die visionäre Erinnerung an die verstorbe, flüchtende Frau viel deutlicher aus dem Unterbewußtsein auftaucht” (276). The increased intensity of Thiel’s blurred perception of reality and fantasy world speaks to a multitude of issues, as it implies the heightened importance of his “Einöde” parallel to the intensification of his deceased wife’s symbolic spiritual role.

Despite his mystical relationship with Minna dulling the severity of the mistreatment of Tobias, there are still clear signs of a continually growing love for his son: “Den übrigen Teil der Nacht fand Thiel wenig Ruhe mehr in seinem Dienst. Es drängte ihn, daheim zu sein. Er sehnte sich, Tobiaschen wiederzusehen” (25). As previously mentioned, Thiel’s emotions towards his son progressively intensify as his obsession with Minna grows. In the real world, Thiel constructs an emotional dependence on his son, who now hampers the alluded anger within him. As the emotional and spiritual connection to the deceased intensifies, so does the importance of Tobias in keeping Thiel’s rage in check.

Pent up emotions culminate and inevitably release with the death of Tobias while under Lene’s watch. This event triggers the release of the repressed emotions residing within Thiel, causing his lapse into a state of psychosis. Immediately following the accident we see the familiar behavior of both Thiel and Lene, as Thiel “[schreit]...die erhobenen Hände unbewusst zur Faust ballend…” (36) while Lene “wiederholt fortwährend
eine Geschichte, die sie von jeder Schuld an dem Vorfall reinwaschen soll” (34). While the behavior of both Lene and Thiel is seemingly characteristic, the disastrous event of Tobias’ death heightens the gravity of his father’s repression. With the loss of his son comes the collapse of his created dual existence, as his only living connection to the exalted Minna has now been taken from him, causing his psychological collapse. “For a moment he realizes both his insanity and spiritual decline” (Driver & Francke, 48) when a squirrel jumps across the railroad tracks, reminding him of his son’s earlier question: “Vater, ist das der liebe Gott?”, fragte der Kleine plötzlich, auf ein braunes Eichhörnchen deutend…” (30). Thiel, in making this connection, initially states:

“Der liebe Gott springt über den Weg, der liebe Gott springt über den Weg.” Er wiederholte diesen Satz mehrmals, gleichsam um auf etwas zu kommen, das damit zusammenhing. Er unterbrach sich, ein Lichtschein fiel in sein Hirn: “Aber mein Gott, das ist ja Wahnsinn”. (38)

However, this ability to resist complete submission to insanity is short-lived as Thiel rather quickly finds a new meaning in the squirrel: “‘Der liebe Gott springt über den Weg’, jetzt wusste er, was das bedeuten wollte. ‘Tobias’ – sie hatte ihn gemordet – Lene – ihr war er anvertraut...Ein roter Nebel umwölkte seine Sinne…” (38). At this moment we see Thiel’s complete fall into insanity, causing the subsequent murder of Lene and their child, which Thiel sees as the only fitting reaction to the catastrophe. Both sides of his dual existence collapse, as he loses his son, his only living connection to the deceased, and his sanctuary becomes tainted. Thiel has ultimately created an emotional existence which is contingent on the life of his older son, leaving himself with no reasonable course of action after his death.

While the death of Tobias can be blamed on Lene in a more direct manner, Thiel
can also be held responsible in a more indirect sense. Though Lene’s personality was tyrannical in nature and her behavior reckless along the tracks, Thiel’s ultimate decision to bring her into his, as well as his son’s life, leaves him culpable in the loss of Tobias to some degree. Along with this decision to bring Lene into their lives, it is

...Thiels beruflich bedingte Isolation, seine mechanisch-stupide Arbeit, seine gering entwickelte Bildung und sein eingeschränktes Reflexionsvermögen, seine dadurch verstärkte Sprach- und Kontaktarmut schränken seine Möglichkeiten freien Entscheidens und selbstständigen Handelns entscheidend ein und befördern den Weg in die Katastrophe. (L. Wiese, 15)

In this way, Thiel creates his own environment of isolation and actively restricts his own ability to handle conflict and tragedy. When inevitably confronted with a catastrophe, his self-created inability to cope causes him to abruptly fall into insanity, which destroys his life and violently ends the lives of others.
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