NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Subject of Honor as an Element and Interpretive Device in German Literature

A Thesis Submitted to the University Honors Program in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree With University Honors

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ABSTRACT (100-200 words):

The purpose of this thesis is to show how the subject of honor has been used by various German authors as either a pervasive facet of literary characters or an interpretive device to study the deeper understanding of human existence. The paper studies two different types of works using honor as a theme. In the first section, works are considered which use honor as an overt theme. In the second, the framework of honor is expanded to consider aspects of honor contained in subjects such as compassion and self-actualization.

Through library research, I have found facets of honor to be present in prominent works by Walther von der Vogelweide, Clemens Brentano, Gotthold Lessing, Arthur Schopenhauer, Heinrich von Kleist, Hermann Hesse, and, in particular, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The essay evaluates each of the above authors for the content of honor in his works.

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in the brief stanza, written in the late-12th century, Walther von der Vogelweide, one of the most prolific middle-
high-German poets, set the stage for a prominent theme through-
out the history of German literature. This theme is the problem of honor. Since the 12th Century, many writers have grappled with the intricacies of honor or related topics as a prevailing theme or sub-theme in various works of literature. The subject of honor has pervaded some of the most well-known works in German literature, some of them without even precisely addressing the subject directly. The intent of this essay is to examine how the subject of honor has been used as a theme in German literature, and how the substantive facets of honor have been incorporated into the works of specific authors.

In general, the problem of honor has been evaluated in one of two ways. In some cases, honor has served as a predominant theme or characterization in a work. In such a work, the author has identified characters as honorable or dishonorable by clearly
... defining their virtues. In addition, the predominant subject of the story will be some type of quest for honor. This overt reference to honor is evident in the works of Lessing, Frontane, and Schmitzler, and to some extent Kleist. In the other works, the author has dealt with honor in a more subtle manner. These works attempt to deal with topics such as self-actualization, compassion, and recognition of situations as they stand. Most of the authors in this category never mention the word honor; yet, all of the works easily fit within an expanded concept of honor. The authors which deal in this facet of honor are Hermannsthal and Hesse.

The Early Subtleties of Honor

Perhaps the best place to begin an examination of honor is with Walther von der Vogelweide's "Der Reichenstein." Not only is this poem the earliest in this study, but it also clearly shows that the subject of honor can be present without clubbing the reader over the head. In his poem, Walther speaks of the grace of God ("gotes hulde" in the original text) as one of three competing values in humanity. Although Walther never proclaims the grace of God to be honor, it is evident from the context of the phrase that this grace is not bestowed like a gift, but is something that comes out of a person through an inner sense of honor. Thus, there is competition in human existence between that which is materialistic, esteem and ownership ("ere und wurden grost"), and that which is truly honorable. It is also interesting to note that the expression of "Ehre" here (that is,
"ere") is not one of true honor, but instead is an expression of false honor which comes merely from the perception of others.

In the next section of the poem, Walther von der Vogelweide goes on to lament the fact that this predicament has no solution. Therefore, he finds it impossible to bring the three facets of existence harmoniously "together in one heart." In other words, to be truly honorable and to truly stand in the light of God, an individual must forsake the false honor of motordery and wealth. In this interpretation, the interior of a person is more truthful than the exterior, and the "grace of God" is the honorable alternative to that which is worldly or materialistic.

Honor in Black and White

In contrast to "Der Reichston", Gotthold Lessing's Minna von Barnhelm is anything but vague. In Lessing's 18th Century drama, the concept of honor is present throughout the entire play. Lessing clearly makes distinctions between two sets of characters: the honorable and the dishonorable. The honorable characters include Minna, the heroine, and the Major von Tellheim, the drama's hero. Tellheim specifically is completely wrapped up in honor. The drama revolves around Tellheim's effort to regain his honor. Tellheim's name has been dishonored, and for that reason, he has broken off a relationship with Minna, whom he states he cannot marry because he has lost his honor. Furthermore, it is through service to Minna's father that Tellheim has had his honor stripped away from him, along with his wages, by the army. Throughout it all, however, Tellheim remains a paragon of
honor. He refuses to accept money from others and he is unwilling to succumb to the vengeful, biting tendencies of his servant, Just. In the end, ironically, Tellheim's honor almost serves as a fatal flaw. Tellheim is so resolute in his quest to regain his honor that he narrowly misses losing his true love, Minna, to his zeal for redemption.

