

Engendering Childhood: The Autobiographical Novel in Eighteenth-Century German Literature

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Abstract

During the latter part of the 18th century two German authors in particular showed great interest in the topic of childhood and how childhood experiences shaped their lives. Heinrich Jung-Stilling finished his autobiographical novel *Heinrich Stillings Childhood and Youth* in 1777, and Karl Philipp Moritz authored *Anton Reiser* between 1785-1790. The purpose of these narratives was not spectacular action or passionate love stories but pure observation of a human being—with particular attention to small details. The texts examined present, often contrary to their stated aims, a persistent picture of a childhood in which family constellations produce children who lack a fixed gender identity, a clear notion of sexuality, and find their identity in fantasy worlds.

Keywords: Childhood, Autobiographical Novel, Moritz, Reiser, Gender

Introduction

The 18th century brought about a dramatic change in the perception of childhood in bourgeois Germany. Influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings, especially his *Emile*, German authors, philosophers, and philanthropists rethought their ideas and perceptions of the realm of childhood. As a result, they proposed a dramatic change in the understanding of children.

This modification in popular thought took place because children in the Middle Ages were not afforded a space where they could play and have carefree time. According to Philippe Aries, the author of *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), children in Medieval Times were viewed as members of the work force as soon as they were able to contribute to the welfare of the family.

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Children, Aries contends, were not perceived as young, weak, and helpless individuals in need of constant protection; rather, they were accepted as part of the realm of adults, with all the privileges and duties of adults.

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult. In medieval society this awareness is lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society. [. . .] Language did not give the 'child' the restricted meaning we give today: people said 'child' much as we say 'lad' in everyday speech. (p. 128)

In stark contrast to medieval belief, the French philosopher Rousseau proposed a radical new idea in his book *Emile* (1762):

. . . let children be children before they become adults. [. . .] Nature would have them children before they are men. If we try to invert this order we shall produce a forced fruit immature and flavorless, fruit which will be rotten before it is ripe. [. . .] Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling; nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute our ways; and I should no more expect judgment in a ten-year-old child than I should expect him to be five feet high. [. . .] Treat your pupil according to his age. Mankind has its place in the sequence of things; childhood has its place in the sequence of human life. The man must be treated as a man and the child as a child. Give each his place and keep him there. (p. 54-55)

He believed in a natural order that grants children a special, separate realm from adults. Just as fruit needs time to ripen on the tree, so too do children need time to grow and become rationally thinking adults. This development is a gradual process that requires sufficient time (p. 55). Rousseau believed that it is contrary to a natural order to expect a child to think and act as an adult.

Guided by Rousseau's writings, German philanthropists and educators soon regarded childhood and children as worthy subjects of observation.

Two German educators in particular showed great interest in the topic of childhood and realized the need to investigate further.

Karl Philipp Moritz and Heinrich Jung-Stilling were two very prominent authors of the time and, though there were others, I will limit my remarks to their works. Both wrote extensively on childhood issues and both wrote autobiographical novels in an attempt to investigate their own early years. Their works are largely autobiographical but contain fictional elements.

As we will see, an accurate retelling of one's past is impossible because it is filtered through personal experiences and now distorted and reinterpreted. Fathers are dictator-like monarchs who suppress individuality which, when combined with the absence of a mother, hinders proper gender development. The end result is an ill-adjusted man-child.

Reconstructing Childhood

The authors take some liberties in reconstructing their early years caused by forgetfulness and an innate desire to fill gaps. This phenomenon of fictionality manifests as the author grows older and, with newly acquired knowledge, is able to understand and interpret earlier memories that did not make sense at the time of its occurrence.

As we grow older, we selectively interpret and reinterpret childhood memories with the understanding of an adult. By recounting these recollections, they are no longer a true account of the original memory, but an interpreted description of the initial experience. Unbiased and impartial retelling of childhood memories is essentially impossible, since we are not children anymore and now have added information and life experiences. New and old stimuli are "knotted" together and form a novel form of memory.

Both Moritz and Stilling believed that, by investigating their childhoods, they could comprehend what shaped them to be the persons they had become.

