

THE IMAGE OF GERMANY IN THE NOVELS OF
GÜNTER GRASS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Günter Grass--German novelist, poet, and playwright--is rapidly becoming recognized as one of the leading European artists and social critics of the twentieth century. His work has been translated from the German into twelve different languages;¹ and many foreign reviewers have received his fiction with praise, some of it extravagant--for example, Richard Kluger's extended metaphor:

If I were assembling an orchestra of authors, I might put Henry James at violin, D. H. Lawrence at trumpet, Tolstoi at French horn, Scott Fitzgerald at saxophone, Saul Bellow at oboe, Norman Mailer at cymbals, J. D. Salinger at flute, and Günter Grass--Günter Grass would be my conductor. . . . For the talent of Günter Grass is so prodigious that his only problem is learning how to ration it.²

Fred Grunfeld calls Grass's first novel, The Tin Drum, "a work of art and power, and thus a liberating event for the new German literature."³ A reviewer for the Virginia Quarterly Review believes the novel to be "quite possibly the masterwork in the novel form to come from a European author

¹M. Koloff, "Günter Grass," Atlantic Monthly, CCXV (June, 1965), 95.

²Richard Kluger, "Tumultuous Indictment of Man," Harper's Magazine, CCXXX (June, 1965), 110.

³Fred Grunfeld, "Drums Along the Vistula," The Reporter, XXVIII (March 14, 1963), 57.

since World War II. . . . The concern of the novel with the questions of basic morality and its high degree of literateness and artistry make it essential reading."⁴ Most comments about his two later novels have also been notably favorable. Joseph Bauke comments in Saturday Review that Cat and Mouse, Grass's second novel, "is an experience to be remembered."⁵ Stephen Spender for The New York Times Book Review says Grass's third novel, Dog Years, "contains scenes more powerful than those by any other contemporary novelist."⁶

In Germany, however, Grass's novels have caused much controversy. Grass himself is an East German refugee living in West Berlin; his books are, therefore, officially banned in East Germany, where an active police state still exists. Nevertheless, the East Germans who have been able to procure his works read them avidly and praise his art.⁷ Even in West Germany many attempts have been made to ban Grass's publications on both moral and political grounds, efforts largely ascribable to extreme right wing groups with Nazi affinities.⁸ But Grass is the darling of the younger

⁴"Notes on Current Books," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXIX (Spring, 1963), xlix.

⁵Joseph Bauke, "To Be Different in Danzig," Saturday Review, XXXVI (August 10, 1963), 28.

⁶Stephen Spender, "Scarecrows and Swastikas," The New York Times Book Review, May 23, 1965, p. 1.

⁷"Writers in Berlin," Atlantic Monthly, CCXII (December, 1963), 111.

⁸James M. Ethridge and Barbara Kopala, editors, Contemporary Authors (Detroit, 1965), XIII-XIV, 180.

generation of West Germans.⁹ More than 150,000 copies of The Tin Drum were sold within the first three years of its publication in Germany,¹⁰ and his television skits and plays have appeared many times.

In a brief career as a writer, Grass, though only thirty-nine years old, has demonstrated an ability to produce steadily in a variety of modes. He has written numerous pieces for radio, television, and theatre. Die bösen Köche (1962), Onkel, Onkel (1965), and Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand (1966), (translated by Ralph Manheim as The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising) have been particularly successful dramas. In 1966, Grass published a book of selected poems ostensibly satirizing such contemplative, intellectual attitudes as those of Goethe and Schiller. Grass, however, betrayed by implication his own intellectuality concerning the novel when he quipped to an interviewer: "The only things for which I never make plans are my poems. I crack them off for refreshment. Like making fish soup."¹¹ Grass's three novels, Die Blechtrommel (1959), Katz und Maus (1961), and Hundejahre (1963), have earned him his wide reputation. The English rendition of these works by Ralph Manheim is considered adequate if not praiseworthy, and the American publication of the three novels in paperbacked

⁹"Grass Takes to the Stump," America, CXIII (July 24, 1965), 89.

¹⁰"Guilt of the Lambs," Time, LXXXI (January 4, 1963), 69.

¹¹"Günter Grass: A Big New Talent," Show, III, 1 (January, 1963), 85.

reprints has greatly extended Grass's audience and admirers, with resulting essays and notices in literary and semi-literary periodicals. However, no close analysis of his entire output--except for one small book in German, Günter Grass by Kurt Lothar Tank--has yet appeared.

What, in general, are the reasons for the wide critical acclaim being given this young author? First of all there is his literary artistry. Under this heading comes his inventiveness.¹² His work is rich in vividly related episodes characterized by the strange, the fanciful, and the unexpected. His many fully realized characters possess these same qualities. Grass once confessed that he first intended to write Gruselmärchen (gruesome fairy tales);¹³ obviously he has strung these odd bits together into novels, thus creating fiction which is essentially picaresque in mode. His half-weird, half-normal characters move, part of the time, against a real naturalistically presented background; but at any moment, without warning, this background may become surrealistic and these characters become strangely disembodied entities more like mannikins or jerky puppets with witch-like or fairy-like qualities. One feels that here is modern avant-garde painting transposed from oil to printer's

¹²George Steiner, one of America's highly respected critics, has acclaimed Grass as "the strongest, most inventive writer to have emerged in Germany since 1945." George Steiner, "The Nerve of Günter Grass," Commentary, XXXVII (May, 1964), 78.

¹³Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 96.

ink. As a matter of fact, Grass was and still is a painter¹⁴ and sculptor¹⁵ of some note, as well as a writer. Grass's essential charm and originality lie in his perception of twentieth-century German life as a ghastly perverted fairy tale.

In his novels, Grass uses both private symbols and conventional symbols.¹⁶ When he creates private symbols, he keeps in mind the indefinite, suggestive images of twentieth-century Symbolism;¹⁷ but when he utilizes conventional symbols, he parodies and mocks them. Grass once professed dislike for conventional symbols--"Nazis with their swastikas, Communists with their hammers and sickles, the Roman Catholics with their arsenals full of images, the capitalists with their trademarks."¹⁸ On another occasion one finds him arguing that "symbols are nonsense--when I write about potatoes I mean potatoes."¹⁹ But according to D. E. Sherman, "Grass is . . . a great kidder;"²⁰ for the German author's stories bristle with symbolism, suggestive, perceptive, and treacherous as quicksand; and without symbols, his novels are mere

¹⁴Anthony West, "Making Scarecrows," The New Yorker, XLI (November 20, 1965), 236.

¹⁵Ethridge and Kopala, Contemporary Authors, p. 179.

¹⁶M. H. Abrams, "The Nature of Symbolism," Literary Symbolism (Belmont, Calif., 1967), p. 18.

¹⁷Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York, 1959), p. 13.

¹⁸David E. Sherman, "Green Years for Grass," Life, LVIII (June 4, 1965), 56.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

skeletons. Grass's symbols, like Kafka's, invite multiple interpretation; but are less abstract and dreamlike, and more directly connected with corresponding ideas. What could better represent German obsession with militarism during the twentieth century than a child's toy war-drum (The Tin Drum)? What could better stand for the police state than a trained police dog (Dog Years)? What could better objectify built-in, half-innocent cruelty than a cat playing with a mouse (Cat and Mouse)?

Grass's three novels abound in sensory detail usually repulsive and disgusting. With a kind of sadistic gusto, he leads the reader from episode to episode by way of eels feeding on carrion, sea gulls devouring vomit, little boys chewing on bird droppings, or girls sucking the "good" from cold, solidified grease. There are smells, such as those of ammonia and stale butter; and colors, particularly bloody reds, deathly blacks, deathlier whites, and stagnant greens. No doubt Grass's experience as a painter and a sculptor accounts for his preoccupation with striking visual and sensory effects.

Scholars have generally recognized the German author's facility with his language. He wrote poetry before he wrote prose; and his novels manifest a poetic word-play, a wide range of irony, parody, satire. He is capable of passages of great lyric beauty as well as those of harsh ugliness; in fact, his ugliness itself has an odd lyric quality. Steiner,

reviewing Dog Years, notes that

The specific source of energy lies in the language. . . . Long stretches of Baltic dialect alternate with parodies of Hitlerite jargon. Grass piles words into solemn gibberish or splinters them into unsuspected innuendo and obscenity. He has a compulsive taste for word-lists, for catalogues of rare or technical terms. . . . The language itself, with its powers of hysteria and secrecy, with its private parts and official countenance, becomes the main presence, the living core of this black fairy tale.

It is as if Grass had taken the German dictionary by the throat and was trying to throttle the falsehood and cant out of the old words, trying to cleanse them with laughter and impropriety so as to make them new.²¹

One of the most attractive features of Grass for some readers is the mental alertness he requires if one is to detect the innuendoes in his tone, his diction, which operates to express the author's despair, uncertainty, humor, and vitality all at once.

It is, however, as a social critic that Grass seems to be making his strongest and perhaps his most valuable impression. He addresses himself, consciously and directly, to the psychology of defeat which has gripped Germany twice in the first half of the twentieth century. He attacks the vital problems, the traumatic neuroses which have beset his people in his lifetime: political failure, religious apathy, moral laxity, and above all a nagging sense of guilt. This area of Grass's work will be the major concern of the study at hand.

A consideration of Grass from this angle involves necessarily a brief look at German culture and history during the

²¹Steiner, "Nerve of Günter Grass," pp. 79,80.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Germans of the nineteenth century were greatly affected by nationalism, which principally grew out of the opposition to Napoleon and le Grand Armée of the French Revolution. Napoleon's victories hurt German pride, and turned the German people against democratic political ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity being spread by Napoleon's armies, and Napoleon's dictatorial ideals. They proudly believed that their own form of government compared quite well with anything the West (France and England) had to offer--a mistake which cost them dearly, since it caused them to neglect their political life.

The conclusion of World War I added to German nationalism rather than diminishing it. According to Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, the Germans had to take full responsibility for starting the war,²² and a democratic government was forced upon them. Thus it was that Hitler received so little opposition in 1933 when he reintroduced the strong, one-man central government and rendered democratic processes powerless.²³ To many Germans, he was merely ridding the country of Western ideas of detested enemies. When Hitler's army invaded Poland and Austria, his people believed he was only reclaiming the territories which had been wrongfully taken from them after World War I.

²²C. Brinton, J. B. Christopher and R. L. Wolff, Modern Civilization: A History of the Last Five Centuries (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), p. 617.

²³Ibid., p. 684.

With nationalism, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, came the glorification of culture--art, music, literature, philosophy--and the denigration of politics. Culture was, in effect, the German answer to the democracy of the Western nations. The more the French and English took up democratic ideals, the more the Germans turned to the poetry of Goethe and Schiller, the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, the music of Beethoven--and the more they shunned politics altogether. That is not to say the Germans' fault lay in their cultural pursuits; rather, their mistake was that they enclosed themselves in a cultural shell, as it were; and in doing so, they completely divorced culture from governmental matters, leaving sordid politics to their western neighbors.

The influence of nationalism coincided with the influence of the aristocratic-intellectual notion that persons of superior rank and faculties should not stoop to deal with matters of bureaucratic governmental procedure. The Germans began to pride themselves on being unpolitical. When Otto von Bismarck, with his motto that "blood and iron must decide the great issues of the day,"²⁴ led the German people through three consecutive successful wars (1864, 1866, 1870),²⁵ the intellectuals and even the would-be liberals decided to "render unto Caesar what

²⁴Fritz Stern, "The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German," History, No. 13 (September, 1960), p. 115.

²⁵Brinton, Christopher and Wolff, Modern Civilization, pp. 474, 477.

was Caesar's and unto Culture what was Culture's."²⁶ The idea that culture and politics were separate spheres provided a much too convenient escape for those who could have opposed the wars; they retreated into their halls of culture, where they had neither to accept nor to reject Bismarck's militaristic dictatorship, which was after all not particularly unpleasant to them. In the same way, they avoided making a decision about the policies of Ludendorff and Hindenburg in 1914, and then again they withdrew from Nazism in 1933.