To serve as a contrast to Tellheim, Lessing pens the characters of the landlord, Werner, and Riccaut de la Marliniere. These three characters incorporate the dishonorable traits which are not present in Tellheim or in Minna. Of them, the landlord is the most outright sinister character. He is totally concerned only with himself. His primary interest is money, even if it means throwing Tellheim unknowingly out of his quarters to make room for Minna, whom he correctly believes could be more profitable to him. In addition, the landlord is a hopeless gossip and gossp who always intentionally enters the scene at all the right times. Werner shares with the landlord a lust of wealth. He, like Tellheim, is involved with the military, but his concern is for the spoils of war. He represents best the false honor of materialism as espoused by Walther von der Vogelweide. Werner's interest lies in going on great adventures to gain fame and fortune even if it means treachery and betrayal. Finally, Riccaut de la Marliniere, while somewhat ludicrous and silly, serves as another example of what honor is definitely not. He is a gossip and a braggart; overall, he has very few qualities to bestow any redeeming values upon him. Thus, these three characters serve as a sort of dishonorable shadow for the Major von Tellheim, a man who knows nothing but true "hse."
"Give Honor to God Alone"

Another story which has a question of honor as its predominant theme is Clemens Brentano's "Geschichte von Braven Kasperl und dem schonenannerl." This story is somewhat reflective of the Walthar von der Vogelweide poem because it deals with a higher state of honor. In this story, all true honor comes from God, and God alone is deserving of this honor. This sentiment is expressed through the grandmother's oft-repeated directions to "Gib Gott allein die Ehre!" ["Give honor to God alone!"]

The story concerns an old woman's efforts to bestow upon her grandchildren a proper burial. Her grandson, Kasperl, has killed himself, and her niece, Annerl, is being executed for the murder of her illegitimate child. The grandmother is extremely concerned that the youths be buried next to each other in "honorable graves." Thus, the subject of honor is clearly expressed by the main text of the story. Furthermore, Kasperl's suicide is a direct result of his having been dishonored. Kasperl has discovered that his father is a notorious thief, and he is very much dismayed. He cries out, "Meine Ehre, meine Ehre ist verloren! Ich bin der Sohn eines unhonorisierenden Dichteers." ["My honor, my honor is lost! I am the son of an honorless thief."] In his anguish and humiliation, Kasperl shoots himself, an extreme measure which shows that Kasperl, like Tellheim in Minne von Barnhelm, carries the concept to dangerous proportions. The result of his suicide, though, is to proclaim himself by law from the right to an honorable grave. Instead, his
body will likely be donated to science, which the grandmother fears would cause him to be unwhole and unable to enter Heaven on the Last Day.

Annerl has also become dishonored by her circumstances. She becomes pregnant, through little fault of her own, and is convicted of suffocating her new-born child. The narrator, upon hearing the circumstances, believes he can stay her execution on behalf of the old woman. However, she quickly indicates that earthly salvation is not at all what she desires for the girl. Her belief is that honor and redemption come from the Lord. It is better for her to suffer and die, thus paying for her sins, and have her honor replaced by God in heaven. The old woman merely wants Annerl, like her grandson, to be placed in an honorable resting place, a request which is eventually granted. Therefore, the result of the story is that despite the fact that both lives have been lost, the true victor is honor. Both Kasperl and Annerl receive burial in hallowed ground, and presumably both have their honor restored to them in the heavenly kingdom.