They had a strong consensus that childhood experiences and traumas were determining factors in the development of a child.

Through introspection, soul-searching, and recollection of all and any childhood memories they believed one could learn more about himself and others. Writing these autobiographical novels was intended to accomplish exactly that.

The Autobiographical Novel

Jung-Stilling finished his autobiographical novel *Heinrich Stillings Childhood and Youth* in 1777, and Moritz authored *Anton Reiser* between 1785-1790. The purpose of these narratives is not spectacular action or passionate love stories but pure observation of a human being—with particular attention to small details. Real life, after all, is simply not as exciting and suspenseful as a novel. Both autobiographical novels therefore deal almost excessively with childhood issues. The authors first take a close look at their own births and the circumstances under which they entered this world. Then they elaborate on their early years and youth. For both, childhood is not an idyllic place of play and leisure, but a realm of work, abuse, trauma, and failure. They live in restrictive circumstances and are subject to the rules and whims of their ruthless fathers. In contrast to Rousseau's fictional character Emile, who was raised in a simple and pleasant world devoid of hard work and without an overpowering father figure, young Anton Reiser and Heinrich Stilling both have very unhappy childhood years.

Father's Influence

The father's authority is all encompassing and leaves no room for individual development. Fathers here are patriarchs who rule with absolute power. They alone determine their sons' futures. Though both boys are physically very weak and feeble they are required to contribute to the welfare of their families by working in the fields. Since Heinrich, for example, is from a hard-working family, one would expect his hands to be rough and his face weathered and tanned. However, he is described in very feminine terms. The narrator mentions on several occasions how white his complexion is and how soft his hands are. He is unable to labor like a man and it is the source of much contention between him and his father. His father needs a strong man to help him in the fields but Heinrich is physically too fragile to fulfill this job.

The father controls everything in the family and his authority can not be questioned. Father Stilling's controlling style of family government becomes very apparent in one scene when the Stillings take a family stroll one afternoon. The old Stilling carries a crude stick.

It is not just a simple walking stick, but it is thick, heavy, and has thorns. With this rod or stick—whose phallic symbolism is hard to deny—he herds his family like cattle. Remarkably, there is a distinct order in how they proceeded down the street. The most submissive members, the women, walk first and are watched over by the men who follow. The Patriarch observes and directs all of them from behind with the help of his stick. “The daughters then went before, Wilhelm followed them, and last of all the father, with his thick thorn stick.” (Stilling, 1844, p.14)

The methods of teaching employed by the fathers and by male teachers are often brutal, restraining, and strongly influenced by religious beliefs. Heinrich Stilling and Anton Reiser lived under strict religious law, under the commandments of restrictive Christian sects, which required the total abandonment of the self. In this setting the boys have to surrender their own individuality and conform to a higher norm and value system, which is forced upon them by their fathers and indirectly by their religious leaders.

The Gender Question

Because of hard work and school, there remains little free time for play, and if there is any, the leisure activities are regulated and restricted by the fathers. As a result, Moritz's and Jung-Stilling's protagonists retreat into a world of fantasy and books, where they can live out their wishes and desires. In the case of the character Anton Reiser, the difference between reality and fantasy eventually becomes so blurred that he is unable to distinguish rationally between the two. Heinrich Stilling's retreat into the realm of fantasy makes it impossible for him to learn who he really is and, as a result, is strongly influenced by the characters in the books he reads. Not the positive influences of a mother and father or an extended family—or even school or a nanny—shape the young impressionable person, but rather the characters in books which are brought to life by the authors. He turns life into literature and thus is utterly unprepared for life.

Especially interesting in these texts is the question of gendering and gender identity. Rousseau proposed a specific idea of gender development in *Emile*. We learn from Emile's progress, that children initially, regardless of their gender, are androgynous because there is no clear or obvious distinction between the sexes. Rousseau writes:

Up to the age of puberty children of both sexes have little to distinguish them to the eye, the same face and form, the same complexion and voice, everything is the same; girls are children and boys are children, one name is enough for creatures so closely resembling one another. (p.172)

In addition, the sexless children treat each other as equals, without realizing that there is an inherent difference. Rousseau claims "The child brought up in accordance with his age is alone. He is unconscious of his sex and his species; men and women are alike unknown" (p.180). This trend is confirmed in the autobiographical writings. The boys do not show any gender specific behavior. Nothing in their early years really distinguishes them from girls. In this respect, Moritz and Jung-Stilling develop normally according to Rousseau's observations.