Hatred of the Jews extends far back into the history of Germany and Europe. Martin Luther acted as one of the early fomentors of racism when he wrote:

"[The Jews] let us work in the sweat of our noses, to earn money and property for them, while they sit behind the oven, lazy, let off gas, bake pears, eat, drink, live softly and well from our wealth. . . . they are therefore our lords, we their servants with our own wealth, sweat, and work."²⁷

Luther thought that the Jews wanted to rule the world; he called them "arch-criminals, killers of Christ and all Christendom . . . a 'plague, pestilence, and pure misfortune.'"²⁸

In 1895, Alwardt, a member of the Reichstag, attacked the Jews in almost the same language that Luther used:

²⁶Stern, "The Political Consequences," p. 117.

²⁷Martin Luther, Von den Juden, p. e2, cited in Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (London, 1961), p. 9.

²⁸Kisch, Jews in Medieval Germany, pp. 149, 266, 203, cited in Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (London, 1961), p. 10.

"The Jews accomplished what no outer enemy has accomplished: they have driven the people from Frankfurt into the suburbs. And that's the way it is wherever Jews congregate in large numbers. Gentlemen, the Jews are indeed beasts of prey."²⁹

He also called Jews criminals and compared them to cholera germs.³⁰

Protestants were not alone in their racist's stand against the Jews. The law-makers of the Catholic Church put numerous anti-Jewish measures into their canon. In fact, from this body of church law, the Nazis took many of their own anti-Semitic measures. The following excerpts exemplify the correspondency between the two systems:

Prohibition of intermarriage and of sexual intercourse between Christians and Jews. [Catholic]
Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. [Nazi]

Jews and Christians not permitted to eat together. [Catholic]
Jews barred from dining cars. [Nazi]

Jews not permitted to show themselves in the streets during Passion Week. [Catholic]
Decree authorizing local authorities to bar Jews from the streets on certain days (i.e., Nazi holidays). [Nazi]

Jews obliged to pay taxes for support of the Church to the same extent as Christians. [Catholic]
The "Sozialausgleichsabgabe", which provided that Jews pay a special income tax in lieu of donations for Party purposes imposed on Nazis. [Nazi]

²⁹Reichstag Stenographische Berichte, 53. Sitzung, March 6, 1895, pp. 1296 ff., cited in Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (London, 1961), p. 10.

³⁰Ibid., p. 11.

Jews not permitted to obtain academic degrees.
 [Catholic]
 Law against Overcrowding of German Schools and
 Universities. [Nazi]³¹

By the end of the war, nearly six million Jews had been brutally and systematically exterminated; but most Germans have been understandably slow to assume responsibility for these mass murders. They disclaim knowledge of the crime or indicate enforced participation or at least enforced silence.

Defeat, disillusionment, disorder, and despair--these states evolved from history for the generation into which Grass was born on October 16, 1927, in Danzig.³² He was only six years old when the Reichstag headquarters burned and Hitler came to power.³³ Like other German boys, he joined the Hitler Youth, for membership was mandatory. He was inducted into an anti-aircraft battery when he was sixteen. He received a serious wound during the defense of Berlin, after which he spent a year in a hospital and another year in an American prison camp.³⁴

During the war, Grass knew the smell of decaying Jewish bodies. After the war, he experienced the despair that comes

³¹Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (London, 1961), pp. 5, 6.

³²Kurt Lothar Tank, Günter Grass (Berlin, 1966), p. 94.

³³C. L. Sulzberger, The American Heritage History of World War II (1966), p. 32.

³⁴Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 95.

with utter defeat. He wanted answers: How could the German nation, a nation with a highly refined culture, come to such ruin? How could the peace-loving Germans with their beer and Gemütlichkeit be associated in any way with the outright murder of 6,000,000 innocent people? The usual answer, which attributed all atrocities to a few Nazi "wolves," did not satisfy him. He was much more inclined to "blame the lambs, because the lambs not only went on grazing happily, but positively adored the wolves until it was their turn to be devoured."³⁵

When the handful of notorious Nazis were brought to trial at Nuremberg, it became easier and easier for the Germans to consider themselves innocent "lambs"; and after the economic miracle "transformed West Germany from a defeated enemy into a valued ally," they dropped the question of guilt completely.³⁶ Grass, repulsed by the moral smugness of the newly rich nation, developed an "anti-lamb complex."³⁷ He chose to express in his writing the true guilt of his people and to force them to face their past.

Today, Grass lives with his Swedish wife, an ex-ballet dancer, and their four children in West Berlin.³⁸ He avidly

³⁵"The Drum of Neutrality," The Times Literary Supplement (London), October 5, 1962, p. 776.

³⁶"Guilt of the Lambs," p. 69.

³⁷"The Drum of Neutrality," p. 776.

³⁸Sherman, "Green Years for Grass," p. 51.

engages in West-German politics, perhaps trying to offset the years of the "unpolitical German." He unhesitatingly lends his influence to a small newspaper, the Spandauer Volksblatt, which he considers one of the few politically unbiased papers in Germany. Besides selling the Volksblatt on the streets, he writes for it at the usual eight and one half cents per line.³⁹ Grass ardently supports the Social Democratic Party by writing campaign speeches for his friend Willy Brandt and, at times, making political talks himself.⁴⁰

The chapters that follow will attempt to scrutinize Grass's message to his people and show his concern for the spiritual health of his country. Each of his three novels bears directly upon political, religious, and moral issues vital to Germany and to the world. The examination is based upon the assumption that Grass as an author is more concerned that Germans see themselves as they are and as they have been than he is concerned with the image of Germany which his novels present to the world. It is, paradoxically, this very special and sincere concern which gives his work universal appeal.

³⁹Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 94.

⁴⁰"Grass Takes to the Stump," p. 89.

CHAPTER II

THE TIN DRUM

Wenn wir auch nur noch vom Brüten reden,
bleibt doch zu befürchten, dass jemand,
ausserhalb unserer Schale, Hunger verspürt,
uns in die Pfanne haut und mit Salz bestreut.--
Was machen wir dann, ihr Brüder im Ei?¹

The Tin Drum has as an underlying theme the corruption in the German society during the twentieth century. In an even larger sense the novel concerns itself with "the tragedy and the final impossibility of renouncing one's share in human destiny."² Grass's real thesis is that a sense of responsibility for one's fellow man is one's only salvation.³ He condemns the unpolitical German who would rather retreat to his own private world than confront the social problems of the times. Theodore Solotaroff sees the theme of Grass's first novel, with Oskar its childish dwarfed here, as "the infantilism of German culture, in particular, and of the human animal, in general."⁴

¹Günter Grass, "Im Ei," Selected Poems, in German with translations by M. Hamburger and C. Middleton (New York, 1966), p. 44. "Even if we only talk of hatching/there remains the fear that someone/outside our shell will feel hungry/and crack us into the frying pan with a pinch of salt./What shall we do then, my brethren inside the egg?" p. 45.

²Frederick M. Ivey, "The Tin Drum or Retreat to the Word," Wichita State University Bulletin, XLII (February, 1966), 13.

³Ibid., p. 15.

⁴Theodore Solotaroff, "The Brownshirt Decade," New Republic, CLII (June 19, 1965), 21.

Another theme closely related to and perhaps induced by political underdevelopment and moral infantilism concerns the difficulty of developing into or even remaining a worthy individual in a police state. Grass sets his fictional characters in a Hitler-made "wasteland," where religion is meaningless, where politics is the tool of the greedy and opportunistic, and where sexual relationships are unsatisfactory if not perverted. The Nazis supplanted faith, hope, and love with futility, death, and sex. Overpowered by the general corruption, Grass's characters become thieves, informants, executioners, homosexuals, nymphomaniacs, and, like Oskar, "moral dwarfs." The inner voice heard by the Wasteland's inhabitants is not the wholesome, righteous voice of Kantian Idealism⁵ but the ugly, nasty voice of a devil.⁶

The ironic discrepancy between appearance and reality substructures all the other themes. For example, the Germans, almost neurotically preoccupied with cleanliness, have washed their hands of war guilt, telling themselves that the Hitlerites should bear all the responsibility. The German people have used "carloads of carbolic acid, lime, and Lysol"⁷ and have worn their brooms down to the very handles. And after this feverish cleansing, they appear healthy enough.

⁵Will Durant, "Immanuel Kant and German Idealism," The Story of Philosophy (New York, 1965), p. 276.

⁶Günter Grass, The Tin Drum, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1962), pp. 136-7.

⁷Ibid., p. 413.

This apparent spiritual health has, since 1950, developed into a dangerous, self-righteous smugness: those who simply followed the Nazi leaders are called "innocent lambs," and those who mildly disapproved of Hitler are hailed saviors. Beneath the prosperous surface, however, lies the grimy, unpurged guilt of widespread complicity, which cannot be wished away.

In The Tin Drum, Grass intends to shock his countrymen out of their moral complacency⁸ and ward off the soothing amnesia that could lead to another national disaster. He puts ugliness into the novel as an antidote for the poison of guilt that he sees beneath the surface of German life; he proposes to show his people the sordid reality of their self-deception and to force them into an emotional realization of their responsibility for the Nazi misadventure. According to K. L. Tank, Grass succeeds well in this purpose: "Mit das beste und wertvollste an dem Buch von Grass scheint mir dieses zu sein: dass es eine starke und langanhaltende Unruhe erweckt."⁹

Another sub-theme of the novel is the development, or the lack of development, of the artist. Grass has sketched in Oskar "a fully rounded portrait of the artist as a young dwarf";¹⁰ for Oskar's great art is his ability to drum; his

⁸"The Drum of Neutrality," p. 776.

⁹Tank, Günter Grass, p. 10. "One of the best and worthiest aspects in regard to the book by Grass appears to me to be: that it awakes a strong and continuous unrest." (Own translation)

¹⁰Grunfeld, "Drums Along the Vistula," p. 57.

failure lies in his preference for performing like a child from such obscure places as the darkness underneath his grandmother's four skirts. As an artist, Oskar vituperates his corrupt environment while he attempts to escape it; his retreat indicates his unwillingness to cope with the problems of society.

Other sub-themes appear in the five hundred eighty-nine pages of The Tin Drum. One concerns the schizophrenia in the German national personality. Modern Germany has been shaped by what Grass sees as two opposing influences: the East, which Grass and many European writers (notably Thomas Mann), understand as being primitive, irrational, and "Dionysian"; the West, which he thinks of as rational, philosophical, self-restrained, and "Apollonian." The Germans do not know with which culture to identify. The problem of the schizophrenic personality intensifies in those persons who live along the borders. The Danzigers, with whom Grass is concerned, find nationality puzzling and meaningless. After the Kingdom of Poland had ruled Danzig in the eighteenth century, the region became a part of the Germanic Kingdom of Prussia in the nineteenth century. In World War I the city became German again; after the war, it went back to the Poles. When World War II began, East Prussia and many parts of Poland were reabsorbed by Germany; then when Germany lost that war, the Danzigers became Poles again. Stalin, incidentally, even tried to make Russians out of these much-

bandied-about people. The dividing of Germany into West and East with the resultant post-war blockade was a traumatic experience for many Germans everywhere: the barbed wire barrier running through the middle of Berlin became a visible symbol of what had become an inner dichotomy. Grass is perhaps more concerned with this disunification than appears on the surface, and his feelings on this matter permeate his fiction.

Grass employs numerous visual leitmotifs or repeated images.¹¹ One of his favorites is the phallic symbol in a land of sterility. He also makes suggestive use of colors. In fact, Grass's use of the color white might be compared to Melville's treatment of that color in the chapter of Moby Dick entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale." Both writers show that although often representative of purity and goodness, white is in reality an absence of color that also suggests death and terror.

There has been much speculation as to where Grass got the idea for his most unusual character, the dwarf Oskar Matzerath, who is the unheroic protagonist and also the most complex symbol in The Tin Drum. Horace Gregory says, ". . . Oskar really is shaped by von Grimmelshausen's Der Simplicissimus (1669), the German classic that came after the devastations

¹¹"The Drum of Neutrality," p. 776.

of the Thirty Years' War."¹² Von Grimmelshausen's narrator is a small seventeenth-century boy who describes the horrors of war with an uncomprehending childish candor; and Grass's Oskar, in his apparent childishness, depicts the terrors of a twentieth-century war. Other critics have felt that Grass received his idea for Oskar from Thomas Mann's Felix Krull.¹³ Felix and Oskar are "confidence" men; both write their confessions in confinement--Felix in jail, Oskar locked in a mental hospital; both are influenced by the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy; both symbolize artists; and both have tremendous cunning and unusual will power. Oskar may have been suggested by Pär Lagerkvist's dwarf, who represents evil and selfishness. Grass himself says that he saw

"einen dreijährigen, mit einer Blechtrommel behängten Knaben. Händchen sollte er geben und guten Tag sagen. Er aber übersah die Erwachsenen, wollte den Tag keinen guten Tag nennen und hielt nur auf seine Trommel. Der Blickwinkel dieses Knaben wurde später zu Oskars Blickwinkel."¹⁴

¹²Horace Gregory, "The Ancient Follies Are Still in the Ascendency," Commonweal, LXXVIII (April 26, 1963), 147.

