

The Creation of Literary Character
in the Fiction of Theodor Fontane

By

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of D.Phil.

At the University of Oxford

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages

Balliol College, Trinity Term 2016

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My thesis examines the creation of character in the work of Theodor Fontane. Although he is repeatedly praised as a great writer of human character, there is no comprehensive analysis of how Fontane's characters work. This thesis is intended to fill this surprising gap in Fontane research. Its analyses do not focus on the author-text interaction as many traditional critical approaches do, but instead look at what takes place between the text and the reader.

The first section, entitled 'Character in Theory', has two chapters presenting my concept of literary character. It draws on the findings of cognitive studies, including formerly neglected aspects such as affective reading and empathy. The second section, 'Character in Practice', contains four chapters. Chapter three demonstrates how our emotions can contribute to our understanding and what role is played by empathy. Chapter four shows the active role readers are required to play when putting together information about characters in Fontane's polyphonous novels. Chapter five focuses on character speech, and chapter six asks to what extent Fontane's characters can be seen to develop. The third section, 'Character in Context', takes a less hermeneutic approach. Chapter seven asks what our expectations of Realist characters are and how these influence our reading of Fontane. Chapter eight examines how our access to these characters has changed compared to the author's contemporary readership. Chapter nine presents an excursus, looking at the author's development from renditions of 'real' people to fictional characters.

The last section compares this author's creations to the tentatively Modernist characters of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. My findings show that Fontane's characters demand and support a more active reading than Realism is usually given credit for. They suggest that the concept of Realist characters as largely descriptive creations needs to be examined critically.

(295/300 words)

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This thesis examines the creation of character in the work of Theodor Fontane. Its analyses do not focus on the author-text interaction as many traditional critical approaches do, but instead look at what takes place between the text and the reader. My approach draws on the findings of other disciplines, such as psychology and the cognitive sciences. The way in which we create literary characters in our minds based on the information provided by the text is strongly influenced by the process of affective reading. Empathy, identification and sympathy or antipathy towards characters play an important role that has only recently begun to attract attention from critics. Unlike textual information on other topics, our creation of fictional characters depends on our most developed ability: to imagine and understand the minds of others. The unique features which come into play when literary characters are concerned have long been neglected. Fontane's characters draw on these and strongly call for an affective reading but also for an active and critical one. The ways in which they do so, and what effect this process has on the reader, is the object of this investigation. Its findings suggest conclusions which range far beyond Fontane and question our concept of Realist character in general.

My only competitor for the analysis of Fontane's characters is Christiane Wandel, who gives little more than a list (by profession and social standing) in a thesis which bears strong traces of its temporal origin (Heidelberg, 1938). Fontane is known and has been praised for his characters, but few have sought to draw out what distinguishes them, or where their lasting appeal to readers lies. There is no comprehensive study of the ways in which Fontane's characters emerge through our reading of the text. Character speech has been highlighted as one of Fontane's achievements, but no-one has yet examined how the abundance of direct speech influences our reading. This thesis draws out the different textual elements which contribute to the reader's creation of literary character, and analyses in what ways Fontane's novels influence our reading process. It is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the theory of literary characters and our

readings of them, drawing on different concepts and insights from various disciplines. The second section puts the approach set out in the first section into practice with the novels of Fontane. Section three sets these findings both into the readers' and then the author's context. Lastly, the final chapter compares Fontane's creations to the tentatively Modernist characters of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.

The first section is called 'Character in Theory'. It contains two chapters. The first chapter gives an overview of previous theories of character and groups different approaches to them. The second chapter explains the general approach I take in regard to literary character and outlines the interdisciplinary toolkit which will be used throughout the thesis.

- The first chapter, 'What is Literary Character?', presents an overview of previous scholarship on character theory. It establishes six major approaches, confronting authors such as Harvey, Bersani and Docherty. Impulses are also taken from cognitive science, notably Schneider, and neurological research on the reading process. However, these only serve to inform a humanist approach. All of the existing theories discussed focus on the uses of character as symbols or historical indicators, but offer no way of approaching character as a fictional, non-referential construct. They do not take into account the effect of character on readers and its co-creation by the reader.
- The second chapter, 'Co-Creating Characters', presents my approach which is primarily interested in how readers create characters in their imagination. Building on the theory of the New Reader, as well as drawing from other disciplines such as philosophy (Simulation Theory, Theory of Mind), psychology (empathy, identification) and the cognitive sciences (information processing, reader response studies), the effect of textual elements on the reader is examined. My approach questions the division between rational and emotional responses in the reading process, and highlights empathy as a central ability in the creation of literary characters. Unlike other textual data, the information we receive about people requires us to imagine another human subject, a task we are uniquely equipped to undertake. Reading literary characters relies on the abilities which make us human, and as many studies have proven, readers are more fascinated by fictional people than by any other element of fiction.

The second section is called 'Character in Practice'. It contains four chapters which illuminate different aspects of Fontane's characters, each focusing on one of his novels.

- The third chapter uses the novel *Unwiederbringlich* to show what is lost if we read without using our ability for empathy and our own feedback gained through affective reading. As the couple Christine and Holk drift apart in the novel, readers have to work hard to continue relating to both characters with empathy instead of siding with the more prominent and charming husband against his wife. He loses his connection to her and fails to understand her, and readers are cautioned not to fall into the same trap by the narrator. However, this task proves challenging, and this chapter focuses on how the text supports or thwarts our attempts to gain access to both characters, and to connect to them emotionally.
- Chapter four, 'Information on Characters', analyses the textual elements of this process in *Cécile*. It shows how the reader can learn from his emotional reactions to the text. It deals with questions such as: Why are we surprised by a character's actions? What makes us experience sympathy or antipathy? What elements support or obstruct empathy? This chapter also analyses the complex techniques Fontane uses in the light of cognitive information processing, showing that they demand active reading rather than passive listening. An unusual quality of Fontane's characters is that they emerge largely through representing each other, rather than being described by the narrator. The resulting characters are thus polyphonous and present interesting challenges to their readers, but also allow us to take an active part in the process of their creation.
- The fifth chapter, 'Characterisation through Speech', gives an overview of the scholarship on character speech and language in Fontane. It also looks at aspects of this topic that have received less attention: the importance of perspective and social groupings on the reading experience and the reader's ability to relate to characters. Fontane's last completed novel, *Der Stechlin*, of which three quarters is direct speech, serves as an example. Its characters show the greatest degree of independence from the narrator. They present themselves unmediated to their readers through their conversations with one another and in doing so create a powerful sense of connection.

- Chapter six, ‘Character Development’, questions the idea of a didactic, linear development towards an improved character as well as the idea of radical change after an important event. In *Mathilde Möhring* and *L’Adultera*, it proposes the concept of ‘character unfolding’, a gradual revelation process through which the reader sees and experiences many different aspects of a character. Both heroines are able to transform in the company of the varying characters who surround them, marking their identities as profoundly social. From these various faces they present and based on the at times conflicting perspectives offered by each character, readers are left to construct a final image by themselves.

The third section is entitled ‘Character in Context’ and contains three chapters. It looks at elements of the readers’ and author’s context.

- Chapter seven, ‘Realist Expectations’, asks what influence genre expectations (for example Realism) have on the reading process and to what extent we experience Fontane’s characters as types or individuals. It uses *Irrungen*, *Wirrungen* and *Frau Jenny Treibel* to explore these questions. While we might expect Realist characters, especially profoundly social beings such as Fontane’s creations, to be exemplary of certain social types, these characters cannot be pinned down so easily. Rather than conforming to either Naturalist types or Romantic individual heroes, Fontane’s characters inhabit a middle ground between the two extremes.
- Chapter eight, ‘Contemporary and Modern Readers’, contrasts the perspectives and reactions of the author’s contemporary audience with a modern one, using reviews of Fontane’s most famous work, *Effi Briest*, as well as letters sent by readers. It also considers what role a reader’s historical or cultural context plays in the effect of a work of fiction, and whether our experience is really so different from readings by Fontane’s contemporary audience. This chapter concludes that many historical elements are incomprehensible to the majority of modern readers, but that their absence does not lessen the powerful effect of the characters. As they emerge primarily as social creations, their identities and conflicts are largely independent of their wider context and instead depend on social interaction on a small scale. While the historical background enriches a reading, Fontane’s characters do not depend on it.

- Chapter nine, ‘The Conception of Character’, looks at the author’s inspiration and seeks to draw out the differences between his descriptions of real people, as presented in his travel writing and autobiographical pieces, and his fictional characters. His transformation of real people, as in *Effi Briest*, *Unwiederbringlich* and *L’Adultera*, and the influence of other writers, are examined as well. Furthermore, his early *Vor dem Sturm* is compared with his last completed novel *Der Stechlin* to look at the beginning and end of his trajectory as a writer of literary character. His fictional creations develop from his descriptions of people he met, and his techniques become increasingly subtle. The most notable difference between his early and late works is that the narrator increasingly fades into the background and allows the characters to take centre stage with their dialogues.

The last section is called ‘Character Beyond Fontane’. It examines the changes in characterisation which were beginning to take place at the end of the nineteenth century. Using Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* as an example, it analyses how the beginnings of Modernism shaped what reading paths authors propose in their works, and what new and different ways readers had to engage with them. Drawing on the previous chapters, it presents a close analysis of Mann’s work and compares its characters with Fontane’s, focusing on the options readers have in their creation. It offers unexpected conclusions about the differences between reading Realist and Modernist characters. The chapter finds that Mann’s characters are presented as near-complete creations by the narrative voice which strongly guides our reception of them. The reader is allotted a more passive role by Mann than by Fontane. Mann’s narrator explains the characters’ thoughts and feelings to us, while Fontane’s narrator steps back and lets the characters speak for themselves (chapter four) and interact with readers directly (chapters two and three).

I am not only offering a new approach to literary character in general, which includes the role of the reader and draws on the new findings of cognitive science, but also seek to explain the effect of Fontane’s characters which many critics have praised without defining. These characters are intrinsically social and thus emerge as polyphonous creations, presented not by a narrator but by each other. The reader takes part in this conversation, and the characters we create in this way are as much ours as they are part of the text they have emerged from. My approach challenges the dominance of the

traditional authorial and historical readings and offers instead a text-imagination dynamic which focuses on the interaction between characters and readers. It sees characters as emerging from the text through our readings. As readers can follow various paths through the text and bring their own memories and thoughts into their co-creations, the characters which come to live in our imagination are each unique to our reading.

Feeling empathy, sympathy or antipathy for one character over another contributes to our personal experience of the text, but in careful reading, it is possible to connect to a number of characters rather than just one protagonist. These emotional reactions allow us to connect to the literary characters as people, and in doing so, we can live through their stories with them instead of simply reading about them from the distanced, unaffected position of an observer. My findings show that Fontane's characters demand and support a more active, affective reading than Realism is usually given credit for. The final comparison with a work by Thomas Mann, which verges on Modernism, suggests that the concept of Realist characters as largely descriptive creations needs to be examined critically.

(2,090/2,500 words)

Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for their generous scholarship which enabled me to carry out my research and to Balliol College, which has been my home for the last eight years. Furthermore, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Dr Ritchie Robertson, as well as Dr Ray Ockenden, Dr Emily Troscianko and the librarians of the Taylorian library for their advice and encouragement over the course of my studies. Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents, Monika and Michael Zieschang, and my husband, Kyle Taylor. I could not have done it without them.

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Part 1: Character in Theory

Chapter 1: What is Literary Character?

‘Great character is the most obvious single mark of great literature.’¹ What, though, *is* literary character? In twentieth-century literary criticism, characters in literature have received a thorough theoretical examination, and the findings have largely not been in their favour. Not unlike the literature that emerged after the great Realist novels, critics have attempted to dismantle literary character and called into question its essence: Is it anything more than an illusion, a trick played by the author on the reader, or a deception the author has himself fallen prey to? The debate gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s, but the concepts that have been put forward are in no way uniform. They can be divided into six approaches or concepts which focus on a different aspect. I call these: the Mimetic, Kinetic, Authorial, Psychoanalytic, Fragmented or Dissolving, and finally (Post)-Structural. Each of these positions will be briefly summarised. Apart from the first one, which – grossly simplified – applies to the nineteenth-century concept of character, all of these attack the notion and/or the importance of character in fiction. However, in the last ten or fifteen years, a new concept of character has begun to emerge which sees fictional people at the centre of fiction, and it is this idea which I wish to explore further, not as a ‘fresh’ concept of character, but as one that those authors we call painters of character have actually held all along, most of all Theodor Fontane.

¹ Gass, p. 35

Setting the Parameters

Before going into detail about these broad categories, it is worth spending some time in setting the parameters for ‘literary character’. According to its Greek roots, it means a stamping tool, and has subsequently been employed to not only mean ‘a literary character’ but also the ‘character’ (personality) of a real person. From here on, character will be used to mean literary character, being a person, or number of internal or external personal traits that inhabit a fictional creation. A character usually consists of external and internal traits, such as physical appearance, social status and historical background on the one hand, and aspirations, mental state and personality on the other. Often, critics of certain approaches have put greater emphasis on one of these aspects over the other, but usually they acknowledge both to some degree. A further important parameter is the distinction between literary character and type, which will be treated in chapter seven, and figures, which feature largely in early drama as well as poetry. This summary of points of view regarding the idea of literary character focuses on the novel, as this is where characters have been given more room and attention than in any other genre. Some, like W. J. Harvey, will even go as far as saying that ‘most great novels exist to reveal and explore character’.²

The Mimetic Approach

As a starting point, the Mimetic approach is surely the most familiar of these six. At first glance, it seems to be the easiest, most obvious way of understanding the ‘people’ who inhabit fiction, but the simplistic view that characters simply imitate actual persons is held by few twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics. Art had long been seen to imitate life – and still is by some, as will be explored further in subsequent chapters. It

² Harvey, p. 23

comes naturally to speak of literary characters as if they were real people, to try and employ 'real world' logic to understand their personalities and actions. Depending on whom one reads, this approach might come naturally, as with the Realists, or it might be a path that leads nowhere, as with the work of Franz Kafka, whose protagonists can hardly be understood outside of the framework of their narrative's literary reality. However, in the nineteenth century, many writers declared just this to be their goal and the aim of their fiction: to represent reality. Authors belonging to French Naturalism, such as Émile Zola, wanted to capture the beauty as well as the ugliness, leaving nothing out in order to give a full, life-like image of reality and the people who inhabit it. This applied to both the physical attributes of a literary character, the 'external' character, and their mental traits, the 'internal' character. Yet the focus was on the external; physical description was given a lot of room in this fiction, and internal character was, before psychoanalysis, seen largely as a result of external factors such as family background, heritage, culture and upbringing.

Critics have taken a more complex approach to the idea of mimetic character, which nevertheless failed to protect them from the attack of their colleagues in later years. In his *Character and the Novel* (1965), W. J. Harvey analyses some basic issues surrounding the notion of character, but his main question still asks: What makes characters seem real? In order to answer it, he looks at narrative perspective and the reliability of the narrator, which he finds to play key roles in determining whether the reader reacts with detachment or sympathy to the characters presented. The protagonist's or focaliser's blind spots can be illuminating to the reader, as well as the possibly ambiguous treatment of different characters by the author or narrator, which is usually easiest to see when comparing protagonists to secondary characters. These latter, so Harvey argues, can also more easily carry a generalised social meaning, as

they are not expected to be given as much personal detail as main characters. Unlike individualised main characters, minor characters lend themselves to being socially representative of certain types or classes. One of Harvey's few questionable arguments, however, is that, while characters constantly oscillate between episodes hardly understood and episodes scrutinised in detail, the reader can see and understand everything and thus has a level of insight far beyond that of the characters. While this may apply to some stories, to many others it does not, where the reader is left confused or even consciously misled by the narrator, struggling to follow the story's internal logic – one need only think of a novel by Kafka such as *Das Schloß*. A major issue with Harvey's theory is that he sees the author as the ultimate authority on character: 'I have maintained that the novelist's relation to his work cannot be anything but god-like.'³ In his view, main characters more or less successfully imitate real people, created by an author who is fully conscious of what he is doing and fully in control of his characters. As the second chapter will aim to show, this point of view focuses on only one side of the author-reader dynamic, and for some authors like Fontane, 'god-like' is not at all the appropriate description for the writer's relation to his characters. Picking up on a further issue, in the second appendix, Harvey criticises the view expressed by some commentators that 'emotional involvement with characters' can cloud judgement and deflect attention from the real core of the novel (whatever that might be). As he states at the beginning of his work, he sees characters at the centre of a work of fiction and does not see sympathy as something negative.

Overall Harvey presents a rather traditional approach to literary character that focuses mostly on mimetic and to some extent on kinetic aspects. He subscribes to and develops

³ Harvey, p. 163

the classical theory of art as mimesis. The reader is aware of all the information the text offers and interprets it correctly, always judging characters from a superior position. The reading process is seen as a flow of information from author to reader. Other critics such as L.C. Knights, A.D. Nuttall and William Gass have followed the same mimetic approach, but focused on different aspects. Analysing the plays of Shakespeare, both Knights and Nuttall ask about the amount of detail – or lack thereof – in the information given about the characters. When Knights ironically asks ‘How many children had Lady Macbeth?’, he draws attention to the difficulties posed by the mimetic concept of character. Surely, a literary character can simply be portrayed as a mother, making only the fact that she has children relevant but not their number? In reality of course, we’d expect to know how many children a woman has, and our view of her might change considerably had she one child or ten. Some years later, Gass goes further by stating that ‘characters in fiction are mostly empty canvas’,⁴ lacking more than they offer. However, he observes that the reader does not need to know all the details; after all, the picture we have of people we meet in real life can be patchy as well (people whom one meets only in certain contexts for example, such as teachers or hairdressers). Gass states that we automatically fill in the blanks from our own experience, giving the reader more weight in the process of characterisation than Harvey did. All of these critics draw our attention to the blank spaces in characterisation, and value the feeling that something remains to be said as a sign of a character’s success: he or she is so convincing – so real – that speculation about the unmentioned aspects of their life, or their future beyond the novel, is not only appropriate but called for. What they see as the mark of a realistic, three-dimensional character actually says more about the reader’s relation to the fictional persona. Contrary to Harvey, the reader is not restricted to mere reactions (such

⁴ Gass, p. 45

as sympathy) to the information given by the author, but can take a more active, involved role.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Gass was one of many theorists presenting modified approaches to mimetic character. While he begins to break free from this approach to some extent, it remains the unspoken underlying principle for most of his analysis. He speaks of ‘fiction, where characters, unlike ourselves, freed from existence, can shine like essence, and purely Be’.⁵ Here, characters are no longer seen as an imitation of real people, but something different. He also draws a more structuralist parallel concerning language: while words already have their meaning, the names of characters still need to have meaning attached to them. Sadly, he does not go much further in explaining what this ‘essence’ is, other than being able to do away with some details in their characterisation. His state of ‘purely Being’ seems to be freed from unnecessary attachments, but he does not describe what, if anything, can emerge now that this weight has been dropped. Some decades would pass until these tender beginnings were investigated further. First, literary character was to come under attack from all sides. It would be reduced to little more than a technique by the kinetic approach, seen as a puppet by the authorial and as a pathological mental state by the psychoanalytic concept, and finally taken apart beyond recognition, resulting in what I have broadly named ‘fragmented character’. Before finding positive voices to speak in its stead again, character faces extinction by the (Post)-Structuralists, who will declare it nothing more than ink on paper, an interplay of signs.

⁵ Gass, p. 54

The Kinetic Approach

Even though the mimetic approach to literary character was dominant from about the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, and is still held by many readers today as it often seems to be the most obvious approach, the kinetic concept actually predates it by centuries. Dating back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, this point of view sees literary character not as the centre of fiction, but as subordinate to plot. It should not be forgotten of course that, being the oldest of the six approaches, it also predates the heyday of the novel itself, but an analysis of whether it might be the best approach for other genres would exceed the limits of this thesis. When Aristotle explained his view on literary characters, or *dramatis personae*, the persons of a play, he put emphasis on characters serving to advance the plot. Their actions and personality must be probable, plausible, or necessary, thus a result of their circumstances. The four chief aims of the artist in the creation of character are the quality of their moral choice, that they ought to be fitting (concerning gender and status), naturalness and self-consistency. Again, this view is partly mimetic, as 'naturalness' is one of his four key points, but the focus lies on the kinetic role played by characters. Characters are not seen as 'those primary substances to which everything else is attached'.⁶ Instead they are the people with whom the action is played out, to whom events happen: agents of the plot, understood in terms of protagonists (driving the plot as well as the moral message forward) and antagonists (hindering and dramatising the development, a force of evil that has to be overcome). John Jones has pointed out that the aim of this action is to convey a moral choice, calling it 'characterful action',⁷ as action is realised humanity. His skilful analysis helps understand the hierarchy of plot over character, as it highlights that plot, as action, was seen as the true revelation of character in Ancient Greece. However, this approach falls

⁶ Gass, p. 49

⁷ Jones, p. 33

short of offering any insights into novels nearly devoid of action such as Fontane's *Der Stechlin* or Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Clearly, this approach is not sufficient to understand the concept of literary character in the novel.

In *Reading (Absent) Character* (1983), Thomas Docherty presents a more complex view, moving onwards from Aristotle's kinetic characters, but also developing Harvey's ideas further. He insists on the importance of the author's feelings about a character, but includes the reader as well. About mimetic fiction, he says: 'A written character, then, is mimetically adequate or "lifelike" not when it totally replaces a real person, but rather when it works, like a reflection, to imply the presence of a real person somewhere else.'⁸ The aim is still for characters to relate closely to real persons, but no longer through mimicry. He does not think characters should be read or interpreted like allegories, as many characters can be in drama (personifying a moral message), and not as real people 'inside books' either. Instead, good characters point outside of fiction to real people. Despite his illuminating and refreshing take on mimetic characters, a large part of his study takes a more kinetic approach. Docherty analyses the role played by character regarding the temporal and spatial organisation of the novel, focusing largely on Post-Modern fiction. His views on these characters will be discussed in more detail as part of the 'fragmented or dissolving' approach to character. Harvey also examines literary characters as kinetic devices in the story which can slow the narrative down or speed it up, giving them a structural function. Depending on the character's experience of an episode, it may be expanded and given more weight, or only glossed over.

Docherty's approach to the characters of Realism sounds familiar to any readers of Harvey: 'In the Realist novel, in which characters are unities, the reader unifies the plot

⁸ Docherty, p. xi

and time-scheme, and there is ultimately one authorial position from which the essential meaning of the narrative can be gleaned; the reader always approximates to this position, but it is the writer, in the privileged authorial position, who occupies it.’⁹

Again, the author is believed to reign paramount over his creation.

The Authorial Approach

This point of view is shared by all those who take the Authorial approach to character. It is a traditional one that only comes under scrutiny in the 1970s with works such as Barthes’ ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (1968) and theorists such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, who will be heard in the second chapter. This approach is perhaps still appropriate to what is often called the novel of ideas (*le roman à thèse* or *le roman d’idées*), a work of fiction that is created with the primary aim of voicing a certain religious, political or social message. Harvey takes this position on the novels of the writer, and more importantly philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Docherty does so in his chapter on novels dealing primarily with politics or religion. Like Harvey, he thinks this approach is most fruitful for modern French fiction. This concept sees characters as the embodiment of the author’s message, they serve to illuminate it and to convey it more strongly than pure theory would. A famous example is that of Victor Hugo’s drama *Hernani*, which contains a preface (as do most of Hugo’s works) explaining how the play ought to be interpreted and understood.¹⁰ Most German Realist authors have not been accused of having made their characters their spokesperson, but many critics still believe them to be omniscient and fully conscious of their own creation, thus holding the key to its understanding.

⁹ Docherty, p. 255

¹⁰ Another example would be Stifter’s *Bunte Steine*.

An example of the many critics who subscribe to this concept is Patrick Swinden (1973). He analyses literary character in Romanticism and Realism in relation to numerous topics, such as entrances, plots or deaths. Concerning mimetic literature, he says that there is always an uncertainty about the reality of his creation on the part of the writer, but this is of no consequence as his fiction will always contain the truth of the author: 'It is in the relation of one thing to another that interference with reality becomes apparent.'¹¹ The different elements of the story create a web which contains a truth, a certain reality, of its own. This is an interesting and different concept from the mimetic one, but his next argument continues on a well-trodden path. Any suppositions a reader makes about this 'truth', including any of the characters, have no reality behind them and do not matter, as the author alone has authority. Subsequently, Swinden writes about flashbacks as inserted explanations by the author. Fiction is claimed to always be autobiographical to some extent, at least on a psychological level, and the reader can with his best attempts never do anything but approach the ultimate truth of the author's conception. As mentioned above, this view was eventually challenged.

The Psychoanalytic Approach

The fourth approach stands out as a cross-disciplinary one. It applies the knowledge unearthed by science to literature and after its heyday under Modernism, is now often frowned upon. With the emergence of Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, and further psychological models offered by Carl Gustav Jung and Otto Rank, a whole new set of theories became available to critics and readers alike, and they were eager to apply them to literary character. Again, this approach betrays an inherent mimetic understanding which wants to see literary characters as if they were real people. Some

¹¹ Swinden, p. 3

authors, like Arthur Schnitzler, were influenced by the development at the time, but even many later critics such as Meredith Anne Skura have applied psychoanalysis to fiction. With *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process* (1981), she takes a more complex approach than early critics and readers who simply sought to use psychoanalysis as a decoding method for literature, attempting to reveal the hidden wishes, desires and fears of its characters, as well as its authors. Skura points out that this approach, which she names the ‘psychoanalytic critic’, readily ignores literary conventions, elements of the character that are explained by literature. Literary characters do not fully lend themselves to psychoanalysis, as they are also works of art and some of their elements, be it personality or actions, cannot and should not be seen with the scientific eye, but with that of the artist and are explained by it. A further drawback of this approach is that psychoanalysis is concerned with pathological mental states, and does not offer much insight into the healthy (or at least non-pathological) mind. Closely linked to the discipline of medicine from which it emerged – Freud, Rank and Jung all had a medical background – it seeks to understand the processes in order to cure. Psychoanalysis will not help the reader value or empathise with a character; it is not designed to do so. It also, as is Skura’s most important stricture, ignores helpful elements that the previously mentioned approaches to character have to offer, as it does not include literary conventions, techniques or style, because it does not see literary character, but simply (human) character. Applying psychoanalysis to fiction can be insightful and entertaining, as for example Freud’s own analysis of Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*, but it remains limited to just one system, just one aspect (the same can be said for example about Marxist or feminist readings). While psychoanalysis has advanced our understanding of the human psyche, it can only go so far in understanding literary character, which remains an artificial construct.

Fragmented or Dissolving Character

The vogue for psychoanalytic readings was understandably followed by a more critical, theoretical approach to character. Again, this was not just a change in attitude among critics, but accompanied by the emergence of a new kind of literature. Leo Bersani, who applies deconstruction as well as psychoanalysis to literature, presents the transition from one to the other in 1976, while Docherty focuses almost entirely on the concept of fragmented or dissolving character seven years later. Bersani's use of psychoanalysis cannot be compared to the previously described psychoanalytic approach, as he does not simply seek to psychoanalyse the characters, but uses the principle of desire to shed light on the unveiling of character in fiction. He sees the nineteenth-century focus on continuity and definite meaning as a fear of desire, which is by definition unfulfilled. His advice to both authors and readers is not to wish for coherence and logic; desire should not be restricted or structured in characters by using behavioural logic. Instead, he proposes a deconstruction of the self, allowing desire to run freely. The reader thus experiences the novel in glimpses and instances without establishing any form of coherence or any connections. His theory offers some valuable insights, but like Deconstruction itself, its analysis takes apart without putting back together: it dissolves and disjoints the idea of character. While some works of Post-Modern literature certainly feature such fragmented characters, it remains questionable whether this approach is a fruitful one. How is a reader supposed to make sense of fiction if it is not written to be understood? If a literary character is, in its most basic definition, several internal or external character traits grouped together under a common denominator, then this approach is an attack on its essence. If we are not to connect the different elements, there is no character, only pieces. Instead of creating literary character, this approach dissolves it, as it gives no room to the effect of art on the reader or the fact that instead of decoding machines, readers are human beings.

Docherty's approach is a little less deconstructive, but fragments character none the less. He observes that literary characters have become less stable and clear in the later novels of the twentieth century which he analyses. From his description of their role in the temporal and spatial organisation of the novel, they emerge as fluid selves without psychological motivation, unfixed instances of subjectivity or series of subjectivities, possibly, but not necessarily, tied together under a name.¹² These characters transcend their own positions in the text. Characters, so he argues by using Freud and Lacan, are an expression of the desire for a static centre, and in Realism they formed part of the author-text-reader hierarchy. 'The motivation in Realist fiction tends towards [...] giving us knowledge of characters, either as types or individuals, but in any case as "selves".'¹³ In Post-Modern literature, the absence of such selves gives the reader the pleasure of the process of characterisation. This point of view, somewhat surprisingly, seems to suggest that the readers cannot partake in the process of characterisation if the outcome is to be any kind of 'self', a literary character that can be understood as an entity, however heterogeneous. Docherty is progressive in so far as he places emphasis on the role of the reader and the process of characterisation over the outcome of it and the role of the author. His central thesis is perhaps best summed up by this statement: 'The conceptual notion of Character is replaced in Post-Modern fiction by the process of Characterization.'¹⁴ There are two central problems with this idea: it is possible for a reader to take (more) pleasure from the process of characterisation as an active co-creator when there is a comprehensible outcome, even if or especially when this resulting character is fluid and has to be reworked, but definitely a 'self'. Secondly, we have to ask if Realist authors like Fontane are really restricted to such narrow and static

¹² See especially Docherty, p. 222

¹³ Docherty, p. 237

¹⁴ Docherty, p. 268

views of literary hierarchy and unity. As Richard Pearce has observed, '*Reading (Absent) Character* is not designed to recall the feeling of reading the novels.'¹⁵

The (Post)-Structural Approach

The most recent approach which questions the essence of literary character is the (Post-) Structural one. It is largely linguistic and applies the theories of Jacques Derrida and Roman Jakobson. Character, along with most literary phenomena, is reduced to a web of signs. It becomes referential – this time not to the world outside, but to other signs that make up the text – and structural. One of the more recent critics to take this approach is Alex Woloch (2003). He focuses on the literary techniques used to differentiate between minor and major characters, tracking them on a distributional matrix of shallowness and depth of description as well as exterior and interior characterisation. The given amount of these elements results in either flat or round characters, so Woloch argues, using E.M. Forster's classic division. A story that has action at its centre will put more weight on major characters, while a story that centres on motive will focus on minor ones. Major characters are thus tied to the plot, arching back to the Aristotelian concept, while minor characters need to be given motives as their action is not simply justified by the main plot. Furthermore, characters belong to a certain part of the story and act as a referential point in its literary structure, with the main characters needing the backdrop of the many minor ones. He further claims that the Realist novel is structurally destabilised by featuring too many characters. The reason, so he says, lies in the democratic impulse of the times which in literature wants to give everyone a voice. Only a few Realists have succeeded in creating interesting minor characters; he names the characters of Balzac's *Comédie humaine* and Dickens'

¹⁵ Pearce, p. 334

eccentrics as examples. This approach reduces literary character, and really literature altogether, to its technical aspects, leaving no room once again for the effect of art or the fact that it is not read by robots, but by humans.

As Mary McCarthy wrote in 1962, it is no surprise that there have been few, if any, memorable, 'great' characters in literature for a while. With these two most recent approaches, characters are reduced to a theoretical or philosophical exercise. Writing about contemporary fiction, D. J. Hughes even spoke of a 'crisis of character in fiction'.¹⁶ McCarthy argues writers have stopped creating characters they understand, citing Flaubert's famous exclamation 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi!'. Instead, she says, they now try to make characters that are different in an ethical attempt to understand the other, featuring people at the margins of society. This noble enterprise is doomed to fail as there is nothing to transfer to the reader other than a shared feeling of exclusion and otherness. Considering 'great' Realist characters and the reading process, she makes an unreflected, but interesting observation: 'This mechanism of identification with the hero is odd and seems to rest, almost, on *lack* of knowledge.'¹⁷ Two pages later, she gives the answer to her own question without realising it: 'Others are to us like the "characters" of fiction.'¹⁸ Writing in 1962, she cannot be blamed for failing to connect the dots of her acute observations. It will take considerable advancements in theory and neurology before these ideas will be taken up again by theorists in the new millennium.

¹⁶ Hughes, p. 793

¹⁷ McCarthy, p. 290

¹⁸ McCarthy, p. 292

Bayley and His Critics

Before moving on to the most recent critics and theorists, there is one last twentieth-century critic who deserves to be heard in this debate, as his approach, even though it predates the others by over forty years, lays the foundations for reading character with empathy. Published in 1962, John Bayley's *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* bears the marks of its time, but his concept of the process of reading and characterisation stands out among his contemporaries. His study concerns itself with the theme of love in fiction, but also the love of fiction by writers and readers. Following a similar train of thought to McCarthy, he comments that 'The author is best on love who loves his own creations.'¹⁹ He argues that a purely intellectual representation is not best suited to portraying love; instead the experience should be recreated for the reader. His focus on experience is important here. Even though he does not explicitly talk about the *reading* experience, his critique of Naturalist writers who sought to represent the whole truth instead of recreating the experience for the reader makes this clear. He makes another interesting point which, while he limits it to the field of love, can be extrapolated to characterisation in general: 'The lover is uniquely capable of feeling the difference between the loved person as an extension of his own consciousness and as a separate "character".'²⁰ I would argue that the same holds true for the reader who, by sympathy or antipathy, is so preoccupied with the literary characters he reads about that he comes to feel the difference between himself and the characters, as well as to an understanding of them as an extension of his own consciousness (since he co-creates them in the reading process).²¹ In critique of other concepts of character, again one of Bayley's statements on the portrayal of love is

¹⁹ Bayley, p. 7

²⁰ Bayley, p. 34

²¹ For brevity's sake, I shall use 'he' for 'he or she' henceforth.

insightful: 'For the author to see a character with the vision of love is rare indeed; more often he is in love with his own vision and with his characters as projections of it.'²² He speaks up against using characters for the representation of anything but themselves.

Many critics in the 1980s and 1990s tried to attack this point of view which sees characters as the heart of fiction, as well as the idea that a reader should or could respond emotionally to a literary character. The example of Martin Price (1983) is an interesting one, as he begins by trying to attack this position, but ends up having to admit more and more that there might be something to it. Early statements such as 'if characters exist for the sake of novels, they exist only as much as and in the way that the novel needs them'²³ align him with the traditional kinetic and authorial approach. He claims that we cannot come to new conclusions or discover more about characters once we have finished a novel. Yet, he later admits: 'The status of character in a novel is not unlike the status of words.'²⁴ Personal experience and linguistics both prove that words change their meaning over time as well as with age. Of course, a reader can also achieve a new level of understanding regarding a literary character as he changes in real life, or even just by being given some time to reflect upon what he has read. Furthermore, he describes the creation of one's own self-image in reality to be not unlike the creation of character in fiction while reading. Picking up a similar thought to Nuttall, he points out that the level of detail we expect from characterisation depends on the degree of time we spend with a character, just as we expect to get to know people better over time in real life, and accept that they are confined to a certain role if we only see them rarely. The longer we observe a character while reading, the more attention we devote to him

²² Bayley, p. 39

²³ Price, p. 37

²⁴ Price, p. 55

and thus try to understand him, an endeavour in which we cannot succeed without a certain level of information. If however a character features in only one scene, on one page, readers usually do not expect to hear much about him or her – he or she is obviously not the object of interest in this novel. Involuntarily, Price has to admit that the boundaries he believed the novel to set do not actually limit the reader. Later on, he concedes: ‘A character, for all the conventions of his literary life, may acquire some degree of autonomy.’²⁵ He does not tell us how this happens, a question to which there are of course two possible answers which do not exclude one another: in the imagination of either the author or the reader. The role of the reader and his relation to fictional characters breaks through in this work, somewhat against the will of its author it seems, because Price chose to focus his study on a social topic: moral imagination. As Bayley has argued, I believe these human experiences cannot be as effectively theorised or described as they can be recreated with the help of characters, who can enable us to live through what is told in our imagination.

Summary

The six different approaches to literary character all have some degree of truth and misconception; overall they are inadequate to the novel because they each focus on only one or two ways of understanding character, and offer little insight into the reader-text dynamic. The Mimetic concept comes naturally, but it is not imitation but reference and similarity to reality that are helpful in understanding fiction. The Kinetic approach is useful for understanding the dynamics underlying the story, but characters which find themselves at the centre of their fictional world are more than their actions. The acceptance of the author’s authority and message that the Authorial point of view holds

²⁵ Price, p. 58

is now largely outdated, yet the author is still an important part of the author-text-reader interplay, laying the ground on which the reader will get to work. However, we now know that an author is never fully conscious of what goes into his creation, nor can he foresee what life it will take on in someone else's mind. The Psychoanalytic approach would never claim something like conscious creation, but its reduction of literary characters to objects of scientific enquiry leaves out the literary dimension. Finally, the fragmented or dissolving approach to character and the (Post-)Structural concept try to disassemble characters into instances of subjectivity and linguistic signs, neither of which are fruitful or offer any explanation for the effect characters have had on generations of readers.

Bayley's views might not seem ground-breaking at first, being centred on love, but his implicit understanding of the reader's relation to literary characters as well as the process and aim of affective characterisation is rare. He talks about 'experiencing love', but underlying that is a view which applies to any mode of experience which is affective in nature. This indirect form of learning about others, which enables us to draw from depths inaccessible to pure reason, had not been understood until more recent advances in both cognitive science and the humanities, more specifically neurology and literary theory. It is this approach, which I call reading character with empathy, that reveals why Fontane's characters have captured their readers for decades, why they remain unforgotten, and why so many readers and critics have struggled to put their finger on just what makes them 'great' and outstanding.

Chapter 2: Co-Creating Characters

All previous approaches to literary character have their advantages, but they are best suited for bringing out a particular aspect, rather than a complete picture of literary character as it arises from the interaction between reader and text. What unites them is a neglect of the reader's role in the creation of character. The engagement of a reader with a literary person or animal can be manifold, but often the ways in which we co-create them primarily use character as a vehicle, for example as symbols or aesthetic elements.²⁶ There is a lot of recent research to suggest that we primarily make sense of stories through characters, making them a, if not *the* core aspect of any work of fiction.²⁷ As fundamentally social beings, we are interested in fictional characters because of our basic psychology, such as the need to animate (animism).²⁸ Stories which acknowledge this centrality of the social dimension in the minds of their readers are thus best suited to the analysis of how we relate to literary characters. Realist authors create stories which centre on the lives of their characters, and Fontane presents an interesting case because his novels tend to lack action and drama, which have again and again been seen to be inseparably linked to literary character.²⁹ This section will focus on the reader as the co-creator of fictional character. Building on New Reader theory, it will examine information processing and inference as ways in which we create characters in our minds. Drawing on the findings of other disciplines such as neurology, psychology and the cognitive sciences, it will confront different concepts of relating to others such as Theory of Mind and Simulation Theory. Finally and most importantly for

²⁶ See Uri Margolin for a summary of different kinds of readerly engagement.

²⁷ See Vermeule, p. 41.

²⁸ Vermeule names animism, personification and the body/soul distinction as the three key primitive psychological impulses behind our interest in characters (Vermeule, p. 26).

²⁹ Since Aristotle, more recently see James Phelan *Reading People, Reading Plots*, see first section.

the works of Fontane, it will address prejudices about affective reading, and examine what role the processes of identification, sympathy and most importantly empathy play for the reader's interactive experience of literary character.

Literary Theory: New Reader

'There are characters in fiction so real, so palpable, that we can reach out and touch them our whole lives. [...] They have a solidity and a humanity that calls up answering emotions in us, and we know we would have been poorer if we'd never met them.'³⁰ Statements like this capture an experience familiar to most readers, but remain limited to the realm of reception. What makes them 'so real, so palpable', what is this 'humanity' to which we respond emotionally and why would we have been 'poorer' had we never met them? And can we say we have 'met' a fictional character at all? None of the approaches I have summarised in the first section can offer answers to these questions, if their proponents consider such questions worth answering at all. It is only now that they can be answered by combining the focus on the reader which began emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, and the insights given by reader-response studies in the last fifteen to twenty years. Linguists such as Umberto Eco have shown how much freedom the reader has in making sense of what he reads on the level of language, while others such as James Kincaid have come to the same result regarding the organisation of the text. (Kincaid finds that texts always have multiple organisatory principles, any of which the reader can choose to follow, making possible several readings of the same text by the same reader.) In a more recent study, Simone Winko has begun to trace how representation on the linguistic level influences the reader's response, looking at phonetic, rhythmic, syntactical, rhetorical and lexical aspects of poetry. Most of these

³⁰ Kress, p. 5

studies, however, remain closely tied to linguistics, which cannot alone explain the impression which literary characters make on their readers.

Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, whom one might consider the pioneer analysts of the reader's role in fiction, are crucial to understanding the reader as co-creator of character and deserve a brief summary. In *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, Iser divides the work of fiction into an artistic pole created by the author, and an aesthetic one created by the reader. It is the interplay between them which transforms the text into a work of fiction and guarantees its dynamic. Like Barthes, he emphasises that a literary text should engage the reader's imagination. The sentences should force the reader to accept the reality or logic of the text, his role is to shape the interaction of its correlatives without drawing on an outside reality. The result of this union of text and imagination Iser calls the virtual dimension, which will differ from reader to reader and even from one reading to another. It is a transitory illusion the reader builds by grouping elements of the text into its 'Gestalt'. He will oscillate between involvement in this process and the observation of his own imagination, a constant interplay between deduction and induction, anticipation and retrospection. Being thus drawn into the text in an ideal reading, the reader lends his consciousness to the text and is so absorbed that he suspends his personal thoughts for the time of reading. Iser's virtual dimension is where literary characters are to be found, and his early definition of it will prove invaluable to later analyses of how this dimension is created.

Almost a decade later, Stanley Fish defends this approach – often referred to as the 'New Reader' – against accusations of indeterminacy. If the reader plays such an important role, are there any limits to his power? Fish tackles these questions with a system of interrelated meaning: the context. Meaning, so he explains, is always

attributed immediately. A linguistic example which Fish provides is the sentence 'It is crisp', which could apply to cold weather or food, depending on the context the utterance is heard in. Misinterpretation is thus not actually a misunderstanding of the text or utterance, but a mistaken *prereading* of its context. In order to understand the meaning an author or speaker wants to convey, the reader or listener needs to share the context in which it is embedded. As language is always perceived from within a structure of norms which changes with the given situation, relativism is only theoretical as no utterance will ever be heard in a non-situation by a non-person (in limbo by somebody without any traits or attributes whatsoever). Readers may thus produce a number of different readings, but not an infinite or undetermined amount. The greater the number of these readings, the smaller the differences between them will be. A good analogy is to ask a mathematician to name a decimal number between 2 and 3. There is an infinite number of answers to this question – 2.5 or 2.3768... – but '17' is definitely wrong, as it lies outside the parameters '2 and 3'.

Steven Cohan was one of the first to apply this theory of the New Reader to literary character. He states that we deal with 'readable' character when text and reader work together to create a character; the result of this process he calls 'virtual identity' (only one of his many references to Iser, in this case to the virtual dimension). Reading takes the reader out of his own reality; it is a process of irrealisation which goes beyond comprehension and intellect. The consciousness which we meet in the text is brought to life by our imagination, and thus the conscious subject (the other) becomes an object of our own consciousness. 'The more the discourse presents the figure as an object by not presenting its inner space as a subject through narration, the more it draws the figure

into our space where we construct its identity as subject.³¹ There are two processes which simultaneously take place in our minds: the first sees a subject as object, the consciousness in the text as an object of our consciousness which we reflect upon, and the second an object as subject, the character in the text being made into a living consciousness in our minds. Which process is in the foreground is influenced by various factors, but most strongly by the narrative voice. A first-person narrator will more easily be seen as a subject, a consciousness, while a third-person narrator's comments on a character lend themselves more easily to objectification. The text thus contains the stimulus which prompts the reader to create literary character, or frustrates his attempts to do so. These prompts will later be examined in more detail with the help of cognitive theory, such as the theories associated especially with Ralf Schneider (discussed below). Cohan tells us that the reader plays an active role in the creation of character, but he does not explain in detail how this happens. James Phelan makes another attempt some years later, but as Phelan says himself: 'This theory is designed to enable its practitioner to achieve a certain kind of knowledge about texts, knowledge about them as communicative transactions between author and reader.'³² It is not designed to gain knowledge about the interaction that takes place between text and reader. Cohan and Phelan manage to combine the New Reader approach with an active author, but in doing so they turn away from the processes the reader performs, despite acknowledging that such processes are important.

The theories of Fish and Iser do not simply emancipate the reader from the author, but stress the connection between the reader and the text beyond a simple system of signs. It is with the reader's consciousness, his imagination, that a work of fiction comes into

³¹ Cohan, p. 20

³² Phelan, p. 207

being. For literary character, this means that without the reader, a character really is nothing more than a name under which different attributes are grouped (the definition of character given by most Structuralists). However, imagination has long been a rather vague term, especially when it relates to people. Do we imagine, understand, approach, feel, somebody else's state of mind? And if we ask these questions regarding people in real life, how can we even begin to ask the same of 'people that do not even really exist'? Understanding fictional beings is an activity that has to be approached from both sides: the side of the text, the literary elements, the author's creation, and the side of the reader, the human perspective, the social, psychological and cognitive elements that filter into understanding another consciousness (be it human, animal, animated object or whatever other kind of literary character one wants to imagine).

Philosophy: Simulation Theory and Theory of Mind

There are many philosophical theories of how we access another person's mind, asking how mind reading works in humans.³³ 'We humans spend a great deal, perhaps most, of our energy seeking to explain ourselves and other people,' Blakey Vermeule notes.³⁴ How exactly we do this is a question which has been asked for many centuries by researchers of many disciplines. The theories of other disciplines offer different avenues to explain how we create fictional characters and relate to them, how we read their minds based on the information provided from the text. Two prominent examples are the so called 'theory of mind' and 'simulation theory'.³⁵ Theory of mind presupposes that people use basic psychological theories to make inferences on the states of mind of others, based on their experience (deductive reasoning). Simulation theory believes that

³³ See Alvin Goldman for the concept of 'mind' as defined by its ability to think about other minds.

³⁴ Vermeule, p. 11

³⁵ For a third position, less applicable to literary characters as it uses a phenomenological model, see for example Shaun Gallagher's 'Interaction Theory'.

humans simulate the mental states of others through empathy. As fundamentally social beings, humans have developed sophisticated ways of understanding others – yet neither theory assumes that they do so with absolute accuracy.

Theory of mind has been challenged by the findings of neurological and psychological research. From the perspective of developmental psychology, it seems implausible that infants, who so far do not have developed a theory of mind, are able to mimic and react to the emotions portrayed by others, such as beginning to cry when seeing a face which portrays anger or sadness, or upon hearing another infant cry.³⁶ Phenomenologist findings do so far not confirm the concept of theory of mind, but rather disprove it in early developmental stages. However, it is widely accepted that social interaction also depends on skills which are learned – not displayed by young children – but by the vast majority of (mentally healthy) adults. When it comes to fictional characters, having some theories on the mental states of others is a prerequisite in order to understand and access the abstract representation of other minds. Whenever we infer motives or detect lies, we use theory of mind.

Opposing this concept is simulation theory. Vermeule states: ‘For fiction and literature, simulation theory is by far the most promising of the mind-reading hypotheses.’³⁷ This might seem like a broad claim, but Vermeule focuses on reading experiences as affective, a dimension which theory of mind by its very nature cannot account for.

Based on simulation theory, Gregory Currie describes the understanding of others and the creation of literary character as follows:

Our basic mode of access to the minds of others works like this: I imagine myself to be in the other person’s position, receiving the sensory information the other

³⁶ See Gallese (discussed in the section ‘Cognitive Insights’) or Zahavi, p. 195

³⁷ Vermeule, p. 39

receives. Having thus projected myself imaginatively into that situation, I then imagine how I would respond to it: what beliefs and desires I would have, what decisions I would make and how I would feel having those perceptions, beliefs and desires, and making those decisions. [...] To imagine having those beliefs and desires is to take on, temporarily, those beliefs and desires [...] In that way I use my own mind to simulate the mind of another.³⁸

His summary of the process of simulation is concise, but it blurs the line between two affective processes. The distinction between the two modes of relating to others, empathy for others and identification of another with ourselves, is crucial. If you imagine how you would respond, what desires you would have, you render yourself unable to understand how the other person would respond, what their desires would be. Imagining yourself in someone's situation is not the same as imagining how that person feels in that situation. When all is said and done, you are not the same person. Currie goes on to state: 'It is when we are able, in imagination, to feel as the character feels that fictions of character take hold of us. This process of empathetic re-enactment of the character's situation is what I call secondary imagining.'³⁹ If we feel as the character feels – do we feel as if we were in his shoes, his circumstances, or do we understand how he feels, considering that he is another person? Currie's secondary imagining does not make this distinction clear at all times, and it also does not differentiate between relating to real or fictional people.

Theory of mind and simulation theory both have their dangers when applied to our reading of fictional characters. One risks entirely ignoring the affective dimension of art, the other appropriates a scientific toolkit which if used improperly could easily reduce the experience of literary character to a purely phenomenological exercise. Both theories can be useful in understanding the reader's co-creation of character in fiction.

³⁸ Currie, p. 144

³⁹ Currie, p. 153

They can be relied upon at different times, resulting in a more complete picture of literary character through their combination. This eclectic approach can then not only make use of different philosophical angles, but also incorporate the findings of the natural sciences.

The Cognitive Sciences

Since the 1990s, research on how we comprehend and relate to other people has advanced considerably.⁴⁰ The discovery of mirroring neurons (see Lauer, 2007) was hailed as a breakthrough in empathy research, but their application seems to be more limited than expected.⁴¹ Mirroring neurons are largely limited to the ‘body loop’, which includes only basic functions such as yawning or crying. They rely largely on visual input relating to such hard-wired emotional signals. Literature gives no visual signals and deals with more complex emotions and mental states. However, the research of Vittorio Gallese has shown that mirroring neurons do react in a small way when participants are told a story.⁴² It remains to be discovered to what extent mirroring neurons apply to our experience of literature, but so far it seems that their reach is shorter than originally thought. As Katja Mellmann has said: ‘There is no worth in metaphors suggesting miraculous fusions of self and other, or a kind of wired connection between them.’⁴³

Cognitive science has more material to offer which can inform our understanding of texts in general and literary character in particular. Research on imagination has shown,

⁴⁰ And it still moves very rapidly, thus research published after spring 2016 could no longer be included.

⁴¹ See Gerhard Lauer, ‘Spiegelneuronen. Über den Grund des Wohlgefallens an der Nachahmung’ in Karl Eibl et al., *Im Rücken der Kulturen* (Paderborn: 2007), pp. 137-63 or Ernst Fehr and Tania Singer, *The Neuroeconomics of Mind Reading and Empathy* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2005)

⁴² See Vittorio Gallese, ‘The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Relations: The Quest for a Common Mechanism’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 358 (2003), 517-28

⁴³ Mellmann, p. 431

through fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), that the brain hardly differentiates between imagined situations or emotions and experienced ones, and consequently, that it does not distinguish between one's own experiences and the imagined experiences or states of mind of others. The same affective brain areas, which govern emotions, are activated in both cases, but the awareness of whether something is reality or not is the thin layer dividing the sane from the insane (the sensory areas remaining inactive, a divide which can be overcome for example under hypnosis). This research gives unexpected support to Iser's claim that we suspend our own life while we create the virtual dimension of the text in reading. For literary character, it means that through bringing a person to life in our imagination, we must temporarily mirror or 'take on' the way they think and feel.