This condition of equality, however, does ordinarily not last forever. There comes a time when nature initiates a separation of the sexes. Rousseau explains again in *Emile*:

"But, speaking generally, man is not meant to remain a child. He leaves childhood behind him at the time ordained by nature" [. . .] "The time is at hand when that same nature will take care to enlighten her pupil." (p. 180)

In stark contrast to this proposed model, the little protagonists Anton Reiser and Heinrich Stilling are unable to progress as Rousseau suggests from this point forth. Their time of sexual awakening simply never comes; thus, their lives lack any distinguishing gender identity. Both remain in child-like stages when gender differences are not yet evident.

For the entire timeframe of the novels, they are destined to linger in sexual limbo, in a pre-pubescent state that Rousseau describes in these words when talking about his young Emile: "[H]e is unconscious of his sex and his species; men and women are alike unknown." (p. 180)

Rousseau explains Emile's consequent development in these words: "[T]he more convinced I am that a solitary brought up in some desert, apart from books, teaching, and women, would die a virgin, however long he lived." (p. 298) Rousseau makes it clear that books, teaching, or the presence of and interaction with women, awaken the next essential stage in the gendering process of a child.

This important step of gender discovery is absolutely missing in the lives of Anton Reiser and Heinrich Jung-Stilling. Therefore, it is possible for Stilling not to understand the advances of a woman when he is already eighteen, and Reiser can never imagine himself with a woman. As a matter of fact, a young woman who would like to be intimate with Anton Reiser goes temporarily insane when he constantly ignores her advances. When asked, Anton Reiser is unaware of any sexual tension between the two. His gender development stopped so early in life that he remains a young man. As a matter of fact, both boys are described in what would be considered very feminine terms.

Heinrich Stilling certainly deviates from the given masculine norm of his time. On numerous occasions, Heinrich faints when he is overwhelmed with sorrow and self-pity. Frequently he breaks out in tears, even at the age of seventeen. When his grandfather's table is removed from the living room, he cries. Even as a teacher he cries when the children tease him excessively. There are countless examples in the text of Heinrich breaking out in tears when other boys or men in the same situation would have reacted defensively, with anger, or very offensively. Heinrich, however, retreats into this world of self-pity and cries until he feels better. All told, we get a very feminine picture of him. His description, his actions, and his inability to work like a man make him appear much more feminine than masculine and thus he appears gender-neutral.

Anton Reiser also has problems with sexuality or the lack thereof. After he leaves home as a teenager he shares a room with a man named G. G. is known to everyone in town as a sexual deviant, a man who lives an alternative lifestyle and is described as a "seducer of men (Reiser, , p.188).

"Because they share the same room, Anton is seen in the same light, but Anton feels he is treated unfairly, especially since he does not understand the implications of such an accusation. Since he has no concept of heterosexual sexuality, the idea of homosexual activity is just as foreign to him.

Anton Reiser's ignorance to anything sexual becomes even clearer in his relationship with his good friend Philipp Reiser. Philipp is always involved with a woman and enjoys sharing his conquests with Anton. Philipp is a libidinous being, one who has feelings for the opposite sex and who enjoys the company of women.

When he brags about his many love conquests, Anton is actually bored by these tales and finds nothing erotic or exciting about them. Hearing about romantic relationships does not arouse him, as it would other pubescent boys, but bores him. Anton even criticizes Philipp's relationships and considers the drives to be an illness and he sees Philipp's endeavor as hopeless. In addition, he believes unfulfilled desires and drives plague Philipp. Since Anton is free of such feelings, he considers them a handicap, or even a disease. He not only does not understand feelings of unrequited love but he deems the topic "extremely boring" (p. 211). At an age when young men, budding with hormones, spend a good deal of their energy on pursuing girls, Anton remains in early childhood.