¹³Richard Plant, "Rhythms of Pandemonium," Saturday Review, XLVI (March 9, 1963), 35.

¹⁴Tank, Günter Grass, p. 57. "a three-year-old boy wearing a tin drum. He was supposed to shake hands and say good day. But he took no notice of the adults, did not want to call the day a good day and just held to his drum. The angle of vision of this boy later became Oskar's angle of vision." (Own translation)

Oskar as a prototype represents Germans at their worst, a "wildly distorted mirror which, held up to a wildly deformed reality, gives back a recognizable likeness."¹⁵ The best critics in Germany, such as Kurt L. Tank, acknowledge the portrait: "Oskar Matzerath gehört zu uns Deutschen wie Adolph Hitler zu uns und unserer Geschichte gehört."¹⁶ Oskar also represents "those many individuals whose accumulation of fear, self-protective indifference [and] private greed" allowed the Nazis to be; thus the dwarf incarnates the guilt of the "technically innocent."¹⁷ The reviewer of The Times Literary Supplement (London) explains further:

. . . Nazism, above all, was a form of political immaturity; but this would be to see Oskar as a representation of society at large, though he has no more use for Nazism than for any other political cause, and betrays both his Nazi and non-Nazi "fathers."¹⁸

Theodore Solotaroff advances the interesting theory that Oskar is the one person in The Tin Drum who does not appear as a case of thwarted development; and the critic approves Oskar's idea that "the best place for a man, particularly these days, is hidden under the skirts of a woman . . ."¹⁹ This interpretation of Oskar seems untenable when one

¹⁵"Guilt of the Lambs," p. 69.

¹⁶Tank, Günter Grass, p. 9. "Oskar Matzerath belongs to us Germans as Adolph Hitler belongs to us and our history." (Own translation)

¹⁷"Guilt of the Lambs," p. 69.

¹⁸"The Drum of Neutrality," p. 776.

¹⁹Solotaroff, "The Brownshirt Decade," p. 21.

considers Grass's markedly positive attitude towards politics: Grass would say that a fully-developed member of society should not be in a private domain of repose or hiding--under a grandmother's skirts. On the contrary such a retreat to inactivity has caused the "dwarfing and reduction to impotence of the individual in modern society,"²⁰ and Oskar is the dwarf.

Oskar sees many physical likenesses between himself and the statue of the Christ child on the altar of his church. Despite his resemblance to that blue-eyed Aryan baby Christ child, Oskar comes not as a savior to his people--at least not as a successful savior. Only after much hesitation and deliberation does he decide to help even a little with the evils of his German community. He contents himself with being a potential savior. His power to save lies in his great art, his drumming on a child's tin drum. He can, if he chooses, drum sweetly, enticing the warlike adult drummers to follow his own less militaristic cadence. Like a latter-day piper, he can drum all the Nazi "rats" out of Germany. If he desires, he can clang and bang unendurably in the ears of the slumbering intellectual Germans, for: ". . . the amount of noise which anyone can bear undisturbed stands in inverse proportion to his mental

²⁰Anthony West, "Ordeal by Fire," The New Yorker, XXXIX (April 27, 1963), 169.

capacity. . . . Noise is a torture to all intellectual people."²¹ Oskar can thus arouse his people, the innocent ones, "the lambs," to set about destroying Nazism; with his drum, he can "drown the siren-song of smooth oblivion."²² But Oskar's protests are veiled or non-existent. He uses his drumming and his piercing voice to get rich. He implicates himself in a murder in order to imprison himself in a mental hospital. He is the epitome of indifference to the degradation of the spirit--both his own and others. Though Oskar is born old at heart, he wills to live his entire life as a child, irresponsible for his fellow man, without duty to society. After receiving a toy war-drum on his third birthday, he miraculously determines to stop growing, at least according to his own story. It is an act of will, and that is what is important to Grass's theme. Oskar chooses to be an "eternal three-year-old," to escape responsibilities, both moral and physical, of the adult world. He contrives an injurious fall down the cellar steps because, as he says, "I felt obliged to provide a plausible ground for my failure to grow . . ."²³ After

²¹Will Durant, "Schopenhauer," The Story of Philosophy (New York, 1965), p. 304.

²²Steiner, "The Nerve of Günter Grass," p. 77.

²³Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 61.

Oskar's fall, appearance and reality diverge even more: his old, old heart is prompted by the devil; outwardly he appears an innocent child.

After his "accident," Oskar develops his miraculous ability to drum. He also finds that he possesses a singularly powerful voice. He can tune his screams to a high decibel and, with his voice, can wreak havoc on all glass within its range. Later, during the war, with his drum and his voice he first opposes and then aids the Nazis. In each instance, however, he is really indifferent to the Nazi cause and to the fate of Germany. He seems little more than a selfish anarchist, who causes the death of his Nazi legal father and likewise the death of his presumptive non-Nazi illegal father.²⁴ Oskar dislikes fascism because during the rule of Hitler, tin drums are scarce. In a rare moment of truth, Oskar states his argument, "Does that [disliking fascism] make me . . . a Resistance Fighter? I must answer in the negative . . ." ²⁵ Like the Germans who disapproved of Hitler (however mildly), Oskar, Grass says, wants to think of himself as a savior of his people. When Oskar plays Jesus, as he sometimes does, he runs no risk of being crucified: he can rely on his childlike appearance or on any number of secret hideouts; and he

²⁴"The Drum of Neutrality," p. 776.

²⁵Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 124.

knows that if Jesus had been a hunchback, as is Oskar, "they would never have nailed him to the cross."²⁶

To the relief of the Germans and to the delight of Oskar, society has locked him away in a mental institution. Oskar's friends (the Germans) visit their unfortunate darling in the hospital; but, they cannot behold Oskar's grotesque deformity with pleasure because he reminds them of their past guilt. They have removed the dwarf from society and placed him in a hospital in order to soothe their consciences. He becomes a symbol of a national guilty conscience. When Oskar drums too loudly, his keeper Bruno politely asks him to play more softly so that he will not disturb everyone.²⁷

Oskar, too, is happy shut off from society. In fact, he assists in getting himself admitted to the institution by not denying the charge that he has murdered a woman. The jury at his trial concludes from his silence that he is guilty. He prefers admiring his art in the solitude of his hospital room rather than addressing it to his nation. Again, appearance and reality differ. Acting insane, Oskar is excused from all responsibility and duty.

At twenty-nine, Oskar decides to jot down his confessions. He is Catholic--at least he has been baptized; therefore, he feels that some sort of confession is in order. Oskar, however, takes his admission of guilt only half seriously: at

²⁶Ibid., p. 584.

²⁷Ibid., p. 196.

the beginning of any particular sentence he might weigh his own faults; but before placing his period he might just as easily mention the price of drums at the toy store. Thus, Oskar only appears to confess. Robert Buckeye believes that the dwarf's lack of seriousness can be explained as the customary attitude that heroes of the modern "psychic" novel take when they attempt to construct games and rules out of the absurd situations of life.²⁸ A better explanation seems to be that Oskar fears taking his past life too seriously, fears confronting his own guilt of parricide. It is because of this fear that he narrates his confessions in both the first- and third-person point-of-view. The eternal three-year-old feels he should grow up and say: It is I who am guilty; but at the same time, his fearful childish voice lies: It is He! It is He! Thus he tries to hide from himself. Oskar's dilemma can best be explained in Freudian terms: one can repress, or will to forget, those things which offend the ego.²⁹ Oskar wants to forget and tries to forget, but Grass insists by implication that he must remember if he is to be purged and redeemed.

There are other ways of explaining Oskar's vacillation between first and third person. F. M. Ivey suggests that

²⁸Robert Buckeye, "The Anatomy of the Psychic Novel," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, IX, ii, 38.

²⁹Calvin S. Hall, A Primer of Freudian Psychology (New York, 1962), p. 86.

the confusion in point of view is a product of the "interweaving" and "identification of the two worlds of the objective and the subjective."³⁰ One reviewer says that Oskar "narrates, as a proper schizophrenic should, in both the first and third person, as twins . . ."³¹ According to Grass himself, the confused use of both points of view "is meant to unsettle, to throw into doubt, to prevent empathy,"³² a statement reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's theory that the audience should remain objective in order to better comprehend the work of art. In view of the extensive symbolism in the novel, however, Grass's explanation seems a bit too simple and ready-made.

Reclined in his hospital bed, Oskar begins to reminisce over his family's photograph album. He uses a compass to mark a vantage point from which he can most meaningfully observe the segments of the past. By scrutinizing the pictures, he hopes to bring out the underlying ugly reality which he knows has existed. From the absurd appearances which the photographs offer, Oskar proceeds to his more significant world of dreams--rather, nightmares. His drum analyzes a picture of Agnes, Matzerath, and Bronski (Agnes's first cousin) arranged in a triangular formation. The drum realizes that the formation is a love triangle. Oskar recalls

³⁰Ivey, "The Tin Drum," p. 9.

³¹Hugh McGovern, America, CVIII (March 9, 1963), 344.

³²Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 97.

that when his presumptive legal father would attend the Nazi rallies on Saturday afternoon, Bronski and Agnes would carry on their incestuous love affair. Oskar gives the disgusting details of the relationship as he has observed them during the weekly coat games of the three lovers. From the casual observer's point of view, there is nothing unusual about the game. Oskar, however, hiding beneath the table, takes the reader beneath the surface appearances and, with the candor of a child, watches Bronski search with a stocking foot for Agnes's lap.

On a particular Good Friday, the three lovers and Oskar stroll along the beach. The setting is ideal:

. . . the Baltic lapped at the beach. . . . A recent rainfall had imprinted its regular pattern on the sand . . . Matzerath picked up smooth little disks of brick . . . and skipped them eagerly . . . over the greenish water. Less skillful, Jan Bronski looked for amber between his attempts to skip stones . . . The sun shone cautiously. The day was cool, still and clear . . . Matzerath and Jan started off into the open sea, hopping from stone to stone . . . gambling like schoolboys. 33

The pleasant scene is quietly but violently canceled when a longshoreman lugs a black horse's head up to the shore. From the eyes, ears, and mouth Matzerath and the longshoreman extract numerous slimy eels, which have been feeding on the decomposing flesh of the horse. Oskar's mother turns pale and regurgitates at the sight of the

33Grass, The Tin Drum, pp. 147-8.

exposed nastiness, which symbolizes, at least to Oskar, her own sordid love affair. Sea gulls swoop down and clean the refuse from the beach, restore order, and return the situation to its quiet beauty of sea, wind, and sky. Matzerath, seeing nothing disgusting, bags the eels, allowing them to squirm to death in salt, and takes them home to prepare a batch of delicious eel soup. He seems unaware of the nauseating nature of the episode just as he is naively unaware of his wife's extramarital affair.

