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**Fairy Tales in the Modern(ist) World: Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindegeld*<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract

Despite the dark impulses that drive many fairy tales, popular nineteenth-century collections were animated by modern optimism. This article contends that two 1887 novellas, Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindegeld*, demonstrate what happened to this optimism and the fairy tale that embodied it at the inception of twentieth-century modernity. It shows how they use fairy-tale frameworks to express a proto-Naturalist worldview and draws out the affinities that make this improbable combination fruitful: foremost, a common concern with poverty and its consequences. Both novellas reject the fairy tale's miraculous resolution of these problems and, with it, the modern optimism it expresses. At the same time, each demonstrates the continuities underlying the shift to modernism. While Hauptmann's story retains the fairy tale's dream of domestic sanctuary and its belief in overwhelming supernatural powers, Ebner-Eschenbach's preserves a remnant of humanist hope.

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## Article

Nineteenth-century German literature offers numerous examples of a fascination with the fairy tale form, from the *Kunstmärchen* of the Romantics to feminist fairy tales by Bettina von Arnim and Benedikte Naubert and the anti-fairy tale in Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*. These tales often delve into mysteriously foreboding realms or the hidden recesses of the human psyche, and many end in such dark depths: the hero of Ludwig Tieck's *Der blonde Eckbert* descends into insanity, and the heroine of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* must kill her beloved Huldbrand. In contrast, the so-called *Volksmärchen* that dominated the children's book market in the late nineteenth century harnesses these same dark impulses in the service of a fundamental optimism. In the fairy tales of the best-selling collections by the Grimm brothers and Ludwig Bechstein, cruelty, poverty, and hardship inevitably dissolve to yield a "happily ever after." In fact, the story of a poor boy or girl who "makes good" dominates many of the "traditional" fairy tales disseminated throughout modern Europe. On the basis of this plot trajectory and the publishing history of these tales, Ruth Bottigheimer claims that this "rise" fairy tale is not a product of folk culture at all, but was invented in sixteenth-century Venice when a literate, urban populace dreamt for the first time the modern dream of climbing the socioeconomic ladder (*Fairy Tales*). If she is correct, the "rise" fairy tale expresses modern optimism from Venice all the way to Bechstein, offering the hope of a miraculous release from the dark, mysterious, and painful dimensions of human existence. In this way, such fairy tales parallel the liberal faith in scientific, technological, and social progress that characterized much of the late nineteenth century.

In Bottigheimer's scheme, the emergence of an optimistic fairy tale tradition corresponds to a turning point in the cultural history of modern Europe. This article examines the evolution of the fairy tale at another cultural turning point: the onset of twentieth-century modernity and artistic modernism. The story of what happens to the fairy tale's poor and downtrodden in these years is, at the same time, a story about the changes—and the continuities—that mark the transition from what I will call the modern period (the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) to twentieth-century modernity. My account of this evolution emerges from two texts published in 1887: Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindekind*. These texts have long been understood as transitional, as combining features of nineteenth-century realism and sentimental literature with those of modernist Naturalism and Symbolism. The following analysis shows that they also work within the fairy tale tradition, which here takes a Naturalist bent. This developmental trajectory seems counterintuitive. The fairy tale's very name asserts a belief in the unseen; Naturalism, on the other hand, celebrates the hyperrealism expressed in Arno Holz's formula "Kunst=Natur - x" (14). Fairy tales appeared in school curricula; the Naturalists frequently found themselves in court, defending their works against the charge that they posed a threat to public order and morality. Fairy tales were believed to represent authentic German roots and traditions; the Naturalists were accused of "Liebäugeleien mit allem Fremden" in their suspect modernist project. (Bauer 446).

Hauptmann scholarship tends to assume the irreconcilability of Naturalism and the mystical, dividing his oeuvre into an early, naturalistic phase and a later "new romantic" phase of irrationalism and mythological impulses, which is often seen to begin with *Die*

*versunkene Glocke: Ein deutsches Märchendrama* (1896).<sup>1</sup> Even Klaus Post, who maintains that both artistic modes coexist in *Bahnwärter Thiel*, argues that Hauptmann employs them to different ends: the naturalistic aspects participate in *Zeitkritik*, while the mythological aspects transcend a limited naturalism, allowing Hauptmann to address timeless and universal themes (128–31).<sup>2</sup> Helmut Scheuer is the exception, contending that the *Urdramen* in Hauptmann's stage plays are always also "soziale Dramen, d.h. sie stellen die Menschen in gesellschaftlich prekäre Situationen und lassen sie ihr Glück und mehr noch ihr Leid im zwischenmenschlichen Bereich erfahren" (42). This view accords with the long-standing tendency in fairy tale scholarship to read these supposedly "mythical" tales as responses to social conditions. *Bahnwärter Thiel* and *Das Gemeindekind* show, not the fundamental incompatibility of naturalistic *Zeitkritik* and the timeless fairy tale, but their fundamental affinities. The fairy tale's concerns reverberate with those that would occupy Naturalism: poverty, hardship, depravity, and the disintegration of the social fabric under such conditions. Such affinities explain, perhaps, the popularity of the fairy tale form among prominent Naturalists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Zola.

The novellas by Hauptmann and Ebner-Eschenbach begin from the same impulses that drive nineteenth-century fairy tales, but they reach different conclusions about the fates of those so unlucky as to set out on their life adventures with the humble beginnings of the fairy tale hero.<sup>3</sup> The core of the optimistic modern fairy tale is the reversal of fate the hero experiences when some combination of miraculous intervention, pluck, ingenuity, hard work, and luck saves him. Both Hauptmann's and Ebner-Eschenbach's texts insist on the impossibility of escaping hardship by any of these means. In these two proto-Naturalist texts, the fairy tale world develops according to the deterministic logic that underlies the

later Naturalism, rather than to the optimistic logic of nineteenth-century modernity and the *Volksmärchen*. No lucky girl or boy diverts attention from the deplorable conditions that mark the tale's beginning. Stories that begin with an acknowledgement of social ills do not end by affirming the status quo. Neither parodies nor anti-fairy tales, these proto-Naturalist narratives demonstrate what happened to the fairy tale and to the modern optimism that embraced it.