Alan Palmer links the concept of cognitive frames to story frames, as both set expectations we have of real or fictional situations. His frames can be understood in the same way as Schneider's categories, similar to Fish's context. He points out another factor, however, which Schneider does not consider. Social units maintain different mental concepts ('intermental thought') to members outside of the group. Palmer's category enables us to understand character units such as couples or families, but also why readers might show such diverse reactions to characters. Richard Gerrig points out that non-Western readers will show even greater variation in their response to character, and the concept of intermental thought helps explain why. Misinterpretation also becomes more common when readers are further removed from the intermental unit of the author (referred to as attribution error by cognitive science, a form of overeager inference), but while Gerrig's *Characters in Fictional Worlds* strives to present an international perspective, this thesis aims to show what prompts and paths texts provide

to readers. The goal is not to speculate on what use readers make of them, but rather uncover what options for engagement are provided by a text in the first place.

Inference and Information Processing

In 2001, the cognitive theorist Ralf Schneider described the process by which we create mental models of fictional worlds. His system of information processing, which has since been widely adopted in cognitive theory, is helpful in understanding the difference between how we relate to and comprehend fictional characters on the one hand, and real people on the other. In the construction of a work of fiction, the reader performs two main actions, which Iser called anticipation and retrospection. Schneider, and now cognitive theory at large, describes these as top-down processing and bottom-up processing. Top-down processes use pre-existing concepts, for example the stereotype of a spoiled child, and applies them in order to have a framework of understanding. Bottom-up processes take in information given by the text, collecting only what is told and thus creating a patchwork image. Readers usually begin with top-down categories and adjust these accordingly as new or conflicting bottom-up information becomes available. When more information is fed into top-down processes, Schneider speaks of individuation; when information is fed into bottom-up processes, of personalisation. The available categories, as Fish would surely remind us, will differ from reader to reader and more strongly from the author's contemporary audience to a modern one. Some categories however are so universal that they stand the test of time – such as the caring mother – and will pose no problem to audiences of any time, while other categories are only available to certain audiences. If in reading a category has to be replaced by a different one due to new information which is so conflicting that it cannot be integrated, it will have a great impact on the reader (surprise, shock, even rejection – 'He would not do that!'). Schneider observes that the more a character conforms to a

top-down category we have available to us, the faster we can grasp him or her, requiring less awareness of the process, while more complex, conflicting and unfamiliar characters slow down information processing in readers, raising the awareness of it. Readers will pay less attention to a character if the expository information is given in a concentrated way and later presentations confirm these traits. When the expository information is stretched out, delaying categorisation, the reader is forced to pay more attention to individual information, resulting in a closer reading.

Richard Gerrig, who presents a modified version of Schneider's model of information processing, uses cognitive inference to illuminate the process of characterisation. He explains that we use memory to understand situations in real life as well as in texts. We commonly make inductive inferences; we attribute character traits according to behaviour we have observed. Deductive inferences, on the other hand, are difficult and rarely accurate – it is hard to predict specific behaviour on the basis of character traits – and yet we often attempt to do so. Inference plays a key role in reading literary character, and it explains why readers react so strongly to unexpected behaviour, thus accounting for emotions ranging from surprise to shock or disbelief. This is only one of many examples of how an empathic⁴⁴ approach to character can be intellectually rewarding: the emotional response to a literary character can make us aware of the process of its creation which we both perform and bear witness to (balancing the information from the text with our own imagination).

⁴⁴ 'Empathic' is the correct scientific term, even though 'empathetic' is commonly used in non-scientific contexts.

Others have applied this system to characterisation, such as Palmer - 'Characterization is an inference from an individual action, then, toward a supposed disposition or trait'⁴⁵ – or Brian Phillips – 'The action of the mind in its first acquaintance with a literary character involves a constant indexing of impressions [...] what is said in description or narration is scrutinized in innumerable ways, each of which, sustaining or correcting the others, contributes to the shape of the person who begins to exist in our imagination.'⁴⁶ Phillips comes to the conclusion that a literary character is 'something like the memory of a real person'.⁴⁷ He recognises that our reception of characters and people is linked, but not the same. His comparison to memory likens it to the creation of mental images, as in remembering a person we create them in our mind based on information we have previously gained. The difference, Phillips' 'something like', is that between reading and experiencing. Reading allows us to pause and reflect, to be aware of what our minds are doing, while experience is immersion and reflection about it comes after. It is a distinction that, as in Currie, has often been unclear. Schneider's model helps us to draw the line between social experience, reading experience and reading reflection.

Affective Reading

Emotional involvement has been criticised or downplayed by many critics, all throughout the twentieth century. Q.D. Leavis, writing in 1932, is a notorious example. She states that a reader who reacts emotionally to fiction is not critical or reflective. He reads novels to pass the time, to gain satisfaction or compensation for life. 'The confusion of fiction with life and the demand that fiction should compensate for life prevents enjoyment of Emily Brontë and Jane Austen, among others.'⁴⁸ Characters have

⁴⁵ Palmer, p. 40

⁴⁶ Phillips, p. 629

⁴⁷ Phillips, p. 630

⁴⁸ Leavis, p. 60

always been the main cause of emotional reactions, and since Leavis' point of view has been and still is widespread, character has long been neglected: uninteresting to theory, an object of enjoyment to the uncritical masses that prefer to be swept away by a story for an hour or two. Only in the last decade has the analysis of literary character and its potential received more attention, but it has still had to defend itself against the same old accusations which stem from the misunderstanding of empathy and its aims. In 2010, Blakey Vermeule still laments that literary theory 'has scoffed the question of why we care about literary characters into irrelevance.'⁴⁹

Twenty-first-century critics, often on the basis of now available scientific insight into the human mind, have reacted against that and taken a new interest in character. Many different approaches are valuably brought together in Jens Eder's *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film and Other Media*. It addresses various issues and problems that arise when approaching literary character from the side of the reader and acknowledges simulation theory, cognitive science and the New Reader approach. Dealing as they do with characters in various media, many of the essays do not focus on the literary effect in particular. Nevertheless, they are of value in informing any approach to imagining another consciousness. In his introduction, Eder himself takes a Fishian approach: he sees characters as embedded in a context which makes their understanding possible. He says that 'in literary texts for example, a transfer of perspective is invited by various modes of the representation of consciousness.'⁵⁰ The reader is invited to see the world through a character's eyes. Eder also mentions 'affective engagement', emotional involvement in the text, as another

⁴⁹ Vermeule, p. 15

⁵⁰ Eder, p. 52

source of information for readers, but maintains a separation between it and cognitive reflection. The most recent research on empathy challenges this distinction.

However, that is not to say that emotional involvement necessarily contributes to an understanding of literary character and characterisation in a constructive way. It can for example lead readers to establish parasocial relationships with characters. The sociological term ‘parasocial’ describes a reader’s or viewer’s attachment to a fictional character, for example a person in a daily soap. Murray Smith, who has analysed parasocial relationships in both literature and film, comments: ‘We do think of and respond to characters in many ways as if they were actual persons.’⁵¹ This can easily lead to reacting to them and feeling about them as if they were real persons, to a point at which the distinction fades away . Examples can range from children yelling ‘It’s behind you!’ at a pantomime, to adults developing a crush on a movie character. The reader or viewer builds a social relationship instead of an imaginative one, and ceases to reflect on his or her own role in the creation of said character. Emotions do not contribute to understanding here, as they do in empathy, but have a social effect. If, as Smith says, ‘the legacy of more general (post-)structural hostility towards character, however, is very much alive,’⁵² such cases of emotional responses are in no small part to blame.

⁵¹ Smith, p. 236

⁵² Smith, p. 232

Empathy, Sympathy and Identification

The cognitive concept of empathy is based on cognitive attention as well as emotional involvement, in fact, ‘empathy studies have from the start challenged the division of emotion and cognition’.⁵³ Empathy, when applied to literary character, is a mode of comprehension which is fed from both active and critical attention to the mode of representation and one’s own process of creation as a reader, as well as from the text’s effect and the resulting emotions (affective reading). The original German ‘Einfühlung’, of which empathy is the twentieth-century English adaptation, might be more suited to render this meaning.⁵⁴ The aim of empathic comprehension is to gain insight into another consciousness, although it employs one’s own in the process. Empathy plays a crucial role in the reader-character dynamic, as it does in the author-character dynamic. In a recent study, the cognitive scientist Marjorie Taylor has even found empirical data which suggests that authors of fiction are more empathic than the general population.⁵⁵ However, the concept of empathy can also lead to some confusion, as it is often blurred with closely related types of affective character engagement, such as identification and sympathy or antipathy.

Hans Robert Jaub’s essay on identification distinguishes six different types, attributing to each a purpose and a reaction. While his categories are neat and orderly, they fail on the basic premise that what is grouped here under the heading of identification is in most cases something else. Jaub’s own definition is as follows: ‘Identifikation in ästhetischer Einstellung ist ein Schwebestand, der in ein Zuviel oder Zuwenig an Distanz – in ein uninteressiertes Abrücken von der dargestellten Figur oder in ein

⁵³ Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, p. 213

⁵⁴ For the history of the concept of empathy, see Breger and Breithaupt, pp. 7-14

⁵⁵ The writers of fiction, she found, can more accurately judge how someone else feels just by looking at them than the average public.

emotionales Verschmelzen mit ihr – umkippen kann.’⁵⁶ The balance of distance and involvement is important to identification – but how can one keep distance from a character if one is to identify with him or her, imaginatively become that character? As examples of the ‘ästhetische Erfahrung’, he then names: ‘Staunen, Erschütterung, Bewunderung, Rührung, Mitweinen, Mitlachen, Befremdung.’ These are emotions, not aesthetic experiences. Some of them – Mitlachen, Mitweinen – are emotions felt *for others*, not for oneself as one identifies with a character. Jauß then lists different modes of identification, such as the associative one, the admirative, the sympathetic, the cathartic and the ironic. These can be defined as playing that person like an actor, admiring that person, feeling for that person (for example pity), experiencing a catharsis along with a character and feeling alienation from them. In my definition of identification, only the associative one, which means to take on the role of the other, is identification, while the others present different types of readerly engagement with a character. As types of engagement, his categories are helpful, but for identification, an everyday example might shed more light. In daydreaming, we imagine ourselves – including all, or at least most, of our personality traits – in a character’s position, using our minds to experience events as if they had happened to us. The completion of this process can help one gain more insight into how the other person felt or thought, but it might also lead to an abandonment of interest in that person (as an other) altogether.

The same blurring occurs in Suzanne Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel*. Her book looks at empathy in reading in order to find out whether reading can make us better (meaning: more altruistic, morally good) people. She states: ‘Character identification lies at the heart of readers’ empathy.’⁵⁷ Identification and empathy, opposite ends of the spectrum,

⁵⁶ Jauß, p. 212

⁵⁷ e.g. Keen, p. 68

come uncomfortably close here. While Keen acknowledges in another work that empathy and identification are not the same, throughout her book, she presents identification as a way of prompting emotions in the reader, a reaction which she then describes as empathy.⁵⁸ In the same article, she argues that we might make wrong inferences about characters when we identify with them, and calls these moments of ‘empathic inaccuracy’, again blurring the two terms.⁵⁹ In the second chapter, she even explicitly describes a reader feeling an empathic reaction which is different from what a character feels. The reader Keen describes felt how *he* would feel in the given situation, not how the *character* feels. In her definition, empathy would encompass any emotional response a reader feels with, for or in lieu of a character, whereas I find it more productive to differentiate between these three as empathy, sympathy or antipathy, and identification.

Keen proclaims wanting to bring together cognition and emotion, drawing on research works such as LeDoux’s *The Emotional Brain* or De Sousa’s *The Rationality of the Emotions*, but maintains the division between ‘empathetic reading’ and ‘analytical reading’. She further makes the slightly surprising statement that ‘empathetic fiction’ is usually written from a first-person point of view, by women or minority writers.⁶⁰ This assumption stems from the same blurring of identification of oneself and empathy for another. What she describes as the characteristics of ‘empathetic fiction’ are a strong invitation to identify and a prompt to feel *for* a character (such as pity, sympathy). These responses, it is worth noting, will largely consist of personal opinions (I feel this situation is unjust) due to identification, or of sympathy for the character (I felt sorry for

⁵⁸ Keen, p. 267 in Breger and Breithaupt

⁵⁹ Keen, p. 259 in Breger and Breithaupt

⁶⁰ She repeats this claim in another article, see Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, p. 213

her) – not of empathy as I define it, an understanding of another’s state of mind. The aim of Keen’s book is to explore the possible influence of reading on a person’s moral compass; it thus focuses on what judgements we make about a character and what feelings we develop for them. Instead, this thesis is interested in how we can understand a fictional other, how we create a character in our minds with the help of the text. This process, which depends on empathy as feeling *with* the other or perhaps better *as* the other, can happen alongside any feelings of sympathy or antipathy, but is hindered by identification.

Why is identification such a difficult thing to separate from other types of readerly engagement, and why is it often considered more tempting than empathy? Fotis Jannidis, who takes a narratological approach using Schneider’s model of information processing, argues that the strongest way of engaging one’s reader is through identification: ‘Die Identifikation mit der Hauptfigur ist sicherlich das wichtigste Mittel, um das Interesse des Lesers am Text zu wecken und zu halten.’⁶¹ The reader is thus most interested not in the story as such, but in his own person. The text serves to prompt a variety of reactions, crowned by identification (the strongest form of immersion), through which the reader feels that he is a part of the text himself. This phenomenon might explain the popularity of many movies and books, but it is misleading to say that all readers are above all interested in themselves and have to be kept interested by allowing them to identify with the main character. There are other ways for both authors and readers to relate to fiction: with empathy, the interest in others because they are not like oneself. Readers may want to understand a consciousness that is different from their own. Empathy is characterised by a thirst for knowledge, going beyond the

⁶¹ Jannidis, p. 108

pleasure evoked by emotional involvement without excluding it. Reading enables us to gain insight into another mind unmediated by social considerations (as the person is not real); it allows us to meet people who are specifically not like ourselves.

The concept of likeability and sympathy is another possible source for confusion, as it can become blurred with the concept of empathy (see Keen). The likeability of a character, which many have linked to empathy, depends on the reader's own values as well as on the narrator's evaluations or comments and those given by other characters. Empathy has often been misunderstood as consisting only of personal involvement, but Schneider points out: 'Unlike identification, empathy does not require readers to share, or want to share, any number of traits with the character, nor does it require them to give up the position of an observer.'⁶² Empathy, while it requires emotional awareness, cannot take place when cognitive attention is given up, but depends on both. If the balance is shifted towards emotional responses, the focus can move to either sympathy (with the other) or identification (being so involved in one's own response as to forget the other). However, if we aim for a less affective reading and ignore our emotional reactions, it is impossible to gain insight through empathy. It is thus crucial to differentiate between empathy, sympathy or antipathy, and identification.⁶³

Summary

An empathic approach to character challenges the separation between rational analysis and emotional involvement. If a literary character fails to affect the reader, it means that the reader has failed – due to his own fault or to the author's – to establish an emotional link, and his imagination will fall short of creating a lively image. When John Bayley

⁶² Schneider, p. 613

⁶³ As many critics have acknowledged, e.g. Breger and Breithaupt, p. 299.

said that an author who loves his characters will create the best ones, he acknowledged the importance of being involved in the creation a literary character with all of your consciousness.⁶⁴ Many former approaches to literary character do not acknowledge the role played by the reader, and see character as a product of the text rather than a co-creation of text and reader. The concept of the ‘New Reader’ began to move away from this idea, but it is only with the recent support of scientific research that the role played by cognitive processes such as information processing, inference and empathy can be better understood. While these new terms are not yet used in a consistent way by critics, and the blurring of different concepts such as identification and empathy might lead to some confusion, they can also substantially enrich our reading experience. With these theoretical tools, we can understand both the creation of the text and our role in the process of characterisation as never before.

‘The old “show, don’t tell” shibboleth of creative writing classes remains to be verified,’ Keen writes in a recent article.⁶⁵ This thesis is not an empirical study of the individual reader’s psychological or sociological background and responses, but is rooted in literary theory. Its object of analysis is a group of texts, the novels of Theodor Fontane. The aim is to show what techniques and prompts these texts use for characterisation, and thus to reveal what material readers are provided with, and in what way, in their co-creation of literary characters, and what options of engagement are offered to them. While certain influences of textual prompts on readers seem likely (such as the effect of withheld information or strong appeals for sympathy), empirical research is needed to confirm these. However, an analysis of the texts provides the basis for such research. The insights gained from the application of twenty-first-century

⁶⁴ see chapter one

⁶⁵ Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, p. 218

cognitive findings to Fontane's nineteenth-century novels challenge traditional literary categories and uncover an unexpectedly interactive reading process which holds the key to the lasting fascination of this author's literary characters.

Part 2: Character in Practice

Chapter 3: Reading with Empathy - *Unwiederbringlich*

There are many ways in which readers engage with literary characters. This chapter will focus on the reader as the co-creator of fictional character through empathy, taking Fontane's novel *Unwiederbringlich* as a case study. Its primary intention is not to offer a new interpretation, but rather to show what reading processes are required in interpreting this novel. Awareness of these processes can, however, lead to a more nuanced reading that attends to as many as possible of the complexities which Fontane allows the reader to find in the novel. *Unwiederbringlich* calls for the empathic approach and makes empathy its main topic, but differentiating between empathy, sympathy or antipathy, and identification presents a challenge to both readers and characters.

Unwiederbringlich engages its readers in the creation of the main characters Christine and Holk, spouses who are struggling to relate to one another through a web of self-deception and false images of the other which they themselves created. Other characters try to draw the couple's attention to these issues, and in doing so also alert the readers to them. However, ultimately, it is up to the readers to see through the characters' subjective representations and relate to both of them through empathy, when Christine and Holk can no longer relate to one another. The novel encourages participation, inviting the reader to make guesses and fill in gaps. Directing attention towards the characters' own misinterpretations, the narrator heightens curiosity, but does not provide an alternative explanation himself. Throughout, readers are given the option to

side with one character against another – or with one group against the other – but both Holk and Christine receive support as well as criticism from both the narrator’s comments and the structure of the narration itself. Even though it can be tempting to side with husband or wife, doing so means reading only one side of the novel. Between attachment and distance, truth and deception, a close reading makes it impossible to follow only one of the two spouses who are each helplessly entangled in a web of delusions.

Gottfried Honnefelder describes *Unwiederbringlich* as a novel about ‘das Problem menschlicher Kommunikation und ihrer Grenzen’.⁶⁶ It is more than that: it is about the difficulty of human communication and mutual understanding, but it also draws the readers into a story where they will have to face their own opinions about love, altruism and identity as they struggle to understand and create two characters who do not understand themselves or each other, and create false images instead. The reader is asked to distinguish between three versions of character: the one presented by the narration, the character’s self-image and the pictures painted by other characters. Distinguishing between truth, self-delusion and the deception of others becomes increasingly important as the spouses lose their sense of identity. As we read, Holk and Christine’s problems become our own: who are they, how can we relate to them in the light of what we know, and where is the line between their identity and our opinion about them?

⁶⁶ See Honnefelder, p. 199.

Holk: Self-Deception and Identification

Unwiederbringlich, which has received considerably less attention than its sibling *Effi Briest*, has been referred to as Fontane's other book about marriage.⁶⁷ However, while both offer ample opportunity for empathy as well as mistaken empathy, there are considerable differences between these two works. *Effi Briest*, as the name suggests, focuses on the wife, allowing only a few insights into Innstetten, and most of these serve to highlight the differences between him and Effi. At first glance, it might seem that *Unwiederbringlich* tells the husband's story instead: chapters 10-30 are set at the Danish court, leaving the wife Christine behind at the family residence Holkenäs, to which the narration only returns in chapter 29. This division seems to give preference to her husband Holk, who is present for the twenty chapters that feature little more of Christine than her letters. However, her absence is just as characterising for her as presence (in the moment) is for Holk. Both to her husband and to the reader, Christine is hard to grasp, and it takes more effort to understand and render her in our minds than Holk, who forces his self-images onto the reader again and again. Furthermore, the twenty middle chapters feature another female character who serves mainly to contrast with Christine, acting as her inverted image during her absence. Ebba von Rosenberg is one of Fontane's many supportive characters, present to illuminate others rather than existing primarily in her own right. Holk is unaware of Ebba's role, until his final proposition to her makes it painfully obvious to him that she is not the synthesis he seeks, but simply the complete contrast to Christine. Readers and critics, such as Gertrud Sakrawa, have noticed this failure on Holk's part, but many have in turn failed to realise how much they have followed in his footsteps. Sakrawa comments: 'Ist Christine der Prototyp des Prinzipienreiters, so ist Ebbas einzig konsequent verfolgtes

⁶⁷ See Sakrawa, p. 29.

Prinzip das, keines gelten zu lassen.’⁶⁸ Yet she fails to realise that this is why Christine features so little in these chapters. There are in fact two Ebbas: the narrative one, which the reader can deduce from her actions and her conversations with others, and the Ebba which Holk paints in his letters and thoughts. The latter is an opposite of Christine – to be precise, of the image Holk has of Christine. The former is the opposite of the Christine which the narration presents, characterised by her egoism as Christine is by her altruism, but Holk fails to see either of them for who they are. Sakrawa’s description falls into the second category, it is part of the illusion Holk builds for the reader. This process will be examined in more detail later on.

Why is it so easy to divert all attention to the husband? As previously discussed, the distinction between identification and empathy is crucial – as Christine and Holk’s inability to comprehend one another demonstrates all too clearly. If we begin to identify with the husband, we inevitably focus on him. The proximity of empathy for others and identification is as much to blame as the narrator and the structure of the novel itself. The vast majority of chapters centre on Holk and he receives a lot of attention from the narration throughout the rest of the story. The novel is filled with gloomy references foreshadowing his fall from grace, making the reader expect Holk to commit a fatal error. Even Gottfried Krickler, who claims: ‘Spannung des Lesers hat der Dichter nie beabsichtigt’,⁶⁹ gives a list of examples where tension is built up. In reading, we begin to look out for the first signs of trouble, constantly anticipating the catastrophe, guessing what it might consist of and where it might come from. In the first chapter, the narrator tells us ‘[dass] die [...] von Natur schon gefühlvoll gestimmte Gräfin eine starke

⁶⁸ Sakrawa, p. 26.

⁶⁹ Krickler, p. 54.

Vorahnung gehabt hatte'.⁷⁰ From the moment that we meet this couple, we know that something bad is going to happen to them. The narrator keeps us guessing, though: he mentions the death of their child, the building of the new residence, the marital problems – any of which could become the source of tragedy.

Paying attention to the hints at Christine's struggle is easier in retrospect. Their marriage is threatened by silence from the first chapter: 'Und sie hing sich zärtlich an seinen Arm. Aber sie schwieg.'⁷¹ This is Christine's 'answer' when Holk asks her whether they will be happy in their new residence. In the end, the silence between them will lead to her death. Direct insertions, like her strong premonition, or more subtle ones like this, are spread throughout the text. They are especially clear when Holk's version of events threatens to become too convincing, such as in Holk's letters to his wife. He paints a picture of court life which features only its brightest side, and Fontane inserts a 'good angel' who warns Holk and reminds him of his wife's qualities, which he has all but forgotten about.

Als er aber gegen das Ende hin die Worte las: „das Beste bleibt doch immer das elterliche Haus“... und dann: „wenn eine Hand wie die Deine dies Haus bestellt“... da überkam ihn eine leise Rührung, von der er sich kaum Ursach' und Rechenschaft zu geben vermochte. Hätt' er es gekonnt, so hätt' er gewußt, daß ihn sein guter Engel warne.⁷²

Home and a reliable, loyal and honest partner like Christine, the narrator reminds us, are more valuable than the ephemeral pleasures at court. These sentences not only heighten the readers' curiosity once again and keep them guessing, thus urging them to take an active role in the reading process, but also remind them that they cannot passively accept the construct Holk has created. Instead, readers will have to try and draw out the

⁷⁰ *GBA*, I/13, p. 7.

⁷¹ *GBA*, I/13, p. 9.

⁷² *GBA*, I/13, p. 131.

more balanced, objective description presented by the narration of both events and characters.

Christine and Holk: Constructing Images

While the game of guessing where destruction will come from is one most readers partake in willingly, egged on by the narrator, there is another effort the novel demands of them, more central to it than the first. It is to construct both Holk and Christine, as well as the gulf which divides this couple. Some critics have neglected this second, more difficult task the text poses, and simply followed the charming Holk along on his journey of self-delusion. Sakrawa maintains that Christine's ultimate sacrifice is her decision to re-join her husband in marriage instead of retreating to a convent, the latter being her true desire. The critic argues that Christine acts out of obligation to others rather than based on her own emotional needs. She is thus described as an altruistic, devoted and dutiful figure, but is not ascribed any feelings towards her husband, or any Romantic traits. This view is held by Holk, as he negates all other aspects of Christine in order to justify his decision to leave her, but is not one put forward by the text. The wife's picture is veiled by her husband's and her own descriptions, but it is nonetheless possible to see that she consists of more than extreme piety, morality and severity. The following comment by Claudia Liebrand paints a different picture of Christine's wishes:

Wäre der Graf begabt mit imaginativer Empathie, könnte er vielleicht die kaum vernehmlichen Signale, die Christine auch in den Gesprächen mit ihm aussendet, jene um liebevolle Anerkennung werbenden Ober- und Untertöne, die durch ihre Moralpredigten nie ganz verdeckt werden, wahrnehmen.⁷³

As Liebrand's book analyses the self-images of Fontane's characters, it is unsurprising that she does not fall prey to either Christine's self-image or Holk's image of his wife.

⁷³ Liebrand, p. 285.

A possible source of confusion here is the concept of likeability. Many readers report that they find Holk more likeable and engaging than Christine. Whether we find a character likeable depends on our own values as readers, as well as on the narrator's evaluations or comments and those given by other characters. Likeability however plays no role, as empathy is not sympathy but a form of comprehension. Empathy has often been misunderstood as consisting only of emotional involvement or personal involvement, but Schneider points out: 'Unlike identification, empathy does not require readers to share, or want to share, any number of traits with the character, nor does it require them to give up the position of an observer.'⁷⁴ Empathy, while it requires emotional awareness, cannot take place when cognitive attention is given up, for then it becomes either sympathy (with the other) or identification (being so involved in one's own response as to forget the other).

The constructed images lead to the destruction of the couple's connection, a breakdown of empathy between them: by the end, they are unable to comprehend or relate to one another. In the early scenes, there is still an obvious tenderness between the spouses, but their last meeting is cold and detached. This development can be traced in their written correspondence. At first, Christine is still complaining that Holk seems not to think of her much, while later she contacts him only for practical matters regarding the children. Honnfelder puts his finger on why the warmth fades from her words: 'Um mit Holk wirklich sprechen zu können, müßte sie zuvor seine Liebe, sein Entgegenkommen spüren, sonst ist sie nicht bereit, sich im eigenen Sprechen eine Blöße zu geben, sich dem Risiko auszusetzen [...] ohne der Erwiderung sicher zu sein.'⁷⁵ As she feels her

⁷⁴ Schneider, p. 613.

⁷⁵ Honnfelder, p. 207.

husband drift away, Christine, vulnerable because she loves Holk, feels less and less able to show that love. Claudia Öhlschläger agrees with Honnefelder's reading which sees Christine as willing but emotionally unable to rejoin Holk: 'Christine [...] will, aber kann die ihr zugefügte Kränkung nicht vergessen.'⁷⁶ Even in her suicide note, she does not dare to express this need for love, but instead uses the words of another – 'wer haßt, ist zu bedauern', underlining the ending of the poem from chapter one: 'und mehr noch fast, wer liebt.'

Christine: A Breakdown of Communication and Empathy

Christine's life as we experience it in the novel seems bleak, but her marriage had once been a happy one. The narrator informs us that Holk and his wife had once been close: 'Denn es war ihre glücklichste Zeit gewesen, Jahre, während welcher man sich immer nur zur Liebe gelebt [...] hatte.' So close in fact that not even the death of their child Estrid could divide them: 'und der Tod des jüngsten Kindes [...] hatte das schöne und jugendliche Paar einander nur noch näher geführt und das Gefühl ihrer Zusammengehörigkeit gesteigert.'⁷⁷ Their marriage had been a happy one, they formed a unit, feeling as though they belonged to each other. When we enter their lives, this unit is already showing its first cracks. If a marriage can no longer sustain itself on love, what can save it? The spouses' confidantes, Julie Dobschütz and Frau Schleppegrell, offer different opinions on this matter. Julie tells Christine that a good wife needs to ignore the bad things in her marriage, as ignorance will make you happier than the harsh truth.⁷⁸ Frau Schleppegrell on the other hand advises Holk that marriage is about compromising and helping each other, and tells him that who is right can depend

⁷⁶ Hunfeld and Schneider, p. 65

⁷⁷ *GBA*, I/13, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *GBA*, I/13, p. 74.

strongly on one's point of view.⁷⁹ It is advice that both husband and wife could benefit from, as Christine struggles to keep her spirits up while Holk fails to take a less selfish point of view. Neither of them will be able to put these well-meant words into practice.

Holk is generally unable to imagine or understand the minds of others, Christine is unable to communicate her thoughts effectively. The combination of these two elements will prove fatal. Their characters are reflected in the narration: Holk presents charming, lively images to the reader, which the narrator (like most readers) recognises as false, while Christine remains hard to grasp if one does not make a conscious effort to gain insight into the feelings she hides behind her cold and stern facade. Rainer Kolk argues that Christine fails to relate to and communicate with Holk because she cannot take part in the offer of 'kommunikativer Reorganisationsangebote'; she is unable to change her relationship through communication with Holk.⁸⁰ Her inability, Kolk says, stems from the loss of her child, which she has not come to terms with ('verarbeitet'). This interpretation leaves out the double effect caused by Christine's speechlessness: it is her character's failure to communicate with her husband, but also the narration's refusal to provide easy access to her mind. It enables us to understand two issues: why Holk can so easily form such a distorted image of his wife, and why Christine is at such a loss that she begins to conform to this role, unable to stand up for what she really feels (and wants). Alan Bance observes: '[Holk] failed to perceive and respond to the woman in Christine.'⁸¹ Liebrand points out that she takes on the role Holk pushes her into more and more out of fear and desperation⁸² – not fear and desperation of the imminent destruction of her marriage, but towards her own emotional needs. Her emotions are

⁷⁹ *GBA*, I/13, p. 186.

⁸⁰ Kolk, p. 60.

⁸¹ Bance, p. 128.

⁸² Liebrand, p. 146.

what connect her to Holk, and as she pushes them away, she loses touch with him. It is from both sides that communication breaks down: Holk ignores his emotions (which are every now and then stirred up by Christine's letters) because they stand in the way of his wish for another life with Ebba, Christine ignores her emotions because she is afraid to acknowledge her desire for love which they express.

What happens when effective communication breaks down? Honnefelder's analysis of the letters that pass between them finds that it is a lack of understanding which separates them:

Zunehmend erweist sich so der Brief als Zeichen, dessen Bedeutung der andere nicht mehr zu entziffern vermag, weil der Verfasser sich in diesem Zeichen nicht adäquat auf den anderen hin auszusagen und der Empfänger aus diesem Zeichen nur die erwartete, nicht aber die ursprüngliche Bedeutung herauszulesen vermag.⁸³

Without explicitly saying so, what the critic describes here is a lack, or a breakdown, of empathy. The spouses stop being able to relate to each other emotionally, and without the input of their emotional response to one another, neither can any longer comprehend the other. Frances Subiotto's analysis of their letters shows that Holk and Christine fail to find the right tone for talking to one another. She describes the letters as 'communications which testify only too clearly to the lack of communication between Holk and his wife'.⁸⁴ The spouses have stopped effectively talking to one another, and instead address the images they have formed of each other in their minds. They are caught up in their own heads, unable to break out of them and connect. Holk talks more and more, especially to himself, but his words contain hardly any truth by the end, while Christine is silenced by the harsh reality of what is happening to them as a couple. In

⁸³ Honnefelder, p. 212.

⁸⁴ Subiotto, p. 306.

the end, she cannot even address good-bye letters to those closest to her: they remain unfinished but the address and a few set phrases.

Narration and secondary characters: Guiding readers

The narration foreshadows the final tragedy from the first chapter, but it is also on the first pages that the reader begins to both witness and take part in the process which will lead there. Holk's incapacity for empathy is demonstrated again and again, he almost invariably misjudges others and himself. He believes Ebba would marry him, thinks that Brigitte is seriously interested in him – grossly overestimating his importance to both women, who are toying with him but really interested in others – and cannot see that the one who loves him so much that his loss will break her is his wife. On the one hand, the narrator's comments make his misjudgements obvious, but on the other, Holk's enjoyment of living, and the appeal of his illusions, do not fail to have their effect on the reader. We follow him for twenty chapters, distancing ourselves from Christine, and see Brigitte and Ebba as they appear to him, observing their seductive qualities (Brigitte's figure, Ebba's intellect). Death lingers over Holkenäs with the loss of their child and the reconstruction of the family crypt, while Holk's time at the Princess' court is characterised by excitement and enjoyment. The reading experience of these two situations is different. The narration appeals to us as we leave Christine behind, drawing us into a chain of witty exchanges, country outings and even dramatic events such as the fire, just as life at court and Ebba appeal to Holk. Holkenäs on the other hand makes demands of the husband and offers only sadness; for the reader, too, Christine demands greater involvement and effort to decipher as the author rarely calls directly for empathy, and the picture to be gained is not one of happiness.⁸⁵ It is through paying

⁸⁵ A rare example: *GBA*, I/13, p. 52 'Diese Worte blieben doch nicht ohne Wirkung...' [auf Christine].

attention to our own emotions, which mirror those of the characters, that in reading we can become more aware of them and of our own role in the reading process.

Why is identification, as invited by Holk, such a difficult thing to separate from other types of readerly engagement, and why is it often considered more tempting than empathy? As previously discussed, *Unwiederbringlich*, while inviting the reader to empathise with both spouses, makes it easy to identify with Holk instead of Christine.⁸⁶ However, there are other ways for both authors and readers to relate to fiction: through empathy, the interest in others because they are not like oneself, wanting to understand a consciousness that is different from one's own, to meet Fontane's various characters.

In *Unwiederbringlich*, empathy not only affects the reading process, but also comes into play more directly for the characters. Christine, before she completely withdraws from both Holk and the reader, makes a number of concessions to her husband: 'Schuld ist überall, und vielleicht ist meine die größere. Du bist leichtlebig und schwankend und wandelbar, und ich habe den melancholischen Zug und nehme das Leben schwer. Auch da, wo Leichtnehmen das Bessere wäre.'⁸⁷ She admits her own part in the difficulties their marriage is facing, even says that she would have wished for him to have a more cheerful wife. However, she is not truly expressing a wish for divorce or an absolution of adultery, two options which would enable Holk to have 'a more cheerful' woman at his side – even though Holk will later see her comments in this light. As Liebrand says, these comments 'sollen nur Empathie und Bewußtsein der eigenen Unzulänglichkeit signalisieren'.⁸⁸ Christine, at least in the beginning, shows empathy. She feels that Holk

⁸⁶ Similarly, *Effi Briest* makes it easy to identify with Effi and demonise Innstetten, instead of relating to both spouses through empathy, for the same structural and narrative reasons.

⁸⁷ *GBA*, I/13, p. 52.

⁸⁸ Liebrand, p. 281.

is suffering and, because she loves him, feels guilty for being the cause of it. Ironically, this sadness, caused by her love for him, only drives the spouses further apart. As they continue to drift in opposite directions, other characters try to draw them back together, but their attempts fail to have any effect and just highlight the depth of the gulf that has opened up between them.

Other characters play a key role in directing the reader's attention towards those sides of Holk and Christine that they fail to acknowledge in themselves and each other. Ebba and the Princess make no attempts to save the marriage, but their comments on Holk are illuminating nonetheless. They talk about Holk's character, concluding that his primary flaw is 'Halbheit'.⁸⁹ This applies not only to Holk's mind, but also to the images he constructs of other people *in* his mind. The Princess, who, like Dubslav in *Der Stechlin*, is one of those typically Fontanesque characters who express what lies hidden without judgement, draws the reader's attention to Holk's delusions early on, thereby discouraging us from identifying with him. During one of the dinner conversations, she talks to Holk about the power of bewitchment, and in the sentence immediately following addresses Ebba.⁹⁰ The subtle hint is of course lost on Holk, but not on the careful reader. Like Dubslav, who has been found by many to mirror Fontane's own language, the Princess here repeats the author's words. In a letter outlining the story of the book for publication, Fontane begins by describing the characters, focusing first on Christine and Holk, then on Holk and Ebba. He concludes: 'Den Rest brauche ich Ihnen nicht zu erzählen. Er ist behext [...]'.⁹¹ This quotation highlights that the Princess serves as a supporting character just like Ebba, but while the latter brings out Holk's character

⁸⁹ *GBA*, I/13, p. 154.

⁹⁰ *GBA*, I/13, p. 208.

⁹¹ *Briefe*, II, p. 414 (letter to Julius Rodenberg, 21. November 1888).

by action, the former voices truths about him closely mirroring Fontane's own statement. While this comment is important, it is not given special weight by the narration, and might escape some readers, thus providing only subtle guidance to our interpretations.

Another character's comments will not as easily go unnoticed, as they constitute the ending of the novel: Julie's final letter. The reader might have ignored the Princess' invitation to direct his awareness to Holk's bewitchment, but he will find it hard to ignore the narrator's direct appeal. 'Eine ganze Geschichte lag in diesen verschämten Strichelchen',⁹² is inserted after Julie's letter, where she states that Christine underlined the poem's last couplet ('und mehr noch fast, wer liebt'). Hers is a story hidden within this narrative, difficult, but not impossible, to read. As Peter Demetz has said: 'Christine gibt ihrem Gatten und Bruder, ebenso wie den Lesern, manches Rätsel auf; aber es ist nicht [...] gänzlich unlösbar.'⁹³ In her analysis of female happiness, Helen Chambers finds that love rarely provides happiness for women in Fontane's novels. She sees Christine's melancholy disposition as the key obstacle to both her personal and her marital happiness.⁹⁴ With her suicide, attention is drawn one last time to Christine with force. Anyone who has read this as Holk's story will have to confront why he did so, and consider at this point, if not earlier, rereading the novel. Critics, such as Peter Demetz, who have described Christine's suicide as 'surprising' or 'sudden', may have been caught up by this effect.⁹⁵

⁹² *GBA*, I/13, p. 295.

⁹³ Demetz, p. 174.

⁹⁴ Chambers, 'Inadequacy', pp. 293-94.

⁹⁵ Demetz, p. 175.

Readers: Taking Sides or Maintaining Empathy

Several critics have ignored the option to empathise with both characters. It is easy to side with Holk against Christine, but it can also be easy to side with her against him. If we react to only one of the spouses with empathy, paying attention to the sympathy we feel for them will (hopefully) alert us to the fact that we have established an emotional reaction to only one of them, or perhaps even identified with one of them, making it harder (but not impossible) to see the truth in the other spouse's point of view. Claiming the larger number of chapters, and being the better communicator, Holk's position is easier to defend. Unlike Christine, his soliloquies and letters describe and explain his opinions, his wishes and desires, the way he sees himself and others. We have more insight into Holk and can thus better understand him, it would seem. However, these passages are nearly always mediated by the narrator who continues to remind us that Holk is simply trying to silence his conscience with these reflections. If even the main character struggles to convince himself, how can he convince the reader? One of the most direct comments or explanations is the following one:

Ja, das alles würde er gesehen haben, wenn er sich wie ein Draußenstehender hätte beobachten können; aber das war ihm nicht gegeben, und so schwamm er denn im Strome falscher Beweisführungen dahin, Träumen nachhängend und sein Gewissen einlullend und schrieb sich ein gutes Zeugnis nach dem anderen.⁹⁶

Holk does not realise who he is, and his failure to characterise himself correctly makes him unable to see the effect he has on Christine, unable to prevent her death. If a reader is surprised by her death, he has most likely failed alongside the hero and become too drawn into Holk's delusion, identifying with him (taking on his point of view) rather than connecting to him through empathy.

⁹⁶ *GBA*, I/13, p. 240.

And yet Christine does not support us in seeing both sides either. The reader, just like her husband, is offered a small and decreasing number of explanations by the narrator. In the first chapter, she is introduced with some characteristic qualities like sadness and tenderness of heart, but soon what we hear from her is excessively pious and joyless. There are only moments when Christine admits to Holk, more frequently to Julie and her brother Arne, that she suffers. Her emotions, which she cannot express, overwhelm her, and cause her to withdraw even further into herself. Outwardly, she conforms increasingly to the role Holk allots to her. Arne, who mediates between them when their written communication breaks down, reminds both that this role is not one natural to Christine and negates part of who she is – but neither is able to change tack.

Relating to each other emotionally, through empathy, becomes impossible for the spouses. Holk too has moments when his emotions for his wife surface, but they do not coincide with these times in Christine and are thus not met with understanding. In their grief for themselves, both are too caught up to continue seeing the pain they cause the other. When in his first letter, Holk describes Ebba and Brigitte, Christine sees that these women are set out to be her counterparts and takes offence. Liebrand notes: 'Ihre Interpretation trifft ins Schwarze – und tut Holk doch Unrecht, weil diese Deutung den Hilferuf um Unterstützung, Solidarität und Schutz vor den erotischen Bedrohungen, den ihr Mann mit seiner Konfession auch ausstößt, überhört und mißachtet.'⁹⁷ While Holk's account of life at court is described more interestingly and thus more seductively to readers, Arne's reminders of Christine's suffering jolt them out of a positive response. When he writes to Holk to inform him that Christine has fallen ill because of his letters, we are reminded that this happiness Holk seems to pursue comes at the price of

⁹⁷ Liebrand, p. 144.

another's. It also points out that, between the two spouses who each read the letters for further evidence to use against one another, there is a third person reading. Like Arne, readers are asked to examine what they read critically, and, for all the attractiveness of his Copenhagen experience, are encouraged, like Arne, to censure Holk.

At first, Holk is surprised, even shocked by Arne's letter – but soon, the wheel of self-deception begins to turn again. Arne's words jolt him out of his comfortable simplistic reading of Christine. However, as he refuses to read her letters with more attention, he simply rejects the information of her emotional suffering as it conflicts with the category he allotted her. As Schneider described for readers, Holk finds the prospect of having to reconstruct his image of Christine too uncomfortable to face and would rather disregard pieces of information instead of having to create a less simplistic image. His reaction both excuses and accuses him: he is so caught up in his own illusions that he actually fails to see what he is doing to Christine, but he is also the source of these false images he finds himself entangled in, and perpetuates them for his own comfort.

In the final confrontation, neither Holk nor Christine is able to relate to or understand one another anymore. Christine has never been colder, never made it easier for Holk to leave her; she even says the words for him when he cannot. One last time, she proves that she knows how he feels and is not afraid to face it, but none of that courage is left when it comes to her own emotions which she keeps locked up. Holk feels reinforced in his decision when faced with this side of her, showing once more how little he knows about what goes on inside other people's heads. If Ebba was fire, Christine, it seems, is ice. However, Holk is soon to find out that Ebba is not filled with the fire of passion, but with cold calculations to her own advantage. She laughs at his proposal and decides

upon a more advantageous marriage. Christine, too, has been misjudged. She is not ice, but water, and finds her death in the sea. Water is an ancient symbol for depth of emotion, the very thing that Holk's view of Christine excludes. It is no coincidence that she chooses death by water; this death offers the reader a last opportunity to see past Holk's limited view of her.

Conclusion

Unwiederbringlich demonstrates what can be gained by the co-creation of characters with empathy, and what is lost without it. Christine and Holk grow apart because they silence their emotions for each other, either because these become too painful or because they stand in the way of wishful thinking. With the breakdown of empathy between them, they lose the ability to connect to and understand each other, and finally communication becomes impossible. As the gulf between them deepens and they move ever further from the empathic unit they once were, the reader has to work harder and harder to relate to both characters through empathy. With Holk, identification becomes increasingly tempting as we come closer and closer to his mind; with Christine, the distance to be bridged grows in her absence. This novel exemplifies how difficult it can be to navigate subjective representation with empathy. Its main characters try to render mental images of one another, while at the same time being victims of these images. Readers can learn from their own emotional responses as they observe Christine and Holk, who mirror the characterisation process with each other. This enables readers to compare how they have related to and created these characters as 'others'. The novel provides guidance only subtly, requiring an active reader. It supports a careful and sceptical reading which encourages a complex, self-critical judgement of other people. *Unwiederbringlich* tells of a loss of 'Verständnis', and a failure of 'Verständigung', of

emotional empathy and cognitive comprehension that depend upon one another. It is in the hands of the reader to succeed where the characters have failed.

Chapter 4: Information on Characters - *Cécile*

The analysis of *Unwiederbringlich* has demonstrated how crucial active reading processes are to the story, but what is it about Fontane's characters that leads the reader to take such a cognitively and emotionally involved role, striking the balance between providing readers with information and allowing them imaginative freedom? After all, Fontane's novels are works of the nineteenth century, always categorised as belonging to Realism. In order to counter common expectations of Realist characters (see chapter seven), it is important to give a full account of Fontane's technique of characterisation and how it affects the reader's creation of characters. In the novel *Cécile*, which centres on the flow of information concerning the protagonist of the same name, readers embark on a quest, alongside the major characters, to find out who exactly Cécile is and what we know about her – and whether we can trust this information. Different characters come to different conclusions, but while the narration leads us through their ideas, it refrains from guiding its readers to a final truth. Fontane's characters are complex, and our reading of them requires more participation than nineteenth-century prose is usually given credit for.⁹⁸ The source of these characters' complexity is what causes the reading process to be emotionally and cognitively involving, ensuring the lasting appeal of Fontane's creations.

In *Cécile*, readers have to navigate a web of subjective information. Alongside the protagonist Gordon, the reader tries to uncover the true identity of the mysterious Cécile. The different types of information available to us can be divided into three sources. The narrator can tell us something about the characters directly; the narration

⁹⁸ See chapters seven and ten.

can reveal something about them – for example through the characters' actions; or the characters can tell us themselves. Each of these categories can be broken down into a number of techniques. The narrator is most visible during the exposition of characters, though later novels often have characters introduce each other as well. The information provided directly by the narrator is usually visually descriptive or tells us something about the character's past, but the narrative voice can also reveal something about characters through its attempts to influence the reader's sympathy or antipathy for them. The narration uses the order in which it provides information, actions performed by characters, character speech (directly performed, rarely described by the narrator), names and denominators, different backgrounds (historical, geographical), perspective, style and supporting characters. Thirdly, the characters can speak directly of themselves or give information and opinions on others, either in monologues or in conversations with each other. The task set for the reader is a difficult one. Not only do we have to evaluate each piece of information, judge its reliability and interpret it, but the character around whose identity the novel revolves is herself largely silent. Furthermore, Fontane's narrator, as is typical of nineteenth-century Realism, is reliable but reticent when it comes to Cécile.

Sources of information

Instead of leading the reader through the story as is the case with Fontane's earlier works like *Vor dem Sturm*, this narrator gives little information and often toys with his readers' expectations of more. In a novel entitled *Cécile*, we find only a handful of direct statements about Cécile. Instead, various other characters provide their own opinions and interpretations of her, and both Gordon and the reader have to attempt to piece together an image. The narrator provides a considerable amount of information on other characters, but as it is largely descriptive in nature and thus the easiest of the three

groups for any reader to detect, use and interpret, it will only be summarised briefly. However, in cases where this information is put together in order to affect readers in a specific way (emotionally, or in requiring more complex interpretative processes), it will be examined more closely. The two other categories, where information is revealed by the unfolding of the plot or by the characters themselves, are harder for readers to notice rather than process unconsciously. For example: if the narrator tells us a female character is beautiful, we can easily remember that this information was provided by the narrator (identify its source) and interpret its meaning. In the other two categories, the information would be provided in different ways. The narration could convey the same message by describing a dinner scene where other women are unfriendly towards this character, but men are especially charming. This scene would require readers to interpret the women's reactions as jealousy of this character's beauty and the men's reactions as attempts to impress her, thus coming to the conclusion that this character must be attractive. Readers will thus need to interpret the information provided by the narration – unfriendly women, overly friendly men – actively, resulting in an 'impression' of this character which, as this type of indirect information is often processed unconsciously, can be harder to pin down to a specific source later on ('At what point in the novel do readers become aware of this character's beauty?').

Thirdly, other characters could let readers know about this hypothetical woman's good looks, in a number of ways. At the same dinner party, the reactions of characters would then not be described by the narration, but – as is typical of Fontane's novels – the scene would consist mostly of conversations between characters. In these dialogues, women could talk negatively about this character, and men could be especially charming towards her. Characters could also discuss this woman directly, but this is not objective and has to be treated with caution: the men might openly recommend the

woman's beauty, while other women might try to find flaws instead (out of jealousy). Again, readers need to be attentive and involved, weighing up the motives of each speaker before interpreting their utterances.

The last two categories, as they require more active information processing (see chapter two), gives rise to the phenomenon of 'vivid' or 'real' characters, as they enable readers to bring characters to life in their minds. Readers have to tap into their personal experience, for example of male and female reactions to a beautiful woman, in order to interpret the information. This makes it possible to connect to the characterisations produced on a personal level, as readers use their own emotions and memories to create them.⁹⁹ The following analysis will examine to what extent Fontane's characters depend on each of these three sources, and what that tells us about them as fictional creations of both the text and its readers, as the unique quality of these characters lies in the way they are created and co-created.

Major and minor characters

Exemplary of Fontane's fiction in general, primary and secondary characters are created quite differently from one another in *Cécile*. With a narrator who provides little information on the main characters, and a plot which progresses slowly until its explosive unfolding at the end, readers have to rely on information provided by the characters themselves for the greater part of the novel while they attempt to characterise and relate to the mysterious heroine. *Cécile*'s secret past is the key point of interest for the main characters – *Cécile* has been described as 'der Roman über den Roman dahinter'¹⁰⁰ – and their reactions to it are more revealing than her actual backstory. The

⁹⁹ Again, this is *not* identification, but creation with empathy (see chapter two).

¹⁰⁰ e.g. Mittenzwei, p. 78

three primary characters, Gordon, Cécile and her husband St. Arnaud, all come to show different faces throughout the revelation of her past. Secondary characters such as the painter Rosa Hexel or the Emeritus, both guests at the hotel where the three main characters spend their vacation for the greater part of the story, are left behind before Cécile's past is uncovered. However, so long as they do appear, their personalities and their opinions of Cécile remain constant. This lack of change in behaviour is a difference between major and minor characters, but by no means the only one.

While the major characters are described by the narrator during the exposition and readers must later largely rely on the narrator and other characters as sources of information about them, secondary characters are rendered almost entirely by the narrator, and usually display less complexity of personality. One reason is that providing information indirectly through scenes requires more space in the novel (see the above example comparing an entire dinner scene to the sentence "She is beautiful."). Minor characters do not make as lengthy and frequent appearances as their major counterpart, and are thus less suited for this type of characterisation. The other reason is that it is difficult for the reader to invest emotionally in several people at once. Secondary characters thus have to take a back seat in favour of primary characters. The two male major characters, Gordon and St. Arnaud, are rendered by the narrator, but in less detail than the secondary characters. The narration slowly reveals more about them through their actions, and Gordon's monologues make up a large part of the novel. Cécile on the other hand is usually talked about by others instead of revealing herself; both she and the narrator are taciturn when it comes to her person. These major characters, all of them in different ways, demonstrate Fontane's techniques of characterisation and the reader's options of co-creation, and the analysis will thus

differentiate between more traditional techniques of characterisation for secondary characters, and more unusual ones for primary characters throughout.

The Narrator: Exposition

The exposition in a novel typically features a lot of direct description: physical traits, clothing, a few important traits of character, social standing, sometimes information about personal history and idiosyncrasies. As is common in Fontane's novels, the first chapter of *Cécile* introduces the couple with a characteristic conversation. The narration, in the form of dialogue, often provides the first point of contact between readers and characters. However, at this early stage it is hard to interpret this information as we know nothing about the speakers yet. These first conversations will influence the way we perceive the characters partaking in them, but it is only possible to recognise how characteristic their words are when looking back at the end of the novel, after having experienced the characters in full. The first impressions readers receive from this dialogue of Cécile and St. Arnaud lay the foundations of their co-creations of them.¹⁰¹ The young woman and her older husband are travelling to their hotel by train when the following short exchange ensues:

‘Du sprichst nicht, Cécile.’