The sight of her own symbolic ugliness is too much for Oskar's mother. She begins to crave the very thing that has originally repulsed her. She devours eel and fish soups of all kinds; the more disgusting the concoction, the better she seems to like it. She dies a few months later of "jaundice and fish poisoning" complicated by her being three months pregnant with Jan Bronski's child. M. Roloff explains her madness: ". . . her mania for eating fish, triggered by her initial revulsion to the eels in the horse head, is as simple and as astringent a portrayal of nymphomania as I know."³⁴

In another episode, Grass again demonstrates the traumatic effect of secret guilt. Hidden in a shed used for beating rugs on cleaning day, a group of local urchins force-feed Oskar some of their own specially invented broth,

³⁴Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 76.

composed chiefly of pulverized brick, urine, two frogs and old man Heilandt's spit. Immediately preceding the recipe for brick soup, Grass takes pains to show the outward cleanliness of the neighborhood people:

On Tuesdays and Fridays it became evident how large the block really was. Oskar looked and listened from the attic as more than a hundred carpets, runners, and bedside rugs were rubbed with sauerkraut, brushed, beaten, and bullied into showing the patterns that had been woven into them. With a great display of bare arms a hundred housewives, their hair tied up in kerchiefs, emerged from the houses carrying mounds of carpets, threw the victims over the rack supplied for that very purpose, seized their plaited carpet beaters, and filled the air with thunder.³⁵

Another example of hidden disease in German society concerns Albrecht Greff, a respectable member of the Langfuhr community of Danzig. He works hard at his vegetable store; and in his spare time, he sponsors a group of boy scouts. He is an ascetic and a vegetarian. Oskar notes that Greff keeps his body in superb physical condition; he takes such pains to harden himself that one begins to wonder whether the greengrocer is not some sort of masochist. The dwarf then indicates that Greff has homosexual relations with the youths in his scout troop. Thus Greff tries to compensate for his abnormal disorder by stressing his physical health.

Oskar's affections appear to the reader in the way they appear to Oskar. He frequently betrays his appalling lack of feeling for anyone or anything but himself. From time

³⁵Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 97.

to time, he claims to have possessed affection for certain persons. He usually expresses his self-conceived love, however, when it is too late. At his mother's death, Oskar appears truly touched. But why? Because his mother has always bought him his tin drums and in his distress, he wonders how he is going to get any new instruments. Oskar mourns the death of the Jew Sigismund Markus for the same reason: when the Nazis raid Markus's toy store, they destroy Oskar's source of new drums. Oskar in his confession expresses deep sorrow over the death of Bebra, another dwarf and circus performer who has befriended and helped Oskar; but soon the true reason for Oskar's distress presents itself: ". . . I incurred a severe financial loss . . . I called off two whole tours . . . on insufficient notice and was sued for breach of contract."³⁶

From his barred hospital bed, Oskar and his drum invoke the year 1899. Fertile Kashubian potato fields lie side by side with the newly emerging sterile Wasteland of factories. His grandmother-to-be, Anna Bronski, sits at her fire in the potato field surrounded by telegraph poles and smokestacks, which, through Grass's ingenuity become phallic symbols against a landscape where machine production has replaced the production of men. The dwarf's dreamy description confuses the mysterious world of a fairy tale

³⁶Ibid., p. 558.

with the sordid world of reality: in the late evening, Anna Bronski enigmatically stirs a pile of baking potatoes with her (witch) hazel branch; the Black Forest (of Grimm's fairy tale notoriety) lies behind her; in front squat the contrasting Bissau brickworks.

Oskar then explains how Anna conceived his mother, Agnes. The hilariously horrible fact is that his grandmother begets her daughter while harboring an habitual incendiary, Joseph Koljaiczek, from law officers. This episode introduces the reader to a major symbol, the "Good Mother" of the Magna Mater archetype.³⁷ In Grass's first mention of Anna Koljaiczek, née Bronski, he describes the grandmother as a mysterious fairy, and Oskar comes to think of her as a "good fairy" who offers him shelter from the difficult times and especially from the Black Witch--Oskar's variation of the Terrible Mother. Anna symbolizes the womb to which he wants to return. She is a life-giver in a Wasteland of death.

³⁷Erich Neumann, The Great Mother, an Analysis of the Archetype, translated by Ralph Manheim (London, 1955), p. 22. Erich Neumann, a student of Jung, explains in The Great Mother that two opposing symbols constitute the Great Mother: the Good Mother (the giver and guardian of life) and the Terrible Mother (the destroyer of life, "the sight of whom turns men to stone"). The concepts of the Great Mother have been inherent in Man's psychology since primitive times. Man's ideas of fairies, nymphs, witches, and goddesses originated with the Magna Mater concept of his own psychology. Good fairies and benevolent goddesses are Man's symbols of the Good Mother; evil fairies and witches symbolize the opposing concept, the Terrible Mother.

Numerous variations of the sheltering Mother (all closely related to the Grandmother Koljaiczek symbol) appear from time to time throughout the novel. Grass almost exhausts the reader with surrealist description of a sordid world, then introduces a "womb" symbol.

Just before the hour of his birth, Oskar considers whether he should or should not be born. He hesitates too long and loses himself to the outside world³⁸ where, eventually, he finds his grandmother's wide, potato-colored skirts--the same refuge that harbored Joseph Koljaiczek years before. The dwarf describes the skirts from the inside as he saw them when he was very young:

This was the watershed, the union of all streams; here special winds blew, or else there was no wind at all; dry and warm, you could listen to the whishing of the rain . . . beneath my grandmother's skirts it was always summer, even when it was time to light the candles on the Christmas tree or to hunt for Easter eggs. . . . Nowhere could I have been more at peace with the calendar than beneath my grandmother's skirts.³⁹

Much of Oskar's description of his grandmother is couched in terms sometimes associated with ancient fertility rites, and Grass uses this image of the Great Mother to suggest the German longing for peace and normal growth in opposition to the violent, distorted, unnatural expansion fostered by military and political adventures.

Since Oskar visits his grandmother infrequently, he must of necessity procure other ersatz wombs in order to

³⁸Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 49.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 125-6.

protect himself from the harsh world. He gladly harbors himself beneath the card table, "in the shelter of the tablecloth,"⁴⁰ which reminds him of his grandmother's skirts. From his hide-away, he observes the crude, promiscuous affair of his mother and Jan Bronski; yet he himself remains unobserved and safe from the corrupt world. Oskar also frequents the "belly" of the rostrum upon which the Nazi orators deliver speeches. He hides there detached and secure from the horrors of life. Once he takes refuge in the clothes closet of Sister Dorothea, a woman he particularly loves,⁴¹ but this asylum does not satisfy him. He looks longingly toward the coziness of the grave;⁴² Oskar, however, lacks the courage to effect his own death, his final escape. As a patient locked quietly away in the protective womb of the mental hospital, he enjoys his longest vacation from the turmoil of the real world. His hospital bed affords him the peacefulness that his grandmother once offered.

By using the womb image as a leitmotif, Grass changes and builds the reader's emotional attitude toward the symbol. With characteristic blasphemy, he walks shod across the holy grounds of the maternal ideal. What begins as a child's natural desire to be protected and coddled by the mother figure becomes a moral dwarf's refuge from responsibility. When Oskar holds the perverted sexual orgy in

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 69.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 496.

⁴²Ibid., p. 165.

Sister Dorothea's closet, he introduces the corruption of the outside world, which he has so carefully avoided, into his own symbol of the perfect state of being; and his prolonged stay in the mental hospital carries his womb-escape image to the depths of debasement.

The significance of a deeper level of Oskar's journey from "womb" to "womb" manifests itself in Grass's poem "Hochwasser." The "flood," interpreted as the war, has driven the narrator and his family indoors. He begins with

Wir warten den Regen ab,
obgleich wir uns daran gewöhnt haben
hinter der Gardine zu stehen, unsichtbar zu sein.
. . . niemand wagt mehr
die Hand auszustrecken.

He concludes that when the "flood" subsides,

Es wird sehr schwer sein wieder über den Platz zu gehen,
deutlich, mit bleischwerem Schatten.
Wir werden den Vorhang am Anfang vermissen
und oft in den Keller steigen
um den Strich zu betrachten,
den das Wasser uns hinterliess.⁴³

Like the narrator of this poem, Oskar, or the German people, Grass suggests, has withdrawn behind curtains--the curtains of his grandmother's skirts; and only comes out long enough to survey the debris, then returns to his shelter. Unlike

⁴³Günter Grass, "Hochwasser," Selected Poems (New York, 1966), p. 12. "We are waiting for the rain to stop,/although we have got accustomed/to standing behind the curtain, being invisible./ . . . nobody dares now/to stretch a hand out." "It will be difficult to cross the square once more,/distinct, with a shadow heavy as lead./We shall miss the curtain at first,/and go into the cellar often/to consider the mark/which the water bequeathed us." p. 13.

the speaker in the poem, Oskar implies little hope of ever losing the "weakness" for his sanctuary. According to Grass, the "innocent" Germans, in times of crisis, retreat to the skirts of the Magna Mater, when they should, as mature men, confront life, no matter how terrible; for only then can they begin to solve the problems of their society.

The Black Witch as a mental creation of Oskar is diametrically opposed to Grandmother Koljaiczek and the "Great Mother" symbol. Oskar associates all his fears and guilt with the wicked witch, according to Neumann, the symbol of the inherent idea of the Terrible Mother. Oskar often quotes a little rhyme that accompanies a children's game: "Where's the Witch, black as pitch?"⁴⁴

As long as Oskar avoids guilt by claiming the innocence of childhood, the Black Witch does not affect him; but the moment he begins to assume responsibility and, thus, the guilt that is actually his (he considers himself responsible for the deaths of his two fathers, his mother, and his mistress Roswitha), the Witch becomes more menacing. F. M. Ivey believes that the Black Witch does not become operative until Oskar assumes the responsibility of writing his book.⁴⁵ Oskar himself says she begins to frighten him

⁴⁴Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 64.

⁴⁵Ivey, "The Tin Drum," p. 10.

much earlier: "It was . . . [during] my flight, when I wanted to be afraid, that she crawled under my skin."⁴⁶

In his confession to the reader, Oskar conscientiously attempts to list all that the "Terrible Mother" signifies to him. He identifies her with Goethe, whose name "sets me screaming and hiding under the bedclothes." She takes the form of an airline hostess who is instrumental in transporting him back to where he must face trial; or she inhabits the unsympathetic reporters who want to write about Oskar's guilt.⁴⁷ She is the mystifier who dwells in the cathedrals of the Catholic Church"--what would Catholicism be without the Witch who blackens every confessional with her shadow?" It is she whom Herbert Truczinski really attacks when he assaults the wooden statue of Niobe. It is the Black Witch who causes Oskar's mother to crave eels and causes the toy shop of Sigismund Markus, the Jew, to be ransacked by the Nazis. The Black Witch helps brew the brick-meal soup as well as the "aphrodisiac" fizz powder solution, with which Oskar seduces Maria. The Witch furnishes Oskar with the coconut mat on which he lies while trying futilely to seduce Sister Dorothea.⁴⁸ The Witch is to Oskar all death, shame, guilt, sorrow, and evil--everything that he would like to hide in the back of his mind, everything which he, in his

⁴⁶Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 581.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 581, 582, 583.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 588, 589.

childishness, would like to hide from under his grandmother's skirts. The Witch is to Oskar the same kind of encompassing symbol that the whale is for Ahab (and it is interesting to note that Grass admits to having been influenced by Melville⁴⁹).

The few critics who have theorized about Oskar's final oration on the Black Witch have supposed that the novel comes to a pessimistic conclusion. William Barrett says that in the end, Oskar is still unpurged from his guilt.⁵⁰ Horace Gregory also believes that "the ancient follies are still in ascendancy--even to the apparition of the great black witch of medieval lore."⁵¹ Oskar himself declares that the Witch might come back to haunt the German people. He says that Niobe, a possible manifestation of the Black Witch,

was sealed up in the cellar of the museum . . . But you can't lock up disaster in a cellar. It drains into the sewer pipes, spreads to the gas pipes, and gets into every household with the gas [an oblique reference to Hitler's treatment of the Jews]. And no one who sets his soup kettle on the bluish flames suspects that disaster is bringing his supper to a boil. ⁵²

At any time, Grass says, Evil, or the Witch, like a dormant infection, can suddenly be reactivated and can spread through modern society as it has done before.

⁴⁹Ethridge and Kopala, Contemporary Authors, p. 180.

⁵⁰William Barrett, "Reader's Choice," Atlantic Monthly, CCXI (May, 1963), 134.

⁵¹Gregory, "The Ancient Follies Are Still in the Ascendancy," p. 148.

⁵²Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 197.

Considering the circumstances of the novel, however, the conclusion, with the soliloquy on the Witch, seems relatively optimistic in comparison with the pessimism of the rest of the novel. Oskar is forced to leave his sanctuary in the mental hospital and to face the Witch-- his guilt and fear. He identifies with evil: he plans to consult the Witch about what he should do upon leaving the hospital.⁵³ Since Grass would say that the German people must face their guilt and realistically identify with the evil of their past in order to do away with their outward, hypocritical "lambishness," and since Oskar represents the German people, the ending cannot be construed as totally pessimistic. At least the dwarf no longer relies on childhood to protect him from his guilt, nor does he turn to insanity to exempt him from his past; rather, he openly shows himself to be evil. If Oskar symbolizes the "dwarfed" Germans of the Nazi era, his leaving the mental hospital suggests that German people will at last look at themselves and their past which they have been hiding.