### **Fairy Tales as a Narrative and Analytical Resource**

By the late nineteenth century, fairy tales were prominent representatives of the bourgeois culture and nationalist cultural agenda that the Naturalists and other modernists criticized. In German-speaking Europe, three fairy tale collections were preeminent: Ludwig Bechstein's *Deutsches Märchenbuch* and *Neues deutsches Märchenbuch*, which predominated in Austro-Hungary, and the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which was more popular in Prussia and was to become the dominant tradition throughout German-speaking Europe by the early twentieth century (Bottigheimer, "Publishing History"). By 1887, not only had the Grimm and Bechstein collections gone through more than one hundred printings, but, in a sign of their endorsement by the cultural establishment, their stories had become standard fare in school primers and curricula.<sup>4</sup> Bechstein's collection encouraged middle-class values such as industry and thrift, and while scholars disagree about the extent to which the Grimms' tales reward such virtues, the brothers clearly saw their collections as pedagogical, and their stories usually affirmed the social status quo.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Wilhelm Grimm in particular edited the tales to make them more suitable for middle-class children: he removed sexual content, changed wicked mothers to wicked

stepmothers, reinforced patriarchal sexual and social roles, highlighted Christian themes, and emphasized virtues like obedience (especially for girls) and industriousness.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the fairy tale was a prime target for critique. Fairy and folk tales offered an effective narrative framework for critical writers because their conventions were familiar to all and the expectations they awakened were so broadly shared.

What are these fairy tale conventions? Indeed, what is a fairy tale? Defining it is difficult, for fairy tales are just one of many tale types in the Grimm and Bechstein collections, and they often share elements with other types. Analyses of the motifs, structures, and patterns that characterize both fairy and folk tales have been used to categorize tales since 1910, when Antti Aarne, a Finnish folklorist, published the first edition of his cross-cultural catalogue of tale types. Expanded and revised by Stith Thompson in 1928 and 1961 and by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004, this catalogue remains a central reference for folklore research. Likewise, Vladimir Propp's 1928 *Morphology of the Folktale*, which identifies the thirty-three essential functions of the Russian folk tale, continues to exert influence. Fairy tales tend to include a particular set of these catalogued features, such as supernatural helpers or opponents, and to close with the proverbial happy end. But, as Ruth Bottigheimer maintains, it is this set of features combined with the brevity and "overall plot trajectory" of the fairy tale that distinguishes it from other tale types (*Fairy Tales* 9). Bottigheimer sees two common plot trajectories: the "restoration" fairy tale, in which royalty falls and is restored through marriage, and the aforementioned "rise" tale (*Fairy Tales* 1012). In her analysis of the Grimms' tales, Maria Tatar calls the plot of the typical fairy tale a "family drama," in which an initial disruption of an intact nuclear family leads to trial, then to magical intervention, and, finally, to a new nuclear unit. The

following analysis relies heavily on Tatar's characterization of the fairy tale, as well as scholarship on the Grimms' tales. This focus on the Grimms is primarily a matter of expediency. Bechstein's tales were just as important in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Austro-Hungarian realm of Ebner-Eschenbach, but there are few systematic treatments of his work. In contrast, the Grimms' preponderance in the market and cultural imagination of the twentieth century has led to a plethora of scholarly analysis. Analyses of the linguistic, formal, and topical patterns of the Grimms' collection ground the argument that *Bahnwärter Thiel* and *Das Gemeindekind* begin within the tradition of the fairy tale, only to adapt its narrative resources to the social conditions and concerns of emerging twentieth-century modernity.<sup>7</sup>

### **If Only Fairy Tales Were True: *Bahnwärter Thiel***

Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* lacks any direct allusions to fairy tales,<sup>8</sup> but its opening pages establish a family drama in the fairy tale's narrative mode. The first sentence identifies Thiel according to his profession, the most common characteristic the Grimms use in introducing their protagonists (Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* 124). When other characters appear, they, too, are presented as namelesstypes who are often defined by their occupations: "ein schwächtiges und kränklich aussehendes Frauzimmer," "ein dickes und starkes Frauzimmer, eine Kuhmagd aus Alte-Grund," and "der Pastor [. . .] der Geistliche" (37-38). Finally, Thiel's son is described in terms of his function in the story before he appears as a named individual with a distinct character: "Thiels Frau war im Wochenbett gestorben, und der Junge, welchen sie zur Welt gebracht, lebte und hatte den Namen Tobias erhalten" (38). At this point in the tale, he is important

primarily because his birth causes his mother's death. This emphasis on his role corresponds to the way folklorists since Propp have described the cast of possible folk tale figures according to the functions they perform. The first pages of *Bahnwärter Thiel* introduce an exemplary cast of characters for the fairy tale's family drama: an abused child living with his father, a wicked stepmother, and the stepmother's favored offspring. Hauptmann's abiding concern with the "family drama" or "mythisches Urdruma" manifests itself already in this early novella.<sup>9</sup>

The second paragraph displays the tripartite structure common to fairy and folk tales. Propp first identified the recurrence of the number three in folk tales, and Wilhelm Schoof notes that Wilhelm Grimm often edited stories to include the numbers three, seven, and twelve when his sources did not (Propp 74; Schoof, "Stilentwicklung" 429). In Hauptmann's text, Thiel's regular church attendance is punctuated by three changes in pattern: one Sunday, a young woman appears with him; on a second Sunday, they are married; and after his wife's death, he appears by himself again (37). This same pattern of three reappears a few paragraphs later in the description of Thiel's second wife, Lene:

Wenn Thiel den Wunsch gehegt hatte, in seiner zweiten Frau eine unverwütlliche Arbeiterin, eine musterhafte Wirtschafterin zu haben, so war dieser Wunsch in überraschender Weise in Erfüllung gegangen. Drei Dinge jedoch hatte er, ohne es zu wissen, mit seiner Frau in Kauf genommen: eine harte, herrschsüchtige Gemütsart, Zanksucht und brutale Leidenschaftlichkeit. (38)

In their trebling, these characteristics are like those of the long-suffering wife in "Lieb und Leid teilen," who was "gut, fleißig und fromm" (Grimm 2:319). Moreover, Lene seems at



first to represent a female ideal, the answer to a man's wish—which also recalls the fairy tale. Only later do her faults become visible. In this contrast, she resembles a number of villainous women from the Grimms' tales. The wicked stepsisters of "Aschenputtel" are "schön und weiß von Angesicht [...] aber garstig und schwarz von Herzen," and the princess of "König Drosselbart" is "über alle Maßen schön, aber dabei so stolz und übermütig, daß ihr kein Freier gut genug war" (1:137, 264). The reader brought up with Grimms' tales knows that no good can come from a woman like Lene.

The compressed narrative time of the novella's first pages is also reminiscent of the fairy tale: the first two paragraphs summarize the action of seven years. Many critics have noted this compression, as well as the eventual reversal in the relationship between narrated and narrative time:<sup>10</sup> later, the events of moments can expand to fill pages. This shift in narrative economy also characterizes many fairy tales. The novella's first word is "allsonntäglich," and the first two paragraphs contrast what Thiel does every Sunday for seven years—go to church—with the few cases when he fails to attend or when his attendance is exceptional. "Die Weiße Schlange" shares not only *Bahnwärter Thiel's* brevity, but also its initial emphasis on iterative action. Its first five sentences describe a king's wisdom, renown, and regular midday ritual, which involves a mysterious, covered bowl. Then, without warning, a sixth sentence relates, "das hatte schon lange Zeit gedauert, da überkam eines Tages den Diener, der die Schüssel wieder wegtrug, die Neugierde, daß er nicht widerstehen konnte, sondern die Schüssel in seine Kammer brachte" (Grimm 1:113). An almost timeless state of affairs crumbles as the events of a single day disturb its equilibrium. The shift is nearly as abrupt in Hauptmann's tale. The introductory paragraphs

conclude with a single, terse sentence: “An einem der vorangegangenen Wochentage hatte die Sterbeglocke geläutet; das war das Ganze” (37).

This death prepares for the introduction of Thiel’s second wife, Lene, and from the moment of her entry into the story, the text begins to depart from the fairy tale’s narrative economy. Despite the fact that little happens in the remainder of the first section—Thiel marries Lene, and she has a child—the narrative expands markedly, describing conversations, characters’ traits and feelings, and the family life that takes shape in Thiel’s household. Lene and Thiel’s relationship also appears in distinctly non-Grimmian terms, for she is a blatantly sexualized woman who uses that sexuality to dominate her husband. Her “brutale Leidenschaftlichkeit” puts him at the mercy of “die Macht roher Triebe.” Her “volle, halbnackte Brüste” and her “breite Hüften” under a skirt in disarray prevent him from halting her abuse of Tobias (38, 39, 47). Returning briefly to fairy tale conventions, the text marks the beginning of the real action at the start of the second section with language that resembles the “one day” of “Die weiße Schlange:” “An einem Junimorgen gegen sieben Uhr,” the events begin that will destroy Thiel’s domestic habits forever (42). But after this turning point, the text abandons the narrative style of the fairy tale completely. In sections two and three, narrative time repeatedly overwhelms narrated time. In several scenes, the narrator takes paragraphs to describe the events of moments: when Thiel witnesses Lene’s abuse of Tobias, for instance, or stands lost in reverie beside the train tracks. Not coincidentally, these moments also mark the places where Hauptmann’s text departs most obviously from common fairy tale concerns. The family drama drives the action of the abuse scene, but it is Thiel’s internal response to that drama that is important. Thiel’s reverie does not advance the drama at all; instead, the text’s vivid description of the forest evening suggests the

activity in Thiel's mind. The text lingers in these moments because they are pivotal points in the development of Thiel's psychological state, which is the text's central focus. At such moments of stopped time, the reader gets a powerful sense of Thiel's inner world and of his perceptions of the outer world. Fairy tales never stop the action for this kind of psychological development, for, as Tatar observes, the characters of fairy tales are psychologically flat. Their psychology is expressed in their actions, and the tale restricts itself to accounts of those actions (*Hard Facts* 78–79). *Bahnwärter Thiel* links characters' psychological states and actions, and these modernist preoccupations obscure its fairy tale structure.

However, the plot continues to follow the fairy tale's family drama as Tatar describes it. As happens in so many fairy tales, Tobias's mother dies, disrupting the nuclear family and making way for the "brutal, scheming" stepmother (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 145)—Lene with her "brutale[n] Leidenschaftlichkeit" (38). While this wicked stepmother plagues and abuses Tobias, his father, like so many other fairy tale fathers, remains strangely passive and impotent (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 148–49). The tale then shifts into "the enchanted realm of the forest [...], [where] the villainous stepmother reemerges in the woods as a monster equipped with powers far more formidable than those she exercised at home" (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 144–45). The vivid imagery of Hauptmann's forest and the train that races through it have long been cited as proof of the novella's status as a harbinger of modernist Symbolism. But the images' content hearkens back to fairy tales. Many of the descriptions present inanimate objects as demonic or supernatural: the approaching train emits a "Keuchen und Brausen [...]. Dann plötzlich zerriß die Stille. Ein rasendes Tosen und Toben erfüllte den Raum, [...] und das schwarze, schnaubende Ungetüm war vorüber" (49–

50); its headlights appear “wie die Glotzaugen eines riesigen Ungetüms” (53); and the telegraph wires are “wie das Gewebe einer Riesenspinne” that preys upon the forest’s songbirds (49). Katja Fullard has argued that the text’s depiction of Lene links her to these demonic machines, too (137): she works “mit der Geschwindigkeit und Ausdauer einer Maschine” and exudes a force that immobilizes Thiel, “leicht gleich einem feinen Spinnewebe und doch fest wie ein Netz von Eisen” (Hauptmann 56, 47). Lene becomes an inhumane beast associated with malevolent supernatural forces.

