

***Lonely Lives* – A Living Theatrical Metaphor**

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Abstract: This article overviews Hauptmann’s naturalist dramaturgy with an emphasis on the play *Lonely Lives* and references to a recent staging by the National Theater of Iași. Thus, we aim to reveal the loneliness of the characters (ordinary temperaments with common destinies, unlike those in other plays) on a vivid metaphorical level, given by faith and the lack of it, respectively.

Keywords: German drama, faith, naturalism, loneliness.

Introduction to the dramaturgy of Gerhart Hauptmann

Dean of German letters, Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946) distinguished himself when he was young and successfully maintained his position among his contemporaries (as Lessing and Goethe did before or Johnson and Coleridge in English culture) during a time in which the rulers complained of the writers’ inability to be as successful in letters¹ as the soldiers on the battlefield. Compared to Dickens in British literature, through the descriptions of the Berlin suburbs and the workers who populated them, the psychology of the characters and the special humour² bring him closer to the Victorian master.

Known for his plays, *The Weavers* (overseas) and *The Sunken Bell* (in Germany), he is remembered as a representative of photographic realism. Rejecting symbolism, its Ibsenian tonality is indigestible. Unfairly accused of the external nature of the methods, lack of personality and originality, the realist and the expressionist fascinate us through the fabric of personal dreams. Of his religion, or lack thereof, it is recorded that he discovered his pagan side

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¹ Brian W. Downs, “Gerhart Hauptmann”, *The North American Review*, Vol. 223, No. 830 (Mar. - May, 1926), p. 103, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25113518>. Retrieved on March 7, 2024.

² *Idem*, p. 115.

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in Greece, just as Tolstoy proved himself a Christian upon contact with the New Testament³. Among the leading Russian writers, Dostoevsky piqued his interest in the study of psychology and the human psyche at the institutionalized level of the asylum.⁴

His youthful melodramatic works with painters, art educators, the comedy *Kollege Crampton* (1892) and the tragicomedy *Michael Kramer* (1900) contain rich material on existential, social, psychopathological issues of identity and artistic calling in which the dramatic tension is revealed by binary oppositions (bohemia – philistinism, art – life/humanity, asceticism – utilitarianism, the curse of genius – mediocrity)⁵. Moreover, a typology of Hauptmann's artists by Karl S. Guthke argues that the character Crampton, for instance, is not the aristocratic Nietzschean artist; on the contrary, he allows others to use him, even tyrannize him (especially his snobbish wife)⁶. The German soul has always been in harmony with nature, both on a literary and philosophical level, but Hauptmann, as an exponent of naturalism, antithetical to romanticism, offered an acute, relentless, photographic realism focused on the ugly, with its particular aesthetics⁷, and the sordidness of life. Anglophile like his author, the German teacher with an English name, i.e. Harry Crampton recommends to his students Swift, Smollett, Thackeray, Dickens and Byron, along with E.T.A. Hoffmann⁸.

Far from glorifying the harmony between man and nature, social progress in the age of mechanization, naturalists exposed the dissonances of

³ T. M. Campbell, "Gerhart Hauptmann-Christian or Pagan?", *The Modern Language Journal*, Mar., 1924, Vol. 8, No. 6 (Mar., 1924), pp. 353-354.

⁴ William Ames Coates, "Dostoyevsky and Gerhart Hauptmann", *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Dec., 1945, Vol. 4, No. 3/4 (Dec., 1945), pp. 110-111.

⁵ Alan Corkhill, "Portraits of the Artist: Gerhart Hauptmann's "Kollege Crampton" and "Michael Kramer"", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), p. 1069.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 1074.

⁷ Cf. Umberto Eco who also applies the Marxist principle that money can compensate for ugliness/lack of beauty, can buy pleasure (women or other), extended in art to portraits of ugly monarchs seen as omnipotent and charismatic by their painters and transposed into paintings as such (ed.), *On Ugliness*, translated from Italian into English by Alastair MacEwen, Harvill Secker, London, 2007, p. 12.

⁸ Brian W. Downs, *op. cit.*, p 107.