‘Nein.’

‘Aber *ich* darf sprechen?’

‘Gewiß. Sprich nur. Ich höre zu.’

‘[...] Gibt es nicht eine Geschichte: Die Reise nach dem Glück? Oder ist es bloß ein Märchen?’

‘Es wird wohl ein Märchen sein.’¹⁰²

It presents two traits of the female protagonist which, even though they cannot yet be recognised as such by the reader, will prove to be her two key attributes: she prefers not

¹⁰¹ See chapter two for Schneider's model of information processing.

¹⁰² *GBA*, I/9, p. 8

to speak, but to listen to others speaking to her, and – despite her apparent scepticism – she likes and is associated with fairy-tales. Throughout the novel, these aspects will gently emerge from the information provided by the narration and the other characters, but neither aspect will ever be directly mentioned by the narrator.

Before analysing this interactive process which requires the reader's interpretation, there is a lot of information easily available to the reader in the expository chapters. This type of description is more frequent in earlier novels, like *Vor dem Sturm*, but it still sets the parameters for the reader's creation whenever characters first appear in the later novels. Minor characters are often introduced in more explicit detail because the reader will need to quickly form an idea of who they are. As Schneider's model of information processing shows, understanding direct information within a certain category – such as the quaint academic, the Emeritus in *Cécile* – is a faster form of cognitive processing than piecing together instances of conflicting or veiled information.¹⁰³ Direct description is thus used for minor characters such as the Emeritus and Präzeptor Rodenstein, as well as for the Berlin guests.¹⁰⁴ The downside is of course that the reader's role in this process is rather passive. However, this type of information can also contain secondary information which only becomes noticeable when several examples of it come together thus drawing the reader's attention, urging us to ask what lies behind the seemingly simple face-value of these descriptions. As Jenny Treibel tells us, 'Das Nebensächliche, soviel ist richtig, gilt nichts, wenn es bloß nebensächlich ist, wenn nichts drin steckt. Steckt aber was drin, dann ist es die Hauptsache, denn es gibt

¹⁰³ See chapter two.

¹⁰⁴ *GBA*, I/9, e.g. pp. 104-05 for Präzeptor Rodenstein

einem dann immer das eigentlich Menschliche.’¹⁰⁵ In this way, even direct descriptions given by the narrator can encourage readers to take an active role in interpreting them.

The Narrator: Visual Description

A common example of the narrator’s descriptions containing two levels of information are physical traits such as facial features, or clothing. Their primary value is visual: they enable the reader to imagine what a character looks like, but readers do not need to interpret or engage further in order to create this visual image in their minds. However, these descriptions can contain secondary information which may be highlighted by the narrator or require readers to actively draw it out themselves (interpret). In chapter three, a hotel guest is described as Gordon observes him, and after giving a detailed description, the narrator asks ‘Worauf deutete das alles hin?’ and then offers various interpretations which could be drawn from the exterior appearance. ‘Seinem unteren Menschen nach hätte man ihn ohne weiteres für einen Trapper, seinem oberen nach ebenso zweifellos für einen Rabulisten und Winkeladvokaten halten müssen [...]’¹⁰⁶ He thus aligns himself with the reader, mimicking the process of characterisation. His musing is taken up by Gordon and the innkeeper, who continue to speculate about the profession of the man described. The narrator encourages the reader to interpret the information beyond its visual content and make guesses about the man’s profession and personality, and the characters, as if taking the same cue provided to the reader, then act on this prompt. The narrator begins the story, but quickly hands the reader over to the characters, allowing readers to align themselves with the point of view of Gordon as this character follows the same path as the reader: both Gordon and the reader meet each character in this novel for the first time, receive (at first) the same level of information

¹⁰⁵ *GBA*, I/14, p. 80

¹⁰⁶ *GBA*, I/9, p. 19

about them, and then try to characterise who they have met. Instead of leading the reader by the hand like many traditional nineteenth-century narrators, this narrator steps back for readers to interact with characters directly.¹⁰⁷

The minor characters' exteriors contain less secondary information than those of the major characters; the 'Waldeck-Kopf' of the Präzeptor, a secondary character, or Cécile's 'Gemmenkopf' give the reader less to unpack than the description of the Emeritus.¹⁰⁸ For the Präzeptor, it is simply an example of his geographical origin which is an important part of his identity ('Waldeck' being a historical district, marking him out as a 'typical inhabitant' of this district). Cécile's features however are mentioned by Gordon in this instance, and thus reveal not only something about her looks, but also something about his relation to her which will be examined in greater detail later on. While major characters do not usually receive as much direct description of their exterior as minor ones, and are less defined by it, there are exceptions. Kathinka (*Vor dem Sturm*) is described in even more physical detail than Brigitte (*Unwiederbringlich*), and the narrator reminds us of her looks throughout the story, which is not the case with Cécile. The reason is simple: while both Kathinka and Brigitte are defined by their beauty, Cécile is not characterised by it. She is beautiful on the outside, but she is not a seductress like the fiery Polish girl. Brigitte and Kathinka on the other hand are aware of their charms and consciously use them; we are reminded of them because this is how they interact with other characters, and consequently, with the reader: other characters see their beauty, and the reader is enabled to imagine it through detailed descriptions, thus both are subjected to these women's charms. Cécile, despite being pretty, is not

¹⁰⁷ Increasingly so in the later works; earlier novels like *Vor dem Sturm* still feature a strong narrative voice.

¹⁰⁸ *GBA*, I/9, p. 104 and p. 59

flirtatious. The narrator tells us: ‘Ihr Profil war von seltener Reinheit, und das Fehlen jeder Spur von Farbe gab ihrem Kopfe, darin Apathie der vorherrschende Zug war, etwas Marmornes.’¹⁰⁹ While the reader is *told* that she is beautiful, the text is careful not to *recreate* the effect of beauty as it does by describing Kathinka’s slender waist and lush hair. In creating Kathinka, the reader is aware of her physicality and attraction, while with Cécile, the picture we create in reading resembles a statue rather than a beautiful woman. Their difference highlights once again that being told and being shown, receiving direct information (‘She is beautiful.’) and being asked to interpret the secondary information behind it (reading a description of a beautiful woman’s appearance) have different effects on readers. The processing of the first kind of information is rather passive, but the second requires readers to interpret and enables them to imagine, as well as react emotionally to these descriptions and form their own opinions (feel attraction towards the image they create in their mind – or not).

Visual description can unveil a great deal more about both the characters and requires active co-creation from the reader, but when the narrator describes personality traits, there is little for the reader to interpret. Subsequently, there are few such instances in Fontane’s novels, most often in the early chapters to sketch the rough outline of a figure. Only rarely will the narrator interject explanations of behaviour, and if he does, then usually as a protection against an all too convincing soliloquist, who offers alternative reasons for his actions. About Cécile, we hear only two things. She has an ‘in ihrer Natur liegende[n] mystisch-religöse[n] Zug’ and she was ‘klug genug, um die Herzlichkeit solcher Sprache zu verstehen und zu würdigen, aber doch andererseits auch verwöhnte Frau genug, um sich [...] wenig geschmeichelt zu fühlen.’¹¹⁰ Both of these

¹⁰⁹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 21

¹¹⁰ *GBA*, I/9, p. 74 and p. 94

comments are limited to specific situations and only offer information about traits which are to be expected of a young woman of Cécile's social position and upbringing. As almost all of Fontane's protagonists are drawn from the same sphere of society, these comments do not tell us much about who Cécile is.¹¹¹ These small bits of information only serve to set parameters within which readers can create characters with the information provided by the narration and the other characters.

This first category of information provided by the narrator already shows the two key elements which set Fontane's characterisation apart from that of many other authors. Even when using direct descriptions, they often contain secondary information. While the narrator will sometimes draw attention to this fact, he refrains from interpreting it for the reader, who is thus asked to take an active role and interpret it. Many pieces of information, such as physical descriptions, have to be judged by readers themselves to form their own opinions on both an analytic (what profession does this clothing suggest?) and a more personal (do I think this woman is beautiful?) level. The reader is allowed to create his own image of a character to a large extent, and is aided in this effort by other characters, who offer their own opinions and interpretations of the same, often visual, information we receive as readers. This creates a cognitively and emotionally engaging reading process.

The Narrator: Emotional and Interpretative Guidance

Other than providing information, the narrator can also influence the reader's co-creation by trying to influence how positively or negatively a character is viewed. Such attempts can be made through direct comments on characters, which run the risk of

¹¹¹ With the notable exceptions of Lene in *Irrungen, Wirungen*, and Stine in *Stine*.

being perceived as intrusive by readers, or more subtly in musings and opinions voiced by the narrator, and these can be harder to identify as elements which influence our attitude towards the characters. Memorable exclamations such as ‘Arme Effi!’ are emotional in nature and try to direct the reader’s feelings; explanatory insertions such as those uncovering Holk’s delusions in *Unwiederbringlich*, on the other hand, aim to direct the reader’s interpretation.

In *Cécile*, the narrator uses his voice in a more subtle manner than either of these examples. He speaks up, musing: ‘Täuschte nicht alles, so lag eine “Geschichte” zurück, und die schöne Frau (worauf auch der Unterschied der Jahre hindeutete) war unter allerlei Kämpfen und Opfern errungen.’¹¹² This statement, however, is hardly typical of a narrator; it sounds more as if another reader is reading with us, mirroring our thoughts. The actual narrator does of course know that there is a scandal in Cécile’s past – yet here he does nothing more than kindle our curiosity. Throughout the novel, this technique is repeated: ‘St. Arnaud, der wohl wußte, was in ihr vorging [...]’ suggests that the narrator, like the reader, can only guess.¹¹³ Later, when Cécile claims to want to learn about history, the narrator says: ‘Wieviel daran Ernst war, war ungewiß.’¹¹⁴ The second comment is of course already ironic, since at this point the reader should have been able to establish that Cécile does not take a great interest in history. However, the interpretation of this comment (in this case recognising it as ironic) demands the readers to take an active role. We have to contradict the narrator based on our own conclusions (as we have observed Cécile’s ignorance of history as shown through previous conversations), which ironically are of course based on the very text provided by the

¹¹² *GBA*, I/9, p. 8

¹¹³ *GBA*, I/9, p. 54

¹¹⁴ *GBA*, I/9, p. 81

narrator. The narrator leaves the reader to work it out for himself, to keep reading carefully, to wonder and guess at who Cécile really is. These comments are not information, they are a challenge which requires us to contradict the narrator's opinion and form our own.

The narrator can seek to influence the reading process in this way, making it more involving, but his general attitude will be a strong influence on the reader's ability to sympathise and empathise with characters at the same time. A simple yet effective technique can be found in children's stories. There, the protagonist's actions will always be motivated: whether the outcome is good or bad, they will be excused for their mistakes and praised for their achievements. The antagonists, however, do evil without any explanation. Automatically, the audience will find it easier to empathise with the protagonist, as the explanations given make it possible to understand and, if fully narrated, emotionally relive the situations that led the character to act in a certain way. *Cécile* is a more complex story, but the same basic principles apply. The narrator tells us what effect comments have on Cécile, usually when she feels excluded from the conversation, but not how others feel about them (such as Rosa or the Präzeptor). Cécile is presented more favourably than the minor characters, but she also receives more sympathetic treatment than the two male protagonists. Insights into St. Arnaud are rare, and Gordon's monologues drown out anything the narrator might offer to justify his actions. We come to know Cécile's past, but we never find out why Gordon became a man who deems it appropriate to treat her differently once the 'scandal' emerges. Similar to the fairy-tale villains, he simply is that way, and thus helps readers to focus their empathy more strongly on Cécile.

As a source of information on characters, the narrator of Fontane's novels, in keeping with readers' usual expectations of nineteenth-century literature, might be expected to provide insightful, definitive and neutral characterisations, and to be responsible for the vast majority of them. However, the narrator of *Cécile*, in common with most of Fontane's novels with the exception of the first, does not fulfil this expectation. When direct descriptions are given by the narrative voice, the reader has to unpack and interpret them, while the narrator remains silent or offers various possible interpretations without favouring any of them. He has little to say about his characters' personalities, and frequently encourages readers to disagree with his musings or simply feigns ignorance. Our ability to empathise is guided subtly, generally in favour of the heroines, and direct appeals for sympathy are rare. This narrator encourages his readers to take an active role in the reading process and thus refrains from providing too much information. Instead, this task falls to the narration itself and most of all to the other characters of the story. The way in which these two sources provide information will be examined now, but by their very nature, they require an even more active and analytic reading process, asking readers to co-create these characters to an even greater extent.

The Narration: Order of information

Unlike information provided by the narrator, information revealed through the narration itself always requires the reader to take an active role in order to interpret it, or even detect it. As this creative process gives more weight to the reader than to the author, the resulting characters may differ more strongly from one another depending on different readings, be it by different readers or by the same reader at different points in time.

Information which was intended one way by the author may also be misinterpreted more easily, as there is no guidance from the narrator. These reading processes require careful analysis and attention if readers are to be aware of the input they are receiving.

However, this information can also have an unconscious effect, leading the reader to certain ideas or impressions about a character, without being able to pinpoint their origin. A primary example, often overlooked even in literary analysis, is the order in which information is given.

As Schneider points out and many cognitive studies have proven since, the order in which information is revealed to us plays a crucial role in information processing.¹¹⁵ In a narrative, further factors come into play such as who makes the first introduction, who gives what information and when, or the reliability of the information given by a narrator or character. Furthermore, readers have to decide on how to deal with later information that conflicts with previous assumptions, or even contradicts them. The order in which information is made available to readers thus plays an important role. These factors are especially prominent in *Cécile*, as the novel centres on the flow of information concerning the heroine's past. In the first chapter, the narrator gives us some basic information about her and her husband, but it is actually another character

¹¹⁵ See chapter two.

within the novel who makes the very first introductions. St. Arnaud comes into the novel through being addressed by a servant, and is only then described by the narrator. Before we hear anything about him, we already know his social standing and that he is someone to be treated with respect by others: a crucial part of his personality, the reason for the tragic duel which will ensue later (St. Arnaud is less shocked by Gordon's behaviour towards Cécile than by the fact that his own reputation for duels did not deter Gordon). Cécile is first mentioned as 'die Dame', the lady which she wishes to be, and then 'seine Dame', the reason for which society refuses her this standing (having been the Prince's mistress). Cécile is introduced by someone who knows little about her, and throughout the novel, the other characters continue to struggle to comprehend and grasp her. Key characteristics of the two spouses are thus set out at their first appearance, but whether the reader processes this information consciously or unconsciously (or disregards it) depends on the level of engagement and awareness he or she demonstrates at that point.

From the beginning, the text makes its readers aware of a lack of information: Cécile has a questionable past. When the information finally surfaces, it is Klothilde who tells the story. Considering that she is writing to her brother, her presentation of events may be tinged by a variety of personal considerations: she could be exaggerating in order to warn him, she might not know all the facts or have been misinformed about some of them, she could be presenting Cécile too favourably out of sympathy. The text leaves the reader with these insecurities as it gives next to no information about Klothilde, making the reader unable to judge what factors might have affected her depiction of Cécile von Zacha. This lack of knowledge about Klothilde encourages the reader to ask questions about the reliability of the information she provides, and thus highlights that Gordon, whose thoughts we have been following in his quest to understand Cécile,

simply takes the hearsay account as fact. Furthermore, the details of Cécile's past are actually – or should be – of little relevance, because none of the information contradicts the character that the text has built up to this point, it is in perfect accord with everything the reader knows about her so far. Again, this effect contrasts with Gordon's reaction. While the reader will find his picture of Cécile completed, possibly his theories confirmed, Gordon's image of Cécile changes considerably. Like a second reader, Gordon's thoughts and reactions, the continuously evolving image of Cécile he provides, make it possible for readers both to take part in and then reflect on their own creation of Cécile, as they can compare it to that of the protagonist at every stage when more information becomes available to both Gordon and the readers.

The Narration: Action and Speech

The Aristotelian concept of being through action is rarely used in Fontane's novels; they rely on conversation, or more generally speech and language, instead. Actions which oppose the social norm are unusual, especially adultery (for example Effi in *Effi Briest* or Melanie in *L'Adultera*), and are rarely shown in the novel. More often, events are concentrated in the very last chapters and unfold in an explosive or cathartic manner: Christine's suicide in *Unwiederbringlich*, the wedding and funeral in *Der Stechlin*, the duel between Gordon and St. Arnaud and Cécile's suicide. The duel shows the extent of the husband's pride which had so far only been assumed by Rosa, but not been proven. Cécile's suicide cements the picture of regret and longing which has been built up by the text, it underlines that her happiness does not belong to this world. These actions confirm the information suggested by the narration and the other characters, but they do not reveal anything new.

The characters' speech on the other hand defines them in many novels. Conversations take up large parts of most novels, famously so in the latest completed work *Der Stechlin*. Fontane's use of language in general and character speech in particular has been subject to so much critical attention over the years, that it deserves its own separate discussion and will thus not be analysed here.¹¹⁶ *Cécile* is also one of the novels in which speech plays a less important role, as the female protagonist is characterised less by her speech than by the lack of it. Like the other categories of information revealed by the narration, character speech will be interpreted in different ways by different readers, and not everyone will pay the same amount of attention to it. The information given on characters in this way is thus an invitation for the reader to read the text actively and co-create characters by drawing conclusions about them based on the evidence provided by the narration.

The Narration: Names and Denominators

Names and denominations, as the earlier example of *Cécile* and St. Arnaud's introduction by a railway attendant showed, play an important role in the characterisation process. Names which carry strong associations are frequent in Fontane's novels, especially in secondary characters. They have drawn the attention of a number of critics, such as Gottfried Kricker, Fritz Behrend, Peter Demetz and Horst Schmidt-Brümmer. Behrend points out that few characters remain unnamed in Fontane, although some of them appear only once, and that a large number of novels bear names as titles. His analysis is led by a biographical interest in the author and thus of lesser relevance to this research.¹¹⁷ Demetz and Kricker develop different categories for characters' names. Demetz differentiates between names which are allegorical,

¹¹⁶ See chapter five.

¹¹⁷ Behrend, *Theodor Fontane: Zu seinem Leben und Schaffen* (Berlin: Selbstverlag, 1933)

referential and antithetical, that is, those that are descriptive such as Pastor Lämmerhirt, or refer to an event in the past, or contrast with the characters who bear them such as the corpulent Frau Dörr (*Irrungen, Wirrungen*).¹¹⁸ Krickler gives an exhaustive list of the humorous names in Fontane, under which he also establishes an antithetical category that is however not the same as Demetz's. Krickler's antithetical names consist of a given name and family name which contradict one another, creating ironic mockery such as in Niels Wrschowitz (*Der Stechlin*).¹¹⁹ About the more enigmatic of his allegorical names, Demetz comments: 'Die eigentliche Bedeutung des Namens enthüllt sich nur, wenn sich der Leser bemüht, sein Teil zur Lösung des Rätsels beizutragen.'¹²⁰

Many of the humorous names can be interpreted easily, as for example the Emeritus Aus dem Grunde for whom 'nomen est omen'; other names are indeed harder to decode. It is not too difficult to see the connection between Rosa Hexel's last name ('Hexe' meaning witch) and her standing at the verge of respectability (painting animals was not an acceptable pastime for women in the nineteenth century). The characters themselves discuss her name, and even support our reading with the comment 'Na, das paßt ja.'¹²¹ The case is more complicated for the heroine. Cécile von St. Arnaud seems a perfectly harmonious French name, as her married existence could be in society, but she is constantly overshadowed by Cécile von Zacha. Her Slavonic maiden name, connected to her past as the Prince's mistress, evokes exotic connotations and associations of the Eastern seductress (see Kathinka in *Vor dem Sturm*). The effect is, as always, on two levels: readers can partake in the process by drawing conclusions from the characters' names, but they can also observe this process through the other characters who offer

¹¹⁸ Demetz, part 4, chapter 1

¹¹⁹ Krickler, p. 126

¹²⁰ Demetz, pp. 194-95

¹²¹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 165

their own interpretations of names. It is not only Rosa Hexel's name that is discussed in the novel: Gordon, the character who most closely mirrors the process of Cécile's character creation in reading, also has a conversation with Cécile about the name of his sister Klothilde. Both agree of course that names say a lot about a person, and conclude that Klothilde sounds utterly reliable.¹²² This is the only information offered about her, and it encourages the reader to trust her depiction of Cécile's past – but only if we make the connection between the reliability of her name and her letter. On the other hand, if the information is processed unconsciously, readers might realise upon later reflection why they were inclined to believe Klothilde. The text encourages the reader to become conscious of the character creation through examining their own interpretations or those offered by the characters. It is only if we feel that Klothilde is trustworthy and reliable that we can examine how this effect was created. Readers who carefully examine their own process of co-creation, including their emotional responses (such as a feeling of trust), can not only become aware of the inner workings of this novel, but also learn about their own reactions and interpretations of each piece of information.

While names reveal information invested in the characters by the author (even though their discussion can give away just as much about other characters), denominations make the social relations between characters apparent. They also offer information when used by the narrative voice, but again, the way in which it is processed depends heavily on the reader. Schmidt-Brümmer lists many examples of denominations in his analysis of *Effi Briest*, *Frau Jenny Treibel* and *Irrungen, Wirrungen*.¹²³ He speaks of a 'Facettierung der Figuren in vielfältige namentliche Erscheinungsformen', as characters

¹²² *GBA*, I/9, p. 95

¹²³ Schmidt-Brümmer, pp. 143-50

can be father, son, brother, employee, lover, friend to different people.¹²⁴ This collection shows how tightly Fontane's characters are tied to their social roles: they bear different denominators depending on the company they keep. In *Cécile*, St. Arnaud's military past is repeatedly alluded to by the other guests who address him as 'Oberst', while Cécile calls him Pierre. The narrator also refers to him as 'einen alten Militär', and in the first chapter, the servant calls him 'Herr Oberst'.¹²⁵ These denominations paint a man not unlike Schach von Wuthenow, and the military honour code is indeed just as important to St. Arnaud as it is to Schach (as proven by the duel). Cécile is frequently referred to as 'die schöne Frau' by the narrator, reflecting the impression she makes on others.¹²⁶ The reader is reminded that other characters see her beauty, but find it hard to fathom the person underneath. However, she is also called 'die nervenranke Frau'.¹²⁷ The denominations used by the narrator paint a 'femme fragile', the polar opposite of the 'femme fatale' as which Gordon wants to see her after he hears about her past. Once again, the narration presents Cécile with understanding and sympathy, gently encouraging the reader to do the same and disagree with Gordon's interpretation.

Names can tell us a lot about secondary characters, and sometimes also about primary ones, such as Cécile's last names which underline her torn identity between the mistress von Zacha and the respectable Frau von St. Arnaud. Denominations uncover the social ties and hierarchies between characters, and subtly influence our reading process when used by the narration. As Fontane's characters are always part of an immediate social network and present themselves primarily in conversation with others, their denominators show core aspects of their identity. Both within the novel and to the

¹²⁴ Schmidt-Brümmer, p. 187

¹²⁵ *GBA*, I/9, pp. 5-8

¹²⁶ *GBA*, I/9, e.g. p. 77 and 84

¹²⁷ *GBA*, I/9, p. 38

reader, the emergence of Cécile as a person and character depends heavily on the opinions of others. She was a mistress because the Prince took a liking to her and she became a wife because her husband chose her. Cécile is then ostracised because many judge her past to be morally reprehensible. In our reading process, we too are confronted with many different images of Cécile, and the quest for her true identity is a battle fought not only by the reader, but by the heroine herself. Both have to defend themselves against the images offered by other characters. Names and denominations show not only who these characters are, but most importantly, who they are to each other. They highlight the perspectival nature of information, and thus encourage readers to ask where they receive information from, how trustworthy it is and how to interpret it in the light of what they know about the source (the character speaking). In the large vacuum left by the narrative voice, characters come to create one another in front of the reader, revealing them to be not only social, but polyphonous fictional creations.

The Narration: Backdrops

Backdrops can place characters in an interpretative context for readers, who are again left a lot of freedom when it comes to what to do with this information, as the narrator offers little direct insight or explanation. Characters speculate about Cécile's personal background for a long time, but society at large does not directly come into play in this novel, nor in most others. A few exceptions which deal with class conflicts, such as *Stine*, *Irrungen*, *Wirrunen* and *Frau Jenny Treibel*, put greater emphasis on the social standing of the characters, but most of Fontane's novels, among them *Cécile*, pay little attention to this aspect where main characters are concerned. Nevertheless, several critics, including Schmidt-Brümmer and Rainer Kolk, have paid attention to the depiction of society and history, finding Fontane's characters to be inseparably embedded in them. While their analyses are of historical and sociological interest, from

a literary perspective, most characters are in essence actually independent of their context and instead depend greatly on the opinions of those characters they find themselves immediately surrounded by. Society, rather than the group of people which has come together in the Harz, only plays a minor role as a background in *Cécile*. During their visit to see the crystal mirror, Gordon describes the former status of a Prince's mistress in society, and Cécile's reaction suggests that she feels connected to the stories of these women, urging readers to see this connection which Gordon (in his wishful image of Cécile) ignores. Otherwise, the novel relies more on human interaction on a smaller scale in order to bring out the characters.

Along with history and sociology, geography and, more generally, space have also been analysed with great attention as a means of characterisation by critics such as Max Tau and Bruno Hillebrand, who have taken a more literary approach than many others on this topic.¹²⁸ Hillebrand argues that first and foremost 'Fontanes Raum [dient] der Untermalung seelischer Vorgänge'.¹²⁹ He presents a list of symbolic flowers and landscape elements which he connects to different mental states, but also finds that space is otherwise only sketched by Fontane as the characters are independent of it.¹³⁰ Tau also enlists several symbolic elements of nature, noting: 'Fontane knüpft dabei an volkstümliche Vorstellungen an, die mit bestimmten Pflanzen und Tieren verbunden sind.'¹³¹ The space surrounding the characters is used as a stage on which they can unfold themselves and become associated with different symbols, but the landscape is not presented for its own sake.¹³² Cécile enjoys relative isolation and peace in the mountains, whereas upon her return to the turbulent capital, a wave of events crashes

¹²⁸ See also Katrin Scheiding for an analysis of interiors and exteriors in connection to action and plot.

¹²⁹ Hillebrand, p. 229

¹³⁰ Hillebrand, p. 230 and 245

¹³¹ Tau, p. 6

¹³² In the novels, the case is of course different for Fontane's travel writing.

over her. The first setting also serves to contrast her current life with the glamour she knew at the side of the Prince: during those years, the Harz would hardly have been a suitable holiday location.¹³³ Berlin and the Mark, where most of Fontane's stories are set, are, as Hillebrand traces in detail, indeed only sketched other than where objects or landscapes gain relevance for the characters, and the same applies to the Harz in *Cécile*. While some older analyses, such as that by Tau, make the case for a close connection between the characters and their geography, Hillebrand's careful analysis proves that it is not an equal relationship, and that throughout Fontane's career, his texts and with them his characters come to depend less and less on location and more on social interaction for characterisation.

The Narration: Perspective

Before delving into the complexity provided by the many characters' perspectives, the use which the narration itself makes of perspective needs to be analysed. All of Fontane's novels share a trustworthy and largely neutral third-person narrator, but this seeming lack of flexibility does not prevent the narration from making perspective a useful instrument of characterisation. Anja Haberer observes: 'Oft läßt der Dichter eine auktoriale Perspektive, eine teilnehmende Außenperspektive und eine kunstvoll angelegte Figurenperspektive unmerklich ineinander übergehen. Der Leser wird dadurch von Anfang an in die Handlung hineingezogen.'¹³⁴ As different characters shift in and out of focus, the narrative adapts to their personalities, creating proximity between readers and characters.¹³⁵ At times, this adaptation verges on free indirect speech. When St. Arnaud tells the other guests about Cécile's illness, she is mortified,

¹³³ Though his analysis focuses more on the relation between space and reader than space and characters, Michael James White finds a similar use of space for psychological contrast in *Unwiederbringlich* (White, p. 164).

¹³⁴ Haberer, p. 116

¹³⁵ As it does in *Unwiederbringlich*, see chapter three.

and her feelings spill over into the narration: ‘Sie begriff St. Arnaud nicht, er war sonst so diskret.’¹³⁶ The first part could still pass as a simple, if uncharacteristically insightful, description, but the insertion of ‘sonst’ into the second part of the sentence shows clearly that we are hearing Cécile think, despite the lack of speech marks.¹³⁷

Through these brief shifts in perspective, the narration unobtrusively allows readers to obtain glimpses of the characters’ minds. Some characters, like Gordon, reveal their thoughts in detail through monologues, but characters such as the taciturn Cécile are more difficult for readers to gain insight into. This short scene allows readers not only to receive more information about Cécile’s thoughts, but in recreating the situation which causes her discomfort (a group conversation over dinner), readers are enabled to understand Cécile emotionally, empathically. It is easy to feel embarrassed for St. Arnaud alongside his wife as we watch him derail the conversation into personal territory. In mirroring her emotions, we come to know what she feels like. Such shifts into the perspective of a character, not as a narrating character but as the focaliser of the narration, allow for proximity between characters and readers through shared points of view.

The Narration: Style

Even more subtle than the shift of narrative perspective is the change of style in narrative language. Cécile has often been described as not belonging to this world, ephemeral, enigmatic, elusive, hard to grasp, and so on. Beyond Gordon’s struggle to understand her, though, where does this impression stem from? Perhaps the most subtle means of characterisation of all, and thus hardest to become aware of in our process of

¹³⁶ *GBA*, I/9, p. 36

¹³⁷ See *GBA*, I/9, p. 100 for another example.

co-creation, is characterisation by association in language. If one examines closely the sentences surrounding any mention of Cécile, they are filled with references to magic and fairy-tales. ‘Märchen’ are mentioned directly by her in the first chapter, and she looks for magic in the landscape herself.¹³⁸ She is described as ‘bezaubert’ and compared to a fairy in the narration.¹³⁹ Floating rose petals and butterflies surround her and make her smile.¹⁴⁰ Like a character in a magic story, she is filled with ‘naive Kinderfreude’ at the sight of the petals and butterflies, and she is frequently compared to a child – after all, these stories are primarily associated with childhood. As she tells her husband in the beginning, her happiness is indeed (nothing more than) a fairy-tale; she will not find happiness in this world. Cécile, being unreflective, is not even aware of herself in this way and does not articulate her sadness. The narration does not draw the reader’s attention to these aspects of Cécile, making it hard to become conscious of the source of these impressions. This indirect characterisation contributes to the sense of mystery which surrounds the heroine, allowing readers to be drawn in by it just like the main character Gordon.

At other times, we meet Cécile near locked gates and grids, or at windows, symbolising her sense of longing and the entrapment in her past.¹⁴¹ These are recreated for the reader rather than communicated directly by the narrator, making it possible for readers to experience them imaginatively and thus understand them emotionally. The changes in narrative language evoke images and associations that can bypass our awareness, but they nevertheless have an effect on the reading process. Apart from characterisation, the text also sometimes uses language to guide the reader’s expectations of the plot. To give

¹³⁸ *GBA*, I/9, p. 25 and exposition discussion

¹³⁹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 45 and p. 175

¹⁴⁰ *GBA*, I/9, p. 84-85

¹⁴¹ e.g. *GBA*, I/9, p. 45, p. 51

but one example: after a discussion of faithfulness, the last word mentioned is 'untreu'. The next paragraph sees Gordon and Cécile. Subtly, we are warned of the impending tragedy.

The Characters: Supporters

The social web which Fontane's characters are embedded in is perhaps the most important factor in their characterisation by the narration. Fontane's characters emerge most strongly through the interpersonal web which the novels build through interaction and conversation. The information given by characters can be divided into three main categories: information from supporting characters, who illuminate others by contrast and comparison, self-depictions through monologues or in conversation, and the characters' opinions of others.

Supporting characters, often referred to by the term 'Figurenkonstellation', are especially numerous in the novel compared to other genres. Dieter Kafitz, who focuses on this topic in the late nineteenth-century novel, sees their importance as evidence of the 'Dominanz der Figuren im Vorstellungsvermögen des Epikers'.¹⁴² A group of characters can work like the composition of a painting and have an overall effect on the reader, creating a picture of harmony for example, or several secondary characters can serve as a background against which a few main characters stand out more clearly.

Secondary characters often come in pairs, such as the memorable pair of Rex and Czako in *Der Stechlin*, whose differences are highlighted by their friendship, which helps both characters present themselves more clearly.

¹⁴² Kafitz, p. 6

The same principle can be applied to primary characters, although with a shift in focus. While Rex and Czako illuminate one another, secondary characters often serve to underline only a few aspects in a primary character. The free-spirited Rosa Hexel, who joins the group on many outings, is a clear contrast to Cécile with her open and carefree attitude. She repeatedly highlights Cécile's lack of education in conversation.¹⁴³ During their trip to the Klopstock house, Cécile's and Rosa's reactions to the gallery paintings are all the more telling because they show the different effect which the same objects have on different people. While Rosa stays calm and cheerful, Cécile is deeply touched and interested in the fate of the other mistresses portrayed in the gallery. Had Cécile been looking at the paintings by herself, her reaction might have been attributed to the effect of the portraits, but since everyone but her takes them lightly, her feelings stand out. Other characters can highlight certain aspects of one another by contrasting with each other in their opinions and reactions. Fontane frequently uses this method of characterisation to guide the reader's attention and subsequently his interpretation. At this point in *Cécile*, the heroine's reaction is made to stand out, urging readers to ask themselves what sets her apart from the other characters.

The Characters: About Themselves

Whenever several people come together in discussion of a common topic, readers can compare the various opinions and reactions. If a character stands out, he or she is shown to be different from the group, and readers can judge that character's unusual opinion or reaction accordingly. However, when a character reflects on him- or herself, different rules apply. Characters' self-depictions addressed to others or, as is overwhelmingly the case with Gordon in this novel, in monologues, have to be read with care. Readers

¹⁴³ *GBA*, I/9, e.g. pp. 28-30

cannot as easily compare a character's self-evaluation to the evaluations others offer of him or her, as – unlike all members of a group observing the same picture in a gallery for example – the other characters do not have the same level of information as the character who speaks about him- or herself.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, characters who act as a source of information on themselves reveal a lot, though their words can rarely be taken at face value.

Claudia Liebrand has published a detailed account of the characters' self-images in which she examines soliloquies, grouping them according to their aims: searching for the true self, reflection on the self, wishful images and self-delusions. Her findings are valuable, but focus on the characters' psychology rather than on the effect this information has on the reader. Observing a character's process of self-creation leads to a similar result as the previously discussed technique of the external observer within the novel: it reminds the reader to examine his own character creation critically by raising awareness of this process. Liebrand observes that soliloquies are usually delivered by male characters, who are more likely to examine themselves rationally, as Gordon does (she names Holk from *Unwiederbringlich* and Waldemar from *Stine* as examples). Women's self-images arise in conversation, as do Rosa's relaxed comments on her paintings or Cécile's rare statements about herself (Liebrand mentions Melanie from *L'Adultera* and Christine from *Unwiederbringlich*). Liebrand also points out: 'Die Autoimages der Protagonisten sind nicht "authentisch", nicht unberührt von den Projektionen anderer Romanfiguren.'¹⁴⁵ This is especially true in the case of Cécile, who fails to define herself amongst people who constantly seek to do just that for her.

¹⁴⁴ See Nora Hoffmann for an illuminating analysis of ways of seeing and their connection to the characters' awareness of themselves and others, e.g. p. 200: 'Damit wird jeder Figur des Romans eine eigene Sehweise zugeschrieben, die jeweils mit ihrer Fähigkeit zur Welt- und Selbstwahrnehmung korreliert ist.'

¹⁴⁵ Liebrand, p. 314

Like many female protagonists, Cécile's self-image runs the risk of conforming to other people's views of her. Twice Cécile speaks about herself and offers information to the reader: once to describe her childhood and another time to state her wishes.¹⁴⁶ However, she is primarily characterised by her silence. In their construction of Cécile, readers are forced to turn to information provided by other characters instead, as she does not provide enough.

Cécile's refusal to speak is highlighted through the stark contrast between her and the eloquent Gordon, who delivers long monologues and instead floods the reader with information, presenting a different type of challenge. His telling leitmotif is: 'Unter solchem Selbstgespräche war er bis an [...] gekommen.'¹⁴⁷ Gordon frequently talks himself into a certain direction of opinion, until he is ready to act upon it. However, these reflections are not about him alone – all of them are triggered by Cécile: his first impression of her, her behaviour during the visit to Quedlinburg, her behaviour towards him, her past, her rejection of him and the impending duel for her.¹⁴⁸ While his own person plays a role in his reflections, they circle around Cécile, not himself. On the surface, Gordon's monologues thus provide information about another character rather than himself. However, his dynamic image of Cécile reveals more about him than it does about her. At times, Gordon shows awareness of his image of Cécile, and of his behaviour towards her, but these moments do not last: 'Ja, die Cécile seiner Thalenser Tage war eine schöne, trotz aller Melancholie beständig nach Huldigungen ausschauende Dame gewesen, während die Cécile von heut' eine heitre, lichtvolle Frau war, vor der der Roman seiner Phantasie ziemlich schnell zu verblassen begann.'¹⁴⁹ In

¹⁴⁶ *GBA*, I/9, pp. 86-88 and p. 184

¹⁴⁷ *GBA*, I/9, e.g. p. 179 and p. 186

¹⁴⁸ *GBA*, I/9, p. 15, pp. 56-57, pp. 124-31, pp. 176-79, p. 186, p. 209

¹⁴⁹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 151

this sentence, Gordon acknowledges his own fictional creation of Cécile by referring to her as a novel written by his own fantasies. His early image of Cécile shows us the kind of woman Gordon wished her to be, presenting his fantasy rather than her identity. His later observations of her, his 'Cécile of today', also contrast sharply with the reader's, as the narration shows her to be anything but 'heiter' and 'lichtvoll' just after his visit. Readers are encouraged to question Gordon's statements even at this moment when he examines his own thoughts critically. Gordon recognises that his previous image of Cécile was wishful thinking, but only the reader is able to see that his present image of Cécile is also far from reality.

When speaking about themselves, characters often find their judgement clouded by their emotions. They project their own thoughts and feelings onto others and in doing so reveal more about themselves than a direct self-depiction could. Their statements are highly subjective and have to be examined critically. When comparing the information provided by characters to information stemming from the narration, readers can find that characters reveal a lot more about themselves in their musings than is visible at first glance. This information is embedded in the social web which touches each character's core. Through the process of revealing oneself in talking about others, it is not only the character's fictional identity, but the reader's co-creation which finds the social dimension at its core.

The Characters: About Others

As Gordon's monologues have shown, characters often act as sources of information for other characters. The images they create of one another in their minds can reveal a lot about themselves, but they can also contain actual insight into others. This process lies at the heart of *Cécile*. The images that characters create of one another become

overpowering in this novel and make it impossible for them to see each other for who they really are. The reader is able to observe the characters' creation of one another, and can compare his own co-creation of them to it. Gordon is the primary source of images of Cécile, but others, among them Cécile herself, also engage in inventive character creation. The characterisations presented in conversation are usually more neutral than the ones held in private, which characters only betray in their actions or side comments. While it is not always easy to judge the reliability of information given by one character on another, generally speaking, the closer a character is to the one they are talking about, the more their opinion of them will be influenced by personal considerations or emotions.

Cécile's different reactions to Gordon and Rosa are a good example. After she and her husband first encounter Gordon, she asks St. Arnaud about the new acquaintance and he informs her that Gordon quit the military because of debt. Cécile, who has not yet become close to Gordon, naively voices her first impressions by asking: 'Und das ist alles?'¹⁵⁰ Early on, she takes a liking to Gordon and thus expects him to have a more romantic, more interesting story: one that would be more fitting to her fairy-tale of happiness. Not only the narration, but Cécile herself associates her rescue from mundane reality with fairy tales, even though she is not aware of it. Her interest in Gordon makes her an unreliable source of information on him, and her opinions of him thus reveal more about herself. When first getting to know Rosa, Cécile describes her as 'ein gutes Kind und dabei heiter', but after the painter shows herself to possess a considerably greater education than she does, Cécile finds her too emancipated.¹⁵¹ The initial judgement is confirmed by the narration through Rosa's behaviour, but the

¹⁵⁰ *GBA*, I/9, p. 67

¹⁵¹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 40 and 64

second one is again influenced by Cécile's emotions. The reader is able to observe how Cécile, who cares about the way others perceive her, changes her opinion of Rosa when the more educated woman highlights her own lack of knowledge. Cécile adjusts her image of Rosa as more information becomes available (Rosa's superior education), but she is guided by her own agenda rather than aiming to understand who Rosa is. With this example, the reader is cautioned not to fall into the same trap. If we want to create more accurate characters in our own minds, we need to compare different sources of information in order to weed out false information. Furthermore, we must remain aware of our own emotional ties and reactions to these characters, as they will influence our images of them in the same way as we observed for Cécile's images of Gordon and Rosa.

The images Cécile creates of others pale in comparison to the numerous images others create of her. Liebrand observes: 'Cécile figuriert für nahezu alle Romanfiguren als leere Projektionsfläche, auf die die (Wunsch-)Bilder, die man sich von ihr macht, gestrahlt werden.'¹⁵² Together with Gordon, as well as less involved characters like the Berlin guests and Rosa Hexel, the reader tries to construct her. Gordon undergoes several stages in his attempts to understand and later define Cécile, and his image of her changes accordingly. Starting with magical mystery, his Cécile runs the course from 'femme enfantine' through 'femme fragile' to 'femme fatale'. His first impression of her already bears the seed of his later conclusion: he believes her to be Slavic, perhaps Polish, and to be a Catholic with a strict upbringing.¹⁵³ The accuracy of these first observations will not be reached again as his characterisations become increasingly influenced by his feelings for Cécile. When he later on meets her properly, his

¹⁵² Liebrand, p. 74

¹⁵³ *GBA*, I/9, p. 15

description is already less neutral. In his first description of Cécile in a letter to his sister Klothilde, he has already begun to adjust the image to his liking: ‘Gordon [...] war mit seiner Charakteristik Céciles zufrieden.’¹⁵⁴ Several times during the course of the story, he calls Cécile a ‘Kinderseele’, echoing the narrator’s information on her (‘[sie] war überhaupt wie ein Kind’).¹⁵⁵ As Gordon and the narrator seem to share the same opinion of Cécile at times, it is tempting to believe this character’s representation of the heroine.

The narration counteracts this temptation to follow Gordon by repeatedly drawing the reader’s attention to the inventive (not detective) process of character creation Gordon engages in. Even though he can be quite confident in his ideas at times, Gordon continuously revises his image of Cécile and struggles to define her clearly. His many monologues and conversations with others bear witness to his difficulties, reminding the reader that unlike the Berlin guests, he is not a neutral and attentive observer, but instead too caught up in the interpersonal web to see Cécile without the veil of his own ideas and emotions. At times, his comments directly contradict those of the text, showing them to be direct misjudgements. In the middle of the novel, Gordon observes: ‘Sie [...] ist doch ohne rechte Gefallsucht.’¹⁵⁶ A page earlier, the narration described in detail how Cécile basked in the positive attention she was provided with upon wearing her fur jacket to dinner. At this point in the narration, Gordon is infatuated with Cécile and his image of her is wishful rather than truthful. As Anja Haberer has observed, Gordon embellishes Cécile in his mind: ‘Der Ingenieur entwirft sich Bilder von Cécile, mit denen er die prosaische Wirklichkeit des Ferienaufenthalts im Harz poetisch auszus schmücken sucht.’¹⁵⁷ Readers are encouraged to disagree with Gordon by

¹⁵⁴ *GBA*, I/9, p. 21 and p. 62

¹⁵⁵ *GBA*, I/9, e.g. pp. 55-57

¹⁵⁶ *GBA*, I/9, p. 125

¹⁵⁷ Haberer, p. 275

comparing two different sources of information, him and the narration. As this character has already revealed himself to be less than neutral towards Cécile, the narration is the more trustworthy source. Readers can only come to this conclusion if they carefully observe the social web this novel weaves, and if they repeatedly examine their own co-creations of these characters in a critical light.

It requires an attentive reader to notice the discrepancies between the Cécile presented by the narration and that of Gordon's early images. However, after the revelation of her past, Gordon's sudden change of tone cannot be explained if readers have not yet become aware of how emotionally charged his characterisation of Cécile is. Haberer even describes him as guilty: 'Gordons Schuld liegt darin, daß er sein Handeln von diesen Bildern abhängig macht, ohne bereit zu sein, dem anderen unbefangen zu begegnen.'¹⁵⁸ If readers are puzzled at this point in the novel, they must critically re-examine Gordon and potentially their own characterisation of Cécile to understand why the protagonist's behaviour changes. When Gordon learns that Cécile used to be the Prince's mistress, he at first tries to decide to pity her instead of judge her – but he is unable to stay true to this resolve.¹⁵⁹ His over-positive image of her then crumbles with increasing speed. After a dinner at their inn, he compares the harsh baroness he had been talking to with Cécile and concludes that she is more feminine and thus a complete opposite.¹⁶⁰ The baroness has of course also been described as unapproachable, thus turning the formerly elusive Cécile into an attainable woman. Later on, he still credits her with a good core, but one which has been neglected by her education and upbringing. His behaviour finally gives away that his idea of Cécile has been

¹⁵⁸ Haberer, p. 275

¹⁵⁹ *GBA*, I/9, p. 178

¹⁶⁰ *GBA*, I/9, p. 183

overwhelmed by his emotions, and he approaches her in a manner that would be socially appropriate for a courtesan, rather than the childlike, innocent woman he first described. Gordon finds that the Cécile of his mind has been pushed off the pedestal he put her on, and he now punishes her for the loss he feels. While his image of Cécile transforms, readers will find many hints laid by the narration confirmed: Cécile's lack of education, her Romantic longing, her melancholy, society's coldness towards her. The gap between Gordon's reaction to Cécile's past and our own highlights once again that Gordon is the main source of information in volume, but not the one we should primarily rely on.

Against the onslaught of Gordon's images, the novel provides assistance to the reader in the form of external, and thus relatively neutral, observing characters. Gordon's image of Cécile is contrasted by the observations of some secondary characters. The technique of the interpreting observer is frequently used by Fontane, especially with neutral secondary characters (who are not as emotionally involved as the main characters are with one another). In *Cécile*, these are the Berlin guests, Hofprediger Doktor Dörffel and the painter Rosa Hexel. The Berlin guests observe Gordon's attraction to Cécile early on and draw the reader's attention to it. Doktor Dörffel makes a passing comment on Gordon's character where he describes him as sanguineous ('sanguinisch'), lively and smart, but with sudden obsessions and ideas, and as hard-headed. Rosa, too, describes both Cécile and St. Arnaud with uncanny accuracy after their day trip.¹⁶¹ The validity of their statements is demonstrated by the explosive unfolding of the plot at the very end, when Gordon turns around his image of Cécile, approaches her and thus forces her husband to challenge him to a duel. The degree of insight and information

¹⁶¹ *GBA*, I/9, pp. 26-27 and pp. 165-68

that both of these observers have stands in stark contrast with Gordon's struggle to understand Cécile. However, they are not led by their feelings, as they are emotionally uninvolved, but by an interest in others. With the help of these 'model readers' of human nature, the reader can navigate his own co-creation of character during the reading process more easily.

Critics have noted the challenge posed by Cécile's characterisation with as well as against the images others provide of her.¹⁶² Liebrand describes Cécile as 'zugedeckt und begraben von einer Fülle von Fremdbildern', and Mittenzwei states that the heroine is not allowed to escape the role imposed upon her by others.¹⁶³ Against Gordon's verbose descriptions of her, the taciturn Cécile herself and the narration pale as sources of information, and it can at times become difficult for the reader to keep an eye on the latter two. The contrast between the information provided by the narration and the conclusions drawn by Gordon at different points in time, however, makes it possible. When talking and thinking about each other, characters often reveal more about themselves instead of providing valuable information about others to the reader. An exception to this are those characters at the margins, who offer helpful insights. In order to use characters as a source of information, readers must pay close attention to the social web which these characters are intrinsically embedded in, as the reliability of their information can only be judged in the light of the social ties which bind them together. This process also cautions readers to be aware of their own thoughts and feelings, as these influence our characterisations in the same way.

¹⁶² Some are more optimistic than others, such as Elfriede Aschauer: 'Der Leser/Rezipient dagegen vereinigt die Perspektive der Figuren zu seiner eigenen „Metaperspektive“ [...] (Aschauer, p. 120).

¹⁶³ Liebrand, p. 74 and Mittenzwei, chapter IV.1

Conclusion

Readers can draw information about the characters of Fontane's novels from three sources: the narrator, the narration or the characters themselves. Over the course of this author's career, the narrator increasingly takes a back-seat in favour of the characters. Information provided by the narrator is largely limited to introductions and visual descriptions; it is easy to detect and its interpretation is usually straightforward. The narration uses a number of ways to provide information which may or may not be consciously processed by readers. From the order of information which we learn about the characters, to their actions and speech, the names and denominators they are called by, the narrative perspective, style of language and the use of supportive characters, there are many factors which can inform and influence our creation of fictional characters stemming from the narration. Lastly, the characters reveal a great deal about themselves and others through monologues and conversations, but this information needs to be examined critically. Contradictions between insights provided by the narrative and the characters encourage readers to evaluate the images which characters present critically. This leads to a more active reading process than Realist novels are usually given credit for.

In *Cécile*, readers slowly discover, with the help of the narration and a few external observers, that the various images which the protagonist Gordon creates of the heroine Cécile are based on his feelings for her rather than neutral observations. As Gordon's judgement of Cécile becomes increasingly clouded by his emotions, readers are encouraged to critically examine their own image of Cécile. In analysing our own co-creation of the heroine, we can become aware of the different sources of information and their nature. As Gordon relies primarily on information provided by the characters (his own thoughts), his image becomes distorted, explaining his change in behaviour

after the revelation of Cécile's past. His actions can only be explained through an awareness of the social ties between these characters, as they define themselves and each other based on their place in the social web they are embedded in. These characters depend strongly on the opinions of others, and through their prominent place in the novel, the reader's co-creations, too, are primarily shaped by the characters' images of one another. The information they provide can only be understood if it is read within their social context. Fontane's characters have a social core and emerge from a social web. Gordon is the model of a reader who fails to become aware of the characterisation process. As this character never becomes conscious of the influence his own thoughts and feelings have on his image of Cécile, he strays ever further from learning anything about her. Our emotional reactions to characters are necessary and insightful landmarks in the reading process, as long as we remain aware of them and judge them accordingly. If we are unable to relate to the characters on a personal level and to be swept along by the story at times, we cannot re-experience what Gordon undergoes in his construction of Cécile, and would struggle to understand him. If we become too immersed and begin to identify with Gordon's point of view, Cécile remains as mysterious to us as she does to him. Fontane encourages an involving reading that allows readers to closely approach and even re-experience what the characters go through, but it also supports an active and conscious process of characterisation which has readers examining different sources of information on characters, including their own emotional responses, critically. The characters which emerge are polyphonous, multidimensional creations of both the text and our imaginations.

Chapter 5: Characterisation through Speech – *Der Stechlin*

Character speech plays a key role in Fontane's novels. They contain a large number of monologues, but even more conversations between the characters. In his last completed novel, *Der Stechlin*, almost three-quarters of the text consists of direct speech and only one quarter of narration. As the author himself famously summarised in a letter to the editor of *Über Land und Meer*: 'Zum Schluß stirbt ein Alter und zwei Junge heiraten sich; - das ist so ziemlich alles, was auf 500 Seiten geschieht.'¹⁶⁴ It has attracted much critical attention since its first heyday in the 1960s, with analyses focusing on language on general and speech in particular, taking linguistic, political, historical, sociological, philosophical or narratological approaches.¹⁶⁵ Few have focused on conversation as a means of interaction between the characters. For the reader-text dynamic, speech becomes interesting as a means of communication that is shared among characters as well as between characters and readers. When characters speak up directly, the reader comes into contact with them without any mediation by the narrator. Observing our own reactions alongside those shown by the fictional recipients of a character's speech (such as the other dinner-table guests) can be an illuminating process. 'Ein literarisches Gespräch ist bewußt auf einen Leser hin konzipiert', says Peter Hasubek, one of the few critics who takes an interest in Fontane's readers.¹⁶⁶ Like many before him, he insists that Fontane presents the most human qualities, 'das Menschlichste' through language – but any language in a novel is a form of communication rather than language spoken into a void, as, even with monologues, the reader is always listening. How does language influence our co-creation of characters and our interaction with them?