According to Grass, the Nazis perverted the concepts of Kantian duty (inherent in man, Kant suggests, is a righteous sense of duty⁵⁴) into a mechanical, cruel sense of justice; and justice in Grass's Wasteland is tempered

⁵³Ibid., pp. 587-8.

⁵⁴Durant, "Immanuel Kant and German Idealism," p. 276.

with opportunism. He provides numerous symbolic examples of this theme throughout the book. Joseph Koljaiczek, Oskar's reformed incendiary grandfather, changes his name to Wranka and finds employment on a raft. While traveling on the river, Wranka has occasion to save a man named Dückerhoff from drowning. Nevertheless, when Dückerhoff vaguely remembers Wranka's incendiary past, he does not allow gratitude, friendship, or the fact that the "firebug" has reformed to stop him from giving Koljaiczek's name to the police.

In another episode, an alcoholic trumpet player named Meyn, having sworn off liquor, decides to drink once more on the occasion of a close friend's death. When Meyn arrives home from the funeral, he finds that he has no more gin. In an alcoholic fit he kills his four foul-smelling cats with a fire poker. His neighbor the watchmaker fulfills his "duty" by reporting to "the local party headquarters of a case of cruelty to animals which could only impair the party's reputation."⁵⁵ Meyn is subsequently punished.

Toward the end of the novel, Grass again illustrates the effect of the warped conception of duty. Even though the war has been ended for several years, two Gestapo men still pursue Victor Weluhn, a Pole who in 1939 defended

⁵⁵Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 201.

his country instead of repatriating himself as a German.

The allegory is full of irony:

They produced a paper issued in 1939, an execution order. At last they had him, cried the one green hat; the other agreed: "And damn glad to get it over with. I've given up all my free time, even my vacations."⁵⁶

Even the Gestapo is duped. They see themselves dutifully performing an unpleasant but necessary chore, when, in reality, they prepare to commit a useless murder.

The final instance of anti-Kantian duty concerns Oskar's own arrest and trial, an episode which has been prophesied by the Dückert-Hoff-Koljaiczek conflict. Oskar, having found a severed ring finger, pickles it, pays homage to it, and has a plaster cast made of it. Vittlar, a young man with whom the dwarf has recently become friends, informs the police of Oskar's strange actions. Vittlar admits that informing the police "brought me quite a lot of attention in the papers."⁵⁷

Perhaps, however, the mechanical ideas of duty that exist in Grass's fictional society can best be summarized in an unforgettable statement made by Joseph Matzerath:

"Duty is duty and schnaps is schnaps."⁵⁸

A treatment of the symbolism in The Tin Drum would be incomplete without a special consideration of the drum itself and drumming. Like almost everything else in the novel, Oskar's drum has a dual nature, combining the East and the

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 572. ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 576.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 116.

West, Dionysus and Apollo, primitiveness and culture, or as Oskar would have it, Rasputin and Goethe. Oskar's art conjures up the primitive rhythms of savages and, according to the dwarf, deep-seated natural pulsations of the creatures of nature. "I have heard," says Oskar, "rabbits, foxes and dormice drumming."⁵⁹ Oskar himself learns to drum from a simple moth that has "no other instrument than two ordinary sixty-watt bulbs."⁶⁰

On the other hand, the tin drum calls forth the rich, civilized culture of German life. In fact, it was Goethe who said that ". . . architecture . . . is frozen music; and symmetry is rhythm standing still."⁶¹ The dwarf taps out modern jazz, foxtrots, and an occasional waltz by Strauss. From his hospital bed, Oskar requests that Maria tag and file his drums away in a very systematic, reasonable, unprimitive manner; thus, the drum symbol becomes associated with Apollonian rationality.

The tin drum is paradoxical in other ways. Oskar drums, as he says, "to eradicate a very definite segment of my past."⁶² The pounding hides his own guilt; conversely, however, the drum awakens his sense of guilt with each calculated attempt to hide the past: ". . . as often as I struck it, it struck back accusingly."⁶³ The drum is thus a

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 48. ⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Durant, "Schopenhauer," p. 338. (Italics are mine.)

⁶²Grass, The Tin Drum, p. 258. ⁶³Ibid.

manifestation of his will-to-forget and, at the same time, is his "serrated red and white conscience."⁶⁴

The tin drum is the plaything of an innocent child, but it foreshadows the drums of war. Oskar's drums are thus painted in appropriate colors: white, indicating purity and innocence, and red, signifying the militaristic.

As with Grass's other major symbols, the meanings of the drum are too various and complex to permit of any single and simple interpretation. Perhaps the idea of meaning does not apply to the tin drum in every instance. At times, a preferable word is feeling, because the drum often elicits undefinable emotions in the reader. Oskar and the tin drum (as symbols the two are really inextricable) exist as the major, controlling image in the novel: Germany of the mid-twentieth century is like a child playing a toy drum. Guy Davenport sums it up thus: "Given a tin drum, excused from adult responsibility, deluded: such is Mr. Grass's caricature of Germany."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 259.

⁶⁵Guy Davenport, "Novels with Masks," National Review, XIV (April 9, 1963), 287.

CHAPTER III

CAT AND MOUSE

Ein leerer Autobus
stürzt durch die ausgesternte Nacht.
Vielleicht singt sein Chauffeur
und ist glücklich dabei.¹

Günter Grass's second novel happily compensates for the sprawling reams of his first novel by being very short; and though the length and episodic richness of his first and third novels make them difficult to summarize, the line of action in Cat and Mouse is simple and clear enough to warrant recapitulation. This novella is essentially an extended characterization of an idealistic German boy of extraordinary endowments and accomplishments--not a Nietzsche superman but a real human being in a very real society. The story, told by a mature narrator, opens with a grotesque scene in which he remembers himself as an adolescent lying on a soccer field and enduring the agonies of a toothache. He watches a black cat pounce upon Joachim Mahlke's constantly bobbing Adam's apple as if it were a mouse. After this encounter, Mahlke determines to be a hero and a clown. He distinguishes himself in the eyes of his classmates by diving down into a

¹Günter Grass, "Glück," Selected Poems, in German with translations by M. Hamburger and C. Middleton (New York, 1966), p. 46. "An empty bus/hurtles through the starry night./Perhaps the driver is singing/and is happy because he sings." p. 47.

sunken mine sweeper, or the "barge" as the boys call it, and emerging with worthless salvage, which he and the others childishly value.

Mahlke starts wearing around his neck a screwdriver to cover his embarrassingly large larynx. He also wears a medallion of the Virgin Mary. He dives into the hull of the mine sweeper and brings up many trophies, including a can of frogs' legs, which he opens and devours while his companions, with nauseated stomachs, admire him. He considers himself particularly fortunate the day he reports to his constant audience that he has discovered a secret room within the caverns of the barge. He refuses to divulge the location of the room, which he thinks would make a "good place to hide if things get hot."²

Nearly all of Mahlke's accomplishments, from his diving to his subsequent military feats, can be related to three motivating factors: the mouse, religion, and school.³ His experience with the cat terrifies him; the Virgin Mary comforts him; and his school teachers inspire him to perform heroic deeds.

During the war, former students of the Conradium High School return and romantically tell of their experiences in the military service. Mahlke covets their medals and wants

²Günter Grass, Cat and Mouse, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1964), p. 52.

³Ibid., p. 34.

to become a hero himself. Later, he enlists and is assigned to a tank division on the Russian front, where he scores many victories and wins the coveted Knight's Cross. He returns to his former high school, where he hopes to tell of his exploits and make the young students proud of him. The principal of the Conradium, however, recalling the time when Mahlke stole a Knight's Cross belonging to a particular submarine commander, does not allow Mahlke to deliver his speech, even though the boy, with a stricken conscience, had, on his own free will, returned the sailor's medal.

Mahlke succumbs to disillusionment and distress. He deserts the army; and with the aid of Pilenz, the narrator, he takes a boat to the same mine sweeper that they frequented in past summers. Mahlke, in his confusion, pathetically addresses his unused speech to the youths whom he imagines he sees on the wrecked ship: "'Hello, boys and girls, you haven't changed a bit!'"⁴ Using two cans of ham as weights, he then slips eternally into the thawing water.

Stephen Spender suggests two places where Grass got his idea for his short novel. First, Spender mentions Alain-Fournier's Le Grand Meaulnes (translated in the American edition as The Wanderer). This story is told by one boy about the mysterious adventure of another boy, whose poetic and unconventional qualities give him the strange name which

⁴Ibid., p. 122.

is the title of the novel. Meaulnes incorporates in his personality "the least known yet most profoundly chivalrous qualities of young Frenchmen who were sacrificed in World War I."⁵ Grass's narrator is a boy who, having fallen completely under the spell of his adolescent hero and friend, tells his friend's story, giving him the title "the Great Mahlke."⁶ The surface similarity between the two novels suggests that Cat and Mouse may be a deliberate attempt by Grass to put the theme of Alain-Fournier's book into a German setting and into profoundly anti-romantic context. Instead of the soft French landscape, Grass depicts Germany in an almost ugly realistic way; instead of romantic love, Grass stresses obscene sexuality; instead of a completely beautiful hero, the protagonist of Cat and Mouse has some rather freakish physical traits, along with his great strength of character.⁷

Spender's second idea is that Grass, being a sculptor, took Mahlke's physical appearance from a Rouault clown that resembles Christ.⁸ Pilenz's description of a caricature of Mahlke sketched on the blackboard at school could either be Mahlke or a clown by Rouault:

⁵Stephen Spender, "Beneath the Adam's Apple, the Tin Drum Beats On," The New York Times Book Review, August 11, 1963, p. 5.

⁶Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 70.

⁷Spender, "Beneath the Adam's Apple," p. 5.

⁸Ibid.

The mouth was puckered and peevish. No trace of any visible incisors that might have been mistaken for tusks. The eyes, piercing points under sorrowfully uplifted eyebrows. The neck sinuous, half in profile, with a monstrous Adam's apple. And behind the head and sorrowful features a halo: a perfect likeness of Mahlke the Redeemer.⁹

There might also be a likeness between Cat and Mouse and Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. Both Holden Caulfield and Mahlke are idealistic adolescents facing a corrupt adult world; but Mahlke, instead of retiring to a psychiatrist's couch with his disillusionment, commits suicide. He is more bleak and inarticulate, though no less mentally disturbed, than Holden.

In Cat and Mouse, as in The Tin Drum, Grass describes Germany as a Danziger would see it. Unlike The Tin Drum, Grass's second novel has as its principal subject the individual, rather than society as a whole. Oskar and Pilenz, the narrators of the stories, resemble each other in that both lack spiritual qualities, and both symbolize society; but they are dissimilar in that Oskar is consumed entirely by the idea of himself, whereas Pilenz is interested primarily in his hero, Mahlke, and speaks of himself only incidentally. The major theme of Cat and Mouse thus becomes focused on the individual more than upon society as a whole, and concerns most the conflict between the individual and society.¹⁰ In the final analysis, Cat and Mouse is the

⁹Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 35.

¹⁰Robert Gutwillig, "House of Mirrors," New York Herald Tribune Books, August 11, 1963, p. 5.

story of those who perished in the war (whereas The Tin Drum tells of the dwarfed survivors);¹¹ in Grass's second novel, the individualist is seen as he disappears soundlessly on the battlefield or beneath the flood of Nazi repression.¹²

Another important theme in Cat and Mouse is betrayal. School teachers and elders have mistaught idealistic young men that war is noble and romantic. Modern religion has offered its symbols for religiously honest but naïve young patriots to fight for and has glorified the war with high-sounding mottos such as "Für Gott und Vaterland." Even friends betray each other, for the effects of the larger betrayals in mass media communication have begun to infect individual members of the mass. And as in Grass's other novel, the theme of Man's responsibility to Man is prominent in Cat and Mouse. Only by becoming humanitarian can a person begin to raise moral standards, stop the betrayals of society, and end all personal and selfish motivation.