Even the two scenes of violence, which would seem to place the tale squarely in the realm of Naturalism, remain true to the fairy tale narrative. Our inclination may be to see Tobias’s violent death as violating fairy tale logic, but, in fact, the stepmothers in several of the Grimms’ tales murder their stepchildren in cold blood: the stepmother in “Von dem Machandelboom” decapitates her son and feeds him to his unknowing father, and the stepmother in “Brüderchen und Schwesterchen” asphyxiates her stepdaughter in a bath. The subsequent retribution enacted on the stepmother (and her child) also finds ample precedent. The evil stepmother of “Die zwölf Brüder” suffers a spectacular death involving boiling oil and poisonous snakes, and the two awful stepsisters of “Aschenputtel” have their eyes pecked out by birds on their way to the heroine’s wedding (1:77, 144). The account of the witch’s demise in “Hänsel und Gretel” shows not only the gruesome nature of her punishment, but also the relish with which it is reported: “Hu! da fing [die Alte] an zu heulen, ganz grauselig; aber Gretel lief fort, und die gottlose Hexe musste elendiglich verbrennen” (1:107). The brief description of Lene’s end accords with Tatar’s observation that “the fairy tale describes [the stepmother’s] demise in graphic and morbid detail:” “Lene lag in ihrem Blut, das Gesicht unkenntlich, mit zerschlagener Hirnschale” (*Hard Facts*

148, 181; Hauptmann 66). In fact, the Grimms often expanded and embellished violent content from edition to edition (*Hard Facts* 5–7).

The function of the violence in Hauptmann's text is clearly different than it is in a fairy tale, however. The novella's violence is horrifying; the fairy tale's, horribly satisfying. Much of this difference derives from the novella's realism and its contemporary setting. But here, at the end of the novella, the plot also departs from standard fairy tale fare. Unlike in "Der Machandelboom" or "Brüderchen und Schwesterchen," there is no miraculous resurrection; Tobias stays dead. The retribution Thiel enacts on Lene and her child is senseless, for, unlike in fairy tales, the stepmother's death does not permit the family's reunion (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 147–48, 181–82). Moreover, she shows remorse, sorrow, and tenderness in the wake of Tobias's death: "ihr Gesicht war bläulichweiß, braune Kreise lagen um ihre Augen;" she accompanies his body to the house "fortwährend schluchzend, mit tränenüberströmtem Gesicht;" and she attends to the collapsed Thiel "mit Eifer und Umsicht" (64, 65, 66). Finally, in her last living moments, she even becomes the focalizer of the narrative for a few sentences. Readers see briefly through her eyes and follow her uneasy thoughts: "Eine Wolke verdeckte die Mondkugel, es wurde finster im Zimmer, und Lene hörte nur noch das schwere, aber gleichmäßige Atemholen ihres Mannes. Sie überlegte, ob sie Licht machen sollte. Es wurde ihr unheimlich im Dunkeln" (66). Hauptmann's text thus raises the possibility that, unlike fairy tale villains, Lene possesses "redeeming features" that might make some kind of reconciliation possible (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 182). In fact, the text states, "sie war überhaupt eine andere geworden" (Hauptmann 66).<sup>11</sup> But, after briefly entertaining such hope, the novella dashes it in true Naturalist fashion. Rather than gratifying the reader with the happy family reunion that concludes

many fairy tales, the novella has the repentant stepmother murdered and then offers a vision of the deranged Thiel arriving at the madhouse clutching Tobias's hat. Nor does the novella allow for any hope of escape. The happy endings of fairy tales are often open-ended and almost timeless: the protagonists of "Rapunzel" "lebten noch lange glücklich und vergnügt," and those in "Brüderchen und Schwesterchen" "lebten glücklich zusammen bis an ihr Ende" (1:91, 86). Hauptmann's ending, in which Thiel enters the madhouse for what is, presumably, a life commitment, suggests that his life, too, will be timeless and monotone "until his end." But instead of enjoying the happiness and omnipotence that is typical of fairy tale heroes, Thiel suffers loneliness and complete mental and physical debilitation (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 71–72). The fairy tale has become almost unrecognizable, but its underlying structure remains.

The temptation, then, is to read *Bahnwärter Thiel* as a relatively straightforward anti-fairy tale, akin to the grandmother's tale in Büchner's *Woyzeck*.<sup>12</sup> In this reading, the text invokes fairy tale conventions, such as the use of narrative time and the family drama, only to frustrate the expectations that those conventions generate. In adapting the fairy tale thus, Hauptmann rejects its way of focusing on events while disregarding the human experience of them, and indicts its fantastical wish-fulfillment, which allows stories of misery and discord to resolve in resurrections and reunions. In its depiction of Lene's raw sexuality and Thiel's capitulation to it, it also breaks the bounds of decency that fairy tales—at least those in the Grimms' collection—observe and uphold. Such a reading corresponds closely to existing studies of the text: Hauptmann uses, then refuses, the fairy tale in order to dispel the illusion that miraculous resolution is possible in a modern world perforated by the brute force of industrialization and complicated by psychological and

sexual drives. Man appears here as the Naturalists saw him—degraded and destroyed by the economic and physical forces that determine his destiny—not as the fairy tale hero whose misfortune ends in unanticipated plenty.