False Honor

Unlike the other literature studied, Leutnant Curti by Arthur Schnitzler deals with a completely superficial notion of honor. The "Ehre" in this story is an honor of materialism, an honor of recognition; thus, it falls under the category with Walther von der Vogelweide's "Ehre". The story concerns an Austrian soldier who is very wrapped up in his own honor. He is not very
closely, so he is unable to find any success in an academic setting. Instead, he joins the military to give himself esteem and position over other citizens. He falls into a mundane routine of military existence and bounces between loveless affairs with countless women, many of whom, like his current lover Steffi, are married. In all, his life shows very little true honor, though Gustl himself is always self-congratulatory about the honor of his military standing.

The crisis in the story comes when Gustl insults a common citizen, the baker. The baker, a large man, grabs Gustl and seizes the lieutenant's sword, threatening to kill him. Gustl is horrified because, although no one has seemed to notice, this confrontation has occurred in public. He anguish that either someone has seen him, or the baker will soon tell someone. In either case, Gustl's honor will be lost because he allowed an ordinary citizen to gain the upper hand over him and rash his sword. He knows that he cannot challenge the baker to a duel, for he is neither academic nor military personnel. Therefore, the baker has placed Gustl in an irreversible situation which Gustl considers a complete loss of face.

Gustl proceeds to spend the entire night wandering through town to consider his plight. He often considers suicide to escape his dishonor (in a parallel to Brentano's Kasparl), but Gustl is clearly not ready to end his life; he loves himself too dearly. He wishes in his heart that no one will find out what has happened, thus keeping his honor intact. However, from time to time, Gustl gets an inkling of true honor because he realizes that even if nobody else knows what has happened, he still will
remember. The thought occurs to him that he will still feel the loss of honor in his own heart, and he will not be able to live with himself. Yet, this feeling soon passes, and Gustl goes back to wishing speedy death and destruction upon the baker.

The experience shows the truly dishonorable character of Gustl. He wallows about the terrible circumstances fate has thrust upon him. He curses his comrade who gave him the theater tickets which led him to run up against the baker. He criticizes and condemns Steffi because he feels she will live on in ignorant bliss with her husband. Finally, when Gustl seems to be at the end of his rope (although he seemingly could have continued to wrangle with his fate interminably), he receives his redemption. While stopping at a café to eat breakfast, Gustl learns that the baker has had a stroke and has died immediately after returning home from the theater. Therefore, through this man's terrible misfortune, Gustl decides his honor has been fully restored because the secret of his dishonor has never been let out. In the ultimate irony, Gustl rejoices over his newly regained honor during a breakfast which consists in part of the dead baker's bread. Truly, this honor of which Gustl speaks is quite false. Although his standing in society has been left intact, he is left more dishonorable than he already was. Whereas most of the other stories contain examples of what honor is or could be, Lieutenant Gustl speaks most strongly of what honor is not.
Honor as a Principle

The final work which deals more explicitly with the problem of honor is *Michael Kohlhaas* by Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist's novel, set in the 16th Century, concerns honor for honor's sake. In other words, a wrong-doing which strips one of honor must be redeemed if only out of a sense of principle. In the novel, Michael Kohlhaas is a horse dealer who is bringing his animals to another region for sale. He is stopped at a border and asked to pay a toll which has previously not existed. He refuses to pay the toll, but he leaves one of his prized horses as collateral with the local Junker until he can right this apparent wrong. When he returns to the region, Kohlhaas finds that his horse has been mistreated and starved nearly to death.

Kohlhaas' concern over the loss of his horse stems not so much from the financial cost of losing a prized animal; instead, his concern is that he has been dishonored by the Junker. He feels that he has been ill-treated and made a fool of. He turns first to legal measures to resolve the issue and to regain the justice he believes is owed him; however, the legal system is hopelessly slanted toward the Junker's side. Next, Kohlhaas' wife makes an appeal to the authorities, but in doing so she is gravely wounded and later dies.