¹⁶⁴ WSB, Abt. 4, V, p. 420 (letter to Adolf Hoffmann, May/June 1897)

¹⁶⁵ see Chambers, *Erzählwerk*, pp. 40-46

¹⁶⁶ Hasubek, p. 65

Conversation as Communication

Conversation, by its etymology, meant social interaction before it came to mean (only) the act of speaking to one another, more closely resembling the meaning of ‘communication’. A text that only consists of words has no other means of communicating with the reader than through speech, in the mode of conversation. Yet a conversation usually includes at least two participants rather than an active speaker and a passive listener. Fontane’s dinner parties offer an ingenious solution to this dilemma: in their polyphony, a multitude of fictional readers appears, and they all react and answer to one another’s speech alongside the actual reader (who does so in thought). ‘Das Sprechen zielt auf einen Partner’, observes Gerhard Bauer in his *Zur Poetik des Dialogs*; a speaker needs an audience.¹⁶⁷ However, he also notes that when conversations take place among more than two people, speech is no longer aimed at a specific recipient and thus becomes less clear.¹⁶⁸ Similar to the idea of Stanley Fish’s context-embedded understanding (see chapter two), Bauer emphasises the importance of shaping speech according to the personality, social standing, age and background of the recipient. When talking to a group, this task becomes impossible as its members will never share every trait, resulting in speech becoming, as Bauer says, blurred. These utterances will contain more general subtexts that can be understood by anyone, not just by a particular individual, and will aim not for specific personality traits, but broad aspects shared by all those assembled, like the level of social standing or the educational background. As they are unable to take the characteristics of an individual listener into account, their reception by listeners is less predictable and can more easily produce a gap between intended and received meaning. To the reader, this type of speech reveals what attributes a group shares, rather than what sets its members apart. The various

¹⁶⁷ G. Bauer, p. 1

¹⁶⁸ G. Bauer, p. 70-72

possible reactions on the other hand can reveal the different levels of empathy with characters – the degree to which they are able to read an utterance in the context of the speaker and the situation, or fail to do so and relate it only to themselves (as if it had been specifically aimed at them). Many conversations in *Der Stechlin* have several participants, and even though, as Hasubek points out, bigger groups are always broken down into smaller units, the problem of unclear recipients remains the same.¹⁶⁹ The text proposes a number of different ways of dealing with this issue. It does not offer a solution but rather highlights the difficulties it poses to both characters and readers.

An advantage of such ‘blurred speech’ is that it contains multiple meanings which, as Wolfgang Preisendanz points out, narration would have to state successively instead of allowing them to coexist simultaneously.¹⁷⁰ For the reading process, this means that the reader is confronted with raw material which he has to unpack, interpret and connect himself. Characters who present themselves in their own words, rather than being presented in the words of the narrator, demand a more active reading. They speak not only to each other, but to the reader, forcing the narrator to the margins. The characters thus take central stage, transforming themselves from objects of narration to narrating subjects. It is no surprise then, nor a sign of fading creative forces, that character speech begins to take over the narration in Fontane’s later novels: it is the logical development towards co-created characters.¹⁷¹ Reading direct speech mirrors social interaction more closely than a narrative description of it could. It invites empathy on the part of the reader whose experience is more immediate. When we can experience conversations as real-time events rather than a reported event in the past, we are enabled to feel as if we

¹⁶⁹ Hasubek, p. 112

¹⁷⁰ Preisendanz, p. 476

¹⁷¹ Critics who have seen it as an example of ‘fading forces’ include Peter Demetz, who describes it as ‘wuchernde Causerie, die sich immer selbstherrlicher aus dem Zusammenhang des Romans löst’ (Demetz, p. 134).

ourselves participate in them more easily, which encourages us to respond emotionally. Rather than just imaginatively projecting themselves into a described situation, readers actually find themselves in the same position as the characters. Both are listening (reading) to a speaker and receiving information in real time. When comparing the answers which we provide to characters' statements with our own inner voice to those given by other characters, and our emotional reactions to theirs, we are participating in an active and engaging reading process.

Speech, 'das Menschlichste'

Many critics who have commented on the 'human element' ('das Menschliche') in Fontane's characters in connection with speech seem to have an implicit understanding of this process. '[Die Sprache verlieren] bedeutet für eine Fontane'sche Gestalt, sie hat aufgehört zu existieren.' '[Fontane] erzählt, indem er andere in ihrer Sprache sprechen läßt.' 'Vor allem ist das gesprochene Wort der Hauptschlüssel der Charaktere, der besonders im Dialog wirksam wird.'¹⁷² These statements are just a few examples of many similar comments, which acknowledge the vital connection between fictional characters and language in Fontane without pointing out what it is that makes this link so intrinsic. The characters themselves repeatedly draw the reader's attention to it, as does the Princess in *Unwiederbringlich* – 'Das Menschlichste, was wir haben, ist doch die Sprache, und wir haben sie, um zu sprechen' – or Dubslav in this novel – 'Und dann sollen wir uns ja auch durch die Sprache vom Tier unterscheiden. Also wer am meisten red't, ist der reinste Mensch.'¹⁷³ Both of these comments have been analysed as philosophical statements on language. However, they are found in a work of fiction and spoken by two characters whose language and opinions, as linguists and biographers

¹⁷² Sakrawa, p. 27; Honnefelder, p. 214 and Krickler, p. 109

¹⁷³ *GBA*, I/13, p. 108; I/17, p. 24

have shown, closely mirrors Fontane's own. If one reads them as meta-statements through which the fictional elements explain their own workings, then the characters are stating that through speech, they can emerge most clearly in our minds as people. Speech is what is most human says the Princess, and it should be used to talk. Whoever speaks most is the most pure human being, says Dubslav, but 'rein' can also mean 'clear', making the character who talks most the one that will be most defined and vivid in the reader's imagination. Fontane's characters and their critics reveal them to be social at their core, and conversation as our primary mode of social interaction has to play a central role in the novels populated by these characters.

What to talk about

While the reasons for this abundance of speech in the novel have not yet been subject to careful scrutiny, the information which the characters reveal about themselves and each other has been analysed. Many exhaustive and intelligent studies have been published on the content and style of character speech, examining Fontane in general and *Der Stechlin* in particular. Their findings will be briefly summarised here, as the way in which readers deal with character information has already been analysed in the previous chapter. More attention will be given to the difference between direct speech and narration for the reading process, and the influence it has on the reader's ability to relate to characters.

Elsbeth Hamann's narratological approach divides the conversations into different types, of which only the expository one primarily serves character illumination. Nevertheless, many critics have found a great deal to say about these conversations and the characters who participate in them. Julius Petersen, Peter Demetz, Hubert Ohl, Konstantina Delbruyère, Rainer Kolk and Gerhard Neumann are just a few examples of

many who have analysed the content of the dialogues. Their findings show that characters reveal their political convictions, their education and their personal history as they speak. A character who always tries to voice his own opinion, such as Niels Wrschowitz, is shown to be self-centred, while those who often refrain from doing so, like Dubslav, participate in conversations more altruistically and see them as places of social interaction rather than utilising them as a podium. ‘Steckenpferde’, favourite topics often repeated, are another way of using speech in a self-centred manner and are thus attributed to the characters who are most stuck in their opinions, who most overestimate their own importance. The type of hobby horse furthermore shows the source of their sense of self-worth: Rex always returns to the church and morals (‘Sittlichkeit’), while Herr Gundermann tries to mention his mills at least once per social encounter, ideally in connection with his political stance: ‘Wasser auf die Mühlen der Sozialdemokratie’.¹⁷⁴ Through using this rhetorical cliché, Gundermann highlights both his repetitive speech patterns and the source of his income. Having only recently risen in the social hierarchy through the wealth generated by his mills, his choice of words shows him to be an ‘arriviste’. Theoretical discussions are held by characters who are portrayed less positively than those who tell anecdotes, and this contrast is most apparent when these people talk to one another, for example Lorenzen and Dubslav, Rex and Czako. Dubslav is characterised as a social ‘Causeur’ from the first chapter: ‘er hörte gern eine freie Meinung, je drastischer und extremer, desto besser. [...] Er ließ sich gern was vorplaudern und plauderte selber gern.’¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ e.g. *GBA*, I/17, p. 17, 33 and 37

¹⁷⁵ *GBA*, I/17, p. 8

Dubslav is not just the character who talks the most, but also the one who takes up extreme or fixed positions most rarely: ‘Und er schmunzelte, wenn er dergleichen sagte, seine Hörer jedesmal in Zweifel darüber lassend, ob er’s ernsthaft oder scherzhaft gemeint habe.’¹⁷⁶ Some critics, such as Claudia Liebrand, have traced what they believe to be contradictions in his statements.¹⁷⁷ However, they carry a social meaning. They characterise Dubslav as someone who does not care much about presenting his own opinions, but instead enjoys talking as a means of connecting to others. To the reader, he is also the main point of connection to the text, the character who most strongly invites an emotional response through being the one who most honestly wants nothing else but to communicate and connect. Throughout the text, he complains about his loneliness and isolation, supported only by his loyal servant Engelke. Dubslav, Melusine and Czako are the characters who most enjoy conversation as an occasion of social play, but they do not come together regularly. Instead, Dubslav has to make do with ‘conversationalists’ like the Gundermanns. The contrast between the three ‘Causeurs’ and the characters whom we know to be Dubslav’s usual companions highlights his unhappiness. Readers are invited to relate to Dubslav with empathy through the way this information is portrayed: it is not commented on by the narration, but developed, demonstrated by direct speech. Reading these conversations, the different effects statements, made by ‘Causeurs’ like Czako on the one hand, and ‘theorists’ like Rex or Lorenzen on the other, have on characters are not hidden from the reader. While the former are a joy to read, the latter contain little source of amusement. In recreating Dubslav’s mental isolation and then his joy in conversation, the reader is allowed to experience and emotionally react to the elements of this character’s life.

¹⁷⁶ *GBA*, I/17, p. 9

¹⁷⁷ Liebrand, p. 253

How to talk

The profound effect this technique has on the reader can explain why this protagonist is beloved and remembered by readers and critics alike; he connects to the reader very strongly. Many have commented on the content of speech regarding both Dubslav and those who surround him, and they are met by an equal number of linguistic analysts. The way in which these characters talk has been illuminated by critics such as Peter Demetz, Bruno Hildebrandt, Richard Brinkmann, Eberhard Lämmert, Herman Meyer (who focuses on quotations), Hubert Ohl, Ingrid Mittenzwei, Wolfgang Preisendanz and Peter Hasubek. Julius Petersen analysed the importance of linguistic style for the author's character creation, and his findings are illuminating for the relation between author and fictional character. All of these critics agree that in *Der Stechlin*, 'it is the manner in which the author causes his characters to speak that determines what kind of characters they are.'¹⁷⁸ However, the extent to which this stylistic variety is overshadowed by a 'Fontane tone' is debatable.¹⁷⁹ There is no disagreement about the importance of language, though: the characters themselves consciously reflect upon their speech. 'Kann eigentlich Fremdwörter nicht leiden. Aber mitunter sind sie doch ein Segen,' and 'verzeih den Kalauer, ich bin eigentlich gegen Kalauer, die sind so mehr für Handlungsreisende', says Dubslav; 'Schon das Wort macht mir jedesmal ein Unbehagen. Es hat solch ausgesprochen katholischen Beigeschmack', says his sister Adelheid (the word being 'beichten').¹⁸⁰ Characters who are alike in spirit are also alike in their style of speech, like Czako and Dubslav. Others, who have been shown to keep returning to their favourite topics, also have notable favourite words and terms: "Stabilierung" zählte zu Rex' Lieblingswendungen und entstammte jenem sorglich

¹⁷⁸ Meyer, p. 170

¹⁷⁹ Examples of those who argue for a strong 'Fontane tone' are Heilborn, p. 50 or Hildebrandt, p. 150.

¹⁸⁰ *GBA*, I/17, p. 73, 56 and 96

ausgewählten Fremdwörterschatz, den er sich [...] aus den Erlassen König Friedrich Wilhelms I. angeeignet und mit in sein Aktendeutsch herübergenommen hatte.’¹⁸¹

These points have been mentioned by many critics, but a few studies deserve to be singled out for their analyses of specific topics. Hildebrandt takes a linguistic approach to Dubslav’s speech, showing a connection between the abundant use of modal verbs as well as long, hypotactic phrases and the characters’ passivity.¹⁸² Meyer sheds light on the use of quotations, tracing which ones are used and how each character uses them (concluding, for example, that Dubslav’s often imprecise use shows a relaxed attitude rather than a lack of education).¹⁸³ Accents (see for example Niels Wrschowitz) and local dialect (Agnes, Buschen, occasionally Engelke and Dubslav) have been noted by several critics and been discussed as signs of a character’s geographic origin or social class, as well as sources of mockery and humour. Walter Müller-Seidel notices the main character’s colloquial tone: ‘[Dubslav] gewinnt unsere Sympathie, indem er so spricht, wie wir es lesen,’ and tantalisingly states ‘daß diese Romanfigur das, was sie ist, durch die Sprache ist.’¹⁸⁴ Why does it make Dubslav more sympathetic if he speaks in a more colloquial manner and what does that make him to the reader? Müller-Seidel does not answer these questions, as he follows a different approach to the novel, but they are of interest for the relation between character and reader. Dubslav’s tone, through being colloquial, more closely resembles the tone of one’s inner voice and thoughts (even more so for the author’s contemporary readers), blurring the lines between Dubslav as presented in the text and Dubslav as we imagine and create him in our heads. The reader can align himself with Dubslav and his perspective not just by experiencing his isolation

¹⁸¹ *GBA*, I/17, p. 31

¹⁸² Hildebrandt, p. 142

¹⁸³ Meyer, chapter VIII, especially pp. 194-99

¹⁸⁴ Müller-Seidel, pp. 439-40

and joy in conversation as aforementioned, but also on a linguistic level. The easier a text makes it for its readers to mirror its characters, the more it invites empathy, which itself is a mirroring process.

Social Groupings

Three aspects of conversation that have less frequently been the object of critical analysis are the social grouping of the participants, the social use they make of speech, and the influence of their perspectives on the reader. Social groupings, the bringing together of characters who by means of comparison or contrast serve to highlight one another's traits, are even more effective in direct speech than they are in narration, as they allow characters to clash or harmonise directly with each other. During the visit to Kloster Wutz, Melusine and Adelheid highlight their differences, while Czako and Rex try to approach one another despite standing in for world and church respectively.¹⁸⁵ Melusine's eloquence brings out Armgard's silence more strongly, as the latter's tendency to allude contrasts with her sister's directness (for example in chapter three, the engagement). However, Melusine, like Czako, means well and does not use her abilities to her sister's disadvantage. 'Im Gegenteil sind ihre kommunikativen Intentionen produktiv', observes Rainer Kolk.¹⁸⁶

Conversations between defenders of different ways of life outnumber those between kindred spirits. Not only does this serve to present each side and thus each character more clearly; it also influences the reading process. Again, it seems that many critics have noticed this effect without connecting it to the reader: 'Der Gesellschaftsroman hat nicht genug an der Sprache. Er will das Gespräch, denn die Substanz des Menschen

¹⁸⁵ *GBA*, I/17, e.g. p. 17 (Czako sees a magic castle, Rex a church)

¹⁸⁶ Kolk, p. 65

verwirklicht sich im Miteinander.’ ‘Indem Fontane also häufig auf das strukturelle Mittel des Gesprächs zurückgreift, stellt er vor allem den Menschen und das Menschliche in den Vordergrund.’¹⁸⁷ These statements by Demetz and Fürstenberg draw out the link between the human element and society (the social core of these characters), but they do not explain why a novel about people needs conversations. Mittenzwei is a little more clear when she says: ‘Die Vorliebe für das Gespräch, in dem Meinungen und Ansichten entstehen und gegeneinanderstehen, faßt den Menschen als Glied einer Gemeinschaft.’¹⁸⁸ The number of conversations in Fontane’s novels, most remarkably in *Der Stechlin* clearly shows that the characters are seen as part of a social web. Gerhard Bauer, who writes on dialogue theory in fiction rather than Fontane, indicates what it means for a fictional character to be dependent on conversation with others: ‘Das Gespräch setzt in Bewegung und schafft Verbindung, und zwar nicht erst nachträgliche Verbindungen zwischen fertig konzipierten Figuren, sondern konstitutive Beziehungen, die ihrerseits das Erscheinungsbild der sprechenden Figuren modeln oder ummodeln.’¹⁸⁹ The characters define themselves, and are thus created by the reader, through others and in their relation to others. Even when alone, the characters remain mentally connected to the social web they are part of, and they understand their own identity in relation to it.¹⁹⁰ The majority of soliloquies held by men and women alike deal either with other characters or with the speaker’s own position in the social context.¹⁹¹ Through being present in the mind of the character who is physically alone, others maintain a constant mental presence. Characters see themselves as embedded in the social fabric of which they are so intrinsically a part.

¹⁸⁷ Demetz, p. 130 and Fürstenberg, p. 9

¹⁸⁸ Mittenzwei, p. 10

¹⁸⁹ G. Bauer, p. 246

¹⁹⁰ Reflecting for example on the social repercussions of their plans, as Holk does when deciding to leave Christine for Ebba in *Unwiederbringlich*, or on their own social standing, like Effi Briest after her adultery is discovered.

¹⁹¹ E.g. Holk in *Unwiederbringlich*, Gordon in *Cécile*, Effi Briest and Mathilde Möhring.

Despite paying little attention to the role of the reader, Fürstenberg's study of 'Klatsch' in Fontane examines conversations as a means of social depiction and judgement. In her analysis of *Effi Briest* and *L'Adultera*, she points out the double role of gossip: as the characters reveal scandalous secrets about others to one another. Fontane, having based these two stories on real events, does the same to the reader. The novel portrays gossip taking place between characters, and during those episodes, it acts as gossip between author and reader. The implications are clear: on yet another level, the reader can mirror and partake in the same activity as the characters, he too is the direct recipient of 'Klatsch' when he listens to the social transgressions being relayed to him by the narrator. As the characters pass moral judgement, so do the readers. In gossip, antipathy and sympathy are at play: sympathy between the two participants, antipathy towards the object of gossip. However, by being able to observe this process through the characters at the same time as partaking in it, the reader is made aware of how easily one's opinion of others is influenced by personal considerations and sympathy or antipathy. The object of discussion is usually the main character (Melanie van der Straaten in *L'Adultera*, Effi Briest or Cécile), a character the reader has come to approach emotionally throughout the course of the novel. Instead of falling into the same trap, readers are thus encouraged to become aware of the process, just as one comes to understand how Dubslav's tolerance emerges from a deep need to connect to others.

Social Aims

The use which Dubslav makes of speech is a further indicator of his central trait, as it is for many other characters. In his theory, Bauer distinguishes four main groups of conversation depending on their aim: to communicate or understand, to conflict, to analyse or debate a topic, and to connect emotionally and share similar opinions (he names this fourth one 'free conversation', as it is the least restricted by formal or

structural concerns). Examples of the third group include Rex, Adelheid or Wrschowitz, while Melusine and Czako frequently engage in indirect self-representation (a type not mentioned by Bauer). The latter two as well as Dubslav also use their way with words to ease conversation for everyone, underlining that they speak to connect to those around them. Others also help group conversations along, such as Czako who comes to the aid of Fräulein Schmargendorf – ‘Die Rundliche geriet in eine momentane Verlegenheit, Czako selbst aber kam ihr mit großer Courtoisie zu Hilfe’ – or Lorenzen who helps Oberförster Katzler – ‘Katzler [...] auf dem Gebiete der Konversation doch nur von einer oft unzureichenden Orientierungsfähigkeit [...] fand sich nicht gleich zurecht und war froh, als ihm der [...] Pastor [...] zur Hilfe kam.’¹⁹² However, it is Dubslav who stands out for prioritising the comfort of others over his own opinions. He takes back a statement which Herr Gundermann attacks as he wants to avoid having to contradict him, and saves Czako from having to agree with an opinion that Dubslav knows the young man does not share.¹⁹³ The encounter with Herr Gundermann, when Dubslav says: ‘Versteht sich, lieber Gundermann. Was ich da gesagt habe... Wenn ich das Gegenteil gesagt hätte, wäre es ebenso richtig.’, has been seen as mockery.¹⁹⁴ However, the first sentence shows that Dubslav is not needlessly vague or seeks to embarrass Gundermann; he takes back his statement out of consideration for his partner in conversation because he cares most of all about keeping the communication going in a friendly manner.

Dubslav’s loneliness, especially in the early part of the novel when his son Woldemar has only recently arrived to bring change into his daily life, is so intense that he does not

¹⁹² *GBA*, I/17, e.g. p. 101 and p. 32

¹⁹³ *GBA*, I/17, e.g. p. 29 and p. 31

¹⁹⁴ e.g. Bowman, ‘Stechlin’, p. 883

care who he talks to. During one of the earlier conversations, this is especially obvious. Dubslav begins by talking to Frau Gundermann, but the recipient changes to Herr Gundermann in mid-speech: 'Diese Worte Dubslavs hatten sich anfänglich an die Frau von Gundermann, sehr bald aber mehr an Gundermann selbst gerichtet.'¹⁹⁵ In contrast to characters like Czako, who delights in the reactions his witty anecdotes cause in chapter three, Dubslav is not looking for an audience to applaud him. He is willing to take back statements (with Gundermann), to free his partner from having to answer him (with Czako), as long as he can interact with someone through language. In the small groups that come together, speech is rarely aimed at a specific recipient, even though it is modified stylistically and linguistically according to the participants of each conversation (Dubslav switches from 'Plattdeutsch' to 'Hochdeutsch' with ease). It is an open attempt to converse, communicate and connect to others, including the reader.

Polyphony

Even though they take care not to antagonise each other most of the time, the characters still present different points of view on matters. While the details of their individual opinions have been discussed by a number of critics – a short list was given at the beginning – the polyphony of perspectives provides not only rich information on characters, but a specific kind of information. It needs to be unpacked by the reader, yet it is also delivered directly, without mediation. This leaves readers in a dilemma: without the guidance of a narrator, how are we to tell which representation is correct? We could believe in Melusine's or Armgard's description of England, Dubslav's or Herr Gundermann's critique of telegrams. Even more difficult are descriptions of people: is Melusine really as Woldemar describes her, does Czako do her justice, does

¹⁹⁵ *GBA*, I/17, p. 28

Dubslav?¹⁹⁶ Hasubek observes: ‘An die Stelle der (meist eindeutigen) Sicherheit des wissenden Erzählers tritt die weniger sichere Perspektivenvielfalt als Ausdruck der (relativen) Selbstständigkeit der Figuren.’¹⁹⁷ While the narrator is not always certain, as we have seen in *Cécile* (see chapter four), Hasubek’s statement highlights an often overlooked factor of polyphony. It confronts readers with a range of choices, forcing them to judge for themselves the extent to which any of these perspectives are accurate or determined by other factors. They have to piece together reality like a mosaic, making the reading process an active one.

Understanding and relating to the social context in which speech is delivered, as well as the background and character of speaker and addressee(s), are essential skills for readers if they are to unpack and interpret character speech with success. The world and actions we encounter in this novel are represented by (largely socially) determined speech, be it descriptions, comments or jokes. Most importantly, we not only meet the characters, but the characters as they appear to others, the characters as they are when in the company of different people, the characters as they want to appear to others. Identity is mediated by a variety of perspectives that create a multi-perspectival experience rather than a single image. Deception forms no part of this game. None of the characters lies; they all show themselves and each other as they believe is true. Truth depends on the point of view taken, and while some characters’ perspectives are shown to be less reliable for being more determined by personal factors, with the majority of counter-representations, it is hard to give preference to any of them. Character is shown to be a phenomenon that can only be fully experienced socially. Through tapping into our

¹⁹⁶ *GBA*, I/17, see for example chapter 10 for the different impressions of Melusine and Adelheid after the dinner at Kloster Wutz.

¹⁹⁷ Hasubek, p. 214

abilities to show empathy while reading and imagining, we are able to mirror the characterisation process that the conversational partners take part in. As they aim to understand and connect to each other, they create an image of the other in their mind, and so do we. Characters not only emerge through conversation but are defined by it.

Conclusion

There is no one true reality to be uncovered within the web of co-presentation that the characters spin during their many excursions and dinner parties. As Liebrand puts it: ‘Die individualisierte Sprache seiner Menschen ist nicht bloß ein Mittel zu ihrer psychologischen Charakterisierung: ihre Sprache artikuliert, was ihnen als ‘Welt’ begegnet.’¹⁹⁸ The reader is invited to take part in their conversations by lending the characters voices in his head and answering them before the other characters do, connecting to them in the process. However, the journey is the reward, as the narration provides no map against which to check how far one has come. Trying to find the other behind the veil of one’s own projections is not something that can ever be fully achieved, though one can be closer to or further from reaching it. Through a changing set of conversational partners, the reader can gain an idea of the characters, but never see a clear-cut presentation of them. As readers, we know the characters as much as anyone can: they only exist as creations, images in their own minds or those of others, in the imagination of the author and the reader. With *Der Stechlin*, readers can embark on this process of creation alongside characters who approach one another and create one another. The reader can listen in on the characters’ conversations as if they were present, they are not reported by the narrator but directly accessible. ‘Alles Erlebte wird erst was durch den, der es erlebt,’ Woldemar tells Melusine, urging her to speak.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Liebrand, p. 152

¹⁹⁹ *GBA*, I/17, p. 255

Fontane's characters are shown to be fundamentally social through the way they speak. It is when readers connect to them as social beings through empathy, through having heard about and felt for themselves the loneliness of Dubslav and the charm of Melusine, that they can fully experience the scope of these characters.

Chapter 6: Character Development – *Mathilde Möhring* and

L'Adultera

Character development often plays an important, if not central, role in novels which focus on literary characters, such as the 'Bildungsroman', – and the novels of Theodor Fontane. *Mathilde Möhring* and *L'Adultera* both tell the stories of women who end up in a different place to where they started out, but can the changes these characters go through be described as a 'development'? There are different concepts of character development available to us, ranging from a teleological process or near-linear improvement over a change of direction at a pivotal moment to an unfolding of personality. Characters, who consist of various personal impressions, as the two previous chapters have shown to be the case for the characters of *Cécile* and *Der Stechlin*, pose a challenge as the reader is never even sure who they are to begin with. Whether these can be said to 'change' or 'develop' will be investigated. What role does any of these three concepts play for the reading process, and most importantly for the character creation the reader undertakes?

Concepts of Development

Before attempting to answer these questions, the three different concepts of character development mentioned above should be briefly outlined; each will be discussed in detail later on. A teleological development is a linear accumulation of improvements towards an ultimate goal (a more mature character, the idea of personal growth), a change of direction might take place after a traumatic event which fundamentally changes a character thereafter, and an unfolding of personality is the gradual discovery of different aspects which make up a character. It might seem that the first two concepts

suggest characters are dynamic, while the third one sees them as static. However, different sides of a character can be visible or hidden at different points in time, leading the characters themselves, the other characters surrounding them and the reader to experience the discovery of the various aspects as dynamic, too. When asking how far these three concepts of development apply to the characters of Fontane, it is important to remember that these are fictional characters who are not bound by the same rules as real people.

One of the many differences between real people and fictional characters is that we expect the former to change and potentially improve throughout their lifetime, but not necessarily the latter. If a character does not develop, they are seen as static, leading to a less interesting reading experience as the characters' actions and thoughts become increasingly predictable to the reader. However, characters, by virtue of being products of our imagination, are more complex than the dichotomy of interesting change or boring static fixtures might suggest. Fontane's characters are not, nor do they recreate, the people we meet in reality. Rather, they are the impressions we have of them, the way we imagine and remember them: a dynamic multitude of images which we evaluate differently depending on our own development. They keep the reader engaged because we never know which side of a character is going to respond to a given situation, or whether we will now discover a new aspect of them.

Whether a character in a story of any kind changes depends on many factors. For example, does character development serve the story's purpose? Did the author imagine his characters' biographies over a course of time, is that timespan portrayed in the work? Some genres, such as the 'Bildungsroman', depend on character development. They make it necessary for the author to imagine a character over a longer course of

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time, although this only applies to main characters and not usually to secondary characters. Today, we might easily take the idea of character development as a given, one of the many expectations drawn from reality and applied to fiction. However, it is important to remember that even for reality, neither scientists nor scholars of the humanities agree on the importance that environmental influences play compared to inheritance or pre-natal influences. Fundamentally, do we think of development as the accumulation of influences that made us who we are today or do we think of it as a line of situations and people we encountered that allowed different aspects of us to flourish? Is it a matter of realising one's inherent potential, discovering oneself in the course of one's lifetime or do our life experiences shape us into different people to such a degree that at a certain stage, our path allows no going back? We could, for example, be born artistic, although that talent might be nourished and discovered only at an advanced age because of circumstance, or we become artistic because of being pushed in that direction and supported in this way early on, making it impossible for somebody lacking these early experiences to become an artist later in life. Developmental psychologists have been working on these questions for many decades, but the development of personality remains a puzzle unsolved.

One might argue that the concept of personality development concerning real people held by the author is vital to understanding his characters (did he for example believe in personality traits being passed down genetically). This approach would be informative for the author-text relation, but has nothing to offer for the text-reader interaction, unless one looks specifically at the reception by an author's contemporary audience. For the readership of any era, the following key questions shape their experience of character development in a work of literature. To what degree does the text enable the reader to focus on the development? An action-packed page-turner will give less time

for reflection on the subtleties of personality than Fontane's calm, slow-paced novels. What are the implications of character development compared to reading static characters, and are the two mutually exclusive? This chapter will investigate how and if Fontane's characters can fit into these categories.

Teleological Development

The much-debated genre of the 'Bildungsroman' might serve to bring out the concept of character development in Fontane by contrast. I do not want to attempt to class any of Fontane's novels within this genre, nor partake in the debate surrounding it. As Helen Chambers has already pointed out, 'der Begriff *Bildungsroman* passt auf keinen seiner Romane.'²⁰⁰ On a sliding scale which sees the concept of teleological character development that approaches a near linear, smooth journey of improvement as one pole and stable, predictable characters as the other, this genre is clearly closer to a dynamic than to a static concept of character, especially when compared to the novels of Fontane. The 'Bildungsroman' has a clear teleology: its goal is to portray the journey of a young character who matures and develops through confrontation with the external world. These novels trace the different stages of a development which build on one another, contrasting the character that started with the one who arrives at the ending. The 'Bildungsroman' aims to present an accumulative gain of experience. The prime example, by critics of the genre seen to be perhaps the only true 'Bildungsroman', is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.²⁰¹ It focuses on the development of the hero towards maturity, his literal and metaphorical journey through the world. Critics have tried to sum up the essence of the genre by describing the character development that takes place in this work. Wilhelm Dilthey's famous definition stresses the stages of the

²⁰⁰ Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 130

²⁰¹ See Selbmann, chapter II and Hardin's introduction for the genre debate.

growth process which are shown in the novel.²⁰² Jürgen Jacobs and Markus Krause believe the key element to be ‘daß der Entwicklungsgang einer zentralen Figur erzählt wird, der über bald bereichernde, bald desillusionierende Erfahrungen zur Selbstfindung [...] führt.’²⁰³ Both definitions would suggest that this kind of teleological character development cannot be found in Fontane: his main characters are predominantly too old for the reader to witness their coming of age, with the exceptions of Grete Minde and Effi Briest. However, the early death of both these women prevents them from ever seeing any development through. The second definition presents not a growth process, but self-discovery as the central element. Self-discovery sees experience as a gain of information on the self rather than an exterior input of information.²⁰⁴ Can we speak of factual information regarding Fontane’s characters? Does the concept of truth, on which the idea of self-discovery builds, hold when confronted with the many perspectives offered by Fontane’s polyphonous novels?

A third definition by Martin Swales describes the ‘Bildungsroman’ as a show of potentiality versus limited self-realisation.²⁰⁵ Melitta Gerhard, who sees the ‘Bildungsroman’ as a subgenre of the wider ‘Entwicklungsroman’, follows a similar teleological concept which sees development as the forming of personality.²⁰⁶ Again, the kinship between these definitions and real-life experience is clear: at birth, all doors are open to us, and as we age, we make choices and choose paths – schools, universities, professions, partners – that narrow down the options for subsequent choices. If this process of self-realisation is applied to fiction, more specifically in Fontane’s novels, the characters would have to show signs of being ‘limited’ in higher

²⁰² Dilthey, e.g. *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin*

²⁰³ Jacobs and Krause, p. 20

²⁰⁴ As explored for example by Terence Cave in *Recognitions*.

²⁰⁵ Swales, *Bildungsroman*, p. 29

²⁰⁶ Gerhard, pp. 1-2

age rather than allowing readers to imagine them in an ever-changing array of circumstance and company. From the many possible examples, *Mathilde Möhring* and *L'Adultera* show most clearly that these characters are able to transform their lives, but whether they develop towards a new self in the process, or simply present more strongly formerly thwarted aspects of their personalities, will be analysed.

In his definition of the genre, Swales also stresses the connection between the adventures and the hero as a central element of the 'Bildungsroman'; the effect which the events have on the hero's personality are what justifies their mention in the novel.²⁰⁷ Again, the difference from Fontane's novels is obvious: there is a striking lack of adventures. Instead of events impacting on the main character and shaping him or her, Fontane presents people who each encounter a different side of our main character and have a different image of them. The many dinner parties, country trips and afternoon walks, during which the characters discuss everything and anything, allow them to show various facets of their inherently social selves – but can the images held by other characters build on one another to form the stages of a teleological character development?

The 'Bildungsroman' shows a protagonist's development towards maturity, a growth process during which the hero adapts to and finds his place in the world. A sense of progression is central to it. Many critics have pointed out that this is a notion originating from a specific time and tied to it, while others see works such as Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* or Hesse's *Demian* as later examples of the genre.²⁰⁸ Whether we see its concept anchored to the late eighteenth century or not, it can serve to bring out the

²⁰⁷ Swales, *Bildungsroman*, p. 23

²⁰⁸ e.g. Swales, *ibid.*

difference between the notion of teleological development and that of a many-faceted character which unfolds. The 'Bildungsroman' hero develops under external influences, and the results of these developments are thus applicable to the external world: skills and opinions. It is a learning process through which he discovers how to apply himself to the world and who he is in relation to it, where he stands and fits in. The 'Bildungsroman' presents a process which leads to a result. The character is thus represented from an objective point of view.

Developing within Society

Fontane's characters largely represent each other from their own subjective points of view, making it difficult for readers to judge whether images of the main character present any kind of change at all, or simply depend on the eye of the character beholding them. His novels also feature little interaction with the world in the form of journeys and adventures, but instead offer an abundance of interpersonal contact. Characters are rarely alone and if so they remain linked to their friends and family, to society, in thought (see chapter five). Their confrontation is not with a factual world, but with the perspectives of others. Their own imagined world and self collide or fuse with the imagined worlds and selves of those surrounding them. As readers, we receive few if any glimpses of an objective reality regarding characterisation, especially in the later novels. This process differs from the teleological concept key to the genre of the 'Bildungsroman', and consequently leads to a different reading experience. What Fontane's characters develop into cannot possibly be anything factual, as they are rarely confronted with facts where characterisation is concerned.²⁰⁹ Instead of external

²⁰⁹ Those who are, like Holk in *Unwiederbringlich*, who is turned down by noble lady Ebba when he asks her to marry him, have shown themselves to be self-delusional to a point where this input of information from action (i.e. her rejection) does not have much of an effect.

information, Fontane's characters observe, often with astonishment, their different reflections in the eyes of others. In the 'Bildungsroman', the reader follows an often omniscient narrator who presents the stages of a process, but in novels dominated by characters' voices, the reader is in the same position as any other fictional character: he takes part in the conversation that is the text, trying to make sense of it and participate in it through his own imagination.

Where the 'Bildungsroman' hero sets out to find his place in society, Fontane's characters start from within it. Lisa Downward and Giovanna Summerfield establish the subcategory of the female-protagonist 'Bildungsroman', which they divide into the novel of awakening, the novel of development and the novel of action. These are characterised by self-realisation with three different results: it cannot be put into practice and thus results in suicide, it leads to a 'mild' integration of certain discovered qualities into life, or to a drastic change of circumstances through which it is realised.²¹⁰ If these categories were applied to Fontane's novels, the story of Christine Holk could be an example of the novel of awakening, Mathilde Möhring of the novel of development and Melanie van der Straaten of the novel of action. Contrary to the previous definitions of the 'Bildungsroman', Downward and Summerfield put greater emphasis on the internal process compared to the confrontation with the external world. However, their concept remains teleological as it describes a process at whose end a different self is achieved, or has been failed to achieve, resulting in death – either way the old self will not endure. There is no such clear sense of direction, of goal or aim, or even just of change, for many of Fontane's characters. The lack of it has implications for the novel and for the reader. These novels do not present the different stages of a

²¹⁰ Summerfield and Downward, p. 171

development towards a richer self. Instead, they offer many different instances of character. Readers cannot follow a guiding narration, but have to grapple with the material presented by the direct speech of characters; it is unmediated. Characters have to be pieced together from their various images without much guidance, without a narrative blueprint against which to check the truth of one's own character creation. This process is engaging and personal, it requires the reader to invest both rationally and emotionally in characters in order to bring them to life.

Hints of Development

However, there are a few instances in the novels that could be read as development hinted: a developmental process is not shown, but hinted at as having taken place. Examples include the narration of Cécile's past, the implied former Jenny Treibel or Holk's indicated future. Have these characters developed, come to be who they are because of past experiences, or are their pasts and futures further aspects of their manifold personality? Jenny Treibel's past is alluded to because it shows her strong ambition, and while we only meet the woman who has successfully climbed the social ladder, it is the same strong-minded girl that got into this position in the first place. Jenny has not changed, she is able to exercise her powers to a greater extent because she finds herself in a different social situation. The consistency of her character serves to put greater emphasis on this aspect of her personality (her ambition) in the eyes of the reader. For Cécile, the opposite takes place. Having previously inhabited a near fairy-tale as the companion of the Prince, she was able to live off the adoration she craves. Now, a 'fallen woman' in the eyes of society, the lack of adoration has her wilting like a flower out of water, she becomes nervous and sickly. Both women are able to present aspects of their personality in different situations; their self-images depend heavily on the images held by those surrounding them. The only 'truth' to be discerned behind, or

perhaps better between, these projections is to be found through comparison and contrast by the reader; the narration only offers a few base lines (see chapter four). The indicated pasts of Cécile and Jenny are further pieces of the puzzle that the reader is trying to put together, not different stages of their development. They depend on the company and circumstance surrounding them, but unlike the 'Bildungsroman' hero, not on the teleological unfolding of the plot.

Similarly, we have little reason to believe that Holk will be less self-deluded in the future than he was in the past. His social position may suffer under Christine's suicide – his wishful self-image is unlikely to. The different facets of his character which he presents at Holkenäs with Christine and at the Danish court with Ebba are both projections from within rather than from others. While the two women are shown to foreground different aspects of themselves depending on the company they keep (and the images offered to them by that company), Holk sources his self-image within his own mind and thus presents a more constant outside behaviour. However, the change of scenery which the narration provides for all three makes the reader aware that, depending on what combination we meet characters in, the same people can appear in a different light. The reading process is absorbed in this complex character creation, there is no need for characters to 'develop' in order to lend relevance to external events (narrative teleology) or to create suspense (keep the reader interested).

Even though these characters do not change or teleologically develop, they are far from static. They emerge to the reader through an overlay of images provided by themselves and others, but the order of the information provided by these perspectives only has implications for the reading process, it does not give them a temporal order (as the stages of development in the 'Bildungsroman' do). On the contrary, the narration is built in such a way that it allows us to trace back aspects which have already been

mentioned in casual comments. Many seemingly unimportant observations by minor characters about major characters later connect to sides of them which were hidden in their previous situation. The duration of the novel gives characters the time to emerge slowly; it allows the reader to take part in every step of this process, creating a more powerful result for it. Gottfried Honnefelder observes: ‘Alles deutet vielmehr darauf hin, daß die augenblickliche Situation das Ergebnis einer stetigen Entwicklung ist, durch die keine eigentliche neue Lage geschaffen wird, sondern nur das schon immer Vorhandene zunehmend zutage tritt.’²¹¹ The reader not only takes part in a gradual revelation by the text, at the end of which he would be presented with an ultimate truth, but also participates in a construction process, the outcome of which is as much his own work as that of the author (and thus no objective, generalised truth). Character development starts with a *given* character and changes or develops it toward a new or modified version. The reader learns of the author’s conception of that character. An unfolding of character takes place at the origin of character itself. It enacts the process of character creation within the novel through the multiple perspectives offered, and in reading, we take part in it, lend it our rational and emotional capacities, engage our imagination. This second reading depends on empathic understanding of characters, while the former can lend itself to this approach, but does not demand it with the same necessity.

Mathilde Möhring and L’Adultera

The two novels that provide the best examples to show the concept of unfolding character are *L’Adultera* and *Mathilde Möhring*, as they might most easily be thought to show character development. Critics have paid much attention to the fact that the first of

²¹¹ Honnefelder, p. 203

these two novels is based on the real story of the Ravené scandal (1874), and the latter is unfinished. While these aspects play a role for the author-text approach, they are of less importance to the text-reader interaction and will thus not be analysed here. The two aspects that most clearly set an unfolding of character apart from character development are the consistency of personality traits and the importance of social perspectives (the images provided by others and the protagonists themselves). Mathilde and Melanie are shown to behave differently depending on the people who surround them, yet the reader also learns about aspects of them early on which he can later connect to the women he encounters at the end, who would otherwise appear quite unlike those he met at the beginning.

In *Mathilde Möhring*, we meet a typical example of the name which Cécile and Gordon discussed in *Cécile*.²¹² Mathilde, living alone with her mother after the death of her father, is indeed practically oriented, reliable, pragmatic, realistic and good-natured. Beyond her name, she is also shown to be intelligent and unafraid through contrast with her fearful but metaphorically short-sighted mother. While her father was alive, the narrator informs us, she received a good education, but at the point that the reader meets her, Mathilde is unable to make use of it and display the capacities she possesses. Their landlord gives the first perspective on Mathilde that foreshadows the woman we will later meet: he describes her as ‘immer fleißig’ and says that she is ‘ein sehr gebildetes Mädchen’.²¹³ These qualities describe not only the Mathilde whom the reader was unable to meet (before the beginning of the narration), but also the teacher at the very end. Her ascent is not made possible through new-found abilities, but realised with the core characteristics she possesses from the beginning. Agni Daffa describes Mathilde as

²¹² GBA, I/9, p. 95

²¹³ GBA, I/20, p. 7

characterised by ‘der von allen Schicksalsschlägen des Lebens unwandelbare innere Kern eines pragmatischen Kalküls.’²¹⁴ What changes throughout the novel is the perspectives from which Mathilde is shown (including her own): ‘Es hatte sich nichts verändert, und doch kam ihr alles ganz anders vor.’²¹⁵ Mathilde is the same, but she appears different to herself and the reader. With only the dim light of her mother’s companionship, her character was not allowed to shine. After the various new perspectives she encountered while being married to Hugo, she is able to piece together a more complete picture of herself along with the reader.

Two Women in Society

The two heroines move in different social directions. Mathilde goes from the lower edges of the middle class to the elite of a small town, and finally settles in a solid middle-class position. Melanie’s social movement is less circular. At the beginning of the novel, we find her as the wife of a rich financier, and hear that she has originated from a poorer, but aristocratic family. After an affair which leads to divorce and remarriage, shortly followed by the collapse of her new husband’s business, she has to rebuild her life and, like Mathilde, settles in a middle-class position. Some critics have described her ability to give direction to her own life as unique, such as Therese Wagner-Simon who observes approvingly ‘daß die Gestalt der Melanie van der Straaten einzigartig unter den Frauengestalten Fontanes dasteht, daß sie sich abhebt von den “languissanten”, fremdbestimmten Mädchengestalten.’²¹⁶ Perhaps guided by affection for a family member, this critic, who is the granddaughter of the real Therese Ravené behind the character Melanie van der Straaten, neglects the fact that Mathilde, too,

²¹⁴ Daffa, p. 248

²¹⁵ *GBA*, I/20, p. 114

²¹⁶ Wagner-Simon, p. 11

clearly does not fit the picture Wagner-Simon paints of Fontane's other female protagonists. Wagner-Simon claims that Melanie builds a new identity, but fails to see how similar her roles at the side of van der Straaten and Rubehn actually are. Early on, the narration describes her as graceful and cheerful, a perfect hostess. While at the side of her first husband, her humour saves her husband both in her own eyes and, at many social occasions, also in the eyes of others. At the side of Rubehn, her good-natured optimism helps her deal with their loss of wealth in a way which earns her the respect of society. Both times, Melanie uses her social graces to influence her social standing.

These positive qualities are balanced by a number of negative attributes. Melanie is also shown to be rather spoiled, having been the beloved child and later doted-on wife. She says herself that she always does what she wants, and even her close friend Rieckchen and her second husband Rubehn comment that Melanie only ever experienced having her wishes fulfilled (the latter compares her to a King Charles spaniel puppy).²¹⁷ It is not a sudden change then when she betrays her first husband, but a further example showing that she takes what she wants. She is also shown to be unhappy with her husband before the affair, the difference being that she decides to pay little attention to this fact. She mostly ignores van der Straaten's remarks that make her uncomfortable, or gives humorous answers. Isabel Nottinger describes Melanie as educated and well-mannered, whereas her husband, 'der mit dem Stemmeisen vertrauter als mit den gesellschaftlichen Umgangsformen ist,' cannot lay claim to the same level of refinement.²¹⁸ Melanie's sister also comments that the two spouses are a bad match in this regard, and the family friend Polizeirat Reiff observes the same.²¹⁹ As is done with

²¹⁷ *GBA*, I/4, p. 140 and 155

²¹⁸ Nottinger, p. 164

²¹⁹ *GBA*, I/4, p. 41 and 44

Schultze in *Mathilde Möhring*, this novel uses other characters' perspectives to draw the reader's attention to aspects of the main characters which would otherwise be hard to detect in their current situation, but which will later take centre stage. The heroines possess these character traits from the beginning; they were present even before the narration began.

Reading Social Perspectives

The reader is made aware of these aspects by other characters because they knew the protagonists before he encounters them, and because in this way, the text can present their observations as perspectives rather than facts. The result is that the reader is not given uncompromised information, as he knows that other characters are far from neutral observers – Melanie's sister likes to romanticise her own marriage in comparison with her brother-in-law, Schultze has taken a liking to Mathilde.

Information provided by characters requires careful reading and cannot necessarily be immediately integrated into the picture the reader forms of the character in his own mind. According to Schneider's model of cognitive processing (see chapter two), the manifold and unreliable information makes it impossible to integrate it immediately into a category. Since different characters often present conflicting information through their points of view, the reader has to make a judgement as to whom to believe and whom to ignore. He is forced to evaluate each piece of information as it becomes available and compare it to the information he already possesses before deciding whether to integrate it into a category he has begun to build for the character, such as the virtuous woman or the seductress. The reader might even have to decide to abandon a category altogether in the light of new information and completely reconstruct the character in his mind. It is a process that demands attention and involvement, it connects information across the text. In these two novels, we see different sides of Melanie and Mathilde once the

perspectives of Rubehn and Hugo become available, and might have to reconsider, extend or perhaps even reconstruct our characterisation of these women.

Influential encounters are what mark the start of an array of new perspectives and images for these two heroines and their readers. Instead of real change being brought about by real events (real within the fictional narrative, that is) as takes place in the 'Bildungsroman', here, reader and characters are confronted with additional points of view that present them differently to the previous ones. The characters become more complex as a result. Their core attributes, which are unmotivated and date back to before the narration, are impossible for the reader to trace. These are the parameters set by the text, but they do not prevent Melanie and Mathilde from being different women in the eyes of different people. As the reader observes this process, he is reminded of his own perspective which influences character creation. Why do Melanie and Mathilde change the course of their lives? It is because of the new self which they behold in the eyes of their future husbands, Rubehn and Hugo. In their company, they are able to see themselves in a new light and discover sides which had previously been overshadowed (by van der Straaten and Mathilde's mother respectively).

As with any of Fontane's characters, who they are depends primarily on who they are *with*. Frau Möhring attributed the highest importance to monetary matters, and subsequently, the Mathilde we first encounter is shown to be thrifty and pragmatic given her situation. Without the comments by Schultze, it would have been nearly impossible for the reader to detect her sharp intellect and drive which are unable to flourish in the company of her mother. When Hugo enters her life, her drive and ambition, as well as her nurturing side, are awakened. A. F. Bance sees Hugo as

Mathilde's first pedagogical project.²²⁰ The text confirms this impression: 'Wenn ihr feststand, wie sie Hugo zu trainieren habe, so stand ihr auch ebenso fest, daß sie sowas wie Zuckerbrot [brauche].'²²¹ Hugo himself is aware of being influenced and shaped by Mathilde, she brings out his best qualities: 'Und dabei hat mich Thilde in Händen; sie denkt, ich merke es nicht, aber ich merke es recht gut. Ich laß es gehn, weil ich es so am besten finde.'²²² However, it is important to note that Hugo does not change (in the sense of character development) under Mathilde's influence, but that he remains the same person whose mediocre qualities are simply allowed to shine brighter in the light which is his wife. After he has, with her help, assumed the position as Burgemeister,²²³ they take a walk in the garden of their new home. Mathilde is busy making plans, while Hugo characteristically picks flowers, and smilingly answers her prompting with: 'wir wollen's versuchen'.²²⁴ From the first moment we meet him, Hugo is a good student and willing to try if he is not asked to try too hard and without support. He wants to take the easiest path, and being picked up by the current that is Mathilde suits him just as well as floating. However, he is not unaware that with Mathilde, he is able to be the best possible version of himself, that she enables him to be the best he could be because she sees his potential: 'Er sah in Thilde nichts als die rührige, kräftige Natur, die sein Leben bestimmt und das bißchen, was er war, durch ihre Kraft und Umsicht aus ihm gemacht hatte.'²²⁵ In her company, he is able to be successful because that is the image of him which she has. She has no illusions about his capacities, but knows that he will follow her lead, and allows the side of him to flourish that prefers to be guided rather than find his own way.

²²⁰ Bance, p. 128

²²¹ *GBA*, I/20, p. 59

²²² *GBA*, I/20, p. 70

²²³ Fontane's usage throughout the novel, old-fashioned spelling of 'Bürgermeister'

²²⁴ *GBA*, I/20, p. 94

²²⁵ *GBA*, I/20, p. 111

This effect works both ways between the spouses. Not only is Hugo able to be surprised by who he can be in the presence of Mathilde, he has the same effect on her. While she actively took advantage of his nature (in his best interests as well as her own), his influence on her is more subtle and she only becomes aware of it after his death. ‘While Thilde fights to mould Hugo [...], there is a part of him which is indestructible, and which by the end of the novel has exerted its gentle influence upon Thilde,’ A. F. Bance observes, and Daffa describes them as ‘zwei Charaktere, die durch den Umgang miteinander allmählich eine Reifung erleiden.’²²⁶ Mathilde allowed Hugo to realise what little potential he had in the world and to see himself as capable of it, but in turn, Hugo and the life at his side allow Mathilde to discover sides of her that were previously almost – but not entirely – hidden. A distinctive point in their marriage is when Mathilde moves the pink light into their bedroom, having previously displayed it in the house where people could see it more easily out of consideration for their standing in the small-town society. Around the same time, she also begins to take an interest in ‘Koketterie’ and fashion.²²⁷ These feminine qualities, which speak of an appreciation for the joys of life rather than the necessities, may seem new when one compares them to the way Mathilde was initially presented. However, the narration repeatedly draws attention to a chaise-longue Mathilde purchased against the advice of her mother. What piece of furniture could more clearly show an ability to appreciate leisure? These sides of Mathilde were present before, but are only now allowed to bloom in the light of Hugo and her new acquaintances as the wife of the Burgemeister. One of these is the Polish Graf Goschin who invites her to a sleigh ride and later even offers her a position in his household. Mathilde is aware that Goschin would bring out not only the side of her that can enjoy life rather than work through it, but also require

²²⁶ A. F. Bance, p. 130 and Daffa, p. 255

²²⁷ *GBA*, I/20, p. 100

her to be led by him rather than lead her own life along with that of Hugo – so she declines. She is self-determined and this character trait is so strong in her that the narration cannot feature her in the company of those who will shadow this aspect for too long without compromising her basic parameters.