But while this opposition of the fairy tale and the Naturalist anti-fairy tale describes the text quite well on one level, it fails to appreciate the shared concerns and continuities that make the fairy tale form so productive for Hauptmann's critique. First and foremost, the fairy tale, like Naturalism, is driven by the specter of poverty and deprivation. If half of all fairy tale heroes are princes and princesses, the other half are the children of poor woodcutters or millers. "Hänsel und Gretel," no less than *Die Familie Selicke*, explores the harsh realities of human relations and family life under such conditions. The underlying concerns of Naturalism and of many fairy tales are the same. Writing about *Bahnwärter Thiel* in 1936, Anna Hellersberg-Wendriner categorized it confidently as an example of Naturalism, since "nur der Naturalist wählt den Arbeiter zum Helden" (56). But that was because she was looking to literary texts for her precedents. If Hauptmann's text did not violate fairy tale conventions so egregiously, but maintained its diction and narrative style throughout, she might have recognized in the railroader and his dairymaid wife the modern incarnations of any number of fairy tale parents.

The family drama in a lower-class world serves Hauptmann's purposes. Likewise, casting a stepmother as villain allows for the introduction of another burgeoning modern preoccupation: the threat of female sexuality. Otto Weininger's famously misogynistic *Geschlecht und Charakter*, which depicted women as innately inferior to men because of their fundamentally sexual nature, was not to appear until 1903. But in *Bahnwärter Thiel*,

Hauptmann's descriptions of Lene anticipate his perception of the dangerously enticing female sexuality that suffuses his journal entries after the turn of the century (Roh 94–102). Lene's "breite Hüften" and "brutale Leidenschaftlichkeit," for instance, are echoed in his description of a woman he had encountered at a friend's home: "die Hüften, die starken Schenkel, furchterregend anlockend. Pervers" (qtd. in Roh 97). Thiel's remarriage and the introduction of a stepmother into the story sanction the entry of a dangerous and destructive female sexuality into his domestic realm.

While the figure of the lascivious stepmother serves the development of Hauptmann's modern, Naturalist plot, it would seem to run counter to the tradition of the fairy tale as it was propagated in the Grimms' collection. As I have already indicated, Hauptmann's open depiction of Lene's sexuality and of her sexual relationship to Thiel violates the strict bounds of decency that govern the Grimms' tales. Yet this concern for decency is not endemic to the fairy tale: the Grimms' tales are only devoid of sexual content because they excised it steadily from each edition (Zipes 46; Tatar, *Hard Facts* 7–10; Uther 511). In other versions of these fairy tales—or, in some cases, in those included in the Grimms' first editions—it is sexual desire and sexual misconduct, rather than poverty, that destabilizes the nuclear family. Tatar gives the example of "Das Mädchen ohne Hände." After the tale's initial publication, the Grimms adopted another version for subsequent editions. But they elected to keep the opening of the first edition, where a deal with the devil led to the girl's hands being chopped off and her decision to leave her father's home. In the otherwise "better" version, there is no devil: the girl leaves home because her father wants her to marry him and then, enraged when she refuses, has her breasts and hands chopped off (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 9). Hauptmann's text shares other fairy tales'



acknowledgement of sexuality and its potentially disruptive force. The discrepancy between this treatment of sexuality and the Grimms' avoidance of it stems not from differing attitudes toward it, but from differing modes of handling it—modes that correspond to its changing treatment in literature as a whole. Sexuality, and particularly female sexuality, is dangerous in many incarnations of the fairy tale, including Hauptmann's. In less sanitized versions of the tales and in *Bahnwärter Thiel*, it is open and punished. In the Grimms' collection, especially in the later editions intended for domestic consumption by children, it is repressed almost entirely. Hauptmann's text is not an anti-fairy tale, because, to a large degree, it shares the understanding of the world, and the dangers it harbors, that underlie the fairy tale. It is a fairy tale in modernist guise.

### **Nothing but a Pack of Lies: *Das Gemeindekind***

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindekind* operates in a similar way, setting up a classic fairy tale situation but refusing the expected triumphant resolution. Here, social pressures and social milieu—rather than industrialization, psychological factors, and sexual drives—determine the protagonist's fate and make fulfillment impossible. Not surprisingly, Ebner-Eschenbach's commitment to the Naturalist ethos is not as complete as Hauptmann's, so that her fairy tale clings to a remnant of nineteenth-century hopefulness. In other respects, however, her tale enacts a much more fundamental critique of the fairy tale worldview than Hauptmann's does. Hauptmann's story refuses a happy end, but in many ways, it shares the basic logic of the Grimmian world. Ebner-Eschenbach's story refutes that logic, as well as the logic that underpins Bechstein's tales. In other words, while it retains a limited amount of the "old-fashioned" modern optimism expressed in

Enlightenment thought and the popular fairy tale, it enacts a more radical critique than *Bahnwärter Thiel* and many high-modernist works do.

The family drama of Ebner-Eschenbach's novel stars a brother and sister akin to Hänsel and Gretel. Pavel and Milada Holub are the children of a thieving drunkard and his browbeaten wife. The two are effectively orphaned when their father is executed and their mother imprisoned for robbery and murder. Milada, a winning and cheerful little girl, is taken in by the local baroness, but no one wants Pavel, and he eventually becomes the foster child of the village rogue and his family. Pavel is treated terribly there, and he becomes known as a thief and a fighter. When the schoolmaster takes interest in him and gives him a new pair of boots for regular school attendance, Pavel appears ready to turn over a new leaf. But when his foster sister steals the boots and convinces him that the schoolmaster is really a sorcerer who has tricked him, Pavel becomes worse than ever. Finally he is able to visit Milada, who is living in a convent and doing penance for her parents' sins, and she makes him promise to be good. Despite the townspeople's prejudice and a false murder charge, Pavel, with the good schoolmaster's help, works hard, buys a small piece of land, and earns the respect of the honest townspeople and the baroness. The book ends with Milada's death and the return of Pavel's mother, who comes to live with him in the little house that he has built.