The absence of a distinguishing gender identity is partially due to the lack of association with the opposite sex in their youth, but also to their fathers' imposed imperative to suppress their individuality. Consequently, both protagonists never mention any friendship with girls in their younger years. They are sheltered from the world, locked in their houses for years, and not allowed to have contact with the outside world. In addition, in their early years, they have to deny any possible feelings of individuality or sexuality, a decree imposed on them by their very controlling fathers. The denial of natural feelings and emotions causes the boys to be ill prepared for life. Though they dive into a world of books, they are taught to suppress any feelings and thoughts, which could have initiated the first step into manhood and toward the male gender.

This gender ambiguity becomes very obvious again when Anton Reiser is cast for a part in a play. He receives tremendous applause for his outstanding performance but strangely enough, instead of the hero, he plays the part of the heroine, a woman.

He plays the part so well in fact that the audience is fooled by his performance. On stage, he loses himself in his female character (p. 347). Since life to him is theater and theater is life, it comes natural to play roles because his entire life has been a role. For this reason, he can easily identify with a female character and portray her convincingly. Because he totally annihilated his self, he can take on an identity and make it his for a brief moment—even a female one.

Absent Mothers

In their effort to reconstruct their childhood in retrospect, the authors Moritz and Jung-Stilling perceive and describe their earlier years as gender ambiguous. In the authors' recollection, childhood and youth, reside in an undefined limbo.

Though nature, according to Rousseau, awakens sexual awareness and gender identity at a certain point in time, it has to be supported by external teachings, such as books, father's explanations, or contact with females. Yet, our boys never reach that stage of awakening and are deprived of their masculine heritage. It appears that outside influences or the lack thereof can nullify nature's effort. Thus, it is not natural surroundings or inherited attributes that make a person; but what a child experiences that is the determining factor. Though a boy is born a male, external influences have much greater influence than sexual identity assigned by nature. Forced suppression of any natural feelings voids nature's effort.

Suspiciously absent are, as in many bourgeois tragedies of the time, the mothers. There is no mention of their nurturing and life-giving role. All learning takes place in institutions such as schools, which are often taught by ruthless and sadistic male teachers. Though Moritz and Jung-Stilling obviously had mothers, in retrospect they usually neglect to mention any female influence on their lives. These men only remember their male teachers and their male classmates. In the process of recollection and introspection the feminine influences seems negligible on male subjects. Perhaps the strong suppressive molding process by males accounts for the lack of any clear gendering. The masculine influence on a boy, as presented in the autobiographical novel, is generally negative, causing some sort of mental ailment in later life. The suppression and brutality of this situation prevents the boy from proper gender identification and socialization, but seems to be the standard for boys.

Conclusion

These protagonists in these autobiographical novels of the eighteenth century are unable to become fully functioning men in society. Essentially they are stuck in a pre-gendered stage and are unable to escape. They approach sexuality with childlike innocence and are not in a position to understand its implications. As a result of his inability to move from the childhood stage to youth, Heinrich Stilling's childhood lasts twice as long as that of other children of his time, lasting past his twentieth birthday.

He consistently returns to his father's lap, submitting himself to his authority, even at an age when others had successful careers. For this extended period of time he remains under the rule of his father and is unable to escape the role of the dependent minor. Consequently, Heinrich is incapable of constructing a separate and distinct personality in order to establish himself in society. This total dependence is the result of being constantly guided, directed and manipulated by his grandfather, his father, and by the Pastor, who all forced their beliefs and judgments on him.

Ignorant to the world, both protagonists escape into a fantasy world of literature—far removed from any hint of reality. In retrospect, gendering might seem unimportant to the authors. Or we can conclude that the almighty father thwarts any attempt of socialization and gendering. Thus, boys raised and educated by males fail miserably in life. Unable to establish themselves in society as individuals, Anton Reiser and Heinrich Stilling remain in search of their elusive identities. They are unable to enter the male public sphere and are thus impotent in every sense of the word.

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