Gaining Self-Awareness

Both Mathilde and Hugo allowed each other to see sides which had previously been overshadowed, but Mathilde only becomes aware of this after his death. ‘Ich dachte wunder, was ich aus ihm gemacht hätte, und nu finde ich, daß er mehr Einfluß auf mich gehabt hat als ich auf ihn’, says Mathilde after Hugo’s death.²²⁸ He allowed what little romance, enjoyment and beauty she had to shine and be recognised by her. In turn, Mathilde supports capacities he is all but lacking in: ‘Sie war gerade das, was ihm fehlte, war quick, findig, praktisch.’²²⁹ Before they found each other, Mathilde faced a bleak future of making ends meet, and Hugo was heading towards a lower-middle-class employment despite having started an education that aimed for a higher position. United, they make each other shine and bring out abilities that neither of them would have thought themselves capable of, allowing them to explore new projections of themselves which lead to different futures. In the end, Mathilde is able to live a different life even without Hugo, because his influence never left her. His perspective, his image of her is now part of the character Mathilde both in the eyes of the reader and in her own, and the knowledge of the Mathilde she was with Hugo gives her the confidence to uphold that image even when back in the presence of her mother. Ultimately, she changes the course of her life and becomes a teacher, choosing the stimulating perspectives of young children over that of her elderly mother.

²²⁸ *GBA*, I/20, p. 118

²²⁹ *GBA*, I/20, p. 45

Like Mathilde, Melanie's life changes because of a man. However, while Mathilde was made aware of subordinate aspects of her character by Hugo, Melanie is reminded of what dominates her nature through Rubehn. While the narration informs us that van der Straaten's remarks have often made her uncomfortable, she was never ashamed of him before. His comments have not changed, but after meeting Rubehn, Melanie is embarrassed by her husband during a dinner when both are present: 'und Rubehn, dem es mißfiel, wandte sich ab [...]. Melanie sah es, und das Blut schoß ihr zu Kopf, wie nie zuvor. [...] Heute zum ersten Male schämte sie sich seiner.'²³⁰ She is embarrassed because she becomes aware of the clash between the Melanie she is at the side of her husband, and the Melanie she can be with Rubehn. She gives a strong preference to the latter. While van der Straaten sees her as entertaining, charming and pretty, Rubehn sees her as musical, educated and elegant. Melanie corresponds strongly to the images others hold of her, but she is not unaware of this process. She enjoys 'das Glück ihrer Freiheit' in the absence of her husband at the summer residence. This is a freedom not only from his presence, but from having to be the woman she is when in his presence.²³¹ Contrary to Hugo, Rubehn remains a secondary character and we do not hear about any influence Melanie might have on him. However, he is aware of the dissonance his perspective brought into Melanie's life: 'ein Gefühl von Schreck und ungeheurer Verantwortlichkeit über ein durch ihn gestörtes Glück überkam ihm.'²³²

During her first marriage, Melanie is able to see many of her qualities flourish, but one of the most important remains undernourished: her moral refinement. Despite her affair,

²³⁰ *GBA*, I/4, p. 71

²³¹ *GBA*, I/4, p. 46

²³² *GBA*, I/4, p. 103

she is a virtuous and honest character and wants to live a life devoid of pretence. At the side of van der Straaten, her good humour has often helped her out, but she also has to pretend to take many of his remarks lightly and choose to sweep under the carpet what displeases her. In the company of Rubehn, she is more at ease and does not have to put on a cheerful mask. Johanna Fürstenberg emphasises the redemption Melanie seeks after her affair: 'In ihrem Bestreben, ihre tugendlichen Eigenschaften wiederherzustellen, ist sie konsequent.'²³³ With Rubehn, Melanie can construct herself as a virtuous woman, a self-image that was difficult to uphold as the wife of van der Straaten in light of his comments. She is also able to use her education as she contributes to their income and thus gains a measure of independence. She is one of the few female characters whose adultery finds a happy ending, and Walter Müller-Seidel finds this outcome unconvincing because he believes Melanie to be too much of a rich, spoiled daughter to find happiness in her new life.²³⁴ However, similar to Mathilde, Melanie is shown to be self-driven from the beginning when her friends remark that she always gets what she wants. The aspects of her character that enable her to build a new life with Rubehn are not new character traits she developed because of him, but aspects of herself that were allowed to flourish in his presence after having been thwarted in her previous marriage.

Both Melanie and Mathilde are presented with different images of themselves through the eyes of their future husbands, and realise that the company they kept so far does not highlight the most favourable aspects of their character. Along with the reader, they discover and rediscover themselves with the help of these new perspectives that break the uniformity of their previous entourage. For them, the old declaration of 'I love you

²³³ Fürstenberg, p. 77

²³⁴ Müller-Seidel, p. 179; unhappy endings are met by Effi Briest and Helmuth Holk

for who I am when I'm with you' takes on a whole new meaning. They do not change, but unfold more fully in the additional room provided by the new images of others. There is no guided development towards an ultimate goal, but a shifting emphasis on different aspects, different lights hitting the prism which in turn casts different reflections. In the last chapter of *Mathilde Möhring*, the narrator tells us: 'Zu Thildens besondren Eigenschaften gehörte von Jugend auf die Gabe des Sichanpassens, des Sichhineinfindens in die jedesmal gegebene Lage.'²³⁵ The quality that defines her in this last chapter is one she possessed from early youth.

Conclusion

In the process of unfolding, the dynamic layering of images, other characters play a crucial role as they offer new perspectives on the main characters to them as well as to the reader. Being delivered through characters, the information contained in these images is compromised by their own points of view, and thus does not contribute to an ever clearer picture, but to a more manifold image of the protagonists in the reader's mind. Characters are aware of who they are to others, they can easily take on the roles that the eyes of others see them in, and in the process they are presented with a greater choice of options for their own self-image. For the novel, this multifaceted concept of character means that continuous potentiality is possible. Characters appear not as finalised, but as manifold and dynamic. Their identity is not factual, but depends on perspective. It is a conversation, and who is listening changes the utterance just as much as who is speaking. This applies not only to the characters as they encounter each other, but especially to the reader who enters into a dialogue with the text. The reader is in the same position as the characters, he listens to the many voices and takes part in the

²³⁵ *GBA*, I/20, p. 118

conversation of the text; he participates in it with his imagination and simultaneously tries to make sense of it in his mind. The degree to which characters are determined by our own personality as listeners can only ever be guessed at, since we are unable to remove ourselves into objective distance from our own persona, but it is a factor that Fontane's novels draw our awareness to.

The characters we encounter here are ever evolving, unfolding, but they do not develop in one specific direction. We discover new sides of them through their interaction with others and see them in the various lights of their companions, but they remain forever hidden behind a layer of images, through which we can only occasionally glimpse objective information – and even then, we have to wonder how objective we are in receiving it. They are unlike real people, but true creations of our imagination.

Part 3: Character in Context

Chapter 7: Expectations of Realist Characters – *Irrungen, Wirrungen* and *Frau Jenny Treibel*

The genre of European Realism comes with its own set of expectations. Descriptions of Realist characters as detailed, tied to a historical context or even as irrelevant to modern readers betray the underlying assumption that readers contribute little to the creation of these characters and that they offer a rather passive reading experience.²³⁶ However, the previous chapters have already shown that Fontane's characters demand and support an active reading. Many Realist writers have also been described as creating characters that are social types which aim to be representative of certain historical social classes. Types are, following Schneider's model of information processing, a prime example of characters which we can process quickly and relatively passively. To what extent can we apply the label of 'social type', or on the other end of the spectrum, that of the 'individual', to Fontane's characters? What exactly are the notions attached to the concept of a 'social type' and how do they shape the way in which readers deal with the character information presented by the text? The novel *Irrungen, Wirrungen* focuses on class conflicts and consequently confronts the question of social types in a dramatic manner, while the more humorous *Frau Jenny Treibel* manages these expectations in a different way, supporting a satirical reading of the characters. Both deal with individuals who are representative of their social class – but to what extent are they defined by it? Patricia Ward states that 'one of the most enduring problems of literary theory has been

²³⁶ Georg Lukács, Horst Schmidt-Brümmer, Markus Lehrer and Ann Jefferson will be cited as examples in the following discussion.

the relationship between the general and the individual',²³⁷ and Fontane's Realist novels, usually seen to focus on society over the individual, offer a surprising method for handling this difficult relationship.

The reading process, the way in which we process the textual information, our ability to relate to the characters and our engagement with them, our willingness to co-create, are all influenced by the expectations we have. Before we even open a book, we pre-read its context based on what labels we apply to it. The way the author saw his characters and wanted the audience to perceive them will be examined in the following chapters, but for the moment, what is examined is the effect that the labels of 'Realism' and 'type' have on reading Fontane's characters – and whether in using these, our reading is enriched or impoverished. What does it mean to read a character as a type or an individual, and are the two readings mutually exclusive? Are they determined by the text alone, by the reader's approach, or a combination of the two? When reading Realist novels, do we look for characters that present subjective points of view, or for objects of a particular society or historical era?

Expecting Historical Characters

Without attempting to redefine Realism, a few basic assumptions about Realist characters can be said to be widespread among the readers: historical accuracy, a close resemblance to reality, a causality of action. Often, the idea of causality goes as far as psychological determinism, which sees characters as arising entirely out of the circumstances they are born into, and thus as an expression of a particular historical, social and local reality. One of the broader definitions of Realism (and thus Realist

²³⁷ Ward, p. 944

characters) is that of René Wellek, who sees ‘Realism in the wide sense of fidelity to nature’.²³⁸ However, just like the three assumptions above, it evades a simple question: what is reality? For the natural sciences, this is an easy question to answer, but for human experience, especially when it comes to a person seen through the eyes of another, the case is a difficult one. The reality of human experience is subjective, and if we construct it in our minds from the information provided by, in the most general terms, the physical world, the ideas we have of people from our real, daily lives are just as much constructed as the characters of literature. If Realism is an imitation of reality, or a fidelity to it, whose reality are we talking about when it comes to characters?

Realism is a genre usually seen as aiming for objective representation, but when it comes to characters, aiming to represent the experiences of reality necessarily leads to subjectivity, not objectivity. The notion of an imitation of reality, as traced by Erich Auerbach in his study *Mimesis*, is a difficult one when it comes to literary character as the reality of another mind which is never fully accessible to us and can only ever be imagined – just as we try to imagine the minds of fictional characters. The concept of historical accuracy or historical determination is less conflicted. Both are concerned with external reality rather than other minds, open to a scientific approach rather than a subjective human experience. The Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács is one of the most famous critics to approach Realism this way. Lukács sees a work of fiction as the product of the social and historical circumstances surrounding its genesis. While this idea certainly presents a worthwhile path of analysis, it focuses on the author instead of the reader and sees the work of fiction as complete before a reading takes place. Any reader, especially one outside of the context that surrounded the work’s genesis, will

²³⁸ Wellek, p. 223

bring an individual mind-set into play with the novel, and the resulting readings are all distinct from each other, to a greater or lesser extent. If we are interested in the ‘virtual dimension’ (Iser, see chapter two) of the work, Lukács cannot answer any of our questions. Horst Schmidt-Brümmer addresses this issue in the following comment:

Es fällt nicht leicht, die Aufmerksamkeit auf Figuren zu richten, deren Verhalten sich von Lebensumständen und gesellschaftlichen Problemen her versteht, die sich seither geändert haben. [...] Durch diese enge Verflechtung des Erzählten mit historischen Lebensformen und einem von heute entfernten Gesellschaftszustand aber scheint auch die Bedeutung der Romane Fontanes auf ihre eigene Zeit beschränkt zu bleiben.²³⁹

He states that it is difficult to focus on characters whose behaviour is determined by their historical and social circumstances, and thus sees Fontane as no longer relevant to a modern audience. However, the many critics and readers who still enjoy Fontane and other similar authors of bygone eras today contradict Schmidt-Brümmer’s claim. Either readers are interested in the specific historical circumstances as depicted in Realist novels, or perhaps the work of fiction is more than the sum of its original influences and offers other readings besides those primarily motivated by a historical interest. If the characters are completely determined by their historical and social circumstances, why are we still interested in them? Whether one sees them as tied to their historical society as Schmidt-Brümmer does, or reacting against it as Rainer Kolk does, they are seen as determined by a context no longer available to later readers. However, there is a strikingly simple answer to why we are still interested in Fontane’s characters. While the characters in the text may or may not be accurate representatives of nineteenth-century society, the characters we help co-create in our minds cannot possibly be limited to a historical existence: they are products of a modern reader as well as of a nineteenth-century author. If we expect Realist characters to require only a passive reading and do not take into account the degree of active readerly engagement which

²³⁹ Schmidt-Brümmer, p. 7

they demand, we are likely to see them as irrelevant to modern readers because we then neglect what modern readers, just like the readers of any century, contribute to the creation of these characters.

Characters who are historically determined can either be seen as examples of their time, as by Lukács, or as misfits who highlight the conflicts and problems of their epoch by struggling against it. Mark Lehrer, for whom 'der realistische Held' is characterised by a disillusionment with society that forces him to revise his opinions, attributes to Fontane 'provozierende Ansichten über die Rolle des Individuums in der Gesellschaft'.²⁴⁰ He argues that Fontane's characters confront the causalities which shape their lives and thoughts, and sees a special focus on the influence of social standing and social consciousness. According to him, characters often feel trapped in their social class or position but are able to deal with the difficulties arising this way as they are conscious of the social rules.²⁴¹ It might seem that Lehrer's point of view contradicts those of Lukács and Schmidt-Brümmer, but what they have in common is that they focus on the characters of the text as finished products and do not take into account how modern readers will shape and change them in their minds. Such critics ignore the active reading which Fontane's characters support. If we approach Realist characters expecting to find historical persons that can teach us something about the time of their origin, but have no other relevance to a modern mind, nothing else to offer, we limit our reading experience to the purely historical value of the novel.

²⁴⁰ Lehrer, p. 3 and p. 5

²⁴¹ Lehrer, p. 7

Expecting Objective Characters

Another common assumption about Realist characters is that there will be an abundance of objective, detailed information with which they are described. How does this concept influence possible readings of these characters? The previous discussion of *Cécile* has shown that playing with this expectation can contribute to a more interesting reading experience, as the narration withholds credible or objective information on the central character. Another example is noted by Ann Jefferson, who comments on Fabrice, the hero of Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, '[he is] an anomaly in the nineteenth-century novel: a hero without qualities [...] lacking the characterfulness that is normally thought of as essential to the genre.'²⁴² Like the statements by Lukács and Schmidt-Brümmer, Jefferson's comment about Realist characters betrays the expectation of a rather passive reading experience. If there is a lack of information instead of the 'characterfulness' she speaks of, readers have to contribute more of their own ideas – in the previously mentioned model by Schneider, more inference takes place – and will thus be more involved in the process of reading. What about the characters of *Cécile*? There is no lack of information in this novel, instead the reader is confronted with an abundance of subjective information given by other characters. Both require a more active reading, a lack of information and a mass of conflicting or untrustworthy information achieving this same result. For the novels of Fontane, where characters increasingly become the tellers of their own and more importantly each other's tales through conversation, the 'Realist descriptions' require an ever more attentive reader who is able to evaluate the subjective points of view he is presented with. Jefferson states that 'it is the characterfulness of characters in realist fiction that provides it with [...] a certain set of expectations and imposes a certain kind of reading on the novel in

²⁴² Jefferson, p. 181

the realist era'.²⁴³ In the case of Fontane, where we find a subjective instead of an objective presentation of characters – characters that depend on a social web for their presentation and thus move in an ever-changing set of different points of view – we cannot continue to hold the same expectations as we might of other Realist characters; the same 'certain kind of reading' cannot be successfully imposed on his novels. Instead, readers are required to make an active contribution to the creation of these characters.

Contradicting the previous determinists, Lehrer acknowledges a certain degree of freedom in the cage of a predetermined world to Fontane's characters, who are able to rise above their circumstances to an extent through their awareness, education, wit and imaginative freedom. What he describes are essential human qualities, qualities that play a key role in the reading process and can only fully unfold in the social context. If Realist characters are to be scientific specimens of an objective reality, Fontane's characters, co-created by each other and the reader, do not fit the mould. However, if we are ready to give up on the idea of factual or objective representation, we can discover a complex web of subjective human experience within these Realist novels and become part of it ourselves. 'Realism' can work as an overbearing, suffocating category applied to works of fiction before the reading begins, but reading with preconceived ideas will not necessarily be the most fruitful approach for modern readers. Richard Brinkmann, in his analysis of Fontane's dialogues, is one of the very few critics to have addressed this issue, albeit indirectly: 'Es geht um die Wirklichkeit des einzelnen Menschen.'²⁴⁴ With this statement, he swims against the current of many Fontane scholars who approach

²⁴³ Jefferson, p. 184-85

²⁴⁴ Brinkmann, p. 318

this author with an historical interest. While there is certainly a great deal of information about nineteenth-century life in his novels, they are not documentaries or reports. They differ from these because they present and recreate the human experience of other minds which is characterised by subjectivity and interdependence, and have more to offer than a reading for historical interest. 'Realism' is a helpful category if the reader is driven by an interest in the material world and external circumstances, but for those who read these novels for the characters who inhabit them, the idea of objectively represented, historically bound characters is difficult to uphold.

Types and/or Individuals

The difference between reading characters as subjects and characters as objects of society is close to that between individual and type. However, the concept of the type has undergone a number of redefinitions and thus needs to be examined before being contrasted with the individual. The French 'type', as used by writers such as Hugo and Nodier, denotes an individual, but this use is rare and will be disregarded here.²⁴⁵ More commonly, the type falls into one of two categories: the traditional, Romantic, or the scientific type. While the former predates the latter, it is the scientific type that has come to dominate literary analysis. The traditional or Romantic type is an exemplary figure, an ideal lacking personal details. In the words of Peter Demetz, 'traditional types as defined by romantic writers embody myths, ideas, essences, principles, tendencies, forces and powers and greatly strain the narrow human form in which they are forced to fit.'²⁴⁶ While the traditional type descends from history, the scientific type reflects a particular time which shaped it and approaches characters with a geneologic interest.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ As traced by Ward, p. 951.

²⁴⁶ Demetz, *Balzac*, p. 408

²⁴⁷ Demetz, *ibid.*, p. 410

Both are representative, but while the latter represents the world around it, the former embodies a humanist idea. Demetz isolates five key differences: the traditional type is selective, intuitive, symbolic, a-historical and distant while the scientific type is a plurality; it is carefully composed, representative, historical and modest (not exceptional).²⁴⁸

Both of these categories are still used in literature, but the scientific concept of the type has become strongly associated with Realism (and Naturalism), while the traditional or dramatic type is mainly used in the discussion of Romantic writing or classical drama. The reason why the scientific type is more commonly used in the discussion of Realist characters refers back to the earlier discussion of expectations of Realism: as referential to an objective, material outside world.²⁴⁹ If Realism is to be representative, characters have to embody aspects of reality. Types of social figures can stand for the nobility or bourgeoisie, for professions such as the academic, the pastor, the officer, or social positions, such as the widow, the fallen woman, the elderly gentleman. Using the works of Balzac, Demetz describes how this Realist writer aimed to present all of society using this technique of ‘the one for the many’. The Balzacian type is made up of the common traits shared by several people of the same social standing or profession.²⁵⁰ His analysis shares many assumptions with Lukács, who states: ‘Rang der Werke und Autoren, innerhalb der Gestaltung eines Typus, wird stets davon bestimmt, einen wie hohen Grad der gesellschaftlichen Verallgemeinerung sie schriftstellerisch erreicht haben.’²⁵¹ If the

²⁴⁸ Demetz, *ibid.*, p. 417

²⁴⁹ For an insightful discussion of Fontane and Darwinism, see Thomas, e.g. p. 397: ‘Culture, the immaterial, affects the inner and outer physical world. Fontane shows that scientism tends to cover up such interaction as it claims absolute truth and authority for itself in positing an autonomous natural world that obeys only its own laws which (e.g. in Social Darwinism) also govern human society.’

²⁵⁰ Demetz, p. 406-07

²⁵¹ Lukács, p. 293

type is the 'Repräsentant dichterischer Verallgemeinerung',²⁵² it is to represent conflicts of society rather than a pathological individual. Lukács goes on to define his idea of generalisation more precisely: 'Die dichterische Verallgemeinerung besteht gerade darin, in eben dieser gesellschaftlich-geschichtlichen Konkretheit die in ihr enthaltenen allgemeinen Bestimmungen aufzufinden und herauszuarbeiten.'²⁵³

The types that Demetz and Lukács have in mind are social types, but types of personality or psychological types will gain more relevance in the literature of the following century. Whether one takes a sociological or a psychological interest in literature, the approach is scientific in that it aims to find an objective truth outside the fictional world.²⁵⁴ The concept of the type, whether scientific or traditional/dramatic, always sees characters as referring to a construct or reality outside themselves, as representative. If novels are filled with types, they are also repetitive by definition. Jared Wenger even goes as far as describing a process of type-casting in Scott, Balzac and Zola. He sees these writers as filling the same roles with similar characters over and over, such as the madman or the melancholy woman. He states that these types have a symbolic function within the story.²⁵⁵ Interestingly, he thus applies the traditional or dramatic type to Balzac, while Demetz uses him to exemplify the scientific type instead. Clearly, when it comes to types, several readings are possible and the interest with which readers or critics approach a novel will influence what they find.

²⁵² Lukács, p. 307

²⁵³ Lukács, p. 295

²⁵⁴ Many critics have approached Fontane looking to identify psychological types, see Chambers, *Erzählwerk*, pp. 102-08.

²⁵⁵ Wenger, p. 231

The contradictory statements of these two critics highlight the problematic nature of the type. René Wellek points out: '[the] Type, in spite of its didactic and prescriptive implications, preserves, however, the all-important association with objective social observation.'²⁵⁶ If types refer to a concept outside of themselves, then by defining what type a character is, we are claiming to have captured their ultimate truth and purpose. Types, as many have noted, carry a connotation of simplicity. Fotis Jannidis, who takes an interest in the reading process, says: 'Außerdem aber ist die Konstellation der Merkmale zumindest in ihren Grundzügen vertraut.'²⁵⁷ Scientific or Romantic types only function if they are recognised as such by the reader. The implications of this familiarity for the reading process will be analysed in more detail later on with reference to *Irrungen, Wirrungen*.

Confronting the concept of the type is that of the individual. However, both do not apply in the same way to primary and secondary characters. A type, being based on a familiar concept, requires less time to be developed, and is thus more suitable to a secondary character. Primary characters are allocated a greater amount of text, so that time for individualisation beyond the type, for complication and development is given. Readers are also guided to pay more attention to primary characters as they are of greater relevance to the story, and thus more willing to deal with difficult information processing than would be the case for secondary characters.²⁵⁸ While secondary characters are more likely to be type-cast, that does not mean primary characters are necessarily individuals – but are the two concepts even mutually exclusive? If readers,

²⁵⁶ Wellek, p. 246

²⁵⁷ Jannidis, p. 103, see also Pfister

²⁵⁸ The difference in time spent on primary and secondary characters has been commented on by several critics, for example Hans-Heinrich Reuter, 'Fontanes Realismus', p. 41.

as we have seen, can find different types in the same novel, can they see a character as both an individual and a type?

In theory, the two concepts are diametrically opposed. An individual character is described in detail and often features arbitrary or unnecessary attributes which are not symbolic and do not refer to an external theory. He or she may contain conflicting information and resemble a patchwork rather than a homogenous type. Jannidis offers a definition (note that 'Charakter' means individual here): 'Ein Charakter verfügt über mehr Merkmale als ein Typus. Diese Merkmale lassen sich nicht nach einem einfachen Schema ordnen, ja Individualität ist geradezu mit der Widersprüchlichkeit der Merkmale verbunden.'²⁵⁹ He sees complexity and originality as the key differences between individuals and types, and is thus in agreement with previous definitions of the type that focused on repetition and recognisability. Which category do we apply to Fontane's characters?

Fontane's types, Fontane's individuals?

In their discussion of types, both Erich Auerbach and Lukács criticise Fontane for presenting characters that show little about their author's contemporary society. As aforementioned, Lehrer argues that their level of self-awareness saves them from being completely determined by external factors, while Kolk thinks that they lose the struggle against circumstantial fatalism. Dietrich Sommer on the other hand, who takes a Marxist approach in his analysis of *Der Stechlin*, says that secondary characters are peripheral, with the exception of those who are representative: 'Diese Einzelpersonen

²⁵⁹ Jannidis, p. 103

repräsentieren zugleich sozial und kulturell abgegrenzte Welten für sich.²⁶⁰ While he sees most characters as ‘mehr oder weniger ungebrochen ihrer Klasse oder ihrem Stand verhaftet’,²⁶¹ he also acknowledges that some of them present opinions and ideas beyond their social class. He describes these cases as ‘ein Geltendmachen der inneren Freiheit gegenüber den nicht aufzuhebenden sozialen Existenzbedingungen’, and specifically names Dubslav, Melusine, old Barby and Lorenzen.²⁶² It seems critics do not agree on whether we do or do not find in types Fontane, and if so, which characters they are.

Christiane Wandel’s *Die typische Menschendarstellung in Th. Fontanes Erzählungen* already announces in its title the preconception which runs through her thesis (which also bears strong traces of its origin in 1930s Germany). She classifies *all* of Fontane’s characters according to a social type, categorising them by class and profession as well as by nationality/ethnicity, family and religion. In her introduction, she claims: ‘Das Typische und Immerwiederkehrende in den Gestalten Th. Fontanes muß also unter der Decke der äußeren Mannigfaltigkeit, Individualisierung und ständig verfeinerten Umbildung aufgesucht werden.’²⁶³ Why we ‘have to’ search for the typical, or what the value of this quest is, she never states. An obvious effect is to bring a rigid structure and order at the cost of complexity, producing a reductive and strongly guided reading (one is to look out for ‘the typical’ at all times and discard differences). In order to define character types, she reduces them to a common factor at the expense of complexity and detail. She defines types as ‘Durchschnittsmenschen’ that are an average of the people

²⁶⁰ Sommer, p. 106

²⁶¹ Sommer, p. 113

²⁶² Sommer, p. 114

²⁶³ Wandel, p. 9

of their social class and lack exceptional greatness.²⁶⁴ One of her more bewildering groupings is the comparison of Botho (*Irrungen, Wirrungen*) and Leo (*Die Poggenpuhls*), between whom she finds no differences beyond ‘external details’.²⁶⁵ Women are divided into flirty or quiet, and the historical ‘Jewish type’ is not lacking either.²⁶⁶ Her classification of the minor characters is necessarily less reductive than that of the major persons, as there is less information about the former, yet she contradicts herself by stating ‘welche Entwicklung von Seidentopf bis Lorenzen!’ before continuing to describe different types of pastor (the initial aim of her chapter being to present types by profession).²⁶⁷ Even with her reductive reading, it was impossible to confine such diverse characters to the one ‘typical pastor’ of Fontane.

When Wandel confronts the comic types, her arguments stay closer to the texts. About some of the dinner guests in *Cécile*, she says: ‘Dabei gipfelt die Kunst Fontanes darin, gerade in dem scheinbar extremen Individuellen zugleich am stärksten die Gattung widerzuspiegeln.’²⁶⁸ While the overall conclusion of her work is that Fontane can only be read with historical interest, this statement shows that individuals and types might not be so incongruous after all. Her analysis is a stark example of the dangers that lie in the type-approach: a reduction of characters to common traits, a preconceived reading process, readers who know what they will find before they start searching, ready to squeeze characters into categories, ‘und was nicht passt, wird passend gemacht’. Despite Wandel’s assertions, this is not the only way of reading Fontane, and his characters offer more than only a historical reading.

²⁶⁴ Wandel, p. 15

²⁶⁵ Wandel, p. 33

²⁶⁶ Wandel, p. 37 and 77

²⁶⁷ Wandel, p. 67

²⁶⁸ Wandel, p. 130

Lehrer is one of the critics who do not subscribe to the type-individual opposition. He thinks that a double role is possible, even in the more humorous works. He describes the heroine of *Frau Jenny Treibel*, as follows: ‘Jenny, [die] einerseits für einen repräsentativen Typus der Bourgeoisie stehen soll [...] während sie andererseits in der Konstellation der Romanfiguren durch ihre selbstbetrügerische Heuchelei als ein Ausnahmefall dasteht.’²⁶⁹ Schmidt-Brümmer agrees that the subjective perspectives offered in Fontane allow the characters to fill several roles at the same time: ‘Der Perspektivismus der Namen und Bezeichnungen bildet die Voraussetzung dafür, daß die jeweils unter andere Hinsichten gebrachte Figur sich weder zu einer nur typischen Figur verfestigt noch auch eigentlich zu einem individuellen Charakter konturiert.’²⁷⁰ In the fourth chapter of his book, Schmidt-Brümmer traces the idea of perspective through denomination (by the narrator as well as by characters) in the text, showing clearly that the direct interpersonal network of the characters has greater influence on the text than society at large. This network is of course constructed from different instances of subjectivity, and types, as we have seen, rely on reference to an objective outside.

If Fontane’s characters depend on subjective points of view, are they all individuals – if we can class them according to common traits, as Wandel does, are they types? Can they, as Lehrer and Schmidt-Brümmer hint, be both? All three options have their own implications for the reading process. Whether we are prepared to find types or individuals, look for historical references or personal fates, our ‘pre-reading’ of the novel influences our reading, limiting or supporting our ability to relate to characters

²⁶⁹ Lehrer, p. 120-21

²⁷⁰ Schmidt-Brümmer, p. 141

through empathy and co-create them. Fundamentally, the difference is that of fact or fiction: do we, as readers, only want to learn about the external world, in this case the past, or do we also want to take part in the creation of a work of fiction and in doing so experience other minds and our own (or perhaps both)?

Reading Types, Reading Individuals

On the level of cognitive science, the reading process of types and individuals is quite different. However, it is important to bear in mind that, as examples of critics have shown, readers might read character as type or individual no matter what the text suggests. The same character could be read as a type by one reader, and as an individual by another. For types, readers establish a top-down category early on, and this category subsequently guides the way in which they process information. As the example of Christiane Wandel has shown, this usually means that information conflicting with the category (the type) will be disregarded, while information that fits in the category will be included. This process is more didactic and relies on previous knowledge, it does not require much engagement or input from the reader. This lack of personal involvement hinders our ability to relate to these characters as other minds through empathy. A benefit of this critical distance is that humour and mockery become possible. If we emotionally distance ourselves from a character, it is easier to laugh about their shortcomings, especially when these are heightened in the form of a caricature – or a type. A classic example is the academic whom Fontane loves to mock, as we find him in Niels Wrschowitz.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ *Der Stechlin*, see chapter five.

Much of the comedy in *Frau Jenny Treibel* also arises from typical behaviour, primarily Jenny's class consciousness. She is an ambitious woman who climbed the social ladder through marriage, a fact which is repeatedly highlighted during the various dinners she hosts. Jenny is concerned about the lack of a servants' entrance to her house because her guests might run into members of the lower class near the entrance: 'Jetzt marschiert jeder Küchenjunge durch den Vorgarten, gerade auf unser Haus zu, wie wenn er miteingeladen wäre.'²⁷² Her fear is of course that having been born the daughter of a simple shop owner, people might be reminded of her origins rather than acknowledge her current position as Frau Kommerzienrätin. For her dinner parties, she prefers to surround herself with members of the lower nobility and upper bourgeoisie with whom she wishes to be associated: 'Frau Jenny präsentierte sich in vollem Glanz, und ihre Herkunft aus dem kleinen Laden in der Adlerstraße war in ihrer Erscheinung bis auf den letzten Rest getilgt.'²⁷³ The narrator frequently mocks his main character with these reminders, and her behaviour marks her out as a typical 'parvenue' compared to her husband, who is much more relaxed concerning social appearances. Readers are encouraged to join in the ridiculing of Jenny and recognise the social type she represents.²⁷⁴ Most of the information about Jenny fits in the same category and is thus processed quickly and passively by the reader, creating enough ironic distance for us to laugh about her.

It is only rarely, as during her conversation with her old friend Willibald Schmidt in chapter 10, that we see aspects of her personality that do not relate to the type of the social climber and thus enable us to see Jenny, the individual. She did not marry for

²⁷² *GBA*, I/14, p. 17

²⁷³ *GBA*, I/14, p. 27

²⁷⁴ see Kohn-Bramstedt, pp 196-97

love, but she can be sentimental when with the man who once courted her. Schmidt calls her present life one of happiness, to which she sighs and answers: ‘daß das beneidete Leben, das ich jetzt führe, meinem Ohr und meinem Herzen solche Worte versagt [...] das ist für eine Natur, wie sie mir nun mal geworden, ein ewig zehrender Schmerz.’²⁷⁵ Whether or not we believe her when she claims a little later that she really would have been happy as the wife of a man like Schmidt, one thing is clear: Jenny might be happy with her position in society, but she is certainly not overjoyed with her husband.²⁷⁶ We can laugh about her as the ambitious bourgeoisie, or we can look at her life story as that of a woman who was forced to choose between social ascension and marrying for love. Instead of mocking her, such scenes encourage us to look behind her often comic behaviour and see that her choice was not an easy one, that she made sacrifices and is more than the cold-hearted type of the social climber. Her current praises of ‘Wissen und Klugheit und überhaupt das Höhere’ are laughable, but we need not forget that she has been starved of these and once showed an interest in them.

Individualised characters require a more active reading than types. The information relating to them is complex, often contradictory, and cannot easily and quickly be included into a category. Our impression of them needs to be constantly modified as new or conflicting information becomes available, and we have to be careful in our construction of them. This process is more involving and often requires the reader to approach a character with empathy in order to understand them, as they do not act and react the way we would expect them to. Individuals do not follow a scheme as types do, their actions are less predictable and their opinions often unexpected. In order to

²⁷⁵ *GBA*, I/14, p. 141

²⁷⁶ Schmidt himself has been described as an example of a character who shows aspects of both types and individuals by Tanja Eisentraut, who describes him as the type of the ‘älterer Herr’, but recognises that Fontane modifies and varies this type. See Eisentraut, pp. 72-73.

differentiate between types and individuals, Jannidis asks: ‘Kann der Leser auf die Figur wie auf eine Person reagieren?’²⁷⁷ While Jannidis’ belief that a comparison with reality is the ultimate touchstone comes with its own set of problems regarding fiction, his question does bring up the issue of relation. Can we emotionally relate to characters? For individuals, in whose creation we have been more involved, it is relatively easy. With types, who are processed more quickly, it can be hard to relate to them through empathy and instead, we often develop feelings about them, making them an easier target for mockery and humour.

While the text might support a type-reading or an individual-reading, readers will not necessarily follow the invitation to read a character a certain way. In Fontane’s novel *Irrungen, Wirrungen*, the characters themselves offer different readings of one another, and the reader can experience them as types and as individuals. Frau Dörr is a frequent source of short characterisations, and offers views of both her husband and of Lene and Botho on different occasions. About Herr Dörr’s avarice, she comments: ‘Aber so sind die Gärtner alle.’²⁷⁸ Clearly, she has an emotional connection to her husband – Lene and Frau Nimptsch, Frau Dörr and the narrator all note that she is rather happy in her marriage – yet she is quick to judge him as a typical gardener who acts as all gardeners do. In terms of his profession, he might be typical, but Fontane’s characters always consist of a variety of facets of which they present different ones to different people and at different occasions.

²⁷⁷ Jannidis, p. 106

²⁷⁸ *GBA*, I/10, p. 16

The narrator's description gives us a different picture of Herr Dörr: 'Mager, mittelgroß und mit fünf grauen Haarsträhnen über Kopf und Stirn, wär' er eine vollkommene Trivialerscheinung gewesen, wenn ihm nicht eine zwischen Augenwinkel und linker Schläfe sitzende braune Pocke was Apartes gegeben hätte.'²⁷⁹ The little flaws set the individual apart from the type and the masses, and this sentiment is later echoed by Botho, who says (concerning spelling mistakes in Lene's letter): 'Die Fehler machen ihn nur noch reizender.'²⁸⁰ The small things that stand out and set the characters apart from the masses make them individuals, yet it depends very much on who is looking and what aspect of a character is being looked at. Herr Dörr might have an individualised face, but as we have heard, he is a typical gardener. Lene's orthography is not exceptional for her social class, but in the eyes of Botho, a nobleman, it stands out and becomes part of her individual character. From his perspective, this trait is not common, but sets her apart from the other young women he knows.

Botho and the reader might disagree here on whether Lene's spelling mistakes are typical or individual, but Frau Dörr is once again clear in what she thinks about the girl: 'proper und fleißig un kann alles und is für Ordnung un fürs Reelle.'²⁸¹ Just like Herr Dörr, who despite his avarice as a gardener is also a loving husband who makes extravagant gifts to his wife from time to time, Lene is not all order and reality. At times she is dreamy, as when she looks out of the window at Hankels Ablage, and superstitious in refusing to bind a bunch of flowers with her hair.²⁸² All throughout the narration she is associated with and likened to nature and the natural (rather than orderly civilisation). Gerhart von Graevenitz describes Lene, in contrast to Botho's future wife

²⁷⁹ *GBA*, I/10, p. 11

²⁸⁰ *GBA*, I/10, p. 41

²⁸¹ *GBA*, I/10, p. 8

²⁸² *GBA*, I/10, p. 85 and p. 76

Käthe, as the epitome of honesty and naturalness, but also comes to the conclusion that she is more than a type: ‘Lene und Käthe sind [...] zwei Personifikationen mit großer moralischer Geschichte, ohne doch im Gang der Erzählung wie allegorische Figuren geschildert zu sein.’²⁸³ She is a complex character, and while many aspects of her personality, as well as Frau Dörr’s description, would fit the typical working-class girl, the narration casts doubt on her association with this class from the beginning. She is only the foster child of Frau Nimptsch, and in the first chapter, Frau Dörr wonders whether she might be ‘eine Prinzessin oder so was.’²⁸⁴

Botho loves Lene because she is natural, in the words of his friend: ‘Rienäcker [...] war immer fürs Natürliche.’²⁸⁵ Lene wants an orderly life and marriage, but she is also able to enjoy fleeting happiness during her trips and extended walks into the countryside with Botho. Nature and dreaming have a place in her mind as well as the rules of society. In many ways, she is a typical representative of her class, but not all aspects of her character will fit into the category of the simple working-class girl, just as not all aspects of Herr Dörr can be summed up by calling him a typical gardener. The same is true for Botho. In his own words, he is a typical nobleman: ‘Wer bin ich? Durchschnittsmensch aus der sogenannten Obersphäre der Gesellschaft.’²⁸⁶ Yet his primary conflict in this novel is precisely that he feels out of place in the social stratum of which he here claims to be a typical example. He is not ready to give up his upper-class life for Lene, but feels drawn to her and the different life she leads. He is torn between different aspects of his character, and while he is a typical nobleman with his leisurely lifestyle, he considers giving it up on more than one occasion.

²⁸³ Graevenitz, p. 481

²⁸⁴ *GBA*, I/10, p. 8

²⁸⁵ *GBA*, I/10, p. 56

²⁸⁶ *GBA*, I/10, p. 105

Conclusion

The characters of *Irrungen, Wirungen* are typical in some ways and individual in others. Most of Fontane's main characters can be seen as types or as individuals at different times. They are presented and discussed as either by the other characters in the novel, as Frau Dörr does here. The two categories are not mutually exclusive in these novels because the texts create characters with the help of other characters, having the reader help them emerge from a web of subjective images rather than handing them over on a platter. Whether we read them as types or as individuals will lead to us creating different characters. It might make us mock them rather than feel their pain, or help us understand them instead of forming judgements that may be premature. Lene and Jenny are, in some respects, representative of the working class and the 'arriviste' bourgeoisie of their time, and their stories can tell us about the society they were part of. However, it would be wrong to reduce them to these aspects alone. If we are ready to accept all the personas they present, despite occasional apparent contradictions, and all images of them offered to us by different characters, we can see them not only as objects of historical interest, but also as subjects who experience the world in a unique way. They appear typical or individual in different instances and are not objectively presented, consistent creations. Instead, they defy categorisation. Fontane's characters are not only recreations of people in a past historical setting; with them, he also recreates for his readers the experience of encountering other people who often appear inconsistent or elusive.

Chapter 8: Contemporary and Modern Readers – *Effi Briest*

Effi Briest has been a favourite with readers ever since its publication in 1895, and remains popular into the twenty-first century, as numerous cinematic adaptations and a never-ending stream of reprints show. Over this considerable timespan, the readership has changed dramatically. Many of the cultural and historical circumstances surrounding the author's contemporary audience, such as the position of women in society or marital law, no longer apply to modern readers. Abroad, the contextual differences are even greater, not to mention issues of translation.²⁸⁷ The phenomenon of novels such as *Effi Briest*, whose popularity outlives the circumstances of their creation, brings up several questions: what role does the identity of a readership or audience play in a novel's reception? What elements allow a reader from a different context to access and enjoy these works? Realist authors in particular, such as Fontane, are often praised for the presentation of their contemporary society and seen as strongly historically embedded.²⁸⁸ How can their novels reach out over centuries?

These questions can be approached from a number of different angles. Sociological and historical investigations have been undertaken in order to shed light on how the lives of modern readers differ from the author's contemporary readers, and how society at large has changed since. Similar research has looked at Fontane's actual audience and compared it with his intended one. Their findings are illuminating and will be heard in turn, but their approach is focused on the connection between readers and their real (historical, cultural) context, rather than the reader and the novel's fiction. Narrative theorists such as Peter Rabinowitz have taken a slightly more psychological approach,

²⁸⁷ see Derek Glass, 'Fontane in English Translation: A Survey of the Publication History'

²⁸⁸ e.g. by Müller-Seidel

asking for example what influence the reader's knowledge of literary conventions plays.²⁸⁹ They all share the assumption that a reading can or should be explained primarily through the readers: the society they live in, their education, their gender, their social and personal circumstances. Although these factors certainly play an important role, they illuminate only one side of the reader-text dynamic. They offer an explanation as to why readers might no longer be interested in *Effi Briest* – to name but a few, views on women, adultery and duels have changed greatly since the late nineteenth century – yet readers have not abandoned Effi. So why do we continue to be fascinated and drawn in by characters whose lives are different from ours, whose opinions we do not agree with and with whom, overall, we might have little in common? The preceding chapter has argued that Realist novels are more, do more than simply document or report on the world. This chapter will bring together the previous analysis with the character theory outlined in chapter two: what if we read not for what we have in common with characters, not to identify with them, but because we are interested in the other and feel empathy with people different from ourselves?

The Contemporary Reception

Our empathy with a given character is influenced by two factors in the text: the extent to which we understand the emotions a character feels – their causes, their development – and whether the novel managed to recreate similar feelings in us through our reading experience (see chapter two). Comprehension is strongly dependent on a correct or sufficiently approximate pre-reading of the context and would thus understandably be easier for the author's contemporary readers who share a more similar background.²⁹⁰ Research into the reception of Fontane was delayed, as Helen Chambers points out in

²⁸⁹ Rabinowitz, p. 3 – also see chapter seven of this thesis.

²⁹⁰ See Chapter two, theory of the New Reader

her overview of Fontane scholarship, and it focused on the reactions of critics and literary analysts rather than the wider readership. A few of Fontane's answers to letters sent by readers have been preserved, as well as some comments he makes in diaries and letters on the popularity of *Effi Briest*. The many available newspaper reviews offer only a limited degree of insight into the reception by the actual audience, as these critics might have had any number of reasons to write a positive or negative review. Many knew Fontane personally, as did Julius Rodenberg, who praised the author's first novel in public, but commented in his diary: 'so unglaublich dumm und albern'.²⁹¹ Fontane's friend Paul Heyse also noted the difficulty of publicly reviewing a friend's work, though he decides differently from Rodenberg: 'So könnte ich auch "Effi Briest" und die "Poggenpuhls" nicht öffentlich besprechen, ohne – noch so schonend – die Grenzen der Begabung ihres Verfassers aufzuzeigen. Amicus Theodorus – magis amica veritas.'²⁹² Both quotations show that printed reviews may at best be conflicted and at worst may present a false image of the reviewer's actual reading experience.

The critical reception of *Effi Briest* has been tracked and analysed in detail, as in the 'Wirkungsgeschichte' by Hans-Heinrich Reuter, and Luise Berg-Ehlers' analysis of the contemporary newspapers that commented on *Effi*. She notes that for newspapers such as *Die Neue Preußische Zeitung*, the representation of a morally unacceptable topic such as adultery disqualified both the author and the critic who discussed his work, but that *Effi Briest* managed to bend this rule to some extent.²⁹³ Despite the taboo, there was a interest in marriage conflicts at the time (such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, translated into German several times in the 1890s, or Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's

²⁹¹ Reuter, *Fontane*, p. 960

²⁹² Erler, *Briefwechsel*, p. 527; 'Fontane is a friend – truth is a greater friend.'

²⁹³ Berg-Ehlers, p. 141 and p. 146

Unsühnbar, 1890), and we are shown signs that even the union of Effi's parents is not without its problems.²⁹⁴ The topic certainly met the interests of its contemporary readership.

When this novel was published, Fontane was already a well-established poet, journalist and critic, and had written several novels with varying success. So far known as a patriotic author, his early prose works such as *L'Adultera* or *Cécile* were not reviewed by newspapers such as *Die Kreuzzeitung*, which had been favourable to his former, more patriotic writing.²⁹⁵ *Effi* however 'war und ist Fontanes größter Erfolg' and the first of his novels that achieved wide popularity.²⁹⁶ The first printing in 1894 which appeared in the *Rundschau* is commented on with a simple 'Erfolg gut' by the author. After its publication as a book, of which five editions appeared in the first year alone, Fontane reports with more enthusiasm: 'der erste wirkliche Erfolg, den ich mit einem Romane habe.'²⁹⁷ When he had attempted the same topic – adultery – in *L'Adultera*, the reception was more mixed, presumably because contrary to *Effi*, Melanie's transgressions are not punished.²⁹⁸ *Effi* quickly won the hearts of especially female readers, among them Martha Fontane, and the author comments in a letter: 'Alle Leute sympathisieren [sic] mit ihr [Effi] und Einige gehen so weit, im Gegensatz dazu, den Mann als einen „alten Ekel“ zu bezeichnen.'²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ Liesenhoff, p. 103 and p. 107

²⁹⁵ Chambers, *Erzählwerk*, p. 12

²⁹⁶ Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 20

²⁹⁷ *GBA*, XI/2, p. 263, diary entry from 1895

²⁹⁸ As many critics assume, e.g. Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 15

²⁹⁹ Brinkmann, p. 448, letters from 1894; IV, p. 704, letter to Clara Kühnast, 27.10.1895

Social Considerations: Adultery and the Duel

Fontane was careful to hide the inspiration behind Effi, Elisabeth von Ardenne née von Plotho, for fear of offending the families by overstepping the boundaries of privacy. He thus claimed it was ‘eine Ehebruchsgeschichte wie hundert andre und mehr.’³⁰⁰ Yet some contemporaries were aware of the true story behind the novel and even complained about too close resemblances, as for example Otto von Glasenapp (‘Grasenabb’ in the novel). He had taken offence at being represented in a supposedly fictional work without his permission, and Fontane apologised to him later.³⁰¹ Since the first comments from 1912, when Helene Herrmann noted the changes to the protagonists’ ages compared to the real couple, critics have become widely aware of the true story underlying the fiction.³⁰² The changes which Fontane made, notably turning all three major characters into members of the nobility, would be more relevant to a contemporary audience whose society still depended on this hierarchy. However, the greater part of the contemporary readership was unaware of the inspiration behind *Effi*. While little is preserved regarding the actual reception, some opinions which will have been widespread among the contemporary audience have been examined. The two key events, the social transgression of adultery and the duel, and their critical representation, are seen by some as a direct critique of contemporary society. Even though, as Jean Leventhal comments, ‘the death of the adulterous woman had become almost a cliché of nineteenth-century fiction,’ Effi’s misstep is excused to some extent through her unhappy marriage and her youth.³⁰³ Women were often seen to be similar to children at the time, and Effi’s age blurs the line even further, thus presenting her as a person who can hardly be held responsible for her own actions.

³⁰⁰ *WSB*, Abt. 4, IV, p. 711, letter to Friedrich Spielhagen from 1896

³⁰¹ *WSB*, Abt. 4, IV, p. 704, letter from autumn 1895

³⁰² Leventhal, p. 181

³⁰³ Leventhal, p. 186

The duel takes place after an added time-lapse of seven years – compared to the real story – rendering it even more clearly as a social convention than an act brought on by intense emotions. Gotthard Erler observes: ‘Doch “Effi Briest” spielte unverkennbar in der Gegenwart, und wenn darin der Ehrenkult als ein Götzendienst apostrophiert wurde, dann ging das die herrschenden Kreise in den neunziger Jahren unmittelbar an.’³⁰⁴ Is Innstetten, a representative of an inhumane social dogma? Hardly, as Fontane tells a female reader: ‘Innstetten, der übrigens von allen Damen härter beurtheilt wird als er verdient.’³⁰⁵ This character is too complex to fit the simple label of ‘cruel monster’.

Near the turn of the century, the duel was far from uncontested as a social obligation, but for the time being it remained a force to be reckoned with, among noble members of the military at least. Between 1882 and 1890 alone, 1012 have been recorded.³⁰⁶

Although the duel was highly relevant to nineteenth-century society, seeing it as a historical phenomenon cannot explain why a story pivoting on it continues to be read long after duels have become socially unacceptable. In her analysis of the duelling practice in society, Ute Frevert presents a more fruitful point of view on the duel in Fontane. She sees it as a generalised symbol of society’s pressure on the individual. Frevert states that Innstetten has not internalised this concept, he remains unconvinced but obeys external rules.³⁰⁷ While her view would explain the relevance of the duel to a modern audience – after all the importance of social rules continues into the twenty-first century – she comes to the surprising conclusion that it poses ‘gravierende Verständnisschwierigkeiten’ for the readers of today.³⁰⁸ On the contrary, modern readers are not unfamiliar with the idea of social constraints, and are able to relate to the duel as a symbol.

³⁰⁴ Erler, *Effi Briest*, p. 300

³⁰⁵ *WSB*, Abt. 4, IV, p. 702, letter from 1895

³⁰⁶ Frevert, p. 272

³⁰⁷ Frevert, p. 10

³⁰⁸ Frevert, p. 11

Modern Readers

Modern readers will indeed find it harder to pre-read the context, and comprehension might require additional work such as making information about the historical background available, but the fundamental conflict between social obligations and individual wishes is still current. While some critics such as Frevert see *Effi* as a relic of historical value, this novel has more to offer than a wealth of information on times past. Contemporary reviews such as that by Otto Pniower in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* remarked that the text requires an attentive and involving reading, praising it for ‘den hohen Grad der von ihm verlangten Lesermitarbeit’.³⁰⁹ A little later, Helene Herrmann places the centre of the novel not in the social report, but in its characters, believing that ‘die Intaktheit von Effis Charakter’ is the ‘Hauptursache für die Wirkung des Romans’.³¹⁰ As previous chapters have shown, Fontane’s characters require an active reading that constructs them from a variety of views offered. These two reviews are more closely connected than they might first appear, having both picked up on what engages readers in Fontane’s fiction.