At the beginning of this narrative, as in *Bahnwärter Thiel*, wicked adults victimize children. But the focus in this story shifts from the conflict between an impotent child and powerful parent to the child's struggle to establish himself in the world at large and, eventually, in a family of his own. This storyline, too, is standard fairy tale fare, according to

Tatar: "Fairy tales habitually trace a trajectory from rags to riches. [...] Exiled from home [...], [the hero's] path takes him from a lowly condition at home to a world of enchantment and finally back to a modified and elevated form of his original condition" (*Hard Facts* 71). Pavel goes from being a destitute orphan without a home to a home- and landowner. To do so, he has to combat the deleterious effects of his parents on his character and reputation, but as the story progresses, his real opponents are not his parents, but the prejudiced, more affluent townspeople who dismiss and condemn him because of his heritage. As he applies his industry, thrift, and ingenuity to achieve an independent identity and successful material and domestic existence, he seems the prototypical hero of Bechstein's fairy tales, where the "single common denominator [...] is perhaps a belief in the efficacy of action as a means of redemption," and bourgeois values win the day (Bottigheimer, "Ludwig Bechstein's Fairy Tales" 77).

Yet, as the plot summary already suggests, Ebner-Eschenbach alludes to fairy tale conventions only to reject them. The figure of the schoolmaster Habrecht, who plays a crucial role in Pavel's development, provides an example of this pattern. When the rest of the town views the boy as a troublemaker and scoundrel, the schoolmaster sees him as a lonely, suffering child, and he makes Pavel's success possible by giving him a place to live and holding his earnings for safekeeping. Initially, however, Pavel rejects his help. Habrecht is rumored to practice magic, and Pavel is tricked into thinking that Habrecht is using his magic to toy with him maliciously. Here, then, Pavel turns away from a potential "helper" figure because of that helper's supposed supernatural abilities. In contrast, magical helpers play crucial roles in the protagonists' quests in many fairy tales, as both Propp's morphology and Aarne's catalog indicate. Magical helpers feature prominently in many of

the Grimms' tales, too. In "Aschenputtel," an enchanted hazel tree gives Aschenputtel the gold and silver dress that allows her to go to the ball, and in "Die drei Männlein im Walde," the little men reward the selfless and helpful heroine by conjuring strawberries from the winter snow and giving her beauty, wealth, and a royal husband.

Ebner-Eschenbach critiques this fairy tale convention by dispelling the illusion that magical help will save the weak and weary. Instead, it shows that Pavel's salvation depends on human sympathy and human help. Initially, simple desperation drives Pavel to the schoolmaster. Hunted by a mob that believes he has stolen a large sum of money, Pavel runs to the school for protection. But the schoolmaster can only help Pavel begin a "neues Leben" of hard work and virtue after Pavel recognizes him as human, with human emotions (102–03). After the mob has dissipated, Habrecht conceals Pavel's money under the floorboards, along with the book he had been reading when Pavel burst in. Curious, Pavel asks him whether the volume is a "Hexenbuch" (100). Habrecht flies into a fury at Pavel's disrespect, then collapses on the table in a shaking heap. At this point, Pavel seems finally to recognize his teacher as a suffering person like himself: he is "mitleidig" as he watches his collapse (102). Free indirect speech dramatizes his attempts to understand this other vulnerable human being, as he speculates about what prevents his teacher from being happy: "Was tat denn der Herr Lehrer? [...] [S]chluchzte er? War es der Krampf eines unaufhaltsamen Weinens, was diesen gebrechlichen Körper so erschütterte? Du lieber Gott, worüber kränkte sich der Mann?" (102). At this point, the narrator reports that Pavel feels a desire to help the older man and himself. He proposes to care for the school and its fields in exchange for room and board, and his escape from poverty and misery begins. No magical helper frees Pavel from his material and emotional deprivation. Instead, he escapes it when

he recognizes that his helper is *not* magical, but a human being like himself—vulnerable, sad, and also in need.

This invocation of magic is very different than the role of magic in *Bahnwärter Thiel*. While Ebner-Eschenbach jettisons the supernatural helper that intervenes in so many fairy tales, Hauptmann's story retains the equally common supernatural opponent. The text's metaphors transform Lene, the train, and the telegraph wires into threatening monsters, so that the decisive role of the supernatural in the story remains the same as in many traditional fairy tales. At the same time, these metaphors enact a critique of modernity, characterizing the technologies and figures of the modern world as demonic machines. Hauptmann mobilizes familiar supernatural figures to critique modernity, encouraging his audience to transfer its instinctual response to the fairy tale villain to the strange new appearances of modern life. The object of fear has changed, but the individual remains just as helpless before it as he was before more traditional foes. Ebner-Eschenbach's critique functions, not by using a traditional bogeyman, but by exposing and rejecting it. In the world she creates, there is no supernatural helper. By dispelling the specter of the supernatural, she opens a realm where human good is possible, and human intervention matters.