Several critics have speculated about the meaning of Grass's cat and mouse symbols; and they usually agree that "the mouse is Nahlke's individuality, forever being pounced upon by the cat, which is society demanding that he conform."¹³

¹¹Guy Davenport, "The Multiple Man," National Review, XV (October 8, 1963), 313.

¹²William Barrett, "Reader's Choice," Atlantic Monthly, CCXII (September, 1963), 122.

¹³Hugh McGovern, America, CIX (September 14, 1963), 264.

Stephen Spender wonders whether the cat might be the state.¹⁴ While these interpretations are applicable, they do not go far enough to describe Grass's rather complex symbols. In folklore, the black cat has often been thought of as a disguise for witches; hence, the black cat of the novella is a logical counterpart of the Black Witch symbol of The Tin Drum. Indeed, cats excite Mahlke with approximately the same terror that witches evoke in Oskar. The cat represents to Mahlke a naturalistic kind of evil fate, quietly but viciously stalking its helpless prey. Because of the superstitious fear which begins to grow in Mahlke that day on the soccer field, he always wears some sort of charm around his neck--a Madonna, a screwdriver, a can opener, a scarf, a phonograph crank, a Knight's Cross--to "distract the eternal cat."¹⁵ Mahlke's Adam's apple, the mouse, might symbolize the vulnerability of the idealistic, romantic, harmless, peaceful individual. While the romanticist immerses himself in his dreams of heroism and chivalry, the ignoble savage cat of reality may, at any moment, spring at his throat. Will Durant expresses this idea when he describes Schopenhauer's feeling about life: "And if death bides its time it is but playing with us as a cat with a helpless mouse."¹⁶ The cat, the evil in life, finally drives the idealistic Mahlke to his death.

¹⁴Spender, "Beneath the Adam's Apple," p. 5.

¹⁵Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 21.

¹⁶Durant, "Schopenhauer," p. 328.

Pilenz's statement: "A cat sauntered diagonally across the field and no one threw anything at it,"¹⁷ goes far to explain the cat's relationship to society. One observes that the attack of the cat could have been repelled if anyone had taken the trouble to throw something at it. Grass thus pictures society as not wanting to become involved with the cat, which might here be interpreted as Nazism, or any viciousness which man suffers. What is worse, Mahlke's companions enjoy seeing Mahlke in pain. And what is still worse, not only does no one throw anything at the cat, but the narrator directs the animal towards his supposed friend's throat--to entertain the other boys. The cat symbol therefore suggests the sadism and treachery often found in political maneuvers such as those performed by the Nazis.

Mahlke himself is probably the most important symbol in Cat and Mouse; in fact, Grass has been criticized for creating in Mahlke too much an idea and too little a human being.¹⁸ Individuality, as Grass suggested in an interview, is Mahlke's outstanding characteristic.¹⁹ To understand Mahlke's individuality, one must understand the process by which the protagonist obtains his uniqueness. As a child, Mahlke possesses no striking characteristics which distinguish him from the rest of society. At first he does not

¹⁷Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 7.

¹⁸McGovern, America, CIX, 164.

¹⁹Tank, Günter Grass, p. 62.

associate with other children because he is weak and sickly. No one--even the narrator himself--seems to remember the child Mahlke;²⁰ but when the pale protagonist reaches fourteen years of age, he matures rapidly; he develops an oversized larynx, a secondary sexual trait which manifests his superior masculinity; he learns to swim well; and at sea, he loses his pallor, turning a healthy brown. His classmates, beginning to notice him, admire his virility but, at the same time, ridicule his strange Adam's apple, the manifestation of his masculinity; thus, on the one hand, Mahlke quietly prides himself in his manliness (part of his individuality) and, on the other hand, he is embarrassed by his large Adam's apple (the symbol of his individuality).

He first tries to hide his uniqueness. He receives short respites from the embarrassment of confronting society while he scouts the bottom of the bay for salvage. He refuses a position as squad leader in the Young Folks, choosing instead to take his physical deformity and blend with the surroundings in the big, sprawling organization called the Hitler Youth.²¹ After his maturation, however, he can never for long escape the ridicule of society. He thus sees himself fitted for the role of a clown.²² Being laughed at should not be embarrassing, he reasons, if one is a clown:

²⁰Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 26.

²¹Ibid., p. 25.

²²Ibid., p. 19.

clowns are supposed to be laughed at. But when a pupil named Karel sketches a misshapen caricature of Mahlke on the blackboard, Mahlke becomes infuriated. His innate dignity and pride overturn his theory about clowns, and he attacks the offender with fist and screwdriver.

Nevertheless, Mahlke remains to his schoolmates a clown, or scapegoat.²³ Their attitude suggests that people, rather than considering their own weaknesses, try to find weaknesses in others, particularly others who may excel in some way. The students find fault with Mahlke. He is strong but funny looking. They can laugh at Mahlke's deformity and, in their own minds, reduce his strength to something mawkish. By thus undermining Mahlke's inner strength, they attempt to add new strength to themselves.

To compensate for his clownishness, Mahlke performs many admirable feats: he becomes an expert skin-diver, a skilled gymnast, and later, a superior soldier; however, "he remains an outcast--sometimes inspiring awe, but never inspiring acceptance."²⁴ The more Mahlke excels, the more he contrasts with the pettiness of his schoolmates and the more they tend to use him as a scapegoat. The one thing Mahlke refuses to do to gain acceptance in society is give

²³In A Dictionary of Symbols, translated by Jack Sage (New York, 1962), p. 106, the author J. E. Cirlot notes that the fool and the clown have often played the part of the scapegoat in folklore.

²⁴"An Outcast Hero," Time, LXXXII (August 23, 1963), 75.

up his uniqueness and become petty like others. He chooses rather "to hide, to be alone with his precious individuality."²⁵

Grass extends his symbolic protagonist from the figure of the clown-scapegoat to the related figure of a betrayed Christ (Pilenz calls him the Redeemer) and, in doing so, appropriately represents the crucifixion of the idealistic individual by the educational system, by religion, and by morally inert society. As has been pointed out, Mahlke's teachers misdirect his honest, righteous, and impressionable idealism to glorify war and honor military heroes; he listens to the speeches of soldiers and wants to become an heroic soldier himself; his patriotic desire leads to his moral downfall. Mahlke's religion figures in his destruction by further idealizing and romanticizing war. He wears his Madonna into war and returns wearing the Knight's Cross, an ironic symbol which confuses religion (cross), chivalry (Knight), and militarism (the medal is awarded to soldiers who have killed a specified number of the enemy). Indeed, it is the Virgin Mary, as Mahlke sees her, who helps him win the medal by guiding his aim toward the enemy tanks.²⁶ Society is guilty of Mahlke's death since it has refused to accept and make proper use of his good qualities.

Like Christ, Mahlke wanders essentially alone through a corrupt society--though he is surrounded by disciples, his

²⁵McGovern, America, CIX, 264.

²⁶Grass, Cat and Mouse, p. 121.

constant audience--as he performs his astounding deeds. The multitude of his peers, who sometimes call him the Redeemer, marvel at his courage when he refuses to lead his squad of Young Folk, when, by removing a contraceptive from the door-knob to his classroom, he foils a crude practical joke which some mischievous pupils had planned for their teacher, and when he devours an undelectable can of frogs' legs. Showing only admiration, his companions trail after him; yet feeling both reverence and hatred for Mahlke, they conspire to jeer and mock his individuality. Even Pilenz, who considers himself Mahlke's only friend, feels both admiration and hate for his hero. On one occasion, the narrator admits: ". . . my pride in Joachim Mahlke was as sweet as chocolate creams. I'd have liked to give you [Mahlke] my wrist watch."²⁷ But at another time, he says bitterly: ". . . we thought him so repulsive we couldn't look at him."²⁸ Pilenz's ambivalent attitude toward his protagonist leads to the Christ-figure's final betrayal.

Toward the end of the novel, Pilenz emerges more clearly as the symbol of a mean, selfish society fulfilling a role much like that of Judas in the Bible. The narrator unconsciously demonstrates his selfishness more than once in his story. He selfishly laments the fact that he could not "get anywhere" with Tulla Pokriefke or with Hotten Sonntag's sister;

²⁷Ibid., p. 42.

²⁸Ibid., p. 57.

thus, he shows that he considers women to be nothing more than objects for gratifying his own sexual pleasure.²⁹ Mahlke, on the other hand, indicates that he considers women to be human beings: "It was wonderful last night with the Pokriefke kid. . . . She's not the way she puts on. . . . it's because of her that I don't want to go back."³⁰ After Mahlke's disillusionment with idealism, heroism, and patriotism, he decides to desert from the army and hide from the military police. He needs someone to help him, to protect him from his symbolic cat, but what does Pilenz think about hiding his friend? "That . . . struck me as unhealthy," he says.³¹ Therefore Pilenz, as a symbol of a fickle and unstable set of values in German society, refuses to stand by his friend when the situation becomes difficult.

Toward the end of the story, Pilenz becomes more treacherous. Afraid to open his own cellar as a hiding place, he suggests that the deserter conceal himself on the old barge. Knowing that Mahlke is contemplating suicide, Pilenz rents a boat and rows him out to the old barge where he can die without anyone's discovering it. Pilenz again demonstrates his uncertainty and deception, his strange hate-love attitude toward Mahlke. When they arrive at the old wreck, Pilenz reminds Mahlke to take the necessary can opener into the hide-out far beneath the water; but at the last moment, the narrator hides the opener beneath his foot.³² The fact that

²⁹Ibid., pp. 93-4.

³⁰Ibid., p. 115.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 124.

Mahlke probably could have opened the cans without the aid of the utensil or that he knew his time had come to die and, thus, would have died whether Pilenz had been unfaithful or not is of no importance here. The point is that Pilenz, the Judas-like society, wants Mahlke to die.

Immediately after the protagonist, "weighed down with two cans of pork,"³³ disappears beneath the water, Pilenz, like Judas, is overcome by guilt. He begins to hammer on the deck of the barge with the can opener, trying to get Mahlke's attention; but his concern comes too late. Back on shore with a pair of binoculars, Pilenz watches for "the Redeemer." He asks for a sign: "Where is the fish that will bring [Mahlke's Knight's Cross] to me?"³⁴ But unlike Christ's disciples, to whom money was delivered in the mouth of a fish, Pilenz receives no sign. And his master fails to surface: he is not resurrected.

Like Grass's other novels, Cat and Mouse is of the confessional type. As Grass figuratively depicts his nation, Pilenz is a prototype of the German people. He is aware of his guilt but does not really understand it. Grass seems to be saying here that the German people are afraid to admit their betrayal of humanity in twentieth-century Europe, their lack of concern for human individuality and idealism. Seldom does the narrator admit his symbolic guilt of setting the cat on Mahlke's throat. Only once, when Mahlke is not allowed

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

to give his speech, does the narrator confess that he has acted meanly: "Nasty little triumph! Once again I enjoyed my moment of superiority."³⁵

The ending of the novel, however, is not completely pessimistic. At least the narrator's guilt does bother him; and although he is spiritually underdeveloped, he does not revert to the amorality of childhood, as happens in The Tin Drum. The hope remains that in his reflection on his life with Mahlke, he will more fully realize his own participation in his friend's death and will better learn to fulfill his responsibility to his fellow man. This realization, Grass seems to say, is necessary if one is to live the right kind of life.

³⁵Ibid., p. 107.

CHAPTER IV

DOG YEARS

Damals schiefen wir in einer Trompeta.
Es war sehr still dort,
wir träumten von keinem Signal,
lagen, wie zum Beweis,
mit offenem Mund in der Schlucht,--
damals, ehe wir ausgestossen.¹

Dog Years, which deals with anti-Semitic racism, is paradoxically Grass's best and worst novel. In Book One, the accounts of the boyish escapades of Eduard Amsel and Walter Matern surpass in beauty, humor, and charm everything else Grass has written; but in the second and third parts, the story occasionally becomes dull, repetitious, and repulsive. Reactions to Grass's third novel have therefore been controversial.