Modern readers share the author’s context to a lesser degree, yet *Effi Briest* has remained ‘a novel whose characters still evoke our sympathy’.³¹¹ This comment, which was pronounced nearly a hundred years after the above ones, still bears the same sentiment: readers relate to the characters of this novel. There is a continued interest in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Apart from having become part of Germany’s school literature canon, there are currently thirty-one movies based on Fontane’s works.³¹² *Effi Briest* alone has been put on screen five times, most recently in 2009 by

³⁰⁹ paraphrased by Chambers, *Erzählwerk*, p. 21

³¹⁰ paraphrased Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 23 (review from 1912)

³¹¹ Leventhal, p. 191

³¹² Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 76

Hermine Huntgeburth. Some of these films chose to transpose the story into modern times, showing ‘dass die Themen seiner [Fontanes] Romane zeitlos sind und nicht eng historisch gebunden.’³¹³ The timeless themes help liberate this novel from its historical origin. Elsbeth Hamann argues that modern readers could only harbour a historical interest for Fontane’s novels as the society criticised within them is no longer one they feel part of – yet she too admits: ‘so bleiben die ästhetische Wirkung und die übergeordneten, in das allgemein Menschliche hineinreichenden Aussagen selbst dann unangetastet, wenn sich ein nicht mehr im fiktiven Adressaten wiedererkennender Leser dem Werk zuwendet.’³¹⁴ Clearly, the fictitious addressee – the narrative audience – does not exclude modern readers, otherwise they would not be reached by the aesthetic effect and the social messages of the novel. Hamann contradicts herself when she tries to hold on to the idea that the narrative audience is equivalent to the author’s contemporary audience. While studies such as those by Hans Werner Seiffert or more recently Horst Budjuhn (1985), Manfred Franke (1994) and Anja Restenberger (2001) have made much of the story’s true background available to modern readers, it remains questionable whether this information benefits the experience of fiction, or reaches the majority of readers. Jean Leventhal cautions: ‘One must resist the temptation to assume that Fontane knew as much about the case as modern readers do;’ and shows in her article that there are a number of considerable differences between the novel and the real story.³¹⁵

³¹³ Chambers, *ibid.*, p. 77

³¹⁴ Hamann, p. 466

³¹⁵ Leventhal, p. 182

Audiences and Contexts

The two key crises, Effi's adultery and Innstetten's duel, are central to the novel, yet they are also the two elements on which views have changed most over time. The position of women is a different one today and Effi's treatment by her husband and parents might seem more shocking, influencing how readers relate to her. However, as the previously mentioned studies point out, awareness of the historical context has grown considerably in the last few decades. Effi, 'dieses sympathische Menschenkind',³¹⁶ has always evoked the reader's sympathy as the few preserved letters written to Fontane by his readers show, so even if her fate were to seem more cruel to a modern than to a contemporary reader, it would only heighten the emotional impact of the character. The case is a different one for the duel and Innstetten. While duels were already heavily under question at the end of the nineteenth century, they were not unheard of and the social codes underlying them, especially where members of the military were concerned, still held strong.³¹⁷ Over 100 years later, however, they are no longer tolerated by either the law or society. More general changes, such as a transformation of social spheres within the military and the rising importance of individualism, will also influence modern points of view. Does this render modern readers unable, or more importantly *less* able to relate to Innstetten than the author's contemporary readers? Fundamentally, we need to ask: in this novel, how important is society in the abstract sense compared to social interaction on a smaller scale? We may see this novel as a story of historical symbolism and sociological evidence or find the conflicts which unfold between these characters still relevant to us without sharing their context. Our approach will influence whether we relate to Effi as a young woman in an

³¹⁶ Erler, *Entstehungs- und Wirkungsgeschichte*, p. 303

³¹⁷ Frevert, p. 271

unhappy marriage and Innstetten as a man caught up in external rules and expectations, or whether we see them both as puppets standing in for greater developments in society.

Modern and contemporary readers have to answer these questions for themselves, and their answers will largely depend on the extent to which they can establish an emotional connection to the main characters. Aside from personal considerations, this process is mainly influenced by the nature of the narrative audience, which has not changed over time. Even though the lives and opinions of modern readers are different from this author's contemporary readership, and duels and the harsh punishment of adultery by society might seem archaic today, the conflicts underlying them are not. A work of fiction will be written with a certain 'desired' audience in mind, yet as art does, it often develops its own momentum, creating the 'narrative audience': the readership implied or required by the text. The narrative audience might differ to a great extent from the desired and the actual contemporary audience. While the latter two are bound to a certain moment in time, the limits of the narrative audience determine whether readers will be able to relate to the work centuries or only decades later. Of course factors external to the text also greatly affect this process, such as canonisation or the transmission through the school system, but those will not be analysed here.

Elsbeth Hamann has taken a closer look at the comprehension process of the author's intended audience with a sociological analysis of their circumstances. She comes to the conclusion that both the social spheres and the setting of *Effi Briest* would have been familiar to the intended audience, as Fontane aimed for the local nobility. She sees these as the two key factors that determine whether a novel will be accepted by an audience.

'[Ein] wesentliches Kriterium für die Aufnahme des Romans scheint zunächst das Wissen des Adressaten um die Gültigkeit eines bestimmten Normen- und

Verhaltenskodex der jeweiligen sozialen Schicht zu sein.’³¹⁸ According to her, the reception depends strongly on the ‘jeweiligen Zeitgeist’, which she does not further specify.³¹⁹ While her second statement would suggest a work of fiction to be limited to an audience which shares the ‘Zeitgeist’ of the author, the first one sees not the sharing of a context, but knowledge about it as key. For an educated modern reader, at least a basic level of knowledge about the context which *Effi Briest* emerged from can be assumed. Fontane has long been taught in schools, as Ulrike Tontsch has demonstrated, and since the Fontane-Renaissance in the 1960s, *Effi Briest* has become a standard text for students. While a certain level of background knowledge is important, a modern audience might know more about the contemporary audience’s society than they did, as political or sociological patterns and secrets are often only revealed decades later. Whether a reader knows more, less or about as much as the actual audience did, background knowledge is not necessarily key when relating to characters.

Peter Rabinowitz describes this phenomenon as follows: ‘We live in a world with a history and with traditions, and it is impossible to experience what an author wanted us to because it is impossible to forget all that has happened between the time when a text was written and the time when it is read.’³²⁰ The author’s contemporary audience, which Rabinowitz calls the ‘authorial audience’, is likely to have shared enough cultural conventions and knowledge with the author in order to understand him the way he wanted to be understood.³²¹ Despite all the differences between the author’s contemporary and modern readers, there are a number of factors both share, and it is their common attributes that allow both groups to connect to a work of fiction.³²² These

³¹⁸ Hamann, p. 465

³¹⁹ Hamann, p. 15

³²⁰ Rabinowitz, p. 34

³²¹ Rabinowitz, pp. 21-23

³²² See Carin Liesenhoff for a detailed socio-historical analysis.

characteristics are brought together under headings such as ‘narrative audience’ (Rabinowitz) or ‘fiktiver Adressat’ (Hamann). This group is not found by sociological or historical research, but instead defines itself from within the novel. It is not the intended audience that the author wrote for, but the readers who can understand and be affected by the work of fiction. The narrative audience however needs to know relatively little to be able to relate to the characters as subjects and create its own interpretation from that.

Challenges to Modern Readers

Realist fiction often features an intricate network of historical symbolism which modern readers may find hard to decode. The important question however is what relevance this information has to the narrative audience. Many critics have analysed the political symbolism in *Effi Briest*, such as Karin Bruns, Rolf Parr and Wulf Wülfing who highlight the importance of dates and monuments. They have come to the conclusion that for Innstetten’s character, the references to Bismarck and Napoleon highlight his nature as well as his marriage conflict. The two military men stand in for Effi and her husband: the first troubles in their marriage coincide with the rise of Napoleon, their daughter is born on the anniversary of the battle of Königgrätz and will later side with Innstetten, Effi is haunted by her past as she moves into the Königgrätzerstraße.³²³ Their argument that these symbols highlight the divide that separates the couple is convincing, but is it necessary to decode these symbols in order to experience that the two spouses grow apart and that the birth of their daughter fails to reunite them?

³²³ Bruns et al, pp. 217-30

The historical symbolism is not ignored by Dieter Kafitz, but he argues that universal symbols are of greater importance to this novel. Without negating the ‘gesellschaftspolitische Implikationen der Ehegeschichte’, he focuses on elements like the window or the swing in the early part of the book, or the repeated instances of nature in connection with Effi.³²⁴ Furthermore, he points out the importance of minor characters as a backdrop: ‘Die Wiederholung bestimmter Figurengruppen führt zu zunehmender inhaltlicher Verdeutlichung, zu einer Konkretisierung der Grundspannung.’³²⁵ These ‘Figurengruppen’ transcend their historical context as they are presented largely through the characters’ feelings towards one another. Gieshübler is a friend to Effi before he is an apothecary, Roswitha first her confidante and then a Catholic, and as we meet Innstetten usually in her presence, he is an absent husband before he is a civil servant. Kafitz comments: ‘Die [...] Spannung zwischen staatlich-gesellschaftlicher Bindung und individueller Unmittelbarkeit wird präzisiert durch markante Figurenbilder, die ein Gegebenes bestätigend exemplifizieren.’³²⁶ State and society, notably Bismarck, loom over Effi’s life throughout the novel, but they never make a direct appearance through representatives or big political or social functions. The local nobles gather only a few times and are described as such eccentrics that it is difficult to see them as socially representative instead of satirical figures. Instead, the connection to the times in which the characters are embedded is maintained through allusions and symbols. ‘Den zeitgeschichtlichen Bezug erhalten die Figurenbilder durch die Evokationskraft politisch brisanter Namen, die Assoziationsanstöße geben, die für die Zeitgenossen Fontanes weit wirksamer gewesen sein müssen als für den heutigen

³²⁴ Kafitz, p. 139 and pp. 135-6

³²⁵ Kafitz, p. 137

³²⁶ Kafitz, p. 153

Leser.³²⁷ Analyses such as the aforementioned one by Bruns, Parr and Wülfing have listed numerous examples.

Contemporary readers will have been more aware of these references, as Kafitz says, yet whether that makes them ‘wirksamer’ is difficult question to answer. While contemporary audiences could establish a closer link between Effi and Innstetten’s personal story and their historical setting, modern audiences have a greater degree of knowledge available about the times as historical research has since been able to digest their events. Modern readers might approach this story with a historical interest, looking out even more for references to the author’s contemporary politics. However, if we assume that the majority of readers approach the story in the same way that the actual contemporary audience of Fontane did – that is to say with the intent of reading a work of fiction rather than of researching the real past behind it – the social (‘zwischenmenschlich’) dimension becomes more prominent. As comments and reviews have shown, what fascinated and continues to fascinate readers and many scholars is not (only) the historical value of this work, but the story of a young woman whom we cannot help but sympathise with.

Connecting to People across Time with Empathy

Throughout the book, emphasis is placed on those elements which define the characters as social beings, and their political or cultural implications are only allowed to play a role in the background. This weighting helps later readers access the novel. The first chapter already exemplifies this principle. Modern readers might be unable to decode the reference that the Briests have lived in their home ‘schon seit Kurfürst Georg

³²⁷ Kafitz, p. 159

Wilhelm' to mean 'since the early seventeenth century', but the family is still shown to be an established local entity.³²⁸ Contrasting with this passing remark is the detailed and evocative introduction of Effi: 'In allem, was sie tat, paarte sich Übermut und Grazie, während ihre lachenden braunen Augen eine große, natürliche Klugheit und viel Lebenslust und Herzensgüte verrieten.'³²⁹ Kurfürst Georg Wilhelm is mentioned only by name with nothing to cause any emotional reaction in the reader, Effi on the other hand is linked to laughter, joy and kindness of heart. We hear that she is like a daughter of the air, unsteady in nature, and that she gets this from her mother, who however cautions her to be less passionate.³³⁰ The two are likened to each other even before Effi's marriage to the man who had once aspired to marry her mother. Before we hear about the considerations, imposed by society (such as the husband's rank) that then prevented the marriage of the mother and now support that of her daughter, we find out that they are alike in spirit, but that the older woman possesses more self-control than the young girl. First comes the difference in character, then in circumstance.

Innstetten is first introduced by Effi and will remain linked to her for the greater part of the novel, rarely appearing to the reader without his wife. She describes him with the words: 'gute Figur und sehr männlich'.³³¹ Although she does not yet know it, keeping up appearances and society's definition of masculinity, namely honour, will be the key influences on her future relationship to him. The contrast between her happy life at Hohen-Cremmen, shown in the second chapter where she is happily playing with her friends in her parents' garden, and her marriage is again hinted at early on. When she first sees Innstetten, knowing that she is supposed to marry him, she begins to shake as

³²⁸ *GBA*, I/15, p. 5

³²⁹ *GBA*, I/15, pp. 6-7

³³⁰ *GBA*, I/15, p. 7

³³¹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 9

if a first glimpse of future haunted nights and loneliness has touched her.³³² These two scenes, one of innocent bliss among nature and friends, filled with laughter and chatter, and the stiff, nervous and formal meeting with Innstetten afterwards create two different moods, and their order invites the reader to undergo the same emotional change which Effi is yet to experience: a comfortable and predictable pace of events in a friendly and warm environment, followed by sudden change that raises concerns for the future. Readers, like the protagonist, are abruptly jerked out of paradise and made aware that what is yet to come will be neither easy to process nor filled with positive emotions. As discussed in chapter three, the character's emotional experience is recreated for the reader – without the help of any references to elements beyond the characters' immediate context.

Empathy with Effi is thus established in the very first chapters, while Innstetten remains hard to grasp to both her and the reader for now. She does not know what she is getting into, as she reveals to her friends when she tells them that she only imagines what she ought to feel like, and neither does the reader.³³³ Her anticipation of her marriage mirrors ours: while Effi is excited about her new status and life as a married woman, the readers might be less naïve about the possible reality of her marriage to a virtual stranger and look ahead with worry or curiosity. Like her first bout of nervousness about the future which passed quickly, the narrator makes sure the reader, too, is served with ominous foreshadowings. When describing her feelings of happiness during the wedding preparations, the narrator already inserts doubt. 'Und diesen ihren heiteren Phantasien entsprach denn auch ihre Haltung', Effi is cheerful, but because of her daydreams rather than realistic expectations. Her mother, having been introduced as less

³³² *GBA*, I/15, p. 18

³³³ *GBA*, I/15, p. 21

likely to give in to momentary emotions, observes: 'sie lebt in ihren Vorstellungen und Träumen.'³³⁴ Dreams, ideas and fantasies are what create Effi's mood at this point, not reality. Throughout the novel, Effi will be associated with fiction rather than facts; even Innstetten observes 'immer Phantasien' and the narrator comments that when looking at a seal, she sees a mermaid.³³⁵

Similarly to Cécile, Effi is associated with a sphere different from reality. Both women will not find happiness in society and die young. They also share a life as everyone's favourite and later that of social outcast. Other characters often address Effi as princess or darling.³³⁶ Her mother is once again the one to offer a more direct commentary on the situation: 'Es kommt dir vor wie ein Märchen, und du möchtest eine Prinzessin sein.' Knowingly, she adds: 'Du bist ein Kind. Schön und poetisch. Das sind so Vorstellungen. Die Wirklichkeit ist anders, und oft ist es gut, daß es statt Licht und Schimmer ein Dunkel gibt.'³³⁷ Effi dreams of a fairy-tale life, continuing to be adored by her husband as she was by her parents and friends. However, her poetic childhood idyll finds an early ending in Kessin. An older and wiser Effi will conclude: 'Man liebte mich zu sehr.'³³⁸

Neither the change in mood that accompanies the move to Kessin, the introduction of Innstetten, nor Effi's characterisation by association with fairy-tales and dreams implies a narrative audience that shares more than the experience of living with other people. No pieces of historical or political information are essential to understand the story and relate to its characters at this point of the novel. These references are present, but they

³³⁴ *GBA*, I/15, p. 24

³³⁵ *GBA*, I/15, p. 101 and p. 151

³³⁶ e.g. *GBA*, I/15, p. 23 and p. 25

³³⁷ *GBA*, I/15, p. 33

³³⁸ *GBA*, I/15, p. 176

only underline what the work communicates to its readers anyway. Throughout, Effi continues to be associated not only with the realm of fantasy, but more generally with objects and ideas that do not fit in. She wants a fur coat, a Japanese folding screen and a red bedroom light, anything exotic and luxurious. She compares her home to impressions of India and Persia which she got from a book. Clearly, all of these objects and ideas are quite out of place in Kessin.³³⁹ Effi is shown to be misplaced too, a dreamer brought down to reality. The discord between the protagonist and her environment is strong even without the historical component.

Effi cannot have what she dreams of, instead she is faced with a grotesque distortion of her far-away fantasies: the Chinese ghost. This is not the first time the narration cautions us to be careful what we wish for. The young woman wanted to be married, she wanted admiration and honour, but the way in which she receives these mocks her wishes.³⁴⁰ Her marriage is a mismatch of temperament, Innstetten's aspirations to glory bring her loneliness, and honour finally breaks her life in two. She hopes for distraction, but it comes in the form of Crampas who will destroy her reputation. What she imagines cannot become reality without being twisted in the process, and despite her youth, Effi already feels that her unburdened life is over once she leaves Hohen-Cremmen. From the beginning she fears Innstetten for his 'Grundsätze', which have even her mother worried.³⁴¹ His principles, and along with them the importance he attributes to his reputation, will not only force him to fight a duel he does not believe in, they show their destructive power towards his wife much earlier. After her first nightmare, she is afraid to turn to Innstetten, knowing that he expects strength not weakness. When she later

³³⁹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 30 and p. 63

³⁴⁰ *GBA*, I/15, p. 35

³⁴¹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 38

confides in him anyway, he indeed ridicules her for her fear, creating more distance between them.³⁴² Little interactions and exchanges between the couple show them growing apart even without the background of Bismarck and Napoleon.

The local apothecary Gieshübler is a light in the dark to Effi, but his highest praise is spoken not by her but by Innstetten, who describes him with ‘und vor allem Seele von Mensch, was doch immer die Hauptsache bleibt’.³⁴³ Next to Effi, Innstetten might seem cold, but he is able to show a softer side with others. He is not what Effi hoped he would be, but as we have learned, she had been doomed the same way as Emma Bovary: her fairy-tale aspirations set her up for disappointment. Without Effi, her husband is friendly and warm with others, even though he remains driven by a sense of duty. When their daughter is born, Effi hopes that it will end her loneliness, but it does not provide the cure.³⁴⁴ The narrator tells us why: ‘was in ihrer Ehe eigentlich fehlte: Huldigungen, Anregungen, kleine Aufmerksamkeiten.’³⁴⁵ Above all, the young woman needs to be adored, to play the role of the beloved ‘princess’, as everyone addressed her before her marriage. The contrast is not only one of setting, of political and historical meaning, but a social one. The people who surrounded Effi at the beginning of the novel were her childhood friends, her family, her cousin who admired her. All of them adored her, she was the only child, the centre of attention. In Kessin, she finds no friends among the few members of the gentry and has only Gieshübler to talk to. Rollo and Roswitha both provide some measure of solace with their admiration of their mistress, but the dog remains an animal and the maid is too far removed from Effi in terms of

³⁴² *GBA*, I/15, p. 88 and pp. 92-93

³⁴³ *GBA*, I/15, p. 58

³⁴⁴ *GBA*, I/15, p. 115

³⁴⁵ *GBA*, I/15, p. 119

social standing, education and intellect.³⁴⁶ Both look at her with adoring, friendly brown eyes, of which the descriptions are strikingly similar, but they alone are not enough to disperse Effi's loneliness.³⁴⁷

The narrator has told us what is amiss in their marriage – and in the isolation of Kessin, lacking in Effi's life in general – but the heroine herself is also aware of it to some degree.³⁴⁸ She comments that Innstetten would save her just like Rollo, but he would act because it is the honourable thing to do. Only as an afterthought does she add 'Und liebt mich.'³⁴⁹ Innstetten is a man who wants to advance in society, he values whatever dogma is held high as he needs to be esteemed by others in order to have a successful career. In this regard he is not unlike Effi; they both depend on what other people think of them. As in previous novels, Fontane skilfully recreates this situation for the reader. Effi depends on the adoration of others, Innstetten on their respect, and the reader on the opinions of other characters as sources of information. Both spouses' situations are created through their cultural and historical setting, but what we witness and experience in the novel are their immediate social circumstances. Similarly, what the author recreates for our reading is the social setting. We may or may not share the same background, but that does not hinder the process of empathy which we partake in. On the contrary, empathy can aid our understanding of historical settings.

A strong example of this kind of recreation is the information surrounding the Chinese ghost. First we hear about him from Johanna and Innstetten, and Effi evaluates their rather short and neutral statements as spooky. At this point, the idea of the Chinese

³⁴⁶ For a more detailed analysis of Rollo, see Rolf Zuberbühler, *Ja, Luise, die Kreatur: Zur Bedeutung der Neufundländer in Fontanes Romanen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991).

³⁴⁷ *GBA*, I/15, p. 56

³⁴⁸ For Effi's loneliness and boredom in Kessin, see Strowick, pp. 188-193.

³⁴⁹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 141

weighs on her, but it is not overwhelming. Crampas adds to the story with his own interpretation: he believes it to be an instrument of education, Innstetten's 'Erziehungsapparat'.³⁵⁰ This view is quickly adopted by Effi as fact, and many critics have followed in her path. Readers are easily drawn into the same situation as the heroine, believing what she does without considering who has provided that information. Crampas of course has his own motives for driving a wedge between the couple, and his words alone should not be enough to convict Innstetten. It is possible that Innstetten's comments were made rather thoughtlessly and only gained significance in Effi's consciousness which acts as a focaliser for the reader for the greater part of the novel. In a moment of clarity, the young woman exclaims 'Wer bürgt mir den dafür, daß Crampas recht hat!', but she cannot shake off the idea and soon believes it anyway.³⁵¹ Brian Holbeche is one of the few critics to have observed that Innstetten's later comments and reactions to the idea of the spook show him to be less sure of it himself than he might like to admit openly.³⁵² Dependent on other people like Effi, is he also plagued by ghost stories like her?

Problems of Affective Reading

The recreation of untrustworthy and confusing information for readers helps them to understand Effi's situation with empathy, but it makes it difficult to see Innstetten. This difficulty is shared by the author's contemporary audience and a twenty-first-century audience, as the character's reception has shown. In the nineteenth century, he was described as 'ein alter Ekel', but critics still feel the need to defend Innstetten against the accusations of heartlessness in the twenty-first century. In 2012, Anja Haberer

³⁵⁰ *GBA*, I/15, chapter 16

³⁵¹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 157

³⁵² *GBA*, I/15, chapter 16 ; Holbeche p. 24

cautions her readers: ‘Selbst eine Figur wie Baron Innstetten, der oft als Gegenbild zu seiner jungen, unschuldigen, lebensvollen Frau gesehen wird, ist eine hochkomplex gezeichnete Gestalt, die keineswegs nur die kalte, engherzige Verstandesklugheit verkörpert, auf die sie oftmals festgelegt wird.’³⁵³ How can audiences divided by centuries experience the same challenge when connecting to this character?

For the greater part of the narration, we see Innstetten through Effi’s eyes, as he was introduced by her description. Holbeche’s valuable analysis of Innstetten highlights that he is not heartless, but was in fact deeply affected by being rejected by Effi’s mother Luise and even changed the path of his career in the aftermath. The reason this story is often overlooked, as Holbeche points out, is that it is once again told by another character and is thus told as the speaker sees it: Effi naively thinks of it as an entertaining story.³⁵⁴ Later she discusses him with her friends, people who are likely to take her side against him, seeing how unhappy she is. One might argue that military honour codes seem even more heartless to modern readers and that they would find it nearly impossible to feel empathy with Innstetten – but this is not the case. As the aforementioned letters have shown, Fontane’s contemporary readers already described him in none too flattering terms. As in *Unwiederbringlich*, it is easy to side with only one spouse in this novel, but submerging oneself in their point of view means becoming unable to see the other spouse as the narration represents him or her. Both Christine Holk and Geert von Innstetten have been accused of being cold and dogmatic by their partners, and subsequently by their readers. Effi’s mother said Innstetten was a man of principle, as does the Ministerin: ‘ein Mann, der nicht nach Stimmungen und Laune,

³⁵³ Haberer, p. 272

³⁵⁴ Holbeche, p. 21-22

sondern nach Grundsätzen handelt.³⁵⁵ Both of these women have reasons for speaking as they do. Effi's mother wants to praise Innstetten when speaking to her daughter, as she wants her to marry him, the minister's wife knows that 'Grundsätze' are held in high regard by the ministry and that such a comment will be advantageous for Innstetten, whom she likes. What does the narration, as opposed to the characters, have to say about this character?

Innstetten frequently tells his wife that he is happy to have her.³⁵⁶ He is annoyed along with everyone else by the overly strict Sidonie, and is not even overly or simplistically patriotic: 'Innstetten, der von solchem Patriotismus nicht viel hielt.'³⁵⁷ He loves Effi to the point of jealousy, and shows her compassion and empathy: 'Innstetten zeigte sich voll Teilnahme mit ihrem Zustand, und das umso lieber, als er ihr in vielem recht gab. Es war wirklich alles schwermütig, so schön es war.'³⁵⁸ Not only does he humour her, the second sentence, rendered in free indirect speech, strongly suggests that he actually feels the same melancholy as she does. Despite the descriptions by Effi herself, her mother, Crampas and others, Innstetten is not as unlike his wife as these characters would have us believe. The move to Berlin furthers his career, but he comments 'und noch mehr um Effis willen'.³⁵⁹ He wants to end her loneliness and make her happy.

The duel which is so often held up as an example of his heartlessness is actually a difficult decision for him, and again several other characters drive him and support readers in believing Innstetten only does what he ought to do. Both of Innstetten's friends, Wüllersdorf and Buddenbrook, assert that there is no other way and that he had

³⁵⁵ *GBA*, I/15, p. 320

³⁵⁶ *GBA*, I/15, p. 171

³⁵⁷ *GBA*, I/15, p. 179 and p. 182

³⁵⁸ *GBA*, I/15, p. 215 and p. 250

³⁵⁹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 261

to face Crampas. Innstetten is actually emotional and acts rashly, cursing himself later for not having taken time to think calmly before calling his friend. When he recognises whose handwriting addressed the letters to Effi, he comes close to fainting: ‘in seinem Kopfe began sich alles zu drehen.’³⁶⁰ He retreats to his room where he begins to pace restlessly – ‘Das Auf- und Abschreiten nebenan wollte kein Ende nehmen’ – and it is only in the evening, hours later, that he can bring himself to reread the letters aloud, as if having to reassure himself that he is not caught in a bad dream.³⁶¹ Brian Holbeche, one of the few critics to scrutinise Innstetten beyond Effi’s presentation, describes him as being in a ‘state of shock [which] prevents him from thinking the matter through.’³⁶² After Wüllersdorf arrives, Innstetten continues pacing but then pulls himself together, managing to restore a measure of order to his mind by adhering to the rules of social conduct: ‘Innstetten ging wieder auf und ab und wäre bei der ihn verzehrenden Unruhe gern in Bewegung geblieben, sah aber, daß das nicht gehe.’³⁶³ Again, Innstetten shows a complexity that is easily overlooked. Suddenly faced with Innstetten in the absence of his wife, the reader is likely to turn once again to other characters for guidance – as Effi did with Crampas – and Wüllersdorf, as well as Buddenbrook later, does not highlight Innstetten’s inner conflict, but only the position of society towards the question. The strong presence of an abstract group – ‘society’ is the one to say ‘daß das nicht gehe’ – and its dogma leaves the impression that it is Innstetten who upholds it rather than the other people present. This effect is reached through the social constellation; it is not anchored in the nineteenth-century setting in the psychological effect of a group.

³⁶⁰ *GBA*, I/15, p. 273

³⁶¹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 274

³⁶² Holbeche, p. 27

³⁶³ *GBA*, I/15, p. 275, ‘daß das nicht gehe’ as a variation of the social dogma ‘das macht man nicht’

Negative assumptions about Innstetten's character, namely his coldness, continue to be made by the characters afterwards, further inviting this impression in the reader. Effi accuses him, but she speaks in rage and forgives him later, saying specifically that he did the best he could.³⁶⁴ When her daughter Annie is brought to visit her, it is again not the narrator but a character, in this case Effi herself, who blames Innstetten for the child's coldness. Similarly to her connection of the Chinese ghost to Innstetten, this view has been widely adopted. Given the situation, however, the young girl could have simply been overwhelmed by the sudden reunion with her mother because she did not know how to act and thus reverted to learned polite behaviour. It is also possible that the servant Johanna, who disliked Effi from the beginning, raised Annie to dislike her mother.³⁶⁵ Effi is the only one to suggest that her daughter's words had been specifically drummed into the child by Innstetten with the intent to hurt; the reader is offered no alternative views or further information on the matter. Seeing her daughter again after years of separation, she is not a neutral observer but overwhelmed by emotions, and they understandably colour her thoughts. Once again, Effi is pulled along by the current, readily drawing the reader with her.

Like the reader, Innstetten is swept away by the opinions of other characters, namely his peers, men whose respect he depends upon. His nourishment is honour, Effi's is love, but both are led by the thoughts of those surrounding them. Effi's mother once again offers insight: 'Sie läßt sich gern treiben, und wenn die Welle gut ist, dann ist sie auch selber gut.'³⁶⁶ Crampas and the Schloon were bad influences on Effi, as Wüllersdorf was to Innstetten. The narrator continues to echo Frau von Briest's sentiment: 'So trieb

³⁶⁴ *GBA*, I/15, p. 325 and p. 348

³⁶⁵ Holbeche also suggests this as a possibility, p. 28

³⁶⁶ *GBA*, I/15, p. 255

sie denn weiter, heute, weil sie's nicht ändern konnte, morgen, weil sie's nicht ändern wollte.³⁶⁷ Johanna and Roswitha, who side with Innstetten and Effi respectively, are also servants of the same household. Their discussion in chapter twenty-nine echoes the inner battle that both spouses fight. How much do you need to give to the social structures you live in to remain part of them, how high is the price of their love and respect? In the end, both spouses have their fate decided by the people in whose presence they find themselves. As Innstetten remarks, had he not alerted Wüllersdorf, he would have been able to avoid the duel, and had Effi not met Crampas, she might never have had an affair.

Briest and his wife soon have to face the same question, answering it first like Innstetten, then like their daughter. In a letter to her, they close their home to Effi, 'weil wir Farbe bekennen und vor aller Welt [...] unsere Verurteilung [...] aussprechen wollen.'³⁶⁸ They do not change their minds as such, but have them changed once again by the influence of another character, in this case Effi's doctor who writes to them and advises that they welcome back their only daughter. Other people constantly decide Effi's and Innstetten's fate. Near her death, she asks her old pastor Niemeyer whether she will go to heaven, reminding the reader once more that other characters hold her fate in their hands.³⁶⁹ In the end, Innstetten is allowed one last opportunity to present himself to the reader without Effi and show his emotions. He misses the happiness he knew at her side, concluding: 'Auszeichnung, was war es am Ende?'³⁷⁰ He leaves us not just as a man of principle and honour, but also as a grieving husband who values love just as highly, if not higher than his reputation. Readers are hindered in their connection to

³⁶⁷ *GBA*, I/15, p. 199

³⁶⁸ *GBA*, I/15, p. 302

³⁶⁹ *GBA*, I/15, p. 333

³⁷⁰ *GBA*, I/15, p. 337

Innstetten by the other characters, most of all Effi, and this experience is shared by the author's contemporary and modern readers.

Conclusion

The characters of *Effi Briest* are part of a specific historical, political and geographical context. However, they are not defined through these elements to the reader. The vast majority of information about them is given through other characters, embedding them intrinsically in a social network. While they bear the traces of their time, their interpersonal conflicts and problems have not been solved over a century later, the questions they ask have not been answered today. This novel can be read with a keen historical interest, but that is not the only approach available to modern readers. The narrative audience implied by this novel is one that knows human interaction, that has felt the pull between one's own wishes and obligations to the group, one that knows what it is like to be swept away by one's emotions or the opinions of others. This narrative audience does not exclude a modern reader. The reactions to the characters of Effi and Innstetten have remained consistent over time, with readers successfully building an emotional connection to Effi and showing sympathy and understanding for her, but largely failing to do so for Innstetten, whose character is overshadowed by the image Effi has of him. Like all of Fontane's novels, *Effi Briest* invites a reader who is fascinated by other people; able to feel for and learn about someone that they might not be able to identify with. This is the journey that the contemporary audience could embark upon, and the path is not closed to us readers today.

Chapter 9: The Conception of Character – *Vor dem Sturm*

‘Was einzig und allein dauernd dem Menschen genügt, ist nur immer wieder der Mensch,’ Fontane said in 1852.³⁷¹ Even though he only began creating fictional characters relatively late in life, he had long been putting real persons onto paper as a travel writer. These descriptions of real people are seen through Fontane’s eyes, as are his fictional characters, and both are recorded in order to transfer an impression from the author’s mind to that of his readers. The characterisation of real people as seen by the author, and the characterisation of fictional characters as conceived by the author, bear striking resemblances to each other in the case of Fontane. While more direct connections can be drawn with the early works, the major underlying traits persist into the late novels. People as they appeared to him are a source of inspiration to Fontane throughout his writing, while influences on his early works, such as other authors, fade over time. To what extent can we speak of Fontane as an observer as well as, or perhaps more so, than a creator?

The early novels, especially his first great work *Vor dem Sturm*, show Fontane emerging as a writer. They still bear the signs of the circumstances they arose from. At the time, the author admired works such as Scott’s *Waverley* or Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*. In *Jenseit des Tweed*, Fontane writes about his admiration for Scott when visiting the Scottish poet’s study. However, while he admired his fiction, he is quite disappointed by the sight of the actual room, and muses that what we find in fiction is not traces of the reality the author experienced, but of his individual artistic gaze. Taking this observation as a guideline, this chapter will not try to search for ‘the real inspiration

³⁷¹ WSB, Abt. 3, III, p. 163

behind' a character, but instead examine the connections between representations of the 'real' and the 'fictional' people that populate Fontane's writing. Their differences help characterise Fontane's mode of presentation; but their similarities, more interestingly, challenge the categories of 'real' and 'fictional' people in writing.

Influences from other writers

Resemblances and similarities to other people – real people as described by Fontane or characters as they appear in the works of fiction by other authors – are present throughout his works. Several critics have drawn close links between the way he renders characters in *Vor dem Sturm* and the techniques used by Scott and Thackeray. Adolf Paul observes that the abrupt introduction of characters through short portraits upon their first appearance in the story stems from Scott.³⁷² The introduction of Hoppenmarieken is a good example. When she first appears, the narrator poses the question: 'Wer aber war Hoppenmarieken?'³⁷³ It is followed by a short portrait of her. Shears not only links the mode of description, but also the matter described to Scott. He compares the individuals as well as the character constellation of Lewin, Kathinka, Marie and Ladalinski to Waverley, Flora, Rose and MacIvor, stressing especially the similarities between the two protagonists, Lewin and Waverley.³⁷⁴ While he argues convincingly that these characters are more than a little alike, his analysis focuses on where the characters originated from. Comparative studies of the English writers Fontane admired and his own novels have been done in great detail by the critics mentioned above – this chapter will not repeat them, as the aim is not to analyse the genesis of Fontane's techniques, but to draw out in how far his representation of

³⁷² Paul, p. 215; Krickler and Shears also highlight this (p. 105 and p. 69)

³⁷³ *GBA*, I/1, p. 73

³⁷⁴ Shears, pp. 40-47

fictional characters resembles that of the real people he describes, and how it can inform our reading experience of fiction.

‘In his earlier novels, especially *Vor dem Sturm*, Fontane often acts as intermediary between his characters and the reader.’³⁷⁵ While in later novels, as previous chapters have shown, the narrator almost disappears, the first novel features a strong narrative voice. Shears again sees this to be an influence from Scott, remarking that both authors use expressions such as ‘our hero’ or ‘our friend’. However, when we think of the magnum opus *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*, we will find that if Fontane’s early narrator was influenced by Scott, the voices of fiction and reality were both affected by him. It is interesting to ask how far an author emerged from having read another, but even more interesting if this influence can tell us something about the difference between fictional and non-fictional writing.

The narrator of both *Vor dem Sturm* and *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* draws the reader onto his side by using the inclusive first person plural. The reader is invited to share the same point of view, to agree with the sympathetic title of the ‘hero’ being both the narrator’s and the reader’s hero. If the narrator thus establishes himself as a figure whose point of view we are likely to share, he leads us onto a path where we are more likely to agree with the opinions and judgements he will deliver later on. This is advantageous for fiction, where it can assure a certain reception of the character by its readers, but why is it necessary for writing which purports to describe reality? In both cases, we are encouraged to share the view of a narrator. Descriptions of real people and places are of course highly subjective even though the object exists in reality, outside of

³⁷⁵ Shears, p. 68

the author's head. Fontane does not render what he sees through objective data (height, age, size, weight, colour, material), but by describing what emotions are evoked when standing at a historical site, what effect a person had on those around him or her. We read a subjective, decisively human and often social point of view, which makes the writing more accessible, but also more likely to be judged as an opinion one does not have to share. If we are to follow Fontane to London, Scotland or the Mark Brandenburg, we have to embark on a journey seen through his eyes and share his point of view.

Alongside Walter Scott, Thackeray, with his *Vanity Fair*, has been shown to be another major influence on the early Fontane. There can be no doubt that the German author read his works, but critics have been pointing out that there are also important differences between the ways their narrators operate.³⁷⁶ Wolfgang Eberhardt's comparative study finds that Thackeray's narrator analyses and explains more to the reader than even the early Fontane.³⁷⁷ Instead of offering this kind of narrative guidance, Fontane uses dialogues between characters, which, so Eberhardt suggests, mirror the reader's inner dialogue.³⁷⁸ As the analysis of *Cécile* in chapter four has shown, the novel's characters often partake in the same guessing-game that the narration aims to involve the reader in. However, the readings of many critics have also shown that their dialogue does not necessarily mirror the reader's inner dialogue, but that, because of the gradual withdrawal of guidance, readers might decide to side with whatever character they find most sympathetic, or with whose view they most agree. Eberhardt notes further differences concerning their fictional characters. He argues for

³⁷⁶ He mentions having read them for example in *Ein Sommer in London*, WSB, Abt. 3, III, p. 25.

³⁷⁷ Eberhardt, p. 207

³⁷⁸ Eberhardt, p. 210

example that Thackeray shows more darkness than light in his characters, while Fontane tries to balance the two.³⁷⁹ Overall he presents Thackeray as more patronising towards his readers than his German counterpart. The degree of direction Fontane offers in early fictional or travel writing is indeed a point that can be difficult to reconcile with the label of Realism (see chapter seven), and warrants more detailed comment in the later analysis of *Vor dem Sturm*.

Eberhardt presents a detailed analysis of Thackeray's influence, showing both similarities and differences. The strongest connection he sees is in the importance of the milieu for the characters of both authors.³⁸⁰ He is far from alone in making this claim, but there are also critics who disagree with this statement.³⁸¹ Bruno Hillebrand for example says: 'Die soziale Struktur interessierte ihn [Fontane] nur am Rande. Was ihn beschäftigte, war der Mensch in seiner Umgangsart.'³⁸² The difference between the two critics lies in their understanding of milieu. Eberhardt understands it as the wider web of the characters' social relations, the society they live in and are part of, while Hillebrand thinks of the more immediate social network (close family and friends) the characters are imbedded in. Georg Lukács notes: '[Fontane] wird zwar erst durch die naturalistische Bewegung der achtziger, neunziger Jahre zu einer Zentralfigur der neuen deutschen Literatur, hat jedoch selbst [...] theoretisch wie praktisch außerordentlich starke Vorbehalte gegen die ganze Bewegung.'³⁸³ This movement, which stresses the extreme importance of the milieu to characters, is Naturalism.

³⁷⁹ Eberhardt, p. 226

³⁸⁰ Eberhardt, p. 180

³⁸¹ For supporters of Eberhardt's point of view, see chapter seven.

³⁸² Hillebrand, p. 231

³⁸³ Lukács, p. 279

Autobiographical Comparisons

In his autobiographical writing, such as *Meine Kinderjahre*, Fontane shows some Naturalist traits in the descriptions of people. He draws a link between his ancestors and his parents' physical and mental traits, concluding that their differences can be traced back to the French tribes on each side of the family.³⁸⁴ Explaining his father's actions, he says: 'Das Gascognische in ihm schlug immer wieder durch.'³⁸⁵ Such remarks are more common in his non-fictional writing, and might betray a personal conviction. However, he does not make extensive use of them, and in his fictional writing, these references disappear almost completely after his first novel. Personal observations, such as those about the nature of his parents, are more likely to bear Naturalist traits than descriptions of people Fontane gives with his readers in mind. From featuring in autobiographical pieces, to playing minor roles in travel writing and having next to no presence on later works of fiction, the trend shows that the presence of almost Naturalist comments decreases as the importance of the effect on the reader increases.³⁸⁶ Whether this was a conscious decision on the part of the author remains unknown.

Real Inspirations

'The real person behind the fictional character' has been a source of interest with many authors, and Fontane is no exception. These cases are a point where the description of real people and the creation of fictional people come into direct contact. The analysis of *Effi Briest* (see chapter eight) has already highlighted how the changes Fontane made when transforming the real event into a story can reveal the paths which the narration tries to lead the reader on more clearly (in this case the changes indicated that the reader

³⁸⁴ WSB, Abt. 3, IV, p. 18

³⁸⁵ WSB, Abt. 3, IV, p. 49

³⁸⁶ For examples from travel writing, see pages 6-7.

is guided to feel sympathetic towards Effi). There are a number of other works which feature characters behind which critics have identified, or believe they have identified, real people: *L'Adultera*, *Graf Petöfy*, *Unterm Birnbaum*, *Quitt*, *Unwiederbringlich* and *Frau Jenny Treibel* are only the most prominent examples besides *Effi Briest*. 'Fontane hat für die meisten seiner zahlreichen Werke den Stoff unmittelbar aus der Wirklichkeit bezogen.'³⁸⁷ *Quitt* is based on the story of Förster Frey, *Effi Briest* on the Ardenne case and *Unterm Birnbaum* on the Letschin case, *L'Adultera* on the life of Thérèse von Ravené and in *Unwiederbringlich* the main character Holk is an interpretation of the real Baron von Plessen-Ivenack.³⁸⁸

The characters of *Graf Petöfy* have been traced back to the story of Johanna Buska and Graf Török, as Fontane admits himself: 'Török ist Petöfy und die Buska ist Franziska.'³⁸⁹ In the case of *Die Poggenpuhls*, Erler notes: 'Die „Poggenpuhls“ gehören zu den wenigen Romanen Fontanes, für die sich eine direkte stoffliche Anregung nicht ermitteln läßt. Allerdings erweisen die überaus zahlreichen Reflexe auf Zeitgenossen und Zeitereignisse ungewöhnlich intensive autobiographische Implikationen.'³⁹⁰ While Erler refrains from an analysis of the writer's psychology, Christiane Wandel sees the author's daughter Martha Fontane as inspiration for several female characters. She argues that Corinna Treibel, Manon von Poggenpuhl and Ebba (*Unwiederbringlich*) were all based on her. Furthermore, she finds the central conflict in *Unwiederbringlich* to be that of Fontane's parents.³⁹¹ These direct biographical links can be limiting for fiction, reducing the reading experience to the work of a detective who is trying to

³⁸⁷ Goldammer, p. 12

³⁸⁸ In order: Goldammer, p. 54; see chapter seven; Wandel, p. 134; Goldammer, p. 57, *Dichter* II, p. 414

³⁸⁹ *GBA*, XII/3, p. 391, letter to Emilie Fontane, 11.06.1884

³⁹⁰ Erler, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, p. 69

³⁹¹ Wandel, pp. 124-26

figure out the real person behind each character as in a *roman à clef*.³⁹² Without saying that these readings cannot offer an interest and a value in themselves, it would be wrong to suggest that they are the only way to read Fontane's novels.

Although psychoanalytic readings will thus not form a focus of this investigation, it is important to note that a number of critics have found Fontane's 'fictional' characters to contain enough elements of 'real' people to be identifiable. Whether these are people he knew personally as family members or friends, people he read about in the newspaper, whose stories he heard through third parties, or even historical figures such as the Marwitz family who inspired the Vitzewitzes according to Fontane himself, there is a large number of links between reality and fiction in his works.³⁹³ However, the connection works both ways. It is not only reality that seems to invade fiction, but more strongly fiction which invades reality. Dieter Kafitz calls Fontane's observations of reality 'produktives Sehen', indicating that there is already a creative process taking place before the actual creation of fiction begins.³⁹⁴ Viewing is in fact not different from listening (see Stanley Fish in chapter two): in both cases the brain needs to interpret information received through the senses, and this interpretation takes places simultaneously in order to guide our attention, leading to such phenomena as change blindness. In other words, what we see and hear depends on who we are. The way two people see the same object or hear the same speech is never the same. If hearing is interpreting, so is seeing.

³⁹² For such studies see for example Susanne Meyer's *Literarische Schwestern, Anna Ozores – Effi Briest*

³⁹³ Letter to Ludwig Pietsch, 24.04.1880 (in *Dichter II*, p. 237)

³⁹⁴ Kafitz, p. 7

Observing People

Fontane is a keen observer of people. On his journey to Scotland, he tells us: ‘Wir fahren dritter Klasse, halb ersparungs-, halb beobachtungshalber.’³⁹⁵ While in London, he describes their innkeeper with a Naturalist touch, and shows that fictional people are never far from his mind when watching real ones. ‘Schärtner’s ganzer Radikalismus ist ein bloßer Zufall,’ he begins, and immediately transposes him into the fictional realm with his following hypothesis: ‘in Stettin oder Danzig statt in Hanau geboren, wäre er der loyalste Weinhändler von der Welt geworden, und hätte am 15. Oktober die Toaste auf den König ausgebracht.’³⁹⁶ Most of what he tells us about Herr Schärtner is actually about the fictional Herr Schärtner he imagines, the one who would have been loyal to the king. In order to strengthen his description of him, he contrasts Schärtner with Dr. Heise, a fellow guest at the inn. ‘Das stechende Auge, die etwas spitze Nase, dazu seine Redeweise, gleich scharf an Inhalt wie Ton der Stimme, sagen einem auf der Stelle, daß man es hier mit keinem Revolutionär aus Zufall, sondern mit einer jener negativen Naturen zu tun hat, deren Lust, wenn nicht gar deren Bestimmung das Zerstören ist.’³⁹⁷ The physical elements are picked out because they align with the interpretation Fontane offers right after: they show that Dr. Heise is a true revolutionary. Given what the author just told us we are likely to agree, but we do not know if another observer would have described the dreamy smile, the wavy hair and the amicable gestures of the same man, evoking a different image without directly contradicting anything Fontane described.

³⁹⁵ *WSB*, Abt. 3, III, p. 184

³⁹⁶ *WSB*, Abt. 3, III, p. 17

³⁹⁷ *WSB*, Abt. 3, III, p. 17

Much of Fontane's travel writing as well as his war reports necessarily feature a lot of history: history, we might want to remind ourselves, being the events of the past we choose to tell in order to convey a certain picture, a picture that can change dramatically depending on which events we pick out. As a writer of fiction, Fontane describes people as seen through the eyes of an author. 'Das Wort Spielhagens: "Finden, nicht erfinden" enthält eine nicht genug zu beherzigende Wahrheit; in der Erzählungskunst bedeutet es beinah alles,' Fontane tells us quite rightly.³⁹⁸ The elements he decides to render in his writing are not haphazard; they set readers on a path which leads them to receive the same impression as Fontane did (see chapter two, Schneider's model of information processing). In his non-fictional writing, he often directly states the interpretation which his narration of a characters suggests. We see the same occurring in early works like *Vor dem Sturm*, but, perhaps because he becomes more confident in his technique, to a lesser degree in his later works.

Characterisations of 'Real' People

The autobiographical work *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig* reveals further connections between the 'real' and 'fictional' people who populate Fontane's works. To the readers of *Unwiederbringlich*, the following description will sound familiar: '[Sie] war eine ganz ausgezeichnete Dame [...], dabei von Charakter und Lebensernst gewesen. Aber leider hatte sie von diesem Ernst, ich will nicht sagen mehr als gut ist, aber doch mehr als speziell meinem alten Freunde lieb und genehm war, ja seiner ganzen Natur nach lieb und genehm sein konnte.'³⁹⁹ Christine Holk would have found a soulmate in the woman described here, the first wife of Fontane's friend Bernhard von Lepel. With the real person, Fontane struggles to say in one short description whether one could claim

³⁹⁸ *GBA*, III/3, p. 252

³⁹⁹ *GBA*, III/3, p. 330

that she was too serious; with the fictional person, he can leave it up to the reader to decide by presenting both the destructive effect Christine's seriousness has on her marriage as well as excusing her character by accusing Holk of irresponsibility.⁴⁰⁰ The fictional characters can emerge gradually, leaving room for nuances and subtleties as well as uncertainties and doubt.

These direct characterisations are however rare in his fictional as well as his non-fictional works. A common method used for minor characters is that of the caricature. As we remember from Schneider's model, well-known categories allow readers to process information more quickly, thus enabling them to save time when grasping less important characters. About Bruno Bauer, a sly man incapable of any political, moral or literary opinions which go beyond immediate self-beneficial application, Fontane gives a standard short character sketch. Reinforcing the characterisation, he follows it up with a description of his exterior: 'Man muß diesen Mann gesehen haben, um zu wissen, daß dies ausgeschlossen ist. In hohen Schmierstiefeln und altem grauen Mantel, einen Wollschal um den Hals und eine niedergedrückte Schirmmütze auf dem Kopf [...].'⁴⁰¹ The description is that of a peasant. Readers are encouraged to think of people they know from their own lives who would fit this description, people they have decided fit this category, and feel Fontane's rendition resonate with their own memories. Instead of trying to find out whether Bruno Bauer – *nomen est omen*⁴⁰² – is really unable to form an opinion on a theoretical topic, we are led to construct him with little information from the text beyond his physical appearance, but strong suggestions to use our own experience of people that we have judged the way Fontane judges Bauer. Supporting us

⁴⁰⁰ See chapter three for more detail.

⁴⁰¹ *GBA*, III/3, p. 307

⁴⁰² '[der] nicht bloß Bauer hieß, sondern auch Bauer war'

in this endeavour, the narrator opens up the end of the paragraph by generalising Bauer's traits as those of his entire family ('die Bauers'), and finally a type of people ('diese ganze Menschenklasse'). The reader's creative process here is based on the interpretation, the impression. With the end-result as the guideline, readers are more likely to pick out elements that fit it and thus later confirm it as they construct the character. The 'real' Bruno Bauer is easily left behind in this process of fictional character construction.