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existence and human anguish as a product of progress. Among his works, *Flagman Thiel* (1887) best illustrates the new *Zeitgeist*, through the outline of the profile of the proletarian, a humble servant of the state with an insignificant and monotonous job. Thiel raises and lowers railroad barriers in a forest in an isolated area, barely making ends meet. The domestic sphere is equally well marked in the play, where the protagonist, a God-fearing man whose masculinity is defined by a Herculean physique, appears to us in the form of a docile husband dominated in all aspects by his second shrew wife after his first wife dies at the birth of their physically and mentally handicapped son. Thus, a visionary, fantastic and phantasmagorical world is foreshadowed in Thiel's mind, with tragic effects, which will alienate him from reality⁹. The (bi)polarity is that between good and evil, Tobias the sick son and the robust half-brother, the spirituality of the first wife and the sensuality of the second, between the church and its believers. The train in the forest, animated as if by a malevolent spirit that injures him, has been compared to a devilish "iron horse" tributary to American folklore¹⁰, thus reminding us of a protagonist from the classic literature of the United States, Washington Irving's Rip van Winkle with a nagging wife, as well, put to sleep by Danish spirits in the forest for two decades. Alienated in his own way, "beyond his comic appearance", the character "can be seen as the American explorer, individualistic in his adventure, dissatisfied by his present condition, whose only alternative to "escape" is to "stroll away" into the virgin untouched American wilderness"¹¹. The forest in Hauptmann acquires symbolic valences (it is like a sea, and the trunks of the trees are its bones), its subjectivity contrasting with the objectivity of the village, both part of the character's mundane existence; in the forest his personality disintegrates, his soul crosses the river Styx to the underworld, and the squirrel and deer reflect the disintegration of his soul. At the end of the story, God finds his counterpart in a squirrel, while the deer is

⁹ Donald H. Crosby, "Nature's Nightmare: The Inner World Of Hauptmann's "Flagman Thiel"", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 1988, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2) (1988), pp. 25-26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43307990>. Retrieved on March 7, 2024.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 27.

¹¹ Iulia Milică, "Visions of America in Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville", *Studies in American Literature*, Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iași, 2013, p. 31.

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associated with Tobias, ironic animal symbols of the struggle between spirituality and bestiality¹².

Humour and chivalry have also been discussed in Hauptmann's comedy *Ulrich von Lichtenstein* and in Ulrich von Lichtenstein's medieval novel *Frauendienst*, the didactic autobiography of the thirteenth-century statesman; the comic potential of serious prose was exploited by the playwright in the 20th century, a courtly love song attracting irony and pointing out the lack of truth of facts¹³. The inner conflict characteristic of Hauptmann's characters is also evident here as a dominant feature, and on stage, the person in question is defined by extremely obvious behaviour; Ulrich thus becomes both masculine and feminine, elegant, strong and sensitive at the same time, sexual and spiritual, a generous extravagant and a humble beggar, a married man and a lady's knight, a creature of the present and an idealist nostalgic of the past. He lives in the private sphere, and the comic comes from the dialogue¹⁴. In *Gral-Phantasien*, a combination of the *Parsival* and *Lohengrin* stories, Hauptmann offers a valid reinterpretation of older material (including Richard Wagner's more recent *Parsifal*) as an expression of his own concerns. The reinterpretation is playful and gives a mythological view of the human condition, a world where Gnosticism is predominant; despite low critical interest, it deserves attention from those interested in Arthurian material for the character Parsival raised in a cabin in the woods by his mother Herzeleide, an unpleasant hard-working peasant woman. As a child he becomes strong and temperamental, and as a young hunter he attains the acuity of a bird of prey, the courage of a lion, the cunning of a fox¹⁵. The social elements are missing, Parsival (conflicting personality from which derives the play's dichotomous symbolism, animals, objects, persons associated with the mother or father figure) is the champion of the

¹² Beverly Driver and Walter K. Francke, "The Symbolism of Deer and Squirrel in Hauptmann's "Bahnwarter Thiel"", *South Atlantic Bulletin*, May, 1972, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May, 1972), p. 47, 50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3197721>. Retrieved on March 7, 2024.

¹³ Carolyn Dussère, "Humor and Chivalry in Ulrich von Lichtenstein's "Frauendienst" and Gerhart Hauptmann's "Ulrich von Lichtenstein"", *Colloquia Germanica*, 1983, Vol. 16, No. 4 (1983), p. 297. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23980162>. Retrieved on March 9, 2024.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 306.