The action in Dog Years, like that in The Tin Drum, is difficult to summarize succinctly because of the extended episodic nature of the plot. At first glance, however, a few salient features stand out. Grass said that he wanted the events to be seen through the eyes of three generations;²

¹Günter Grass, "Eblechmusik," Selected Poems, in German with translations by M. Hamburger and C. Middleton (New York, 1966), p. 30. "Those days we slept in a trumpet./It was very quiet in there,/we never dreamed it would sound,/lay, as if to prove it,/open-mouthed in the gorge--/those days, before we were blown out." p. 31.

²Michael Stone, "The Author," Saturday Review, XLVIII (May 29, 1965), 26.

hence he supplies three different first-person narrators: in Book One a half-Jewish man Eduard Amsel (alias Haseloff, Goldmough, Brauxel); in Book Two Harry Liebenau, a detached and theoretically disinterested observer; in Book Three Walter Matern, Amsel's closest companion during childhood. As a second rather odd and unexpected feature, the title of the novel is misleading, for the major symbol is not the dog but the interdependency of Jew and Gentile. The title is appropriate, however, since it suggests the years of the twentieth century when men lived and acted like animals. The phrase "dog years" also implies that the relatively few years which the novel encompasses cannot be calculated on a conventional calendar. Living like a dog, one must measure time as a dog measures it: "twenty-two dog years," estimates Grass, "equals one-hundred-fifty-four human years."³ The amount of suffering during and immediately after the war is too great to be contained between the two dates on a calendar.

The theme of universal brotherhood substructures Dog Years. One infers from the novel that a kinship binds men together in spite of themselves--in spite of the fact that there lies in every man, specifically in the German, a sleeping, rabid hound, which, when awakened, can viciously destroy human qualities and decent human relationships. There nevertheless always remains a universal, fraternal

³Günter Grass, Dog Years, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1966), p. 371.

spirit which will eventually manifest itself and reconcile man with his fellow man. Because of this enduring spirit, one will become conscious of his responsibility to others and for others. He will learn that he can neither commit crime nor can he innocently stand by without protest while crime is being perpetrated, and he will ultimately understand that if he unleashes the hound, the hound will destroy him. Many historians have suggested that Nazism derived from Judaism the dogma of a "chosen race";⁴ if this is true, then the interdependency of man is a dreadfully ironic lesson one can learn from Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Earl Kovit gets at the underlying truth of Grass's theme of catholic kinship:

[Grass] is the engineer of the death factories, the straffer of the crowded refugee roads, the pitiless destroyer, the untrammelled insatiable appetite. He is also, of course, the victim--the incinerated ash, the twisted loin, the terrified bullied spirit. . . . [In Grass's novel] men are more than mere victims of their own powers of destructiveness; they are also victims--fruitful fortunate victims--of their own creativity. If man is the torturer and the sufferant, he is also the creator. If he is guilty for the mounds of white bones that bulldozers scrape into the earth, he is also responsible for beauty, for goodness . . .⁵

There are countless other themes in Dog Years, some more important than others. The author again attacks religious apathy and ineffectualness by implying that the priests who

⁴Steiner, "The Nerve of Günter Grass," p. 77.

⁵Earl Kovit, "The Holy Ghost and the Dog," The American Scholar, XXXIV (Autumn, 1965), 677-678.

listen to persons confessing guilt do not care in the least about the spiritual well-being of those individuals. Grass also suggests that confession in itself can no longer absolve one from guilt. Passive confession cannot save, and there is no physical or bodily punishment that can purge the soul of a crime like bureaucratically administered genocide. Man's only hope is to search honestly his own conscience, and, having seen his guilt, to accept his responsibility for the welfare of those around him.

In Dog Years, Grass more rigorously than ever condemns his people's willingness to forget their own participation in and their own responsibility for crimes committed against humanity in time of war. Grass finds his countrymen returning from the war to normal life, understandably wanting to make new starts, willing to forget the nightmarish past. The author perceives with bitterness that others who, like Oskar, actually had no part in the war come out of hiding smug and self-righteous. Some of those who so efficiently produced military materials become wealthy in peacetime by manufacturing related products, thus keeping the factories ready for quick reconversion.

Grass makes a major matter from what should perhaps have remained a sub-theme when he attacks modern philosophy and philosophers, particularly Martin Heidegger, a cant-banding adherent of Hitler and Nazism, who became quite

popular in Germany during and after the war.⁶ Grass's contempt for Heidegger has a personal note, which weakens his case against philosophers in general.

The major theme, the universal brotherhood of man, is developed through the two boys, Eddi Amsel and his friend Walter Matern. Considered together, they are a microcosm of mankind or at least of Germany. Amsel is a Jew; Matern is a Gentile. Amsel is corpulent and rather weak; Matern is strong and muscular. Amsel inclines toward the arts and the pursuits of the mind; he sings, draws and creates scarecrows. Matern favors athletics and occupies himself with his physical appetites. Amsel is the master; Matern is his servant. Amsel holds nothing sacred; Matern gullibly espouses a number of doctrines: he becomes a Communist, then a Nazi, then (after surrendering to the Americans) a radical anti-Nazi. Both German and Jew need each other. This theory is set forth allegorically when the two boys play faustball. Amsel is the "born play maker," the middleman, the arranger, the brains; whereas the "unstoppable" Matern scores the actual points.⁷ They are a complementary pair in every respect and, thus together seem to suggest the wholeness or completeness of mankind in general. In a private ritual, the two friends become "blood-brothers," and the knife with which they effect

⁶Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 94.

⁷D. J. Enwright, "Casting Out Demons," New York Review of Books, IV (June 3, 1965), 9.

their kinship becomes a symbol of their fraternity. Matern, however, demonstrates even in his boyhood that he, at times, fails to value this relationship. While listlessly playing alone on the dike of the Vistula River, he looks about him for a rock to throw. Seeing none, he carelessly skips the emblematic pocketknife across the filthy water.

When Matern's righteous spirit controls his actions, he is Amsel's bodyguard and protects the fat, vulnerable "sheeny" from the practical jokes and rough treatment of the hooligans--but Matern's better spirit does not always inspire him. His lack of enthusiasm about his brotherly pact with the Jewish boy seems to waken a savage, animalistic spirit in him; thus, on a particular evening, Matern and eight of his Nazi-inspired cronies surround Amsel on Erbsberg, a small mountain, the name of which suggests inheritance; they knock out all thirty-two of Amsel's teeth, and pack him inside a snowman. Between blows, Amsel recognizes Matern and asks rhetorically, "Is it you?" then, in the secret language of their blood-brotherhood, "Si ti uoy?"⁸ as if to ask, "Et tu, Brute?"

How is Amsel, a symbol of the victimized, partially responsible for the crime committed against him? Amsel has always wanted to have his teeth knocked out so that he could replace them with gold teeth. It is almost as if he has been

⁸Grass, Dog Years, p. 220.

hoping for and counting on the attack. He has already obtained a forged passport, and as soon as his teeth have been battered out, he makes arrangements to leave the area.⁹

Grass further symbolizes the close and complicated relationship of Jew and Gentile in Germany. Amsel's father had owned Perkun and Senta, the grandparents of Prinz, Hitler's favorite German shepherd dog. When Harras was whelped by Senta, Amsel's father gave the puppy to a German friend, who later presented Hitler with the gift of Harras's pup Prinz. No comment is made upon whether Hitler knew of this or whether it made any difference to him. The ironic implications are that he treasured unknowingly something which came to him from a Jew, and that the Jews contributed to their own destruction by giving the symbolic vicious dog to the Nazis.

Grass emphasizes again and again man's animalistic nature. Matern's genealogy and that of his dog are often mentioned. The lineage of both dog and master can be traced back to eastern ancestors: Matern stems from a notorious Slavic robber,¹⁰ and his dog Prinz is the direct descendant of a Lithuanian she-wolf.¹¹ By juxtaposing these two genealogies, Grass draws the reader's attention to the similarities between beast and man. Tulla, the repulsive little

⁹Enwright, "Casting Out Demons," p. 9.

¹⁰Grass, Dog Years, p. 59. ¹¹Ibid., p. 44.

girl who appears in Cat and Mouse, re-emerges in Dog Years. In Grass's third novel, she is extremely animalistic. She brings out the animal nature of the men she becomes involved with. When her parents take her with them to the patriotic meetings held in beer halls, Tulla, almost by a simple act of will, can cause a riot. On one occasion, Tulla practically becomes an animal herself. She lives in the same kennel with her black German shepherd dog and shares with him his cold, greasy horsemeat. The evil, animalistic Tulla is to the little girl Jenny as the beefy, unpredictable Matern is to the friendly Amsel. Tulla and Matern are victimizers; Jenny and Amsel, victims.

Matern allows his vicious animality to gain ascendancy over his basic humanity; but he, like many other characters in Grass's novels, fails to realize that he himself has committed a crime. After that evening when he and eight other ruffians pulverize Eddi Amsel's face, Matern loses track of his blood-brother. The war comes and finally ends. The former athlete, because of a leg injury received in battle, limps back and forth across his nation in a monomaniacal effort to avenge the crime perpetrated against his blood-brother, Amsel. Matern remembers that nine youths attacked the Jewish boy; but he can recall the names of only eight. His own name he forgets.¹²

¹²Ibid., p. 511.

Having avenged the crime against his Jewish friend, Matern seeks vengeance for some personal grievances. His remembrance of those culprits who he feels have betrayed him in one way or another is revived as he reads the handwriting on the wall--specifically, the graffito scrawled and scratched upon the walls of public restrooms. There, among the pornography, he finds the names of persons against whom he has grudges; and with Hitler's erstwhile dog Prinz, now called Pluto, he sets out to judge and then to punish the offenders. His most frequent course of action is to seduce and impregnate the culprit's wife or daughter. To punish an unmarried person, Matern, on one occasion, burns his victim's stamp collection;¹³ another time, he squeezes the life out of a canary; once, like a dog in a chicken coop, he even strangles a man's chickens.¹⁴ Matern, however, has many characteristics in common with those whom he punishes. Like his victims, Matern has completely forgotten his complicity in the crimes perpetrated during the Nazi era; yet his childhood habit of grinding his teeth has become steadily worse, as though he were grinding his fangs down to keen points.¹⁵ At last Matern's search slows perceptibly; his

¹³Ibid., p. 391.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 390, 391.

¹⁵Neal Ascherson, "Danzig to Düsseldorf," New Statesman, LXX (November 26, 1965), 844. It has been noted that in Germany "teeth grinding (Zähneknirschend) is an excuse-cliché for what is done against one's finer judgment."

zeal for vengeance subsides. The recipients of his wrath ply him with beer and surround him with warm-hearted fellowship. Matern finds that he also, in the words of one of his victims, wants to "forget all that crap."¹⁶

He immediately decides to return to his old faustball team, but he plays a poor game and damages his reputation as a great athlete. The symbolic element here is significant: since he has driven the Jew, the play-maker, the middleman, out of his life, Matern, representing only one side of man, cannot score his accustomed number of points; there is no one to maneuver the ball into scoring range. He needs his other half.

Completely disillusioned, caring little for his own life, and at times wishing for death, Matern ties Pluto, the Nazi dog, to a nearby Protestant church¹⁷ and boards the train for Eastern Germany. At a stopover in Berlin, however, a strange man, leading Pluto, meets him. Matern does not recognize his blood-brother, now going by the name Goldmouth; the Jew's appearance has been changed by time and by thirty-two new gold teeth. But even when Goldmouth explains his identity and shows him their old pocketknife, which he has dredged out of the river, Matern still refuses to recognize him and wills not to remember the fraternal significance of the knife--

¹⁶Grass, Dog Years, p. 381.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 514.

wills, indeed, not to see his own guilt. Goldmouth, however, is not dismayed. He understands his degree of responsibility for the crime committed against him. He comprehends the fact that he, being an integral member of humanity as a whole, shares in the collective guilt of man. He therefore determines to save Matern, whom life has condemned to disillusionment and distress because of his failure to keep his symbolic dog chained inside. Matern has failed to understand his own responsibility to his fellow man; Goldmouth, the victim, understands.

At last, when Matern recognizes the knife, the representation of his fraternal kinship with Goldmouth, the two recall their early youth together; but Matern still does not emotionally experience his guilt. After their evening of beer, sausage, and story, Matern strolls along the Rhine, looks down at the old knife in his hand, and hurls it with all his might into the river. Crying "Sheeny!" he turns to face Goldmouth.¹⁸ Then, suddenly overcome by grief, he prostrates himself before the forgiving Jew. Goldmouth promises to have the knife retrieved from the Rhine just as he has had it dredged from the Vistula.