Major characters are most often rendered through anecdotes, and again Fontane's non-fictional writing does not differ from his novels. Describing his father's social and jovial nature, he tells us that Fontane senior liked to debate difficult topics with beautiful women, to the amusement of both. He then follows this observation with: 'und wenn ich entsprechende Szenen in meinen Romanen und kleinen Erzählungen lese, so ist es mir mitunter, als hörte ich meinen Vater sprechen.'⁴⁰³ In Fontane's mind, anecdotes are closely linked to the people who experienced them. It is how he remembers people, and the memory of people is, like history, a fictionalisation of sorts. "'Ja, wie lebten wir?'" Ich gedenke es in einer Reihe von Bildern zu zeigen [...],' is how he begins a series of anecdotes and little stories to show the people of his childhood town, whose characterisations take up the greater part of *Meine Kinderjahre*.⁴⁰⁴ He follows the same principle in the larger work *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig*. When larger groups are introduced, each of them is again rendered through a little anecdote; Fontane remarks: 'Nur *ein* Beispiel stehe hier für viele.'⁴⁰⁵ As part of the excursion into the life of his wife Emilie, he takes an excursion from the excursion: 'Ich möchte diese

⁴⁰³ *WSB*, Abt. 3, IV, p. 82

⁴⁰⁴ *WSB*, Abt. 3, IV, p. 81

⁴⁰⁵ *GBA*, III/3, p. 35

Sprechweise gern charakterisieren und greife zu diesem Zweck ein kleines Vorkommnis heraus.⁴⁰⁶ Perhaps aware that this might be taking things a little too far, he justifies: ‘und [ich] rechne auf die Zustimmung derer, die mit mir davon ausgehen, daß eine Menschenseele durch nichts besser geschildert wird als durch solche kleinen Züge. Schon das Sprichwort sagt: “An einem Strohhalme sieht man am deutlichsten, woher der Wind weht.”’⁴⁰⁷

Characters as Organisatory Principles

Characters dominate not only these two autobiographical works, but all autobiographical pieces, most strikingly *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig*. The narration begins in Fontane’s late teens and seems to progress chronologically for the first few pages – but this chronological approach is soon abandoned to follow the fates of individual people through to the end, only returning to the ‘underlying’ chronology of Fontane’s life once their stories have been told. His narrated past is structured by his memory of the people who shaped his life, every stage is rendered by the person he spent it with. Narration for Fontane, whether fictional or non-fictional, is fundamentally the tale of someone. If he describes a place such as London or Scotland, we hear of the people who live there and the historical figures who did in centuries past; if he describes a person, we experience their life through the lives of those who mattered to them. His non-fictional writing is as much, if not more so than his fictional writing, dominated and structured by characters. Just like their fictional counterparts, they are rendered not so much through facts, but by the impressions they left on those around them, including the author.

⁴⁰⁶ *GBA*, III/3, p. 361

⁴⁰⁷ *GBA*, III/3, p. 362

Non-fictional writing, especially in the case of autobiographical pieces, which Fontane wrote rather quickly as relaxation exercises between novels, is led by the importance of people. The genesis of many novels demonstrates once more that the process is the same with fictional characters. Dieter Kafitz and many others have commented on ‘die Dominanz der Figuren im Produktionsprozeß’.⁴⁰⁸ Most novels bear the names of their heroes or heroines as titles – *Grete Minde*, *Schach von Wuthenow*, *Graf Petöfy*, *Cécile*, *Stine*, *Frau Jenny Treibel*, *Die Poggenpuhls*, *Effi Briest*, *Der Stechlin* (arguably), *Mathilde Möhring* – but even the ones that do not do so in the published version sometimes bore their major character’s name as working titles, such as *L’Adultera* which started out as ‘Melanie Vanderstraaten’ and ‘Frau Commercierräthin R.’⁴⁰⁹ The first notes are also predominantly character sketches, such as *L’Adultera* which starts with a long characterisation of van der Straaten, who Fontane briefly considered as the main hero instead of Melanie, or *Frau Jenny Treibel* which began with notes on the various characters who later feature in it.⁴¹⁰

The genesis of Fontane’s novels has been analysed in detail, as early as 1926 by Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld. About *Vor dem Sturm*, he says: ‘So beginnt mit der eigentlichen Ausführung gleichzeitig ein *Abrücken vom Historischen*. Das allgemein Menschliche drängt sich vor dem historisch Bedingten in den Vordergrund.’⁴¹¹ This description – of the genesis of a work of fiction – could be applied equally to the non-fictional *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig*. Many of the non-fictional works which have been subject to less revision, such as personal travel notes and autobiographical pieces, are similar to the manuscripts of fiction. With the first great work, Rosenfeld also identifies ‘the real

⁴⁰⁸ Kafitz, p. 134

⁴⁰⁹ Radecke, pp. 98-106

⁴¹⁰ Erler, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, p. pp. 15-16 and pp. 60-61

⁴¹¹ Rosenfeld, p. 8

people behind' characters such as Marie Kniehase or Hoppenmarieken. The daughter of a travelling acrobat who died in Letschin, leaving her to be raised by a local teacher, inspired Marie, and a woman named Anna Dorothee Hoppe closely resembles Hoppenmarieken in appearance and lifestyle.⁴¹² Rosenfeld concludes that this novel arose out of the *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*, to which he sees most connections.⁴¹³ Supporting Rosenfeld's claim, many of the names in this novel are also overlap with Fontane's non-fictional pieces, such as Graf Bninski, mentioned in *Meine Kinderjahre* as being the employer of a local nobleman, who teaches the Graf's children ('eines Grafen Bninski').⁴¹⁴

Part 2: Between Reality and Fiction:

Techniques of Characterisation in *Vor dem Sturm*

Vor dem Sturm, being Fontane's 'Erstling', warrants closer examination. It contrasts most strongly with Fontane's last completed novel, *Der Stechlin* (as discussed in chapter five). It has more elements in common with the author's non-fictional writing than any other work, but it also already features the techniques which will later develop to become characteristic of Fontane's narration. Abrupt introductions, a focus on the character's exterior, and direct characterisations are what this novel shares with many non-fictional works, but there are also instances of characterisation through other characters, of characters siding with and guiding the reader's point of view, and of description through association, which play a more important role in the later fictional works.

⁴¹² Rosenfeld, p. 17

⁴¹³ Rosenfeld, p. 5

⁴¹⁴ *WSB*, Abt. 3, IV, p. 60

Similarities with Non-Fictional Characterisations

Most introductions are given simultaneously with the character's first appearance in *Vor dem Sturm*, but the guessing games played around the true nature of the siblings Tubal and Kathinka foreshadow novels such as *Cécile* (which in its entirety keeps reader and characters guessing about what Cécile is really like, see chapter four). Many are introduced with rhetorical questions that aim to draw the reader in; Gottfried Krickler has compiled a list of them in his analysis of Fontane's rhetoric.⁴¹⁵ This 'Plauderton' goes further than it does in other works, for example in the following scene that takes place early in the novel: 'In der Halle schwelen noch einige Brände; schütten wir Tannäpfel auf und plaudern wir, ein paar Sessel an den Kamin rückend, von Hohen-Vietz.'⁴¹⁶ Here the narrator directly addresses the reader, inviting him in. This narrator is a stark contrast to the narrator of *Der Stechlin*, where over three-quarters of the novel consist of conversations between the characters. While the latter narrator only speaks up when absolutely necessary, the former is a figure who establishes direct contact with the reader. We are invited to feel sympathetic towards him, after all he wants to have an amicable chat with us ('plaudern wir') and asks us to sit in comfortable armchairs with him by the fireplace. If we like a person and believe them to like us, we trust them, we believe what they say. The narrator of this early work has to establish trust for the reader to believe him, as he delivers information about characters directly, while the absent narrator of later works, where the narration characterises indirectly, does not need such support.

Anecdotes have already been analysed in non-fictional writing; they are used the same way in this novel. 'Die ausgedehnteren Einführungen dieser Art sind stets eine

⁴¹⁵ Krickler, p. 107

⁴¹⁶ *GBA*, I/1, p.16

eigentümliche Verquickung von Bemerkungen des Dichters über den Charakter und das Vorleben der Person und charakterisierender Aussprüche der Person selbst,' Krickler remarks.⁴¹⁷ As in *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig*, the introduction of a person often leads to an excursus into their past and/or their future. Additionally, character speech plays an important role, an element which Fontane develops over the course of his career as a writer. A person's exterior is also often described in their first scene, especially with minor characters, relying on the same principles that underpin the rendition of Bruno Bauer discussed above. Coachman Krist is depicted through his worn coat with the three collars, just as Lewin is inappropriately dressed for the weather but for his boots.⁴¹⁸ Krist is a good and loyal servant, but he cares little about appearances, and Lewin wears the sensible boots his father gave him, but his own clothing is of little practical use in the world. He grew up in the Mark, but has since developed into a different person. A little dreamy, he no longer has both feet firmly planted in the ground of the Mark Brandenburg. Yet, he still speaks with 'einem Anflug von märkischem Dialekt', a little narrative remark with great implications for Lewin's personality.⁴¹⁹

Direct description by the narrator is more present in this novel than it is in the later works. The narrator thus takes on a more prominent role, as he does in the greater part of Fontane's non-fictional writing, acting as an intermediary between characters and reader. Instead of weaving elements of characterisation into the text, as in later novels, both non-fictional writing (such as the examples previously discussed) and *Vor dem Sturm* are interrupted, if not disrupted, by character portraits. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

⁴¹⁷ Krickler, p. 107

⁴¹⁸ *GBA*, I/1, p. 7 and p. 8

⁴¹⁹ *GBA*, I/1, p. 9

Da wir nun im langen Verlauf unserer Erzählung nirgends einen Punkt entdecken können, der Raum böte für eine biographische Skizze unter dem Titel “Tante Schorlemmer”, so halten wir hier den Augenblick für gekommen, uns unserer Pflicht gegen diese treffliche Dame zu entledigen. Denn Tante Schorlemmer ist keine Nebenfigur in diesem Buche, und da wir ihr, nach flüchtiger Bekanntschaft in Flur und Kirche, an dieser Stelle bereits zum dritten Male begegnen, so hat der Leser ein gutes Recht, Aufschluß darüber zu verlangen wer Tante Schorlemmer denn eigentlich ist.⁴²⁰

The narrator engages directly with the reader, breaking his immersion by inserting that the character is ‘keine Nebenfigur’, and talks about the biographical sketch as a ‘duty’ one has to ‘discharge’. At the same time, he is considerate of his reader’s curiosity, states that the reader has a right to information about the character and continues to use the inclusive first person plural. An openly present narrator is a double-edged sword: this technique can establish a close connection between narrator and reader, or create distance between the reader and the narration itself. Fontane later distances himself from this technique as the analyses in previous chapters have shown, but he uses it throughout this early novel.⁴²¹ Excursions such as in *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig* are also common, like the following one into the life of Ladalinski: ‘Überlassen wir ihn auf eine Viertelstunde ungestört seiner Lektüre und erzählen wir, während er sich in Empfangsfeierlichkeiten und Loyalitätsadressen vertieft, einiges aus seinem Leben.’⁴²²

Developing into Fiction

Unlike the narrator of the autobiographical works, this narrator shows awareness of the sometimes disruptive nature of his technique. He asks for the reader’s indulgence, stating that these characters are meant to support and underline an effect rather than appear in their own right:

Es wird unsere nächste Aufgabe sein, der bloßen Vorstellung dieser Herren [...] eine kurze Charakterisierung folgen zu lassen. Wenn dies also kein Verstoß gegen die Gesetze guter Erzählung ist, so möge der Leser Nachsicht üben und um so mehr, als

⁴²⁰ *GBA*, I/1, p. 53

⁴²¹ e.g. *GBA*, I/1, p. 111 and p. 172

⁴²² *GBA*, I/2, p. 33

der zu begehende Fehler vielleicht mehr scheinbar als wirklich ist. Denn mit wie großem Recht auch die Vorführung abgeschlossener, ihr Tun und Denken zettelartig am Mantel tragender Gestalten verworfen und statt dessen jene Erzählkunst gepriesen werden mag, die die Phantasie des Lesers in den Stand setzt, das nur eben Angedeutete schöpferisch auszubilden und zu vollenden, so mögen doch Ausnahmen überall da gestattet sein, wo, wie hier, das Nebeneinanderstellen fertiger Figuren nicht viel mehr bedeuten will als eine weniger um der Bildnisse selbst als um des *Ortes* willen, wo sie sich finden, dem Leser vorgeführte *Porträtgalerie*.⁴²³

The gentlemen concerned are indeed not main characters, but supporting characters, an early example of a technique Fontane will later use extensively: characterisation through other characters. They are the people who surround the Vitzewitz family, old and young, and thus act as various options of personal representation to its members. With each of them, the main characters can show a different side of themselves (see chapter six).

Many other characters also offer usually short but nevertheless interesting perspectives on the main characters. Frau von Vitzewitz says about Marie: ‘Sie hat Mut, und sie ist demütig.’ Tante Schorlemmer speaks in a similar vein about her, and is supported by the narrator: “‘Unsere Marie sieht nur, was ihr frommt, für das, was schädigt, ist sie blind.’” Und so war es.⁴²⁴ In this novel, the narrator still supports or undermines the characterisations given by other characters, and often uses them to dive into further description of his own. When Lewin recognises certain traits of character in Kathinka, the narrator continues to illuminate them further for the reader.⁴²⁵ Minor characters, such as Dr Faulstich, who is rendered by Lewin for his friend Tubal, are sometimes left without further comment from the narrator.⁴²⁶ Characters also illuminate one another by means of contrast, such as the typically Fontanesque duo of clerics.⁴²⁷ The minor

⁴²³ *GBA*, I/1, p. 173

⁴²⁴ *GBA*, I/1, p. 96 and 97

⁴²⁵ *GBA*, I/1, p. 349

⁴²⁶ *GBA*, I/1, p. 230

⁴²⁷ *GBA*, I/1, p. p. 110

characters surrounding the Vitzewitzes especially do not only act as social options for the major characters to engage with, but demonstrate the influences under which Lewin grew up. 'In der Beschäftigung mit den Künsten, auch in der Freude daran, waren sich beide gleich; aber während der eine das Schöne nur feinsinnig kostete, strebte ihm der andere mit ganzer Seele nach. Was den einen verweichlichte, stählte den anderen, und so war Grell ein Vorbild, während Faulstich eine Warnung war.'⁴²⁸ This quotation also explicitly shows how the same matter can have a different effect on different people. The point of view is crucial, to both Fontane's characters and himself.

A technique that finds hardly any use in Fontane's non-fictional writing is the creation of narrative tension in combination with attention guiding. As discussed above, there are few character guessing-games played in this first work and in his non-fictional writing, giving less opportunity for this technique. There are however a few instances. Lewin, whom we follow for large parts of the novel, is not always a good judge of character and sometimes wonders about the true nature of other people. In the beginning of the story, we try and work out the personality of other characters like Kathinka or Tubal with him. We thus engage in the same process as he does, and through it are invited to align ourselves with his point of view. Pastor Seidentopf steps in to explain things at times, showing the foolishness of Lewin's guesses, possibly embarrassing the reader along with him.⁴²⁹ This embarrassment is one of the ways in which Fontane will later recreate emotions felt by characters in the reader. After judgement has been passed on Kathinka, the jury is still out on her brother Tubal, and Renate, her brother Lewin

⁴²⁸ *GBA*, I/2, p. 228

⁴²⁹ *GBA*, I/1, p. 108

and her maid Maline Kubalke offer different perspectives on the matter, mirroring the polyphonic decision process which the reader has to go through.⁴³⁰

A further technique, characterisation through association, is again shared with his autobiographical and travel writing, but in a different form. It plays an important role in later works such as *Cécile* (see chapter four), and a more minor one in non-fictional writing. Examples from *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig* such as the description of Bruno Bauer through his boots and coat, or the descriptions of Fontane's literary friends are instances which the author did not fully develop. In *Vor dem Sturm*, we find the technique used on a similar level of elaboration. Instead of weaving different elements all throughout the text, such as fairy-tale references for *Cécile*, the author uses descriptions of property owned by a character to depict him, or details his circumstances to the point where we can picture the kind of person we would find there. Berndt von Vitzewitz, for example, is best characterised by the lengthy description of the room he spends most of his time in, and the parsonage stands for Pastor Seidentopf's personality.⁴³¹ In the case of the latter, the parsonage's interior is linked to another favourite technique of characterisation, that of the favourite phrase, with the priest Uhlenhorst observing: 'Prediger Seidentopf greife mitunter fehl und schlage in Bekmann statt in der Bibel nach.'⁴³² Even though this already creates a vivid image of Seidentopf, the narration follows it up with a direct characterisation of the pastor, but manages to link back to his possessions: 'Wer auf Waffen hält, der sorgt auch, daß sie blank sind. Nur an das theologische Bücherbrett, wo der Staub zu dicht lag, vermied er es, heranzutreten.'⁴³³ Uhlenhorst delivered the first comment, he could have also

⁴³⁰ *GBA*, I/2, p. 322

⁴³¹ *GBA*, I/1, p. 37 and pp. 98-99

⁴³² *GBA*, I/1, p. 100

⁴³³ *GBA*, I/1, p. 104

delivered the second. However, due to the previously discussed presence of the narrator, characters are not given the same strength and credibility in their statements, so that the narrator has to confirm or discredit what they say. In the non-fictional pieces, the narrator, Fontane himself, usually gives his opinion on statements made by other real people, playing out the same dynamic.

Another means of characterisation by association is the historical and ancestral embedding of characters. As in *Meine Kinderjahre*, where Fontane paints his parents through their French heritage, Renate and Lewin are characterised by their family: ‘Daß es Geschwister waren, zeigte der erste Blick: gleiche Figur und Haltung, dieselben ovalen Köpfe, vor allem dieselben Augen, aus denen Phantasie, Klugheit und Treue sprachen.’⁴³⁴ The same technique is also used for two minor characters at the very beginning of the novel, the brothers Anselm and Matthias. Their ancestor dies believing that he has atoned for his sins, and this belief is shared by his children and grandchildren. However, they inherit not only his hope for forgiveness, but also his sadness and guilt, which are passed down as traits of character:

Er war in der Zuversicht gestorben, daß Gott seine Buße angenommen habe; auch die, die nach ihm kamen, waren dieses Glaubens voll. Aber dieser Glaube, wie festen Lebensgrund er ihnen gab, konnte ihnen doch den Frohsinn des Lebens nicht wiedergeben. Sie blickten ernst um sich her. Und dieser Zug begann sich fortzuerben. Der Familiencharakter, der in alten Zeiten ein joviales Aufbrausen gewesen war, wich einem Grübeln und Brüten, und ihr Hang zu Festen und Gelagen schlug in einen Hang zu Selbstpein und Askese um.⁴³⁵

Associating the brothers with their family members serves to characterise them as people; like all of Fontane’s characters, these individuals are tightly embedded in a social web, they are part of a social context and cannot be sufficiently described without

⁴³⁴ *GBA*, I/1, p. 28

⁴³⁵ *GBA*, I/1, p. 24

it. Sometimes this context is a family's direct lineage, but it can also be history at large, as it is for Aunt Amelie. Before we meet her, there is a long build-up of historical background to her residence, Schloss Guse.⁴³⁶ Amelie von Pudagla is as mentally encrusted with her family's history as her castle is with that of the country, she is a traditionalist whose identity depends on her noble heritage. The episode is reminiscent of Fontane's journey to see the study of Walter Scott (*Jenseit des Tweed*), where the narrator builds up expectations with historical references to show the strong ties to history maintained by the person we are about to meet. Compared to the later works of fiction, these examples rely heavily on the objects to which the characters are connected. In travel writing, descriptions of objects and places understandably take on a more important role; in the autobiographical and early fictional works, characters begin to take over instead, taking centre stage in their own right even if the proclaimed aim is to render the Mark or the city of Leipzig (*Vor dem Sturm* and *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig*).

Conclusion

'Was wir die Stimmung der Landschaft nennen, ist in der Regel unsere eigene. [...] Das Land war nicht verändert, aber *wir*,' Meerheimb says at the Kastalia meeting in Fontane's first published novel. In his last finished work, Woldemar von Stechlin puts it in a nutshell: 'Alles Erlebte wird erst was durch den, der es erlebt.'⁴³⁷ Instead of tracing biographical influences or analysing the psychology of the author in his characters, we can choose to look back at our reading experiences and ask if, how and why real and fictional characters in texts differ. Even when describing places, Fontane's texts are filled with vivid representations of people, when reporting on battles, he tells us about

⁴³⁶ *GBA*, I/1, p. 162

⁴³⁷ *GBA*, I/2, p. 145 and *GBA*, I/17, p. 255

the people who fought them, when retelling history, we hear of the people who lived in these times. The story of his own life becomes the stories of the people he met, to the extent that his autobiographical texts become disjointed. Dieter Kafitz says about Realism: ‘Auch realistisches Erzählen bleibt in seinen kritischen Abbildern und sinnhaften Leitbildern an den Blickwinkel des jeweiligen Autors gebunden.’⁴³⁸ If the comparison of non-fictional and fictional writing in the case of Fontane shows one thing with absolute clarity, it is that characters are at the centre of Fontane’s artistic gaze. The genesis of his novels and the evolution of characterisation techniques from the first to the last work show a move towards characters who speak for and present themselves, gaining increasing independence from the narrator. The works start with the idea of a character, the manuscripts and many published versions bear their names. The non-fictional texts too are taken over by characters, in structure and volume in the case of autobiographical works, in presence and as examples in travel writing, and as points of connection for the reader in reports on war and history.

‘Fontanes Kunst der Menschenzeichnung hat eine künstlerische Vollendung erreicht, die es schwer macht, nach Vorbildern oder gar nach Einflüssen zu suchen.’⁴³⁹ His art of characterisation evolves in the novels, but his first one shows that his depiction of real and fictional characters does not differ by much. He employs the same techniques and attributes the same degree of importance to characters. If these are used less often and in a less subtle manner in the non-fictional works, it is for the same reason as their use in *Vor dem Sturm*. The prominent role of the narrator in this novel is shared with non-fictional works, and leads to more instances of direct characterisation, insertions which

⁴³⁸ Kafitz, p. 131

⁴³⁹ Eberhardt, p. 201

guide the reader's attention and comments that try to influence his judgement of the characters. The memory of real people is close to, and as numerous examples have shown often even blended with, the creation of fictional characters. The way in which both are transferred from the mind of the author to that of the reader is almost identical. Other writers, real stories and his personal life may or may not have affected the literary characters we meet in the novels of Theodor Fontane; in most cases we may never know for certain. What each of us can know and experience is how we bring them to life in our heads as we read, and we can ask whether to our minds, they are really so different from the memories we have of real people.

Part 4: Character Beyond Fontane

Chapter 10: The Controlling Narrator – Thomas Mann’s

Buddenbrooks

The novels of Thomas Mann are among the best suited to bring out the peculiarities of Fontane’s characters by means of contrast, while at the same time demonstrating how the same principles can yield a valuable reading of works of fiction which move beyond Realism. Published in 1901, his early novel *Buddenbrooks* bridges the gap between Realism and Modernism. As a strong interest in the individual mind took hold, new representations of interiority surfaced in literature and changed the way literary characters were portrayed. What differentiates the characters of Fontane and Mann from each other? How does this affect the ways in which readers interact with them? What paths of engagement are lost, gained or changed? With a writer and time so concerned with subjectivity, can readers approach the characters of *Buddenbrooks* more easily than those of Fontane’s Realist novels?

After a brief overview of previous scholarship on the comparison of Fontane and Mann, the analysis of *Buddenbrooks* and Fontane’s novels will not seek to draw out how the former might have influenced the latter, but focus on those points which most critically shape the reception of literary character by their readers: introductions and descriptions, speech, the concept of roles and masks, and the significance of social groups. The most striking differences arise from a closer inspection of the role of the narrator as mediator between readers and characters. The degree of guidance and insight given, the shifts of perspective, and especially the emotional stance of the narrator differ greatly between

this novel and Fontane's. As a result, *Buddenbrooks*, despite all its insights into characters' minds, presents anything but an easy invitation to read characters with empathy.

***Buddenbrooks* between Centuries**

The 1901 novel stands right at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁴⁰ The strong interest in psychology is a development belonging to the beginning of the new century.⁴⁴¹ The many Modernist elements in *Buddenbrooks* lead to greater awareness and an interest in the human psyche. Several critics have described *Buddenbrooks* as a novel with strong psychological traits, such as Eckhard Heftrich, who praises Mann's talent 'in die Hinter- und Untergründe der Künstler-Psyche zu schauen', or Jochen Vogt, who notes the 'starke Psychologisierung des Erzählens'.⁴⁴² Early Modernism was strongly influenced by pre-Freudian psychology,⁴⁴³ but numerous critics have since applied the theories of Freud and Jung to this novel, such as Gisela Bensch and Klaus-Jürgen Rothenberg.⁴⁴⁴ If we focus on the comparison of Fontane's Realist novels and Modernist works, of which *Buddenbrooks* shows some first signs, a move from objectivity towards subjectivity can be broadly observed. In his analysis of Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, Robert Holub sees a subject-object dichotomy as essential to Realism, which is then broken down in Modernism. He further clarifies that in Modernist works, 'What is important is the impact of this reality on the perceiving subject.'⁴⁴⁵ Statements like this one would suggest that, in moving towards Modernism, *Buddenbrooks* should allow readers to feel closer to the minds of its characters than to those of Fontane's novels – however, the analysis will show that this expectation is far from reality.

⁴⁴⁰ For shared influences, namely Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, see Dieter Borchmeyer or Hans Rudolf Veget.

⁴⁴¹ As has been acknowledged by many critics, e.g. Rorty, p. 180 or Ryan, *Vanishing Subject*, p. 2.

⁴⁴² Lukács, chapter 2, Heftrich, p. 15 and Vogt, p. 129; Jean Finck even finds an early (pre 1920s) interest in psychology in Mann, e.g. Finck, p. 322.

⁴⁴³ See Ryan, *Vanishing Subject*, pp. 6-22

⁴⁴⁴ E.g. Bensch, p. 45 and p. 47, Rothenberg, p. 93

⁴⁴⁵ Holub, pp. 211-12

While *Buddenbrooks* is usually called a Realist novel, Thomas Mann is established as a Modernist writer through his later works. Georg Lukács describes *Buddenbrooks* as a novel that presents a Realist take on Modernist topics.⁴⁴⁶ Similarly, Ken Moulden and Gero von Wilpert see the novel as presenting ‘den Ausklang des 19. Jahrhunderts und einen Ausgangspunkt für den Roman des 20. Jahrhunderts’.⁴⁴⁷ Its hybrid nature, often described as standing between Realism and Modernism (for example by T.J. Reed and Martin Swales), has also seen a number of other titles, such as Realism and Aestheticism (Judith Ryan), Realism and Romanticism (Klaus-Jürgen Rothenberg), Realism and Mythology (Richard Sheppard) or Realism and Symbolism (Martin Swales).⁴⁴⁸ With all these avenues available in terms of naming the counterpart to Realism in Mann’s novel, it might be best to conclude with Hugh Ridley: ‘In many ways he [Mann] wished to go beyond realist themes and techniques.’⁴⁴⁹ These critics see the novel as consisting of two halves, one of which is Realism. Consequently, we would expect that it would show many links with Fontane, but also present a different side which goes beyond Realist character. Albert Braverman and Larry Nachman come to the conclusion that the realistic detail serves to show that ‘the human personality has become an outcast from the world and can find a place for itself only in worldless inwardness, i.e., in pure subjectivity’.⁴⁵⁰ Statements like this are common, and suggest that readers can expect to meet characters who are at home in their own minds, and that we can feel even closer to characters we know so personally and intimately than to Fontane’s polyphonous and often enigmatic characters – yet this will not prove to be the case.

⁴⁴⁶ Lukács, chapter 2

⁴⁴⁷ Moulden and Wilpert, p. 63

⁴⁴⁸ Reed, p. 37; Swales, *Buddenbrooks*, p. 12; Judith Ryan, ‘Buddenbrooks: between realism and aestheticism’, pp. 119-36; Rothenberg, p. 229; Richard Sheppard, ‘Realism plus Mythology: A Reconsideration of the Problem of “Verfall”’; Swales, *Buddenbrooks*, pp. 108-14

⁴⁴⁹ Ridley, p. 25

⁴⁵⁰ Braverman and Nachman, p. 208

The connections between Thomas Mann and Theodor Fontane have been the object of numerous studies. Genetic studies have sought to show the influence of Fontane on Mann, and literary analyses have highlighted similarities in technique.⁴⁵¹ Thomas Mann himself often stated his fondness for Fontane: ‘Unendliche Liebe, unendliche Sympathie und Dankbarkeit, ein Gefühl tiefer Verwandtschaft [...],’ and dedicated an essay, ‘Der alte Fontane’ (1910), to his favourite ‘old soul’.⁴⁵² Individual characters especially have been compared in many studies.⁴⁵³ A few studies touch directly on connections between the characters of *Buddenbrooks* and Fontane’s works.⁴⁵⁴ This comparative analysis does not aim to be a genetic study, or seek to show the degree to which the characters of Fontane’s works and Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* resemble each other as people. Instead, its goal is to compare the presentation and treatment of the characters, and subsequently show which reading paths are shared, and which ones are lost and gained. It will focus on the ways in which readers can engage with and approach these characters, and most centrally, what role the narrator of *Buddenbrooks* plays in this process.

Introductions and Descriptions

The highly detailed and realistic setting of nineteenth-century Lübeck provides the stage for no less meticulously described characters. All of the main characters and the majority of secondary characters are first introduced by the narrator, who provides an often long and visually detailed description of them. Although Fontane’s early works such as *Vor dem Sturm* introduce characters in a similarly direct and abrupt manner, later works handle introductions in more complex ways. Characters are more frequently

⁴⁵¹ e.g. Ralf Harslem or Gertrude Michielsen

⁴⁵² *GFA*, Essays I, p. 244 and pp. 245-274 for ‘Der alte Fontane’

⁴⁵³ E. g. Harslem, pp. 187-198 and Vaget, p. 257; most recently (2014), Hans-Peter Fischer, p. 133 and pp. 164-206.

⁴⁵⁴ Such as Harslem, p. 132.

introduced and described by other characters. They only come to reveal their full personality through social interaction, and some even remain enigmatic for both other characters and the reader (see the discussion of *Cécile* in chapter four). There are no guessing-games surrounding the introductions of the characters in *Buddenbrooks*, and little room is left by the narrator for readers to form their own opinions about characters. Most characters are introduced and described, physically and mentally, immediately after their names are first mentioned, rarely leaving the reader in suspense.⁴⁵⁵

Most characters can be pieced together quickly by readers, requiring little active involvement: no deduction or careful observation is required, as explanations are given by the narrator, and different opinions do not need to be weighed up against one another, as characters only comment on each other after the narrator has already told us who they are. The same principles apply to secondary characters, where both Fontane and Mann introduce them in this way. The primary characters are introduced with more attention to detail by both authors, but there is a noticeably greater level of reading guidance in *Buddenbrooks*, especially compared to Fontane's later works. Physical traits are not simply described, but decoded for the reader (in contrast to Fontane's narrator, who leaves readers to piece together an impression for themselves, see chapter four), and telling characteristic gestures or phrases are not used just to render characters, but to foreshadow their fate. As we follow two Buddenbrook generations from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, the narrator also re-introduces them anew at each stage.⁴⁵⁶ These 'repeated introductions' serve to highlight how Thomas, Christian and Tony (and later Hanno) develop, but also underline again the sense of

⁴⁵⁵ With the exception of Uncle Gotthold, a minor character.

⁴⁵⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 66 Tony as a teenager, p. 81 Thomas at 16, p. 257 Thomas as an adult, p. 285 Christian as an adult

decay which strongly permeates the last two generations of Buddenbrooks. Unlike Fontane's characters, these Buddenbrook children are not only described for their own sake, but their descriptions bear a clear message which the narrator wants to transmit: things are going downhill for the Buddenbrooks.

In the first chapter, character introductions follow a clear scheme: a first utterance, followed by a physical description from the narrator. Unlike Fontane's characters whom we approach more slowly, Mann places us right away in an intimate family setting. Introductions follow one another in rapid succession with the narrator only briefly returning to the scene in-between. The denominators we encounter on the first page are those of family members (Schwiegermutter, Gatte, Tochter, Großvater), highlighting the close proximity between the characters. With slower introductions such as Fontane's, the first denominators usually describe social roles and positions (see chapter four). In Fontane, as characters grow closer to one another, readers approach them as they approach each other, and slowly personal denominators are introduced. In *Buddenbrooks*, the narrator not only uses these from the beginning, but even appropriates the characters' family nicknames. Throughout his youth, Thomas is referred to as Tom and his son Johann as Hanno. While Hanno will not live to see adulthood, his father is later no longer 'Tom' but 'Thomas' to the narrator, while some family members, such as his sister, continue using the nickname for him.⁴⁵⁷ The use of denominators is not only an indicator of the narrator encouraging readers to connect to characters emotionally, it also shows emotional proximity between the characters and the narrator himself, especially so with Tony who is rarely referred to with her full name

⁴⁵⁷ The narrator moves from Tom to Thomas at p. 73 when he concludes 'Toms und Christians Jugendzeit'

by the narrator. This relation, far from distanced, will influence the readers' reception considerably.

Tony's physical description opens the reign of characters who are described by the narrator in the first chapter.⁴⁵⁸ She is followed by her grandfather Johann, her grandmother Antoinette, and her mother Elisabeth. All three women are attractive and expensively dressed, but while Tony's description is neutral as a child (whose sense of dress reveals only the taste of her mother and grandmother), Elisabeth and Antoinette are decoded for the reader. Antoinette wears a black and grey striped dress with no jewellery which, so the narrator tells us, portrays her simple and modest nature, and her eyes show her French heritage.⁴⁵⁹ Elisabeth is an elegant woman, whose gestures and voice show clarity, peace and trustworthiness. The narrator makes sure to explain what character traits the physical features indicate, and the detailed description of their clothing underlines their wealth. While Fontane's characters are also described in physical detail, these indicators are rarely explained to the readers, who are left to interpret them for themselves. At times, the narrator may even joke about the different interpretations available, such as in *Cécile*: 'Seinem unteren Menschen nach hätte man ihn ohne weiteres für einen Trapper, seinem oberen nach ebenso zweifellos für einen Rabulisten und Winkeladvokaten halten müssen [...]'.⁴⁶⁰

Gerda's introduction stands out from that of other members of the Buddenbrook family. She is described externally, no explanations as to her personality are given, and we will also never see into her mind later on. Helmut Koopmann observes: 'Thomas kennt seine

⁴⁵⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 9

⁴⁵⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 10

⁴⁶⁰ *GBA*, I/9, p. 19 – see chapter four

Frau nicht viel genauer als der Leser.’⁴⁶¹ The distance the narrator keeps from characters like Gerda actually helps readers assume a similar position to Thomas, making it easier to understand his emotions through empathy. She remains a similarly elegant, but ‘fremdartig[e] Erscheinung’.⁴⁶² Other than the notable exception of Gerda, which makes more sense in the context of later insights into Thomas’ mind, another person who marries into the Buddenbrook family is also rendered superficially: Bendix Grünlich. He is introduced not by the narrator, but by Jean: ‘Aus Hamburg. Ein angenehmer, gut empfohlener Mann, ein Pastorssohn. Ich habe Geschäfte mit ihm.’⁴⁶³ The narrator follows with an exterior description. However, unlike the other characters, the narrator withholds any explanations or insights as to Grünlich’s personality. As with Gerda and Thomas, this restraint makes more sense in the context of Tony’s story. Gerda and Grünlich play major roles in the lives of the two Buddenbrook siblings, but are not understood by them. Far from being omniscient, the narrator will show himself to side with characters at times, of which the introductions of Gerda and Grünlich are a first example. They are not explained to the reader because they appear foreign and unknown to Thomas and Tony.

Speech

Speech forms an important part of both Fontane’s and Mann’s characterisation and is often drawn attention to during the introductions. The conversations during the first dinner scene and many thereafter in *Buddenbrooks* are reminiscent of similar dialogues in Fontane, as critics such as Ruprecht Wimmer have noted. Wimmer finds that Mann focuses more on foreshadowing the plot while Fontane highlights the presentation of

⁴⁶¹ Koopmann, p. 57

⁴⁶² e.g. *GFA*, I.1, p. 94

⁴⁶³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 102

characters and their social conflicts.⁴⁶⁴ Both authors are fond of repeated sentences and phrases, but while these are characteristic utterances in the case of Fontane, Mann uses them as leitmotifs which connect the characters to the plot (in the case of the *Buddenbrooks*, notably to the theme of decay). Fontane and Mann also use dialect at times, for example Jean Buddenbrook talking to the crowds during the revolt or conversations between members of the nobility and the lower classes in Fontane, for example Dubslav or Botho talking to their coachmen (see chapter five).

A notable difference however is Mann's focus on pronunciation. While Fontane occasionally draws attention to a character's pronunciation for entertainment, such as that of Dr Wrschowitz in *Der Stechlin*, the narrator of *Buddenbrooks* repeatedly comments on it. Dr Wrschowitz's accent is shown by a change in orthography, but the characters of *Buddenbrooks* have their pronunciations explained to us, mediated by the narrator, who again takes up a rather dominant and guiding position between characters and readers. To provide but a few examples: "'Immer" sprach sie wie "Ümmer" aus.' (Antoinette Buddenbrook), 'schnurrte das r in der Kehle, denn sie hatte es ursprünglich überhaupt nicht aussprechen können' (Ida Jungmann) or 'er war noch nicht lange reich, stammte nicht gerade aus einer Patrizierfamilie und konnte sich einiger Dialektschwächen [...] leider noch nicht entwöhnen' (the wine merchant Köppen).⁴⁶⁵ As the latter two examples show, the narrator will frequently even tell the reader how to interpret these peculiar pronunciations, making sure his audience draws the right conclusions about characters. Fontane's narrative voice steps back and lets the characters speak for themselves, Mann's narrator, through his clarifications and explanations, sits between characters and readers. The latter seeks to influence the

⁴⁶⁴ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 116-23

⁴⁶⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 12, p. 71 and p. 24 (also p. 15, 41 and 92)

reception of characters more strongly, but in doing so, this narrator interferes with readerly engagement. Readers are not invited to form their own opinions and take an active part in shaping these characters, instead their imagination is kept on a rather short leash.

Roles and Masks

The narrator's position between characters and readers becomes especially apparent when social roles and masks, as played and used by the characters, are compared. Fontane's characters try out and play a number of social roles; they present themselves according to the company they keep (see chapter six). The different social roles these characters play allow them to show various facets of their personality, but they are rarely reflected upon by the characters or throw them into a crisis of identity. The characters of *Buddenbrooks* on the other hand are highly conscious of the roles they play. They do not show aspects of themselves through them, but try to conform to images imposed upon them by others. Where Fontane's characters are multi-faceted, Mann's characters wear masks and are unable to show their private selves in society. They struggle with their own identities and are conscious of this process. They are torn between their true nature and their social mask, a battle which most of them lose, crushed under roles they cannot fulfil.

There are two key elements which drive Thomas, Christian and Tony, and in a different way also Hanno, into playing roles and assuming masks: family pressure and vanity. Thomas and Hanno have already been shown to be weighed down by symbols of family pressure during their early teenage years. All of them are caught between their individual identities and their family identity as Buddenbrooks. Their family is an

immense source of pride to them, most of all to Thomas and Tony, who subsequently try hardest to put on a convincing mask or to play an authentic role, though each makes one attempt to escape. After spending some carefree time away from her family in Travemünde, Tony is pressured to fall in line by various members of her family upon her return. Her father tells her: ‘wir sind nicht lose, unabhängige und für sich bestehende Einzelwesen, sondern wie Glieder in einer Kette [...] Du müßtest nicht meine Tochter sein, nicht die Enkelin Deines in Gott ruhenden Großvaters und überhaupt nicht ein würdig Glied unserer Familie, wenn [...]’.⁴⁶⁶ Having been raised to respect the family name, the price only becomes clear as these children get older: they are expected to subordinate their personal wishes and desires, their individual identity, to the needs and identity of ‘Buddenbrooks’. Tony confronts this challenge by playing roles, the mentally unstable Christian turns directly to acting, and Thomas tries to conform through wearing masks.

‘Mann uses Tony Buddenbrook to explore problems of individual identity.’⁴⁶⁷ Judith Ryan observes that Tony enjoys presenting herself in different roles at times, for example playing the ‘grande madame’ in the early days of her first marriage to Bendix Grünlich. However, her roleplaying does not bring her happiness, but confusion and always disappointment in the long run. When Grünlich, to whom she is not attracted in the least, first proposes to her, she tries to reject him: ‘Sie hatte geglaubt, man brauche nur zu sagen: “Ihr Antrag ehrt mich, aber ich kann ihn nicht annehmen”, damit alles erledigt sei... “Ihr Antrag ehrt mich”, sagte sie so ruhig sie konnte; “aber ich kann ihn nicht annehmen...”’.⁴⁶⁸ Tony tries to act as she think the role of a young lady demands,

⁴⁶⁶ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 160-61

⁴⁶⁷ Ryan, p. 123

⁴⁶⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 119

and is confused when things do not go as she envisioned – Grünlich does not gallantly accept her rejection. Although she does not want to marry him, even feels disgusted by him, her family dominates her thoughts during this time and she keeps repeating words such as ‘Verpflichtung’, ‘Pflicht’, ‘Der Weg [...] ist der vorgeschriebene’, ‘Familie’ or ‘Firma’. The narrator, again interpreting for the reader, explains: ‘Sie, Antonie Buddenbrook [...] war von der Geschichte ihrer Familie durchdrungen.’⁴⁶⁹

Her holiday in Travemünde, granted by her family before her first marriage, is the time during which Tony fluctuates most in her roles. At home in Lübeck, she constantly aims to conform to her role as a Buddenbrook, but removed from this sphere, she adapts to the other people who surround her. Morten Schwarzkopf, the son of her host, is a young student whom she falls in love with, and she repeats his words along with her mother’s whenever she speaks during her first days spent there.⁴⁷⁰ Even though she feels drawn to him and states that she does not want to mingle with the other holiday guests of her social standing (and would instead rather spend more time with Morten), she cannot fully let go of her normal role when she sees them. Her pride in being a Buddenbrook gets the better of her: “‘Soll ich Sie nicht vorstellen, Herr Schwarzkopf?’” fragte Tony mit Wichtigkeit.⁴⁷¹ Ever keen to assure a certain reading, the narrator adds ‘mit Wichtigkeit’, leaving little room for readers to imagine the scene any other way, and clearing up any possible doubts on the reasons behind Tony’s change of tack. Nevertheless, Tony begins to break out of the role of ‘Tony Buddenbrook’ by the end of her time in Travemünde, but when she returns to Lübeck, the same pride grabs hold of her again and she remembers her role. Having been pushed to accept Grünlich’s

⁴⁶⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 116

⁴⁷⁰ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, pp. 137-38

⁴⁷¹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 142

invitation, she now uses expressions like ‘um meine Hand angehalten’ and ‘Jawort fürs Leben’, which she had previously declared frightening and foreign to her. The narrator explains for us: ‘Dabei wurde das Gefühl in ihr lebendig, das sie in der Zeit nach Herrn Grünlichs Werbung erprobt hatte: Das Gefühl persönlicher Wichtigkeit.’⁴⁷²

Christian’s roleplaying is not social; he turns to acting as a pastime and even considers it as a profession (until his family convinces him otherwise). His first proper appearance in the novel has him re-enacting a little scene from his school day to the amusement of everyone present, and he is always happy to entertain family and friends with his comical imitations of other people.⁴⁷³ Like Tony, Christian only derives momentary happiness from these roles. He is nervous and a hypochondriac; both tendencies will worsen as he ages. However, unlike Tony, Christian puts on performances consciously and observes his audience for the effect he has on them. It seems his roles are less like those played by Tony, and instead approach Thomas’ masks: ‘Ganz unvermittelt wurde er ernst: so überraschend, daß es aussah, als ob eine Maske von seinem Gesicht hinunterfiel.’⁴⁷⁴ His acting often ends abruptly, and, thrown back into the mercantile world, he cannot find an identity beyond that of the entertainer.

The narration dwells little on Christian, but more on Thomas. The older brother strains to conform to the ideal picture of the Buddenbrook businessman, but also struggles with the idea of fakery. Thomas himself feels his businessman identity is only a mask. ‘Wie bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verändert sein Gesicht sich ausnahm, wenn er sich allein befand! [...] wie eine Maske fiel die nur noch künstlich festgehaltene Miene der

⁴⁷² *GFA*, I.1, p. 155, notice the repetition of ‘Wichtigkeit’

⁴⁷³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 18

⁴⁷⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 289

Wachheit, Umsicht, Liebenswürdigkeit und Energie von diesem Gesichte ab, um es in dem Zustande einer gequälten Müdigkeit zurückzulassen.⁴⁷⁵ Below the mask, the effort and strain are beginning to show, and Thomas only tries harder to create a convincing façade of vitality and energy. The narrator mockingly refers to him using his title, and notes: ‘Senator Thomas Buddenbrook, dessen Blässe den wachen, energischen und sogar humoristischen Ausdruck seines Gesichtes Lügen strafte.’⁴⁷⁶ As Thomas gets older, we are told that he takes longer and longer to do little things, like tediously cutting cigars, ritualising getting ready in the morning, and often changing his outfits – not unlike the actor which he accuses Christian of being.⁴⁷⁷ Thomas suffers under the knowledge that he is unlike his forefathers.⁴⁷⁸ He thinks about his identity often, but cannot bring himself to recognise his deep wish to break out of this role his family name imposes on him.⁴⁷⁹ He is filled with doubt and becomes increasingly vain in an attempt to cover up his own insecurities and to convince others of his role. The narrator interprets: ‘Thomas Buddenbrooks Dasein war kein anderes mehr, als das eines Schauspielers.’⁴⁸⁰ Only for brief moments can Thomas recognise what lies beneath the mask; however, he always returns to playing his role. ‘War er ein praktischer Mensch oder ein zärtlicher Träumer? [...] Aber er war zu scharfsinnig und ehrlich, als daß er sich nicht schließlich die Wahrheit hätte gestehen müssen, daß er ein Gemisch von Beidem sei.’⁴⁸¹ The narrator urges us to take this reflection as an important insight into the character by referring to him as ‘scharfsinnig and ehrlich’ at this point, and calls this self-evaluation ‘die Wahrheit’. Again, the reader’s interpretation of the character is guided.

⁴⁷⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 511

⁴⁷⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 583

⁴⁷⁷ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, p. 514

⁴⁷⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 516

⁴⁷⁹ *GFA*, I.1, e.g. p. 740

⁴⁸⁰ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 672-77

⁴⁸¹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 517

The narrator forcefully draws our attention, for a final time, to how far Thomas has moved from the mask he wears, through the character's death. On his way home from the dentist Thomas loses his balance, faints and falls down in the street. Dressed in a fur coat and spotless white gloves, he lies face down in the puddles and dirt of the gutter. When he is brought home, his wife says: 'Sein ganzes Leben lang hat man nicht ein Staubfäserchen an ihm sehen dürfen... Es ist ein Hohn und eine Niedertracht, daß das Letzte *so* kommen muß...!' ⁴⁸² His death is brought about by a lack of physical and mental strength, he faints, takes one wrong step, and everything that he so carefully held together falls apart. With Thomas' fall, the Buddenbrook family business quickly crumbles to dust: the company is finally dissolved.

The mask not only burdened Thomas beyond what he could bear, it also stands between him and his son Hanno. Every attempt Thomas makes in pushing Hanno towards the role he himself suffers in drives his son further away. The mask of the strong, powerful and practical businessman scares the sensitive and artistic Hanno; he fears his father and the pressure he exerts. Hanno knows he is absolutely unable to conform to this role. However, father and son share one moment of bonding when Thomas lets his mask slip. Grieving over his wife's connection (and possible affair) with Lieutenant von Throta, Thomas briefly opens up to his son and the following scene ensues:

“Nun ist der Leutnant schon zwei Stunden bei Mama... Hanno...” Und siehe da, bei diesem Klange schlug der kleine Johann seine goldbraunen Augen auf und richtete sie so groß, klar und liebevoll wie noch niemals auf seines Vaters Gesicht [...] sie fühlten es Beide, daß in diesen Sekunden, während ihre Blicke in einander ruhten, jede Fremdheit und Kälte, jeder Zwang und jedes Mißverständnis zwischen ihnen dahinsank, daß Thomas Buddenbrook [...] wo es sich [...] um Furcht und Leiden handelte, des Vertrauens und der Hingabe seines Sohnes gewiß sein konnte. ⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² *GFA*, I.1, p. 750 and p. 751

⁴⁸³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 716

Father and son share a moment of deep connection, showing that their relationship could be closer if Thomas would allow himself to interact with his son without his mask more often.

We will not witness another scene like this between father and son during Thomas' lifetime. It leaves a lasting impression on Hanno. Despite being ill-suited for the position, a key reason why Hanno does not want even to try to play the role expected of him is because he sees how it strains his father. The two pay a number of visits to important clients, a trip which, so Thomas hopes, is meant to inspire Hanno for his future career. However, it has quite the opposite effect, as Hanno sees right through Thomas' mask to the tired man underneath:

Er sah auch – sah es mit einem seltsamen, quälenden Scharfblick – wie furchtbar schwer sie [die Liebenswürdigkeit] zu machen war, wie sein Vater nach jeder Visite wortkarger und bleicher, mit geschlossenen Augen, deren Lider sich gerötet hatten, in der Wagenecke lehnte, und Entsetzen im Herzen erlebte er es, daß auf der Schwelle des nächsten Hauses eine Maske über ebendieses Gesicht glitt.⁴⁸⁴

Making things worse, Thomas tries to encourage Hanno to be strong and powerful in life, but his words betray how he feels: 'Wenn du leben willst, und sogar gut leben, so wirst du arbeiten müssen, schwer, hart, härter noch als ich...'⁴⁸⁵ Hanno, knowing he is not strong enough to play this role which crushed even his father, will subsequently decide to give up on life.

Hanno's close friend Kai fittingly summarises the inevitability of Hanno's situation. He is talking about the impossibility of leaving the school playground during break time, but the metaphor he chooses applies not only to Hanno, but to all of the Buddenbrook

⁴⁸⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 691

⁴⁸⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 718

children who are caught in roles which they fail to even imagine escaping, and which subsequently keep them captive both in life and in their minds:

Sieh, hier ist eine Thür, eine Hofthür, sie ist offen, da draußen ist die Straße. Wie wäre es, wenn wir hinausträten und ein bißchen auf dem Trottoir umhergingen. [...] Aber die Sache ist die: es ist unmöglich. Verstehst du das? Hier ist die Thür, sie ist offen, es ist kein Gitter davor, nichts, kein Hindernis, hier ist die Schwelle. Und dennoch ist es unmöglich, schon der Gedanke ist unmöglich, auch nur auf eine Sekunde hinauszutreten...⁴⁸⁶

Thomas, Christian, Tony and Hanno are all under immense pressure, primarily stemming from family expectations, to conform to certain images. They face this task in different ways and develop different roles and masks with which they confront social situations, but their approaches all deliver the same result: an identity torn between the, true, private self, and an inauthentic, artificial social image of the self which can only be upheld at great expense.

Social Groups

While Fontane's characters use each other to show different sides of themselves through social interaction, the characters of *Buddenbrooks* are caught in their roles even in private. It is noticeable that Fontane's characters are hardly ever alone, while the *Buddenbrooks* are frequently found on their own. For Mann's characters, the authentic self is not the social self. Despite this difference, Fontane's novels and *Buddenbrooks* share the variety and sheer number of characters, who come together for many dinners and conversations. However, the way these gatherings are used differs greatly. In Fontane, they serve two key functions in regard to the characters: characterisation by contrast and comparison, and characterisations offered by other characters in conversation. Mann also uses these techniques, but as his introductions show, descriptions given by the narrator dominate the exposition of the characters. In the

⁴⁸⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 818

course of the novel, the narrator continues to play the role of mediator and guide between characters and readers, ensuring that we interpret characterisations by comparison or contrast in a certain way, and qualifying or correcting characterisations which characters give of each other.

Characterisations by contrast or comparison work best when characters appear in pairs. Fontane's novels feature many memorable examples, such as the unlikely friends Rex and Czako in *Der Stechlin*.⁴⁸⁷ In *Buddenbrooks*, the most interesting pair of opposites is that of the brothers Thomas and Christian Buddenbrook. The narrator continues to contrast the two brothers throughout, but also draws on other members of their family group to reinforce their differences. While Thomas' behaviour is described as 'gleichmäßig und von verständiger Munterkeit', we hear that 'Christian dagegen erschien launenhaft, neigte einerseits zu einer albernen Komik und konnte andererseits die gesamte Familie auf die sonderbarste Weise erschrecken...'⁴⁸⁸ The older brother is consistent, sociable, happy, whereas Christian appears ridiculous and even scares his family at times. Against the backdrop of the Buddenbrook group, the image of Thomas is a positive one, while that of Christian shows the first negative traits. In the first chapter, this positive-negative dichotomy is already present in the links which are established between each brother and an older family member. Thomas is compared to his grandfather Johann, the ideal Buddenbrook, while Christian is linked to Jean and his nervous disposition through exactly the same description of their eyes.⁴⁸⁹ Through the presentation of several generations, Mann is able to establish links between family members across time. Mann and Fontane both use the technique of comparison and

⁴⁸⁷ see chapter four for further examples

⁴⁸⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 74

⁴⁸⁹ *GFA*. I.1, p. 18

contrast between characters, but while it primarily shows personality traits in Fontane, it always links back to the central theme of a decaying family in *Buddenbrooks*. Thomas and Christian are set out as the businessman and the artist, a good Buddenbrook and an ill-fitting one, but both will fall into decadence and eventually collapse.