¹⁵ Carolyn Dussère, "An Interpretation of Gerhart Hauptmann's "Parsival"", *Colloquia Germanica*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1980), p. 233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23980038>, Retrieved on March 9, 2024.

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wounded lady, Lohengrin of the weak and poor. Interestingly enough, King Arthur's court is not mentioned at all¹⁶.

A Painful Case, one of the most powerful short stories in Joyce's *Dubliners* due to the main character, James Duffy, identified with the author himself by the desire to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen, without friends, church or a creed, generally unconcerned with the obtuse criticism of the middle class, mentions the presence of a translation of Hauptmann's *Michael Kramer*, a play which the modernist admired and translated in his youth, a symbol of the only amusement and escape from everyday life he had, his love for opera and concerts¹⁷. The female characters of Gerhart Hauptmann and their little sorrows and joys are also found in the memory of Stephan Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, his walks on the streets of the metropolis, bringing him closer to Clarissa (*Mrs. Dalloway*), modernist figures of the "transient and the 'fugitive'" whose "nature of encounters and impressions made in the city" is "often ungraspable"¹⁸.

Lonely Lives

The play *Lonely Lives* (*Einsame Menschen*) was performed at the Freie Bühne in 1891 and together with *The Weavers/ Die Weber* (1892) "substantially contributed to his glory, making him one of the best-known playwrights of the age"¹⁹. Unlike other creations (which spanned 60 years and include no less than 44 plays, 10 novels, poems, short stories, and autobiographical impressions), "*Lonely Lives* no longer brings to the stage special temperaments and opposing destinies, but the isolation and drama of the individual unable to find points of spiritual communion with his own

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 236.

¹⁷ Marvin Magalaner, "Joyce, Nietzsche, and Hauptmann in James Joyce's 'A Painful Case'", *PMLA*, Mar., 1953, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Mar., 1953), Pp. 95-96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/459908>. Retrieved on March 15, 2024.

¹⁸ Cf. Dana Bădulescu, *Early 20th Century British Fiction. Modernism, part I*, Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iași, 2005, p. 12.

¹⁹ Ileana Berlogea, „Gerhart Hauptmann”, în *Teatru*, vol. 1, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1968, p. 6.

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family. The parents adore their son, and Kitty, John Vockerat's brooding wife, is a self-sacrificing spirit full of tenderness. And yet, the young intellectual feels alone. His thoughts are misunderstood, he does not seem to find moral support among the loved ones. The meeting with Anna Mahr, a Russian student, energetic, intelligent, opens the perspective of true friendship and then of love full of momentum, but which cannot be reconciled at all with his obligations as a son, husband and father"²⁰.

The setting of the country house from Friedrichshagen near Berlin is a sophisticated-bourgeois one and the time is his present, the end of the 19th century. A staging²¹ introduces (post)modern elements in which the drama of the characters is doubled by the televised rendering of action, a parallel text in itself. "Reproductions of sacred subjects by Schnorr von Carolsfeld"²², announce the family drama. "Photographs and engravings of modern men of science (including theologians), among them Häckel and Darwin"²³ keep us anchored in the present and bear witness to the intellectual side of the family. The portrait of a pastor, also hanging above the piano, symbolizes the authority of the Church, the clergy having a special place in the playwright's work. In the play, according to international critics, pastor Kollin is placed on a pedestal, in the opinion of the elderly; as representative of the Church, he is obeyed by the members of the community who keep him in high regard. Prominent citizens like the elder Vockerat are so impressed by this servant of God that they naturally lose themselves in his presence; this veneration even affects John Vockerat who is a revolutionary in thought and gets a feeling of unease around the pastor. The man of the Church certainly enjoys this appreciation, he allows himself to be asked to stay even though he had no intention of leaving after the baptism in the play, an insincerity that the reader/audience feels and perceives as hypocrisy since the pastor enjoys worldly pleasures such as wine and cigars. He is convinced of the correctness of his point of view, in his intolerance ridiculing the opinions of others whom he does not understand very well. This is especially the case of those of the

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 18.