Just as Ebner-Eschenbach's tale evokes, then rejects, the magical helper, it employs sequences of three events, but resists the resolution expected from the third event in the series. Milada's death ends the first unsatisfying trebled sequence. When Pavel and Milada are first separated, the baroness refuses to let Pavel visit his sister, fearing that he will be a bad influence. Finally, he is allowed to see Milada in her convent, but a meeting of stormy

affection ends in disaster as Milada sobs desperately and disobediently insists that she wants to stay with her brother. Time passes, Pavel reforms, and Milada becomes a model of virtue at the convent. Pavel is allowed to visit her a second time, and this time both siblings retain their self-control. Milada will soon be consecrated as a nun, and Pavel is to visit again for the sacrament. But when Pavel is summoned to the convent for his third visit, it is not for Milada's consecration, but for her funeral. She has worked, prayed, and fasted herself to death. This death, like Tobias's, is irrevocable. And unlike the deaths of the six virtuous protagonists in the ten *Kinderlegenden* appended to the 1857 version of the Grimms' collection, Milada's death is not redeemed by being characterized as a reward. Her starvation on earth is not made irrelevant by a belief that, in her death, God will nourish her, as is the case in "Gottes Speise," nor is her death presented as the long-yearned-for entrance to heaven, as is that of the young hero in "Die Himmlische Hochzeit" (2:438, 444).<sup>13</sup> The abbess tries to present Milada's death in this mode, saying, "sie ist genesen [...] eingegangen zum ewigen Licht," but Pavel thinks only that Milada would still be alive had the baroness heard his concerns about his sister's health and removed her from the convent. He imagines telling her that if she had listened, "du hättest dein Kind noch und ich noch mein liches Vorbild, mein kostbarstes Gut" (258, 260).

The *Kinderlegenden* are not fairy tales in Tatar's sense. They are more clearly moralistic than most of the original tales. Yet the stark contrast between this blatantly pedagogical material and Milada's sad end illuminates Ebner-Eschenbach's critique of the bourgeois ethos of both the Grimms' collection and Bechstein's tales. Ebner-Eschenbach's characters do profit when they show middle-class traits. For a time, both Pavel and Milada find prosperity and a degree of happiness. But Milada's fate reveals the hollowness of the

ideal set forth for children—especially girls—in the traditional tales. Ebner-Eschenbach's rejection of this ideal is not peculiar to *Das Gemeindekind*. Charlotte Woodford has demonstrated how her other fictional works undermine the values of sentimental literature by not conforming to tropes such as the happy end of marriage or the spiritual value of female suffering and death. The concurrence between the tropes of sentimental literature and the narrative strategies of Bechstein's and the Grimms' tales (especially the later editions) is not surprising, given that both were meant for domestic consumption by women and children and aimed to instill similar sets of values. In writing against this domestic ideal, Ebner-Eschenbach's narrative rejects the logic of the fairy tale much more fundamentally than does Hauptmann's novella. Hauptmann's story begins when domestic stability is destroyed by the death of an exemplary de-sexed and spiritualized woman. Her death makes way for a woman whose sexuality and aggression allow her to threaten and dominate her husband. This imbalance eventually leads to the family's annihilation, but before that, it brings Thiel to yearn for his delicate, spiritual first wife. In his tale, disaster is predicated on the destruction of the kind of domestic ideal that the Grimm and Bechstein collections affirm. Ebner-Eschenbach's story softens the disaster into a gentler disappointment, but it destroys the illusion of the domestic sanctuary that the nineteenth-century tales promise and that Hauptmann's still implicitly affirms.

That ideal of a domestic sanctuary also crumbles in a second trebled sequence, which treats Pavel's quest for a bride. As a boy, Pavel loves his beautiful but cruel foster sister, Valeska, who eventually marries his chief persecutor in the town. As a respected adult, he falls in love with the beautiful and happy Slava, and he is prepared to propose to her. But at the decisive moment, young men from the village taunt him with insults from his

past. As a result, he abandons his suit and proposes to Slava on behalf of his friend. In a fairy tale, we might expect this progression to end with a third girl, who is beautiful and good (and a princess), and who would become his wife. But in the novel, the third woman to appear is not a girl, but his mother. Pavel succeeds in escaping abuse and poverty through the kind of cunning and industry that Bechstein and the Grimms valorize, but he does not ultimately win a beautiful bride. In his world, differently than in the fairy tale universe, even hard work and luck cannot free him from the social stigma and disadvantages that his inherited background imposes on him. And Pavel displays great bitterness about this inheritance. After his abortive proposal, he rails at the unhappiness caused by the contrast between his life and the one he desires:

Ich hab Schand fressen sollen, dazu hat die Mutter mich geboren. Jetzt haben sie “was Bessres” aus mir machen wollen, der Herr Lehrer und meine Schwester Milada, und jetzt schmeckt mir die Schand nicht mehr, und jetzt bring ich sie nicht mehr hinunter, das ist mein Unglück. (250–51)

In this insistence on the lasting, determining power of inheritance and social milieu, the text reveals its Naturalist impulse—and rejects the notion propagated in Bechstein’s tales that we can control our own fates, that hard work guarantees success, and that people are rewarded for what they *do* rather than what they *are* (Bottigheimer, “Ludwig Bechstein’s Fairy Tales” 69, 77).

To be sure, the novel’s conclusion drains away much of this bitterness. Unlike *Thiel* and many Naturalist works, it does not end with death or social cataclysm. Instead, Ebner-Eschenbach paints the mother’s return as a kind of redemption: her eyes radiate love



toward Pavel, “eine Liebe [...], ein glückseliges Entzücken, die wie Licht und Wärme auf ihn einströmten” (264). When he embraces her at last, he knows “daß er jetzt seinen besten Reichtum, sein Kostbarstes und Teuerstes in seinen Armen hielt” (267). Pavel will no longer be lonely. But his story ends with only a partial redemption of the failed domesticity that had characterized its beginning. The mother’s return does not offer the same kind of promise and closure that a new, prosperous marriage would. Moreover, while the book ends with Pavel’s words “liebe Mutter”—an affirmation of the re-constituted family—the brief exchange that precedes these words raises the issue of social discrimination again (267). After the two have reconciled, society still stands as a potential barrier to their domestic happiness. When Pavel asks his mother to stay, both recognize that, although Pavel’s prejudice has been overcome, the townspeople’s has not: “‘Ich weiß nicht, ob ich darf,’ sagte sie. ‘Der Leute wegen?’ ‘Der Leute wegen’” (267). Pavel insists that the people will eventually accept her, but this transformation will not be miraculous; they will be accepted in the end because they are hard-working people. *Das Gemeindegeld*, while it shares Naturalist concerns, softens its darkly deterministic vision. There is a continuing hope for human good, so that Pavel can enjoy a happy end of sorts. But there can be no *miraculous* happy end for a child of poverty, alcoholism, and crime.