The highlighting of similarities between family members, as seen with Thomas and Christian, is also used to foreshadow Hanno's sad fate. Having sufficiently shown Christian to be of a fragile mental state, of questionable artistic talent and as having no value as a businessman, the narration links Hanno to his uncle. Like Christian, Hanno wishes for a puppet theatre as a child at Christmas.⁴⁹⁰ When his wish is fulfilled, his uncle enjoys the present as much as Hanno, while the other adults only smile benevolently: 'Nur Onkel Christian wußte nichts von diesem Erwachsenen-Hochmut, und seine Freude an dem Puppentheater [...] unterschied sich gar nicht von der seines Neffen.'⁴⁹¹ As always, Christian's joy is only short-lived, and he suddenly turns serious and cautions his nephew not to move too far towards theatre as he himself did. Christian is already visibly caught in a downward spiral, and through establishing links between them, the narrator strongly suggests that readers should expect the same fate for Hanno. Family links are used to underline the theme of decay rather than highlight who they are as individuals.

The second way in which social groups are used by both authors is to enable characters to give characterisations of each other. This technique can shed light on both the speaker and the object of discussion at the same time, and is often used for character

⁴⁹⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 587

⁴⁹¹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 592

expositions in Fontane. In *Buddenbrooks*, the narrator usually introduces characters first, but we sometimes learn more about them through their acquaintances later on. However, these characterisations differ from those found in Fontane once again by their aim: they show the hopes of the Buddenbrook family, and how they will inevitably be disappointed. The poet Jean Jacques Hoffstede describes the brothers Thomas and Christian, but his positive opinion is undermined by the narration, cautioning readers to look at his words critically. After witnessing Christian imitate his teacher, Hoffstede gives an impression of Napoleon in a similar way, and we see that the poet is biased towards the budding actor and cannot judge him neutrally.⁴⁹² To ensure that readers notice this similarity between Hoffstede and Christian, it is spelled out by Johann at the end. Hoffstede's characterisation begins, as always, with Thomas: 'Thomas, das ist ein solider und ernster Kopf; er muß Kaufmann werden, darüber besteht kein Zweifel.' His description highlights the family's hopes for a new strong businessman, but the affirmation 'darüber besteht kein Zweifel' already undermines any feelings of certainty (and indeed Thomas will not prove up to the task). Hoffstede continues: 'Christian dagegen scheint mir ein wenig Tausendsassa zu sein, wie? Ein wenig Incroyable. Allein ich verhehle nicht mein engouement. Er wird studieren, dünkt mich; er ist witzig und brillant veranlagt...' The poet admits to favouring Christian, even calls him brilliant, but is cut short by the boy's grandfather who interjects: 'Soll er nicht gleich Dichter werden, Hoffstede?'⁴⁹³ The reader is pushed to see that Hoffstede admires himself in Christian, and the qualities he praises might not be qualities at all – Christian will indeed not study or accomplish anything of brilliance, but end in an insane asylum.

⁴⁹² *GFA*, I.1, p. 31

⁴⁹³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 17

Far from leaving characters to speak freely for themselves and about each other as they do in the novels of Fontane, the narrator of *Buddenbrooks* does not take any chances. Despite having already shown Hoffstede to imitate people in the same way Christian does, letting Hoffstede admit his 'engouement' for the boy and having Johann Buddenbrook ask directly whether Hoffstede wants Christian to become a poet like himself, the narrator wants to leave no room for error in the reader's interpretation. This exchange between Hoffstede and Johann is immediately followed by a characterisation of Christian given by the narrator:

Er war ein Bürschchen von sieben Jahren, das schon jetzt in beinahe lächerlicher Weise seinem Vater ähnlich war. Es waren die gleichen, ziemlich kleinen, runden und tief liegenden Augen, die gleiche stark hervorspringende und gebogene Nase war schon erkenntlich, und unterhalb der Wangenknochen deuteten bereits ein paar Linien darauf hin, daß die Gesichtsform nicht immer die jetzige kindliche Fülle behalten werde.⁴⁹⁴

The wording of this description reads like a caricature, and highlights the child's negative characteristics. As he grows older, he will be increasingly ridiculed and never enjoy good health. The similarities with his father, of nervous disposition himself, are underlined, and foreshadow Christian's mental problems. Again, the reader's understanding of this character is strongly guided and focused on the decline of the family.

In Fontane's novels, readers are able to construct an image of the characters themselves by comparing the views characters offer of themselves and each other. We repeatedly see characters through each other's eyes at dinner parties and during country excursions, everyone is in constant dialogue. The characters of Fontane's novels are multi-faceted, social beings. In *Buddenbrooks*, the narrator plays a more dominant role and is careful to adjust and guide the reader's reception of any information provided by the characters.

⁴⁹⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 18

Readers are not left to create characters with the text, but are encouraged to follow the narrator to a specific conclusion: the process of decay in which the Buddenbrook family is caught up. When social groups gather in this novel, it is not to further illuminate one another and to allow characters to show different sides of themselves, but instead, as Ralf Harslem has said, to advance the plot – the gradual decline of the family.⁴⁹⁵ It is striking that for Mann's characters, social life has become inauthentic, an affair of masks behind which they hide their true selves.

⁴⁹⁵ Harslem, p. 174

The Narrator of *Buddenbrooks*

The role of the narrator as mediator between characters and readers is, as the comparison of the different techniques of characterisation has shown, the key difference between the way in which readers can relate to the characters of Fontane's novels and of *Buddenbrooks*. The narrator strongly seeks to influence and even guide the reader's interpretation of characters, and persistently foreshadows their fate by linking them to the theme of decay. However, this narrator also provides insights into the character's minds unlike anything found in Fontane. We are allowed to see directly inside their heads, especially frequently with Thomas and Hanno. Although these passages could create intimacy between characters and readers, they are again mediated by the narrator who uses them to explain the character's thoughts and feelings. This proximity does at times lead the narration to shift to the perspective of one character; something that only rarely and briefly occurs in Fontane, and affects the reader's ability to construct these characters. However, this narrator not only approaches characters in these ways, but also retreats from them. Repeatedly, the narrator establishes distance from the characters, and finally, also from the readers. Many times we will come to question the reliability of this narrative voice, which changes its mind on both secondary and primary characters, especially on Tony and Thomas. What would first appear to be critical distance on the part of the narrator turns into mockery and even cruelty, and is soon unveiled as being the opposite of neutral detachment.

Narrative Guidance

Fontane's narrator only intrudes rarely, and then often with appeals for sympathy.⁴⁹⁶

While the statements of characters in his novels are sometimes qualified by the narrator, this is the exception, not the rule. Further to the examples already discussed, the narrator of *Buddenbrooks* also guides readers by foreshadowing the characters' fates strongly and frequently. Gertrude Michielsen's analysis focuses on archetypes or archetypal traits and comes to the conclusion that Christian's decline into decadence is foreshadowed in his being a typical artist, while Hanno's death is inevitable for the archetypal frail child.⁴⁹⁷ A strong sense of inevitability indeed runs through this novel, but it not only foreshadows the decay of the family, it also starkly contrasts this future with the characters' own hopes and expectations. On the occasion of Clara Buddenbrook's birth, her siblings are each given a present: a notepad for Thomas, a doll for Tony and hand puppets for Christian.⁴⁹⁸ This not only foreshadows their fate – Thomas will become a businessman, Tony will remain a powerless but pretty 'doll' and Christian's only use will be entertainment – the presents also show how the children are perceived, and expected to develop, by their family. Thomas' present is the least child-like, he has to shoulder the burden of the family name and work in the company. Tony, so they hope, will have an easy life as the adored wife of a rich businessman, and Christian is creative and artistic. These hopes will quickly prove to be illusions, as they face one disappointment after another in their adult life, from failed business deals to divorce and madness.

⁴⁹⁶ see chapter three

⁴⁹⁷ Michielsen, p. 48

⁴⁹⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 64

The last of the Buddenbrooks, Thomas' son Hanno, is the one whose reception the narrator guides most carefully, and the character who most fully embodies the decaying family. His body is frail, his teeth are crooked and sensitive, and he does not perform well at school. The child's only saving grace, so it would seem, is his musical talent. Hanno's deep connection to music would appear to be positive, but it only serves to underline how incompatible he is with the role he is expected to fill. Several pages earlier, we heard how this future will play out in a description of his father: 'oft genug, von Jugend an, hatte er diesem Leben gegenüber sein Fühlen korrigieren müssen...'⁴⁹⁹ This is the fate which awaits Hanno, and his love for music would then not be a positive trait, but something to be corrected. Many critics have commented on Hanno as someone generally unfit for life, a symbol of decay and decadence.⁵⁰⁰ Hanno is drawn to death, and his own impending passing is foreshadowed throughout his life.⁵⁰¹ When this long awaited moment finally arrives, it comes in rather unexpected form. Katja Grote, who analyses all the deaths in *Buddenbrooks*, finds that the extreme distance from Hanno's death, shown through the medical description of typhus and the avoidance of any direct link to Hanno, contrasts starkly with previous deaths, such as that of his grandmother Elisabeth, which are described in detail.⁵⁰² She concludes: 'Der Erzähler [...] überläßt dem Leser den Transfer, weil so die Verinnerlichung dieses Sterbeprozesses gesteigert wird.'⁵⁰³ While Grote argues that this technique actually supports the reader's engagement with the character, Li describes Hanno's death as an 'Erzählstrategie der analytischen Distanzierung'.⁵⁰⁴ Readers have to take a more active role in this scene and transfer the medical descriptions of the progression of typhus onto

⁴⁹⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 516

⁵⁰⁰ e.g. Shuangzhi Li, p. 170

⁵⁰¹ see Li p. 183 for a list

⁵⁰² Grote, pp. 92-104

⁵⁰³ Grote, p. 107

⁵⁰⁴ Li, p. 204

Hanno, but this does not lead to an internalisation. Instead, Hanno is now further removed from being an individual than he ever was. In death, he is fully reduced to being a symbol of decay. Grote also says: ‘der Erzähler versucht, in *Buddenbrooks* maßgeblich Einfluß auf die Meinungsbildung des Rezipienten zu nehmen,’ and in this case, the influence consists once again of highlighting the theme of decay, behind which Hanno, the individual character, disappears.⁵⁰⁵

Hanno is not the only character the narrator uses to foreshadow the decay of the family, but he is the strongest example of it. Many other characters are used to remind readers of the novel’s central theme. The first evening in the Buddenbrook home, an otherwise happy occasion, is already overshadowed by the previous owners of the house, the Ratenkamp family. They were once rich and prosperous, but fell to ruin – the same fate which will befall the Buddenbrooks.⁵⁰⁶ Not only will the hopes of Elisabeth and Jean for their children be shattered – Tony’s marriages fail, Thomas and Clara die, Christian spends his last days in a psychiatric hospital – but servants and friends of the family will also be disappointed.⁵⁰⁷ Sesemi Weichbrodt’s repeated wish for happiness, ‘Sei glücklich, du gutes Kend!’, becomes a bad omen, as it is said at both of Tony’s weddings, which will end in divorce, at Erika’s wedding, whose husband will leave her behind after spending time in prison, and to Hanno on Christmas Eve, the last one before his death.⁵⁰⁸ The narrator also increasingly points out the signs of struggle and ill health in Thomas, such as the blueish veins in his temples.⁵⁰⁹ When we hear that something is going well for him, such as a description of his hard work and efforts

⁵⁰⁵ Grote, p. 112

⁵⁰⁶⁵⁰⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 25

⁵⁰⁷ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 771-72

⁵⁰⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 178, p. 392, p. 490 and p. 601

⁵⁰⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 349

paying off in the business world, the narrator is quick to remind us that this Buddenbrook, like all Buddenbrooks, is heading downhill nevertheless: ‘Bei alledem aber gab es manches, was für Stunden seinen Mut lähmte, die Elasticität seines Geistes beeinträchtigte, seine Stimmung trübte.’⁵¹⁰ Even the character himself fears the impending fall.⁵¹¹ The narration makes it impossible for readers to expect any other outcome.

All of these examples pale in comparison to the portrayal of Hanno. As a baby, he already has blueish shadows surrounding his eyes, which, as the narrator reminds us, resemble those of his mother. We are thus led to expect that Hanno will not be suitable as heir of the Buddenbrook name, and are frequently reminded of these shadows which symbolise his different nature. Mockingly, the narrator comments: ‘aber Gott wird geben, daß es nichts Ungünstiges bedeutet.’⁵¹² Tony hopes things will take a positive turn for their family through Hanno, but her phrasing does not bode well: ‘jetzt ist mir, als ob noch einmal eine ganz neue Zeit kommen muß!’⁵¹³ The weight of family expectations, expressed by her ‘muß’, will prove too much to bear for the fragile heir. Again, readers are not left to draw this conclusion themselves; the narrator explains: ‘was auf ihm lastete, eine Bürde, die von Anbeginn seine Seele beschwert habe und sie irgendwann einmal ersticken müsse...’⁵¹⁴ From the moment of birth, he is the counterweight to Thomas’ professional success. He develops slowly and is ill a lot as a child.⁵¹⁵ Readers are not only guided to see Hanno as a sickly individual, but to interpret this character as a threat to the Buddenbrook lineage and a disappointment of the

⁵¹⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 399

⁵¹¹ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, p. 474

⁵¹² *GFA*, I.1, p. 435, reminder e.g. p. 506 and p. 532

⁵¹³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 442

⁵¹⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 774

⁵¹⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 465

family's hopes, especially those of his father Thomas: 'daß er Kaufmann werden und dereinst die Firma übernehmen mußte, war selbstverständlich, und Fragen seines Vaters, ob er Lust zu seinem künftigen Berufe in sich verspüre, beantwortete er mit Ja... einem einfachen, etwas scheuen Ja ohne Zusatz.'⁵¹⁶ Hanno himself feels drawn to death, and his reactions to endings and decay are illuminated for us by the narrator once again: 'Dergleichen befremdete ihn nicht mehr; es hatte ihn seltsamer Weise niemals befremdet.'⁵¹⁷ Readers are not able to form a picture of Hanno for themselves, he becomes a device for the narrator to demonstrate the decay of this family.

Narrative Insight

Strong narrative guidance and continuous foreshadowing create distance between characters and readers, as the narrator constantly mediates between them and thus blocks any direct engagement. Unlike Fontane's narrator who generally keeps in the background, this narrator also provides direct insight into the characters' minds, with the narration even shifting into their perspective. At first, it might seem that these moments provide an opportunity for readers to engage directly with the characters, as they witness their most intimate thoughts and feelings. We stay with many of these characters when they are alone, a situation which rarely occurs in Fontane where characters are usually found in groups. However, instead of letting readers analyse the characters' inner minds for themselves and relate to them as people, the narrator uses these insights to explain the characters to their readers and once again to underline not their individual personalities, but their connection to the decaying family.

⁵¹⁶ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 682-83

⁵¹⁷ *GFA*, p. 771

Through direct narrative insights into the characters' minds, readers are offered a truth by the narrator: the face behind the mask, a glimpse at the real person. The narrator is thus in a position of power, able to reveal things to the reader – but in doing so, the narrator declares that there is a final truth to be discovered and claims authority for his insights. These characters are thus not fluid or polyphonous, or a collection of the impressions they and others have of them. Instead, they are constructs of the narrator which are presented to the reader as finished products. The reader takes little or no part in their creation and simply has to accept what the narrator offers. The reader is guided through the process of characterisation towards a pre-set interpretation. Explanatory insights are especially common with Thomas and Hanno, the two failed Buddenbrook family heads, as they show the fastest decline.

Thomas keeps his feelings a secret from those around him. He is careful never to let his mask slip, so the narrator has to let us peek underneath in order to guide our reception of him. This father suffers whenever his son Hanno withdraws from him in fear or simply seems to dislike him, and even though he shows no outward signs of his emotions, the narrator reveals: 'nichts verriet etwas von dem schmerzlichen Sich zusammen ziehen seines Inneren.'⁵¹⁸ Frequent inner monologues show Thomas doubting himself.⁵¹⁹ Among them, the famous Schopenhauer reading stands out. Thomas finds the second volume of a badly printed book and skips many pages of it, yet it prompts him to think about death and to a seeming epiphany. However, these thoughts are soon followed by embarrassment and then forgotten; his resolution to delve deeper into this philosophy is never realised: 'und schon am nächsten Morgen, als er mit einem ganz kleinen Gefühl von Geniertheit über die geistigen Extravaganzen von

⁵¹⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 561

⁵¹⁹ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, pp. 672-75

gestern erwachte, ahnte er etwas von der Unausführbarkeit dieser schönen Vorsätze.

[...] Er gelangte niemals wieder dazu, einen Blick in das seltsame Buch zu werfen.⁵²⁰

Instead of letting the reader approach this character, the episode is retrospectively devalued through Thomas' shame and the expression 'geistige Extravaganzen'. What it still reveals is that Thomas, seemingly fully in control, is desperate for help, even if it comes in the form of a tattered second volume of a philosophical work.⁵²¹ The narrator unveils this desperation from a critical distance, judging the apparent epiphany the next day, and thus encourages readers to emotionally distance themselves from Thomas in the same way.

The narrator repeatedly makes readers aware that Hanno shares his father's concern about what others might think of him. We first see into his mind when he has to recite a poem for the company's centenary and is about to break down in tears. The reader can now see Thomas through the eyes of his son, who experiences him as 'ernst [...] mit prüfendem, ja sogar kaltem Blick'.⁵²² Having previously been told how much it pains Thomas to see his son in fear of him, the reader is now in an omniscient position, able to show either empathy for both, or follow the guidance of the narrator and analyse them psychologically. We are only allowed to observe other characters so closely for shorter periods of time, but the narrator takes us through an entire day in Hanno's life. From the moment he wakes up and dreads going to school, through getting ready, each individual lesson, break time and finally walking home with his friend Kai, readers experience everything with Hanno.⁵²³ With this much attention paid to the inner workings of characters like Hanno, there is little or no guesswork or inference involved

⁵²⁰ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 721-27

⁵²¹ Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, but Thomas' is unaware of the title

⁵²² *GFA*, I.1, p. 532

⁵²³ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 772-823

on the part of the reader. Instead of co-creating them, as is possible with Fontane's characters, readers are presented with creations of the narrator and are strongly encouraged to judge and interpret them in a specific way.

Shifts of the narration into the perspective of a character are relatively rare in Fontane, but they occur momentarily with sentences rendered in free indirect speech.⁵²⁴ These moments allow us to hear a character think and bring us closer to them, as these instances are rarely commented on by the narrator. In *Buddenbrooks*, the many passages rendered in free indirect speech are longer, which makes it easier for readers to detect the shift of perspective. Lilian Furst describes the text as switching between referentiality and textuality, but for the characters, it might be more fitting to say that the narration oscillates between objective and subjective reality.⁵²⁵ The narrator occasionally delves into the point of view of minor characters, especially when they are observing or discussing the Buddenbrooks. More frequently, and in more depth, the perspectives of primary characters such as Thomas or Tony are explored. These moments allow us to see what is behind the roles they play and the masks they wear.

The Buddenbrooks observe others, but more frequently, we see them being observed. These narrative shifts usually highlight negative qualities of the family members and create distance to them. When Tony waits tensely to hear whether Hermann Hagenström or her brother Thomas has been voted senator, the narration chooses not to remain close to her during these emotional moments, but moves into the perspective of the crowds instead. We are not allowed to approach her emotionally at this important

⁵²⁴ see chapters three and four

⁵²⁵ Furst, p. 327

moment. The narrator creates such distance to her that she is not even mentioned by name, and we can only guess it is Tony from the description of her coat and veil. Instead, she is referred to – as the crowds see her – by ‘die Dame’.⁵²⁶ Similarly, the narrator withdraws from Thomas to the emotionally uninvolved point of view of the crowds when talking about his marital problems. The masses are interested in the marriage of Thomas and Gerda, and spread the rumour that Gerda is having an affair with the musician Lieutenant von Throta, who visits her a little too frequently: ‘zuviel, wie die Leute meinten, zuviel, wie auch der Senator selber meinte.’⁵²⁷ The outside perspective of the crowds, together with the title ‘der Senator’ for Thomas (like ‘die Dame’ for Tony) makes it harder for readers to relate to these two characters during times which would offer opportunities to feel sympathy for them and take their side against a hostile world (embodied by their fraudulent and potentially unfaithful spouses).

Although the narration retreats from Thomas and Tony for these crucial moments, it allows their perspectives to take over during others. These times are predominantly marked by weakness and failure, and once again thus link the characters to the theme of decay. From Thomas’ point of view, we experience the dreaded celebrations for the centenary of the company. The loud and hectic succession of guests is described in detail, leaving Thomas, and perhaps the reader, overwhelmed and exhausted. In the middle of these tiring festivities, Thomas is dealt a heavy blow with the telegram informing him of the failed Pöppenrader harvest. Suddenly, he is slow and calm. The narration moves from a rapid succession of short sentences such as ‘Thomas Buddenbrook [...] eilte die Haupttreppe hinab’ to a slower tempo: ‘Langsam, gesenkten

⁵²⁶ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 454-59

⁵²⁷ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 708-711

Hauptes, schritt er über die spiegelnden Fußbodenflächen'.⁵²⁸ As Thomas slows down, so does the narration, which in this way mimics the experiences of the character for its readers, allowing them to closely mirror Thomas' emotions. Similarly, we often see Christian's decline into decadence and ridicule through Thomas' eyes and are thus enabled to feel the sharp sting to the Buddenbrook pride along with him.⁵²⁹ We can be close to Thomas when he feels overwhelmed in his role as a Buddenbrook, moments often rendered in free indirect speech: 'Er hatte keine Zeit. Er war bei Gott überhäuft. Sie sollte sich gedulden [...]'.⁵³⁰ The narrator approaches and retreats from Thomas without consistency, and the same can be observed with Tony, the cause of her brother's distress in this quotation.

Tony's point of view is adopted even more often than her brother's. Frequently, readers are allowed to see into Tony's mind for a moment, which the narrator follows with an explanation of Tony's thoughts and feelings. What is revealed is her childlike Buddenbrook pride. The narrator's mocking comments encourage readers to judge or laugh about Tony, and thus to distance themselves from her.⁵³¹ An exceptional episode for both its length and the narrator's attitude towards Tony is the time surrounding her first proposal from Bendix Grünlich, especially the ensuing holiday in Travemünde. After being proposed to by Grünlich, whom she finds both ridiculous and repulsive, Tony struggles to reconcile her personal feelings with her sense of filial duty. As she considers the expectations of her family and her role in society, the same sense of self-importance rises in her: 'Für sie, Tony Buddenbrook, handelte es sich plötzlich um alle diese, furchtbar gewichtigen Ausdrücke, die sie bislang nur gelesen hatte: um ihr

⁵²⁸ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 535-43

⁵²⁹ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, pp. 342-45

⁵³⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 429

⁵³¹ *GFA*, I.1, e.g. p. 65 and p. 95

“Jawort”, um ihre “Hand”... “fürs Leben”... Gott! Was für eine gänzlich neue Lage auf einmal!’ Notably, she refers to herself with her full name, underlining her responsibility as a Buddenbrook. Her thoughts show her to be a naïve young girl. She has only read about such things in books, and is both overwhelmed and impressed by now taking part in these events. As before, the narrator guides our interpretation: ‘die Wichtigkeit ihrer Stellung fing an, sie mit Wohlgefallen zu erfüllen.’⁵³² These comments are likely once again to remove the reader into ironic distance, but we are allowed to approach this character again soon after.

Although Tony revels in her sense of importance after the proposal, her family’s pressure to accept soon makes her unwell, she loses her appetite and stops smiling. Readers experience alongside her how everyone who matters to her pushes her in the same direction: her parents, her maternal grandparents, Sesemi Weichbrodt and her nanny Ida Jungmann, even the pastor, who directs a sermon at her.⁵³³ Her parents finally notice Tony needs a reprieve, and send her to spend some time in Travemünde. Tony will never be as happy and carefree as she is during the weeks she spends at the coast with the Schwarzkopf family. After the stifling conditions at home, the narrator tells us: ‘Sie blühte auf, nichts lastete mehr auf ihr’.⁵³⁴ We are allowed to see a different side of her. Contrary to her aristocratic airs, the girl who is normally impressed by finery now admires the simple room and plain porcelain in the home of her hosts. Frau Schwarzkopf apologises for their simple way of life, but Tony retorts: ‘Pah, allerliebste!’⁵³⁵ Without mockery or constant links to the theme of decay, the narrator

⁵³² *GFA*, I.1, p. 114

⁵³³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 124

⁵³⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 145

⁵³⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 130-31

allows the reader to see that there is more to this character than the Buddenbrook daughter.

The most important source of happiness during her time in Travemünde is Morten Schwarzkopf, the son of her hosts. When he enters the scene, we see not only a carefree and happy Tony, but one who considers turning away from everything she holds dear as a Buddenbrook: prestige and wealth. The Travemünde episode most closely resembles Fontanesque character presentation, as Tony is allowed to show a different side of herself, divided from the central theme of this novel, in the presence of a character so unlike the people who normally surround her.⁵³⁶ Tony remains the focaliser for the entire time she spends with Morten. When he first appears, we see him through her eyes: 'Plötzlich kam ein junger Mensch von etwa 20 Jahren mit einem Buch in die Veranda, der seinen grauen Filzhut abnahm und sich errötend und etwas linkisch verbeugte.'⁵³⁷ We experience the openness of the landscape, the refreshing smell of the sea and the beautiful wild flowers on the Schwarzkopfs' dinner table with her. What we do not learn until later, when Tony does, is Morten's name, as she does not understand it when his father first pronounces it in his strong dialect.⁵³⁸ The reader's knowledge is limited to Tony's, and the narrator, normally so keen to guide and explain things to us, remains silent. This allows readers to approach Tony emotionally rather than judge her, and grow closer to this character as we experience the world through her eyes.

Soon Tony and Morten fall for one another, and the simplicity of the scene during which they confess their mutual love is youthful and clumsy – a stark contrast to

⁵³⁶ Her transformation resembles that of Mathilde Möhring, or Melanie (*L'Adultera*).

⁵³⁷ *GFA*, I.1, p. 131

⁵³⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 133

Grünlich's stylised and fake language, which we are immediately reminded of through a letter he sends to Travemünde.⁵³⁹ Again, the narrator does not intervene and allows readers to draw their own conclusions at this point. The letter brings back the world at home, and is soon joined by one from Tony's father, who reminds her of her role as a Buddenbrook. Tony's reading of them is followed by a passage written in an almost Romantic style. It rains heavily, mirroring Tony's feelings, and 'klagende und verzweifelte Stimmen redeten in den Ofenröhren' as if lamenting Tony's situation.⁵⁴⁰ The narration describes the world as it appears to Tony, caught between Romantic love and the mourning of its impending loss. When the day of her departure arrives, it is announced with a heavy and dramatic 'Der Tag war da.'⁵⁴¹ As she leaves, her thoughts are rendered in free indirect speech: 'barfüßige Kinder kamen herbeigelaufen und betrachteten neugierig den Wagen. *Die* blieben hier...' A few pages later, her return to Lübeck is described as bleak as it must appear to her. She drives past a prison, a hospital and a row of grey houses, which the narration, again from her perspective, comments on with: 'Mein Gott, alles das war geblieben wie es war!'⁵⁴² The proximity to Tony is so great that even the style of the passage becomes more Romantic in tone, and readers can feel every emotion, from her carefree happiness to her love for Morten and finally the despair of her departure, with Tony.

⁵³⁹ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 157-58

⁵⁴⁰ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 160-61

⁵⁴¹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 167

⁵⁴² *GFA*, I.1, pp. 168-70

Narrative Reliability

Fontane's narrator is neutral and trustworthy, presenting the characters' weaknesses and strengths, but often shows sympathy for them in times of weakness or distress.⁵⁴³ The narrator of *Buddenbrooks* however changes tack, and we have to wonder about the reasons. Readers thus begin to look critically at the narrator as a figure and might even begin to question the authority of the narrative voice that plays such an involved role in this novel. The narrator's phrasing will often give first cause for concern and raise doubt. After the poet Hoffstede describes Thomas and Christian in a positive light and predicts they will go on to be a great businessman and a brilliant student, the narrator says: 'J. J. Hoffstede hatte, was die beiden Söhne des Konsuls Buddenbrooks anging, sicherlich ein treffendes Urteil gefällt.'⁵⁴⁴ The course of the novel will show Hoffstede's evaluation to be false, and the over-emphatic insertion of 'sicherlich' here encourages readers to doubt the narrator's statement already. Similar insertions are common whenever anything positive or hopeful is said about this generation of Buddenbrooks. 'Augenscheinlich waren auf Thomas Buddenbrook größere Hoffnungen zu setzen, als auf seinen Bruder.' 'Augenscheinlich' makes this statement sound dubious, and Thomas will not lead the Buddenbrooks into a new age of prosperity, but into ruin, despite his best efforts.

The narrator not only presents his statements as dubious, but sometimes as open irony. After describing the exotic and un-Buddenbrook-ish appearance of Thomas' wife, who will only produce one frail heir, we hear: 'Es war Gerda, die Mutter zukünftiger Buddenbrooks.'⁵⁴⁵ As her son dies in his teenage years, the Buddenbrook line will not

⁵⁴³ See chapter three for Holk or chapter eight for Effi.

⁵⁴⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 71

⁵⁴⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 333

continue, but end with her. Furthermore, later characterisations often contradict earlier ones. Makler Gosch for example, so we are told, is ‘der gutmütigste Mensch der Welt’. Several hundred pages later, this positive attribute is revealed to be nothing but a deceitful mask: ‘Ein Kind hätte diese heuchlerische Maske durchschauen müssen, unter welcher die tiefinnere Schurkenhaftigkeit dieses Menschen gräßlich hervorgrinste...’⁵⁴⁶ If readers have not suspected Gosch until this point, and the narrator has not offered any reason to do so, they will now find themselves mocked by the narrator, who says that even a child would have seen right through this estate agent. Throughout the course of the novel, readers will be confronted with a rising number of such false, ironic evaluations by the narrator, and must begin to question and critically examine all his statements. This constant demand to remain alert makes for an active reading, but it creates critical distance between characters and readers, as they are repeatedly forced to expect any positive elements of these characters to be turned into their opposite, and any hope to be destroyed by a narrator who will always return to the theme of decay.

The dilemma applies especially to the three Buddenbrooks whom we follow for the greater part of the narration, the brothers Thomas and Christian, and their sister Tony. The narrator constantly contrasts the two brothers, yet also repeatedly undermines this contrast. In their introductions, Thomas was linked to his grandfather Johann and Christian to their father Jean, opposing the steady, successful businessman and ideal Buddenbrook to his nervous and religious son. However, Jean himself will later link Thomas’ nervousness to his own mentality. The reader is faced with the same difficult situation as previously with Tony: whom to believe, Jean or the narrator? Repeatedly, the narrator assures us that Thomas will make a great businessman, yet whenever he is

⁵⁴⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 197 and p. 654

described at work, the narrator highlights how stressed and pressured Thomas is.⁵⁴⁷ The older brother himself recognises that he is not unlike Christian, and even exclaims: ‘Ich werde alberner als Christian!’⁵⁴⁸ Both brothers are preoccupied with appearances and acting. Christian entertains his friends with little scenes, Thomas perfects his social mask. Christian is overly focused on his body as a hypochondriac, Thomas develops lengthy vanity rituals. Several critics, among them Ingeborg Robles, have noted: ‘Mehr und mehr aber werden sich die Brüder ähnlich.’⁵⁴⁹ And yet, despite the long descriptions of Thomas’ vanity and the repeated affirmations of the strong sense of pride in this generation of the family, the narrator claims that this Buddenbrook does not build a new family home out of pride, but because he feels relentlessly driven forward.⁵⁵⁰ The question soon moves from ‘do we believe the character or the narrator in this case?’ to ‘can we ever believe this narrative voice which contradicts its own statements?’

Tony’s treatment by the narrative voice contains even more contradictions than that of her brothers, but their abundance begins to shed some light on the reasons behind this unsteady relation between the characters and the narrator. Tony’s several leitmotifs do not create the picture of a congruent personality: she is shown to be vain and childish, superficial, yet her love for Morten is her most lasting influence. She begins to repeat his sentences in Travemünde, and continues to do so until the end of the novel. Even her daughter was almost named after Morten’s sister Meta, had her husband Grünlich not insisted on Erika.⁵⁵¹ A vain and superficial woman primarily concerned with wealth and

⁵⁴⁷ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, p. 81

⁵⁴⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 520

⁵⁴⁹ Robles, p. 197, see also Li, pp. 174-75

⁵⁵⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 461

⁵⁵¹ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 132-33 Morten’s sentences; Tony repeats them on pp. 136-37; p. 319 Tony wants to name her child Meta and continues to repeat Morten’s sentences, see also p. 396, p. 608 and p. 680

class on the one hand, a Romantic girl forever thinking back to her true love, the son of a poor, lower-middle class family, on the other. In Travemünde, Tony openly speaks out against the importance of class and wealth: ‘Er ist nicht reich, was wohl für Dich und Mama wichtig ist, aber das muß ich Dir sagen, lieber Papa [...], daß Reichtum allein nicht immer jeden glücklich macht.’⁵⁵² The only time we see Tony happy is indeed far removed from her family’s wealth and their sphere of influence, with Morten at the beach. The narrator describes Tony as an open character who cannot leave anything unsaid and has no secrets. Yet she rarely speaks of Morten later on, and only her repetition of his sentences, as well as the naming of her daughter, give her thoughts away. She also only confesses to her disgust for both her husbands to her brother long after her divorces, and Thomas is visibly shocked by her revelation. Robles voices the suspicion of many readers: ‘Hier spätestens drängt sich der Verdacht auf, daß dem Erzähler so ganz nicht zu trauen ist.’⁵⁵³ The narrator tells us that Tony is incapable of hiding anything, yet shows her successfully hiding her feelings even from her brother.

Narrative Criticism

The narrator’s unsteady position in regard to the characters creates mistrust, and thus distance from the reader. Repeatedly, the narrator even dips into less neutral behaviour. From unveiling the characters’ delusions to direct mockery and a coldness bordering on cruelty, the narrator’s attitude towards the characters can often be described as unambiguously negative. Many characters have their personal delusions unveiled by the narrator in an unsympathetic fashion. A common set-up is to have characters evaluate themselves or others, with the narrator showing the opposite to be the case.

⁵⁵² *GFA*, I.1, p. 141

⁵⁵³ Robles, p. 216

The Buddenbrook siblings frequently misjudge themselves. Thomas is the most self-critical of them, yet the narrator shows us that this does not help him. Thomas tries hard to be unlike Christian: “Ich bin geworden wie ich bin”, sagte er endlich, und seine Stimme klang bewegt, “weil ich nicht werden wollte wie du. Wenn ich dich innerlich gemieden habe, so geschah es, weil ich mich vor dir hüten muß, weil dein Sein und Wesen eine Gefahr für mich ist.”⁵⁵⁴ He gives a long characterisation of Christian, claiming to understand his issues because he had to overcome similar ones himself.⁵⁵⁵ However, the two brothers are repeatedly shown to be quite alike, as Thomas was not at all successful in trying to eliminate his own mental issues, and is in fact more like Christian than he wants to admit. During a family meeting about Elisabeth’s inheritance, Tony takes pride in being involved in such serious family business. However, when she speaks up, her words are ignored: “Ja...” sagte Tom. Und man fuhr fort [...]’⁵⁵⁶ Tony believes herself to be a woman of experience or even wisdom, but she repeats this opinion to such an extent, and at the most unsuitable times, that the statement ridicules her. ‘Sie haßte diese schwarzen Herren aufs Bitterlichste. Als gereifte Frau, die das Leben kennen gelernt hatte und kein dummes Ding mehr war, sah sie sich nicht in der Lage, an ihre unbedingte Heiligkeit zu glauben.’⁵⁵⁷ Not only do we know that she did not experience the world, as she lived in a remote country home with her first husband and was in the dark about his fraudulent business transactions, her hatred of the priests who visit her mother’s home is not founded on religious doubt, but simply reflects her wish for more entertaining soirées.

⁵⁵⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 628

⁵⁵⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 290

⁵⁵⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 254 and p. 282

⁵⁵⁷ *GFA*, I.1, p. 308, e.g. p. 302 Thomas and p. 376 Tony

This tendency to overestimate their own importance and skills is also present in the last Buddenbrook, Thomas' son Hanno. Gerda, judging his piano skills, estimates he will not be a soloist, yet Hanno loves to compose by himself. He creates dramatic pieces, but his music teacher Herr Pfühl tells him: 'Das sind Possen.'⁵⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Hanno performs this composition in front of his family in a theatrical manner, which the narrator describes in detail – only to cut it short with a sarcastic comment. 'Es war unmöglich, daß die Wirkung, die dieses Spiel auf Hanno selbst ausübte, sich auch auf die Zuhörer erstreckte.'⁵⁵⁹ Hanno may be deeply moved by his own music, but others are not. The narrator also tells us that Thomas is unable to examine Hanno's future without being blinded by his own hopes for his son, and instead he lets himself be influenced by Tony, who predicts a successful Buddenbrook heir.⁵⁶⁰

These examples create distance between characters and readers, as the narrator presents his characters' opinions to be false and distorted by emotions. However, the narrator does not stop at highlighting their delusions. Mockery finds its way into the narration, either indirectly through other characters, or directly through the narrator. The presence of Gotthold's three daughters serves no other purpose but to highlight everything wrong with the main Buddenbrook family. On several occasions, they discuss Christian's mentality, Tony's failed marriages, Clara's excessive piety, Elisabeth's vanity over her fake hair, Erika's resemblance to her father Herr Grünlich (a painful reminder to Tony) or the siblings' pride.⁵⁶¹ Other characters at the margins are also drawn on for this purpose, such as the previously mentioned crowds who make observations about Thomas' marriage. Gerda, too, is used in this way by the narrator during a confrontation

⁵⁵⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 550

⁵⁵⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 557

⁵⁶⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 681

⁵⁶¹ e.g. *GFA*, I.1, p. 301 and p. 464

between Thomas and Christian. During their discussion of family responsibility, the narrator interrupts their argument by telling us that Gerda watches them ‘mit ziemlich spöttischer Miene’.⁵⁶² Through their reactions, these outside observers ridicule the Buddenbrooks, encouraging us to do the same from a safe distance.

The character who is most often and most strongly subjected to the narrator’s attacks is Tony. Readers live through unparalleled happiness at her side in Travemünde, but this episode opposes persistent mockery and coldness from the narrator for the rest of the novel. The narrator often comments directly on Tony’s negative sides. She is presented as a superficial and vain child on several occasions.⁵⁶³ Having returned home, she is told that it would be most appropriate if she stayed indoors for a while instead of mingling, and the narrator mocks: ‘sie durchlebte eine nachdenkliche halbe Stunde’.⁵⁶⁴ Tony is repeatedly shown to be vain and theatrical, even at the most inappropriate times such as during her divorce or at the grave of her recently deceased mother. Guiding our interpretation, the narrator comments on her speech: ‘Bei dem Worte “Leben” hatte sie einen hübschen und ernsthaften Augenaufschlag, welcher zu ahnen gab, welche tiefe Blicke sie in Menschenleben und -Schicksal gethan...’ At the graveyard, when she kneels and prays, the narrator muses: ‘Gott allein wußte, wieviel Schmerz und Religiosität, und andererseits wieviel Selbstgefälligkeit einer hübschen Frau in dieser hingegossenen Stellung lag.’ We do of course know, since a few pages earlier, the narrator showed us how Tony enjoyed mocking the pastors at her parents’ house, and we are thus strongly encouraged to believe it is vanity that motivates Tony even at this moment.⁵⁶⁵ As the narrator encourages readers to laugh *at* Tony, making her the object

⁵⁶² *GFA*, I.1, pp. 633-35

⁵⁶³ *GFA*, I.1, e.g. p. 101 and p. 115

⁵⁶⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 252

⁵⁶⁵ *GFA*, I.1, p. 255, p. 256, p. 283 and pp. 264-66

of mockery, it becomes harder to laugh *with* her and relate to her as a subject, an individual character.

This treatment of Tony, so far rather benevolent and amusing, often tips over into cruelty. An especially ironic situation arises early in the novel, when Grünlich is first introduced into the family. Tony's parents treat her like a child, and the narrator refers to her in the same way, yet also shows that she is the only one to see through Grünlich's charade, while her parents are blinded by his charming manner. The prospective son-in-law cunningly flatters Elisabeth's vanity and Jean's piety, and presents himself advantageously. Even though he flatters Tony too, this girl, often accused of vanity, is not fooled. 'Tony dachte: Woher kennt er meine Eltern? Er sagt ihnen, was sie hören wollen...' Tony recognises that he only says what her parents want to hear, yet her father tells her: 'Du bist ein kleines Mädchen, das noch keine Augen hat für die Welt, und das sich auf die Augen anderer Leute verlassen muß.'⁵⁶⁶ If only she had listened to her own instinct rather than the voice of her parents, she could have avoided a marriage that brings her misfortune. The narrator continues to call her a child and describe her as such throughout this scene, underlining how her parents perceive her, yet shows the readers Tony's thoughts, which reveal clearly that she is the only one not blinded by Grünlich. The narrator sides with her parents by mimicking their perception of her as a minor, yet Tony's words mirror the thoughts of the attentive reader. She listens to Grünlich's thinly veiled self-appraisal and thinks the obvious: 'Er sagt alles nur, um sich herauszustreichen!'⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁶ *GFA*, I.1, p. 107, p. 104 and p. 113

⁵⁶⁷ *GFA*, I.1, p. 108

The narrator even uses her first love Morten to misjudge Tony. Throughout the novel, Tony repeats his sentences, even wants to name her daughter after his sister – yet Morten once speaks in congruence with the vain and superficial picture of Tony built by the narrator. ‘Sie können wohl einmal mit Einem von uns zur Erholung ein bißchen an der See spazieren gehen, aber wenn Sie wieder in Ihren Kreis der Bevorzugten und Auserwählten treten, dann kann man auf den Steinen sitzen...’⁵⁶⁸ ‘Auf den Steinen sitzen’ is a phrase the young couple coins for being left behind alone. Tony would have most likely been happier if her family had allowed her to marry Morten; we never see her as happy as she was in Travemünde, and she always thinks back to those days. However, the people surrounding her make it difficult to see her as anything but a spoiled child, and the narrator works hard to convince the reader of the same image.

Hanno also becomes a target as the embodiment of Buddenbrook hopes. At his baptism, we hear his family’s joy in free indirect speech: ‘Ein Erbe! Ein Stammhalter! Ein Buddenbrook!’, but the narrator cruelly contrasts their dreams with reality, a boy who is only ‘ein kleines, unter Spitzen und Atlasschleifen verschwindendes Etwas’. The family’s wish for a prosperous future is made fun of: ‘nun ist er da und empfängt das Sakrament der heiligen Taufe, er, auf dem längst so viele Hoffnungen ruhen, von dem längst so viel gesprochen, der seit langen Jahren erwartet, ersehnt worden, den man von Gott erbeten und um den man Doktor Grabow gequält hat... er ist da und sieht ganz unscheinbar aus.’⁵⁶⁹ Again, readers are encouraged to laugh about the ill fortune and decay of these characters, rather than relate to them through empathy. An older Hanno

⁵⁶⁸ *GFA*, I.1, p. 151

⁵⁶⁹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 435

will later underline the futility of his family's hopes with statements such as: 'Ich bin gar nichts und kann gar nichts' or 'Man sollte mich nur aufgeben.'⁵⁷⁰

Not only do characters become objects of mockery and are thus removed from empathy, readers will find themselves made fun of by the narrator, too. Our level of insight is, especially with Tony who is presented overly negatively, often used by the narrator to underline that it is possible to withhold information, and that readers have to be wary of this narrative voice which will seek to lead them astray. When Tony visits Travemünde again with Thomas and they walk along the boulders by the sea, where she spent time with Morten, we hear 'wobei Tony Buddenbrook aus unbekanntem Gründen jedes Mal in eine begeisterte und unbestimmt aufrührerische Stimmung geriet.'⁵⁷¹ The reasons are of course not unknown, but the lasting impression of Morten. The narrator brings this situation to a cruel peak by following the scene by claiming that Tony had 'nicht das Geringste hinunterzuschlucken und stumm zu verwinden' – exactly what she did have to do, and has done, with her love for Morten.

Narrative Emotions

This ironic distance to characters, the mockery and at times cruel treatment, the strong guidance and explanatory insights into the characters' minds – all of these elements establish the narrator as a figure which creates distance between characters and readers, and hinders them in relating to the Buddenbrooks emotionally. The narrative voice is unreliable because it is neither neutral nor constant in its relation to the characters. This lack of trust is caused by the narrator frequently moving between positive and negative

⁵⁷⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 783 and p. 820

⁵⁷¹ *GFA*, I.1, p. 739

treatment of characters, which makes the narrative voice seem not neutral, but emotionally involved. The shifts between insight and distance, as well as sympathy and mockery, are often quite drastic, and can leave readers feeling as if the narrative voice changes its mind on a whim, and thus has to be treated with critical distance.

After the Travemünde episode during which we follow Tony closely, so closely that the narration even mirrors her unhappiness at her departure, the shift back into mockery is quite sudden. Upon her return to her family home, the narrator immediately tells us about her exaggerated self-importance as she reads the family genealogy.⁵⁷² Readers are abruptly removed from feeling closely with and for Tony, and instead are now encouraged to see her once again as a character to laugh at. Her brother Thomas, whose mind we are often allowed to look into, is at other times treated like an unknown entity by the narrator, who feigns ignorance about this character's thoughts. His death is described with little sympathy, and his actual passing is rendered in impersonal words: 'Der Senator starb.'⁵⁷³ Despite the many insights into Thomas' mind, the narrator here guides readers not to mourn for Thomas, but highlights the passing of the Buddenbrook family head as a sign of their further decay, behind which Thomas the individual, to whom we could relate emotionally, disappears.

The Travemünde episode for Tony is mirrored by a slightly shorter passage for Hanno, the long description of his school day. The narrator shifts back into ironic distance with Tony, and does the same with Hanno. His long and difficult day, during which readers were allowed to experience everything with this character, is concluded by: 'Dies war

⁵⁷² *GFA*, I.1, p. 173

⁵⁷³ *GFA*, I.1, p. 256 and p. 755

ein Tag aus dem Leben des kleinen Johann.’⁵⁷⁴ ‘Johann’ is not a name ever used to refer to Hanno during times when the narrative voice approaches him, and the formulation suggests a simple children’s tale, nothing to be taken seriously.⁵⁷⁵ Even more so than his father, Hanno dies anonymously, removed from the reader’s sympathy – the narrator offers only an impersonal, medical description of Hanno’s illness.⁵⁷⁶ The final moments of this character are told with the greatest possible distance, denying him any kind of personhood, now nothing more than a symbol of decay.

All of these factors encourage readers to remain emotionally removed from the Buddenbrooks – and yet, at other times, the narrator makes appeals for sympathy. The tone is often even sentimental, such as with Hanno during his childhood: ‘[...] jenes glückseligen Alters, wo das Leben sich noch scheut, uns anzutasten, wo noch weder Pflicht noch Schuld Hand an uns zu legen wagt [...] Ach, nicht lange mehr, und mit plumper Übermacht wird alles über uns herfallen, um uns zu vergewaltigen, zu exerzieren, zu strecken, zu kürzen, zu verderben...’⁵⁷⁷ There is worry and pity for Hanno in these words, an understanding and a sympathy for the suffering he will have to endure. Especially Tony, the character most often mocked by the narrator, is often brought close to readers. We live through the pleasant time in Travemünde with her, and are often entertained by the pranks she pulls on others, such as the pastors.⁵⁷⁸ Similar to Holk in *Unwiederbringlich*, with whom we live through charming days at the princess’ residence, experiencing interesting and entertaining episodes with characters encourages

⁵⁷⁴ *GFA*, I.1, p. 828

⁵⁷⁵ See also p. 566 for ‘der kleine Johann’, again used mockingly to show Hanno not being a good fit for the traditional name of Johann Buddenbrook.

⁵⁷⁶ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 828-33

⁵⁷⁷ *GFA*, I.1, p. 480

⁵⁷⁸ *GFA*, I.1, pp. 264-66

sympathy on the part of the reader.⁵⁷⁹ Four times we even hear ‘Arme Tony!’; once spoken by her brother Thomas, but three times directly from the narrator.⁵⁸⁰ These clear appeals for sympathy, reminiscent of Fontane’s ‘Arme Effi!’, ask readers to relate to Tony emotionally and understand her suffering through empathy, perhaps even to feel sorry for her during these difficult times.

The unsteady narrative voice allows readers to come close to characters such as Tony, Thomas and Hanno, and even demands we show sympathy for them. At other times, it creates distance between readers and characters by highlighting the negative qualities of the latter, leaving their minds closed to us during important events, and even mocks them directly. The narrator of *Buddenbrooks* is not the neutral, steady and fair voice of Fontane’s novels, but one that achieves greater insight and withdraws into further distance. This narrative voice changes its mind on characters and presents them either positively or negatively at times, always commenting on their thoughts and behaviour in an explanatory, guiding manner. It thus plays a dominant, visible role in the novel and mediates the contact between readers and characters.

⁵⁷⁹ see chapter three

⁵⁸⁰ *GFA*, I.1, p. 169, p. 400, p. 402 and p. 406 – her departure from Travemünde and the failure of her second marriage

Conclusion

Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* at first appears to share many traits with the novels of Fontane in terms of its characters. Both authors use detailed descriptions and characterisation through speech. They show their characters in different social roles and surround them with a great number of other characters, creating scenes such as dinner parties or family gatherings. However, these techniques are employed to different ends by Thomas Mann, leading to the loss of some reading paths while opening up other, new ways for readers to engage. The world of *Buddenbrooks* is divided between an external, objective world and an internal, subjective one. Between these two, the narrator moves back and forth, mediating for the reader. In Fontane's novels, characters are largely able to present themselves and others as primarily social beings, and readers are left to piece together their own characterisations from the different images offered by a multitude of voices. In Mann's novel, characters are often found on their own as their social selves are inauthentic, and the images they hold of themselves and each other are presented by a narrative voice which interprets them for us. The narrator repeatedly links the characters to the theme of decay and in doing so reduces them to mere symbols, making it difficult for readers to relate to these characters as people in this objectified state.

The omnipresent guidance of the narrator seeks to influence readers, and thus continuously stands between them and the characters. This poses an obstacle to the establishment of an emotional connection between readers and characters – even more so as this narrator is shown to be untrustworthy and far from neutral, unsteady in the relation to characters, and seems emotionally involved, as the narrator moves between intimate insights and impersonal distance, mockery and appeals for sympathy. This

frequent change of tack undermines the reader's trust in both the characters, who are shown to be deluded, and the narrator, who seems unfair and unreliable. The surprising effect is that even though *Buddenbrooks* allows readers to see deeper into the minds of its characters, they are more difficult for readers to engage with and relate to through empathy. Readers are unable to take part in the creation of these characters as the narrator presents and interprets them, leaving little freedom for readers to use their imagination or form their own opinion, which severely limits the scope for co-creation. The characters are hard to relate to emotionally as the narrator frequently encourages readers to analyse them with detachment, to laugh at them and mock them.

Buddenbrooks, with its Modernist influences, would appear to offer more room for subjectivity and the human mind than many Realist novels, but as it does so with a more dominating, less sympathetic gaze than Fontane, this does not lead to an approach to characters in the reading process, but to a greater detachment from them. The comparison of these works not only illuminates the characters of Fontane. It confronts expectations of Realist and Modernist characters in a way that raises the question as to whether Modernist fiction in general allows readers less freedom in character creation than Realist novels.

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