²¹ See the play staged at the National Theatre in Iasi, 2022.

²² Gerhart Hauptmann, *Lonely Lives*, translated from the German by Mary Morrison, London: William Heinemann, MDCCCXCVIII.

²³ *Ibidem*.

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younger generation (John Vockerat) who perceive him as narrow-minded (hence the playwright mocking him). Jovial when everybody pleases him, he is in the center of attention and feels esteemed; it is hard to imagine him in a delicate situation that he would probably struggle to handle. The Vockerats are simple, honest in their faith and interested in its healing power even though they lose themselves in Kollin's presence. Thus, the old woman sends her husband for the pastor when she realizes his son fell in love with Anna Mahr; the two feel guilty, and in their fear of God's wrath, they look for the root of the evil in their own past, in the shared conviction of the truth of the Bible and the teachings of the Saviour. Johannes respects his father despite the beliefs that separate them. At the sight of his father, John comes to his senses and drops the revolver with which he was threatening to take his life²⁴.

Loneliness recently documented at the economic level as the lack of communion with those around us, the impossibility of calling someone in case of need or not belonging to a group of friends²⁵ is debated by Hauptmann in *Lonely Lives*, as we are told from the title. It is a living metaphor, in the hermeneutic sense where the word is the unit of reference, and the metaphor, a stylistic figure of similitude, an extension of words rooted in the substitution theory (from Aristotle to recent Western thought).²⁶

Kitty, a wife weakened after giving birth, is encouraged by her mother-in-law, Mrs. Vockerat who hopes that the grandson will strengthen/save her son's marriage after his wife recovers. John, the young father, is portrayed as a man with "an intellectual face; expressive play of feature; restless in all his movements"²⁷ who complains about his submissive wife finding her pale and dim. He would like a strong, impatient and passionate soul instead to be by his side. After the baptism scene that pleased his faithful parents, the wife urges her husband to see his son to drive away his unpleasant thoughts; Mrs. Vockerat hopes to see him satisfied, but she is powerless as John

²⁴ Johannes Nabholz, "The Clergymen in Gerhart Hauptmann's Contemporary Plays", *Monatshefte*, Vol. 39, No. 7 (Nov., 1947), pp. 463-465.

²⁵ Cf. Norena Heertz, *The Lonely Century. Coming Together in a World that's Pulling Apart*, Sceptre, London, 2020, pp 5-6.

²⁶ Cf Paul Ricoeur *The Rule of Metaphor. The creation of meaning in language*, translated by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ, Routledge Classics London and New York, 1995, pp. 1-2.

²⁷ Gerhart Hauptmann, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

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philosophically decrees that contented people are the idle in the hive of worker bees. From a theological viewpoint, he argues that God is one with nature, and knowledge of the latter also guarantees knowledge of the former, through the prism of Goethe whom Johannes sees as superior to all clerics, blasphemy for the mother and the Church, the lady regretting that the son did not become a theologian after the inspired sermon at the exam, to the relief of the institution that got rid of a heretic as the reader/viewer may easily grasp. Unlike Kitty, Anna Mahr is agitated in her gestures, graceful in movement, self-assured, though modest and tactful, making herself immediately noticed by John. She came to the Vockerats to look for Braun, the artist, friend of the young father; Mrs Vockerat wonders at the student from Switzerland claiming that too much knowledge harms women. While waiting for the still unfinished great painting of the artist, Anna is invited to enjoy a meal with the family and learn about the philosophical-critical-psychological-physiological work of Johannes who gets upset when he is reminded of it. The wife worries about her simplicity in front of the student whom she thinks is cultured and full of fancy words, seeing herself in decline at twenty-two compared to Anna's twenty-four that she did not suspect. She wilts when her John proposes to take Anna in for a few weeks because of her poverty as he thought the young mother could use some company.