## Conclusion

*Bahnwärter Thiel* and *Das Gemeindegeld* are not artistic fairy tales, anti-fairy tales, or parodies of fairy tales in a postmodern vein. Instead, they seem to confirm A.S. Byatt’s postulation that fairy tales have long shaped “the narrative grammar of our minds” (xvii). In these stories, this traditional narrative grammar becomes the framework around which

Hauptmann and Ebner-Eschenbach articulate the still-nascent anxieties and understandings of modernity. Their borrowings and departures from the fairy tale go far beyond the adoption and adaptation of formal features. In both cases, structural and narrative relationships are indicative of the changes and continuities that mark the broader cultural transition to twentieth-century modernity and modernism. Hauptmann's novella clearly foretells his commitment to a Naturalist worldview as it rejects the modern optimism enshrined in nineteenth-century fairy tale collections. But when we see the fairy tale as the source of the fears and desires implied in his text, we are also reminded of the continuities that underlie the shift to modernism. The fear of female sexuality and the corresponding dream of a docile femininity that characterize the fairy tale reappear in the misogynistic tendencies one finds in modernist dramas such as Wedekind's *Lulu*. The villainous supernatural opponent of the fairy tale is reincarnated as the powerful, inhumane machine of the industrial age, as when Georg Heym made a smoke-spewing factory "De[n] Gott der Stadt." Reading *Bahnwärter Thiel* as a fairy tale highlights the ways in which even the most radical modernism continued to be engaged with old preoccupations. In contrast, Ebner-Eschenbach's story denies these persistent dreams and fears. The domesticated, spiritualized feminine ideal is shown to be a sham, and the dream—or nightmare—of superhuman powers that intervene in human fate dissolves. But the resolution that she offers preserves some of the liberal faith in modern progress that is expressed in the modern "rise" fairy tale's fundamental optimism, including its belief in the possibility of *Bildung*, self-improvement, and the ultimate reward for the hard-working individual. This optimism is subdued in the novella, since circumstances make a happy end impossible for its hero. Still, Pavel's prospect for an improved life suggests a humanist

vision of the world, in which hope depends on fellow humans' help. Such cautious humanism, too, persists in twentieth-century modernity, both in the works of artists such as Thomas Mann and in social reform movements. These two modernist fairy tales anticipate both the darkly pessimistic strands of modernism and the progressive impulses of twentieth-century secular humanism. Perhaps twentieth-century modernity did not kill fairy tale wishes—"und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch heute."

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<sup>1</sup> See Sprengel, whose study on Hauptmann identifies his "Soziale[n] Dramen" and "Märchen-Legende-Mythos: Symbole der Selbstaussage" as distinct categories of composition, and Weiping 226. Sprengel explicitly rejects the idea that *Bahnwärter Thiel* has mythological features (192).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Weiping reads the mythological aspects of his work as features that allow Hauptmann access to a deeper reality.

<sup>3</sup> They also take up and adapt the novella of poetic realism, but this development goes beyond the scope of this study. See Sprengel 187–94 and Polubjarinowa.

<sup>4</sup> The number of copies per printing is not always available. See Bottigheimer, "Publishing History" 90 and Tomkowiak.

<sup>5</sup> Bottigheimer, for example, claims that Bechstein's tales represent a bourgeois point of view, whereas the Grimms' tales "express the worldview of the impoverished and powerless" ("Ludwig Bechstein's Fairy Tales" 81). Tatar explicitly rejects the notion that the Grimms' tales propagate "family values" ("Reading" xxiv). But other scholars have asserted that the Grimms' tales reinforce bourgeois values (Zipes ch. 4 and Uther 514–17).

<sup>6</sup> See Tatar, *Hard Facts* 142–43; Zipes 46; Uther 512–17.

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<sup>7</sup> Interpretations of the tales within their social and historical contexts often construct their arguments around the types and tropes they identify within the body of tales as a whole. See Zipes and Bottigheimer *Bad Girls and Bold Boys*. Schoof and Rölleke have provided detailed accounts of the evolving stylistic and formal characteristics of the Grimms' collection.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart notes twice in passing resemblances between *Bahnwärter Thiel* and fairy tales (143–54).

<sup>9</sup> See Scheuer 45 on the importance of the family drama in Hauptmann's work, and Post 136 and Scheuer 42 on the concept of the *Urdrama*.

<sup>10</sup> See Wiese 39; Martini 67; Clouser 100; Hahn.

<sup>11</sup> Reading Lene as the archetypal stepmother figure may help explain why readers' sympathy tends to remain with Thiel even after his violent acts. Others explain this sympathy in relation to Lene's association with a threatening sexuality or soulless, mechanistic nature. See Clouser and Fullard.

<sup>12</sup> See Post 108. While Post says that Hauptmann's naturalistic works read "wie eine einzige Variation des grauenvollen 'Märchens' vom verlassenen Kinde," his comparison accounts only for their shared atmosphere of abandonment.

<sup>13</sup> Bottigheimer points out that, while the male protagonists all arrive in heaven after their deaths, the question of female salvation is left open, since the female protagonists' stories all end with the death itself (*Bad Girls and Bold Boys* 151–52). However, the language of these tales makes clear that the female protagonists' deaths are still to be viewed as rewards, as Bottigheimer also acknowledges (96).

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