At this point, Kohlhaas' quest goes beyond a battle for justice and honor. Instead, his search for honor becomes a sort of battle for vengeance. He gathers together a band of men to exact a reign of terror upon the Junker and all the people of his region. Kohlhaas reacts to his loss of honor by burning
down houses and killing innocent people. Yet, this transformation of an honorable principle into a dishonorable method does not leave Michael Kohlhaas in an entirely bad light. He can be viewed as an unfortunate character, who has been gradually pulled into an overwhelming melee. He is a man whose honor meant so much to him that he was willing (unlike Leutnant Gustl) to fight to his death to have that honor restored and justice served. In contrast, the Junker is a totally despicable character. He covers in fear under the bedcovers, being shuttled from one relative to the next in order to evade Kohlhaas and his men. He has no sense of honor whatsoever and is too proud to correct his wrongdoing or even to admit his guilt. In this case, it is the criminal, Michael Kohlhaas, who possesses the truer sense of honor. Kohlhaas zealously fights his battle for the principle of honor.

Hofmannsthal’s Expanded Concept of Honor

One author who has dealt heavily with themes relating to honor is Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Although Hofmannsthal never really addresses honor directly, he works excessively with subjects that denote honor in an expanded framework. In general, he addresses honor in one of two different ways. In some of his works, Hofmannsthal approaches honor through characters who have become hesitant to engage in forms of discourse which they feel are inappropriate. Both “Ein Brief” and Der Schwierige are included in this category of literature. Hofmannsthal’s other works deal with characters who lead seemingly privileged, honorable lives. Yet, they lead only half an existence. The crises of these stories develop when the characters are exposed to the
other side of life they have avoided. Four of Hofmannsthal's works fit into this category: "Reitergeschichte", "Das Märchen der 672. Nacht", Der Tor und der Tod, and Frau ohne Schatten.

Of the two works in the first category, "Ein Brief" addresses the problem more directly. "Ein Brief" is a lengthy letter written by Philip, Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon in order to explain his cessation from writing. Lord Chandos' explanation for his silence is that he is no longer able to express simple judgments honorably. In other words, he feels that tacile judgments are inappropriate and unfair. In order to write, he would need to generalize and judge; thus, his feeling of dishonor has left him unable to write. To further explain his point, Lord Chandos relates the story of a Roman senator who has a pet fish. The senator is devastated when the fish dies, and he weeps bitterly. His colleagues, however, ridicule and pass judgment on him for his seemingly silly reaction. However, the senator responds by noting that these same people, who ridicule his mourning for the fish, did not shed a single tear upon the deaths of their spouses. Therefore, their judgments, like those decried by Lord Chandos, are dishonorable and unfair.

Hofmannsthal's drama, Der Schrei, also addresses a similar theme. Like Lord Chandos, Hans Karl Bühl, the hero of the comedy, is unwilling to make snap judgments. Hans Karl disdains simple conversation; he would much rather remain silent than engage in superfluous discussion of trivial matters. In addition, he will not make negative judgments about other characters. Thus, he befriends Count Nechlingen, a character who all the others, including
his wife, utterly despise. Hans Karl feels it is not honorable to judge the man as simply bad. Instead, he recognizes the positive traits of the man’s military service. The unusual facet of the story is that Hans Karl’s friends and relatives insist that he smooth over uneasy relations and convince them of all sorts of things, a role which Hans Karl is wholly uncomfortable about playing.

Hofmannsthal is able to parallel Hans Karl through use of the description of a clown named Furlani. Furlani tries to help everybody, yet his every action causes even greater confusion. However, Hans Karl deeply admires him because he sees “how much he respects himself and everything in the world.” Therefore, although Furlani is a clown, Hans Karl, and presumably Hugo von Hofmannsthal, view him as a character with a great sense of honor within himself, and the parallel between Furlani and Hans Karl, who also casts a wide course of confusion through his actions, is quite obvious.