In the second act, Mrs. Vockerat is greeted as mother by Anna on a splendid autumn morning, coming from the garden where she picked grapes, extolling the family life she has not yet had, the loneliness of celibacy not surpassing that felt in a relationship which she does not suspect between John and Anna; only Mrs. Vockerat tells her not to praise family life, God takes care of all despite the fact that things are not quite as they should be. However, she enjoys Anna's good influence on her son. Mrs Vockerat and Anna cherish each other at this point, and if the former is bitter that her son has lost his faith, the latter sees high aspirations in it. Meanwhile Kitty also enjoys the young lady's presence, never letting her son out of her sight. John complains about his wife's paleness. Naturalism is brought into play through the short story read by the characters who lament the fate of some Russian workers, deafened by hard labour at the boilers, admired by the young and criticized by Mrs. Vockerat who argues that art must give one pleasure, a tribute brought by the old generation to romanticism and the beautiful. John is satisfied by Anna's presence, the only one able to judge his work as his wife praises him no matter

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what he does, and his parents are bewildered anyway. The wife, who does not want to take responsibility for material things either, tries to bring him down to earth, to worldly things, but he does not want to hear that their funds are considerably decreasing and soon they will not have anything to live on. Everything he is interested in is his work, he is the lonely scholar in the ivory tower of his own thoughts. They want to keep Anna away from all this, John takes her side arguing that the horizons of (German) women, therefore also of his wife, are limited to domestic chores, despite her big heart, worthy of a fairy tale character.

John became a recluse, avoiding friends, Braun included, since the appearance of Anna; she has become his faithful companion, soothing his loneliness. Kitty confesses to the painter that she needs to earn a living and is considering embroidery for linen or painting on porcelain, and has made a few attempts in this sense. John would like to move to Switzerland, where Miss Anna will go to devote herself to work and see her friends again (at least that is what she claims, that she will not be lonely); people in the area have started gossiping and even in the house she is frowned upon by Mrs. Vockerat. Loneliness has left its mark on John's physique; he has a deep crease in his mouth that the sorrow of his soul has dug. He who is alone has a lot to suffer because of others. The wife received as a young woman to marry, Anna came to value her freedom, to be without homeland, family or friends, and the separation from the Vockerats grieves her. Kitty falls prey to despair, she wants to go far away, where no one will know her, to England or America by ship, because her man has always been there more for others than her, first friends and now Anna; she was never happy alone, which makes her life miserable and cursed. Mrs. Vockerat laments the state of things and blames everything on the atheism of her son, whom she suspects of adultery, especially because he asks Anna to stay in the house. From the appreciation she had for the girl at the beginning, she asks his son to choose between the two, companion and his mother, even though she lives in his house arguing that as a coquette, Anna has caught him in her nets. Braun also tries to make him understand that there is a question of choosing between Anna and the family, but the man firmly claims that between the two of them there is only friendship based on matching ideas, that their intellectual evolution was similar, that he has regained his self-confidence thanks to her, that since she came it was as if he had been reborn (like the phoenix bird from the ashes) and

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has regained his creative force; Anna, therefore, is the essential condition of his intellectual development, and it is precisely for this reason that his friends and family urge him to make her go before it is too late. The wife is getting weaker and weaker with anger that Anna stayed, and her husband only has eyes for the guest with whom he goes for walks in the surroundings and on the boat even though the lake is a dangerous place. Anna confesses to John her intention to leave in a few days, the need to obey conventions despite his sadness and loneliness that will deepen tenfold. Braun also appeals to Anna's conscience; seeing that Kitty's health is deteriorating, Mrs. Vockerat asks her to leave, as well. The son is angry that the mother kicked the guest out of his house and threatens to kill himself, putting the revolver to his temple, his father, coming home, tries to bring him to his senses. Anna and John say goodbye, kissing passionately on the lips, fooling no one or themselves that they care for each other like brother and sister. The wife accepts her fate, that she will never be good enough for her man. John is the one who disappears after writing a few words on a piece of paper (by boat on the lake, Braun tells us); reading the note, Kitty faints, while the others call him out.

Conclusion

The loneliness in the play discussed is one in a relationship (between husband and wife, John and Kitty) attributed to the lack of faith of the old generation (Mrs. Vockerat), of the philosophical genius misunderstood by others (John) who finds companionship in a young spirit, free from masked loneliness (Anna); by leaving, she drives him to despair and possibly death. What felt like things going back to normal (i.e., the marriage between the young couple and implicitly, Kitty's recovery), degenerates into drama through the loss of the intellectual who no longer feels at ease in a world hostile to his own ideals.

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