Hofmannsthal also pens a character to act as a foil to Hans Karl. Whereas Hans Karl is portrayed as the honorable Austrian, Neuhoff is characterized as a dishonorable Prussian. Hans Karl is short and modest, and simple; Neuhoff, on the other hand, is a gossipy, arrogant character. He is very self-centered and impolite. He shows very little respect, and immediately takes on an inappropriate informal tone with everyone he speaks to. Neuhoff is clearly an attempt to further illustrate the type of man that Hans Karl, thankfully, is not.
One of the stories which fits into the second category of Hofmannsthal's works is "Erzähergeschichte". The story begins with a glorious cavalry ride through a conquered Italian city, during which the language of the story brings out the beauty of the surroundings. One of the riders in this march is the Wachtmeister. He considers himself to be a very respectable figure. However, it soon turns out that not all is goodness and light in his world. A fleeting glance of a woman brings to him a recollection of an affair in his past in which he was not the woman's only lover. Thus, this victorious ride is sullied by the image of a relationship which was clearly not wholly honorable. Furthermore, the cavalry soon leaves the city for the countryside, where beauty and bounty no longer exist. The bright streets are replaced by dark, dirty alleys with poor, desolate houses and frighteningly destitute people. The spoils of the city are not present here; instead, the Wachtmeister is thrust into a world of poverty and disease. The result of this experience is a sort of loss of honor, for which the Wachtmeister, in a true literary tradition, pays with his life. Moreover, the direct cause of his death was his unwillingness to part with the spoils of war, a part of his newly destroyed dishonorable pride.

"Das Märchen der 672, Nacht" takes the same idea and expands upon it. In this story, a young Kaufmannsohn lives a very sheltered existence. He prefers to stay in his own home within a world dominated by his beautiful, precious possessions. Therefore, he has never had a chance to live a full life or to truly care for another. One day, circumstances lead him out of his home, and he
is unwillingly thrown into a world outside of his bright, narrow being. The Kaufmannsohn has always considered himself above the ordinary. Thus, he cannot deal with the darker side of existence. He finds himself trapped in a maze-like surroundings and is faced by a frightening, disheveled child. The Kaufmannsohn reaches out to the child, but he receives a flashback which reminds him of a parallel situation in which this contact made him very uncomfortable. Instead, the Kaufmannsohn throws money at the feet of the child, putting himself above the child rather than reaching out to him with human compassion. Again, as in "Reitergeschichte", the punishment for the loss of honor is a violent death. Once the Kaufmannsohn escapes the garden, he is kicked by a horse and dies soon after.

Hofmannsthal's drama Der Tod und der Tod serves as a further explanation of this expanded concept of honor. In the play, Claudio is visited by Death. The spirit of Death shows Claudio, a nobleman, how his ways have gone astray from the path of honor. Claudio has lived his life with himself and his possessions, thus constituting the choice of "varde guot" over "gotes bulde" in the Walther von der Vogelweide poem. Claudio has not reached to others around him, including his mother, his friends, and a woman whom Claudio should have given a part of himself to. He is presented with a cast of characters to relate to in ways in which he has chosen the path of egotistical self-absorption, rather than the road of humanity. As a result, Claudio recoils his ways at the last moment, but it is of course too late. His fate, like that of the others, is death. Honor seemingly takes no prisoners.
Probably the best example of this concept of honor is **Frau ohne Schatten**. This mystical fable concerns an empress who is really a god brought into human form through very unusual circumstances. Yet, although she has the shape of a human, she is not truly human, for she casts no shadow. She discovers that if she remains on earth for 12 months without casting a shadow she will be taken from earth, and her husband, the emperor, will be turned into stone. To prevent this fate from befalling her husband, she goes off, with her nurse, to find a shadow for herself. The nurse, a very sinister character, concocts a scheme to obtain a shadow by stealing it from another woman. The object of her plan is the wife of Barak, a poor dyer. In return for her shadow, the nurse offers Barak's wife the promise of eternal beauty. Yet, the price of losing her shadow will be to deprive the Baraks of ever begetting children.

In the end, the empress proves unwilling to finalize the scheme. It becomes apparent that by giving up the shadow, Barak's wife will be damned. The empress, in an act of true compassion, refuses to subject the Baraks to such a fate. This expression of true humanity, encompassing the unpleasant facets of life rather than the simple, materialistic side already experienced by the empress, results in her being given a shadow. It is through this act of compassion and suffering that the empress is given the "gift" of humanity and the emperor is saved from a fate of stone. Therefore, humanity lies in the honor of self-sacrifice, empathy, and thoughtfulness. The shadow itself is a reflection of the darker sides of life (suffering, sacrifice, perhaps even the pain.
of childbirth) which are as fully a part of human existence and honor as the glorious gifts of a splendid lifestyle. Thus, the actions of the empress express a higher plane of honor reserved for human selflessness.

The Culmination of the Expanded Concept of Honor

If a facet of honor is, as expressed by Hofmannsthal, a recognition of the darker, less perfect side of life, the apex of this concept lies in Max Demian, the title character of Hermann Hesse’s classic novel. The novel recounts a struggle by the narrator, Sinclair, to come to grips with the two sides of existence battling for control of him. He turns to Demian as a sort of role model, a man of considerable honor and character who has mastered the technique of assembling an existence which recognizes not just one side of the spectrum, but which assimilates both the dark side and the light side together into one.

Throughout the first part of the novel, Sinclair struggles to choose between the bright, cheerful existence of home, family, and school and a darker existence of disbelief of accepted doctrine and, to some extent, debauchery. This struggle gradually develops into a battle for self-actualization. He periodically becomes submerged in the darker world through petty theft, drinking bouts, and the like; yet, he always manages to struggle back to the warmth of his bright family life. It is Max Demian, a school friend, who finally leads him to recognize that both sides of life should live in unity within him. This, to Demian, is the true form of honor: to live a full existence without shutting out the unpleasant or incomprehensible.
Denian teaches Sinclair that there is more than one way to interpret most situations. For example, Denian tells the story of Cain and Abel with a positive connotation for the "mark of Cain", a sign which, as it turns out, both Denian and Sinclair possess. The mark of Cain is interpreted as a kind of symbol of greater understanding of the true nature of life and its order.

Furthermore, Denian introduces Sinclair to Abraxis, the god which Denian believes is supreme. Abraxis is described as half-God, half-Satan, a being which represents both good and evil upon the Earth. Only by recognizing both sides (that is, by acceptance of Abraxis) can a person achieve true understanding of human existence and, likewise, receive an inner sense of honor.

Therefore, with honor comes the recognition that good and evil reside together on the same plane of existence. Rather than constituting different planes of being, good and evil constitute pulses of influence with each their effect upon individuals in different ways, yet come from the same source. An example of the concurrence of good and evil occurs at the end of the novel. At the same time as Sinclair is experiencing a blissful existence at the house of Denian and Frau Eva, ominous signs are foretelling a dark shadow which is to overtake the world. The dark shadow finally comes to realization in the form of the First World War. Yet, the truly honorable thing is to be, like Max Denian, able to recognize that both existences are functioning simultaneously.
Conclusion

If one is asked for a precise definition of honor, it is unlikely that an exact denotation can be found. Likewise, the problem of honor in German literature has been dealt with in vastly different ways by different authors. Despite the various interpretations among the authors discussed, there remains the common element that honor is an important theme of human existence. Whether it is simply an intensive facet of a whole person, as in Manna von Arnheim, or it is a difficult understanding of the human state of being, as in Derian, the subject of honor has been an intriguing subject for numerous authors throughout the years. Moreover, while German authors have been unable to conclusively indicate what the precise meaning of honor is, the study of honor has proven a unifying theme in German literature as well as a useful tool of insight into the interpretation of human existence. In short, the problem of honor is a thought-provoking mechanism which extends into various aspects of the complete human being and the world he lives in.
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