Matern's salvation, however, has not been completed. At Goldmouth's behest, Matern and Pluto, ignorant of their destination, accompany the Jew aboard an airplane. The plane

¹⁸Ibid., p. 541.

lands at Hanover, where Goldmouth is greeted by the name of Brauxel. Here, for the first time, the reader understands that Amsel and the fictional author of Book One are the same person. Matern finds himself in the middle of Brauxel's mining complex, which no longer produces minerals. Brauxel has converted the mines into scarecrow factories. To complete the salvation of his friend and brother, Brauxel leads Matern on a tour of the cavernous pits. Terror fills Matern as he descends far into the earth by way of a flimsily constructed elevator. Out of the stale, damp air of the mine shaft come the screams and the horrendous laughter of the scarecrows. In these figures constructed from old Nazi uniforms, Matern can see himself and his own grotesque guilt. The likeness between himself and the scarecrows, "created in man's image,"¹⁹ horrifies Matern and his horror purges his guilt. He finally realizes that the guilt he has been searching for is his own. Brauxel commands that Pluto, the "hell hound," be taken from Matern and chained in the bottom of the pit, thus symbolically removing from him his vicious, animalistic nature. The two men leave the mine. As they rise to the surface, Matern, with his eyes affixed to the single, worn cable holding up the elevator, says a prayer that he might be delivered safely to the solid ground above--he no longer wishes for death. Matern and Brauxel, thus symbolically reborn, leave the gaping womb of the earth.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 41.

In the final paragraph of Dog Years, Matern begins narrating in first person, thus, for the first time showing himself to be the fictional author of Book Three. He closes:

I and he are led to cabins where Matern's and Brauxel's clothes are in keeping. He and I strip off our mine outfits. For me and him bathtubs have been filled. I hear Eddi splashing next door. Now I too step into my bath. The water soaks me clean. Eddi whistles something indeterminate. I try to whistle something similar. But it's difficult. We're both naked. Each of us bathes by himself.²⁰

Each person must bathe himself, or look within himself, to cleanse his life of its old, filthy guilt.

The conclusion of the novel is thus more optimistic than that of Grass's other novels, but it is far from cheerful. The cleansing may have been only temporary, for it is Brauxel himself who says, "No world has come discernibly to an end."²¹ The world of the dog years still exists in everyone. This troubling thought is implemented in the symbolism of the scarecrows, which are, as has been observed,

things made from rags and tatters left over from the past. They are being made by handicraft techniques at the start of the story and turned out in mass production by a huge underground factory at its end. Grass is saying . . . that the Germanic tradition is as lethal as ever, perhaps even more so, since Hitler's regime now forms another of its nightmarish ingredients.²²

It is both frightening and disheartening to Grass that though terrible atrocities have been perpetrated, no one cares. The

²⁰Ibid., p. 569.

²¹Ibid., p. 118.

²²Anthony West, "Making Scarecrows," The New Yorker, XLI (November 20, 1965), 238.

executioners and murderers who ruled Germany during the war still occupy places of importance today.²³ One reviewer clarifies Grass's protest as follows: "Krupp, Flick, Schneider, Hoesch, the captains of industry, are back in business. Priests who blessed the swastika yesterday are preaching forgiveness today. Yesterday's storm troopers are today's promoters of the economic miracle . . ."²⁴ The entrepreneurs, the big-business men, the industrialists, the arms makers, whom Grass acrimoniously satirizes in Dog Years, pose the greatest threat to the moral recuperation of Germany. Grass has observed how quickly they convert factories to the production of tanks and bombs and how easily they ready their plants for peacetime demands. This greed, this amorality, this lack of concern for fellow men disturbs Grass most and calls forth his bitterest and perhaps most effective words.

With almost equal vehemence Grass attacks German philosophers who have abdicated a heritage of fearless integrity. As has been noted, Grass particularly dislikes Martin Heidegger, who accepted Nazism and lent his influence to Hitler. Grass blames Heidegger for the rapid spread of National Socialism in the 1930's.²⁵ In Book Three, Grass makes his

²³The most recent example of this problem, of course, is the election of Kurt Kiesinger, an ex-Nazi, the chancellor of West Germany.

²⁴H. F. Peters, "Creator of Superior Scarecrows," Saturday Review, XLVIII (May 29, 1965), 26.

²⁵Roloff, "Günter Grass," p. 94.

narrator say that philosophers from Kant to Hegel simply have no soul; from Hegel to Nietzsche there is only a vacuum; but in the symbolic pits of hell, Brauxel is constructing scarecrows of Heidegger in his nightcap.²⁶ One of the persons on whom Matern attempts to wreak his vengeance is Heidegger:

what did all that talk of Being and Nothing do, except help people to convince themselves that there wasn't a bad smell, or if there was, then it didn't come from that pile of bones, or if it did, the bones weren't human bones?--but only succeeds in wrenching off the philosopher's gate and throwing it into the philosopher's garden. The philosopher himself is as abstract, as evasive, as his philosophy.²⁷

Grass parodies Heidegger's complex and almost meaningless language when he has Matern, disillusioned, reviewing the philosopher's ideas:

"I exist self-grounded! World never is, but worldeth. Freedom is freedom to the I. I essent. The projecting I as projecting midst. I, localized and encompassed. I world-project! I, source of grounding! I, possibility--soil--identification! I GROUND, GROUNDING IN THE GROUNDLESS!"²⁸

Grass likewise deprecates the apathy of the German clergy who failed to care for the spiritual needs when spirituality was on the decline. He believes that the life has been taken out of modern religion: Christ has been relegated to a cold portrait behind glass; and his ministers on earth would rather deliver vapid, coldly intellectual sermons, than "fling hair-raising parables from the pulpit."²⁹ He has Matern attempt

²⁶Grass, Dog Years, p. 588.

²⁷Enwright, "Casting Out Demons," p. 8.

²⁸Grass, Dog Years, p. 385. ²⁹Ibid., pp. 434, 461.

to punish a priest named Joseph Knopf whose name is inscribed on the walls of a confessional--what Grass calls the "holy men's toilet."³⁰ Many people come to Knopf to tell their guilt; but the priest does not listen to them, although he pretends to hear, for he is completely deaf. Matern is angry at the idea that so many people waste their time in the old priest's confessional. The questing avenger therefore purchases a long knitting needle and takes it with him to the confessional in Knopf's church. When the priest lends his sympathetic but deaf ear, Matern plans to pierce the hardened eardrum with the point of the needle; however, at the last moment, Matern decides that his ten-pfennig knitting needle is no match for the priest's colossal ear, that "ingenious product of a Gothic stonecutter."³¹

Grass postulates that religion, at least as it was practiced after the war, has not effectively coped with the tremendous problems created by war and racism. Rather than providing solutions, religion has, in fact, created new difficulties for the Germans. Using the idea of the religious confession as a precedent, they prefer to "discuss in order not to have to soliloquize";³² they confess quickly and forget, in order to avoid seriously meditating their own

³⁰Ibid., p. 411.

³¹Ibid., p. 413.

³²Ibid., p. 498.

individual guilt. Grass says that people do not act, love, or die--they discuss.³³

In reviewing Dog Years, one critic comments that "never before has a dunghill been reported with such a consummate pageantry or the violence of racism smacked dead with so savage a hand."³⁴ No doubt the novel becomes progressively uglier after the conclusion of Book One; but the hideous story, which Grass himself pretends to dismiss as "'simply a report of the situation in postwar Germany up to 1957,'"³⁵ does have a purpose. Grass has drained off from the recent German past a measure of toxic militarism and racism; and using his novel as the hypodermic needle, he injects the serum, now an antitoxin, back into the veins of the German present.

³³Ibid., p. 482.

³⁴Paul West, "The Grotesque Purgation," Nation, CCI (August, 1965), 84.

³⁵Stone, "The Author," p. 27.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The three novels of Günter Grass, universal though they may be in their wider implications, follow a pattern of displaying various types of Germans and facets of the German psychologic condition in a definitely nationalistic context. The Tin Drum is an exhaustive account of those who actually took no part in the excesses of war and its concomitants, who refrained, for one reason or another, from effectively directing their influence against the evil that characterized much of Nazism, and who considered themselves completely innocent of the worst military holocaust the world has ever known. In Cat and Mouse, attention is directed to a more idealistic and noble kind of German, whose very goodness renders him an easy victim for a petty, selfish, diseased society. Dog Years is based upon racism and genocide during the lurid years of World War II and concerns itself with the effect of these two evils on the German psyche.

All three stories are narrated by fictional authors--all schizophrenic, all choosing to forget their painful and guilty past. These men cannot unify their fragmented egos or harmonize the opposing forces in their personalities.

They reveal their pathological condition in the ease and capriciousness with which they move from first- to second- to third-person point of view, even in the middle of a sentence. Each narrator's remembrance of things past¹ is revived by a concrete image or symbol: Oskar has his drum; Pilenz has Mahlke's Adam's apple; Amsel and Matern have their pocketknife; and Harry Liebenau has his cousin Tulla.² In fact, Grass's novels abound in mocking symbols and cunning but troublesome leitmotifs which startle the reader and keep him aware of a distorted and suffering psyche. Each story is picaresque in mode and didactic in purpose.³ All three narratives take place in the impoverished environs of Danzig; all begin with episodes concerning poor, neglected children; all are pessimistic but never completely without hope; and, what is most striking, all depict the ugly, the depraved, the wicked, the guilty--seldom the innocent, the unblemished, the beautiful.

The painfully ugly caricature of Germans as Germans and men as men and, thus, of himself, makes Grass appear masochistic or even sadistic. What lies behind this ghastly picture he paints? What may be his motives? After all,

¹It is interesting to note that Grass has admitted being influenced by Marcel Proust. Ethridge and Kopala, Contemporary Authors, p. 180.

²Tank, Günter Grass, p. 77.

³In an interview, Grass insisted that art with a message is bad art. Peters, "Creator of Superior Scarecrows," p. 26.

Grass was himself a soldier in the army of the Third Reich. Why, then, is he so unsympathetic to the failure of his people? Why all this wallowing in the repulsive, the nasty, the ignoble, the nightmarishly offensive? One can only speculate about Grass's reasons for committing himself so whole-heartedly to twentieth-century shock techniques. It is quite possible that his motives are less altruistic than most critics seem to think. Knowing well the German propensity for self-analysis, Grass has written novels particularly conducive to introspection; thus, his books have become popular, and he, like the entrepreneurs he criticizes has become quite wealthy. After all, he has chosen to live an easy life in West Germany with the money, instead of returning to East Germany or Poland, where people suffer under the blight of Communist dictatorship and Russian rigidity.

There may, too, be something basically sadistic and masochistic in Grass's character. He apparently delights in the painful shock treatment he gives his readers. His most vivid scenes and lines deal with the ugly, the brutal, and the grotesque. He might be accused of enjoying the painful grimaces of the people to whom his work is addressed while he luxuriates in the comfort of the money they spend on his books.

Perhaps, however, the motivation behind Grass's writing is really honorable. Grass seems to disregard

innocence in his works because it is the easy assumption of innocence that has weakened the integrity of the German people of his time. Certainly he realizes that not all Germans are as wicked as he pictures them, and that the German cultural achievement is something to be proud of, not something to hide in shame. He ruthlessly denigrates the German heritage and everything else admirable about Germany in order to strip his beloved people of all illusions and excesses and compensations. He apparently wishes to reduce them to complete shame and self-abasement, which he may conceive to be necessary to any real moral rejuvenation. According to this interpretation, Grass insists that his people see and experience the latent infections that, having gone too long unrecognized, have made them psychologically unhealthy.

The diseased image of Germany which Grass assembles in his novels bears small resemblance to the mental picture that most foreigners have of that nation's miraculous economic revival. Grass's canvas is decidedly surrealistic--it is Germany as he beholds it in his wildest, darkest imagination--and its grotesqueness should not be mistaken for a photographic likeness. He shows his country moving from a romantic, mysterious past into a wasteland. Germany can produce enduring concrete machine-gun bunkers but has failed to provide for decent human relationships. As Grass sees it, war and a belief in war have betrayed his people,

and they have progressed to a mood of fierce disillusionment with everything but personal pleasure and self-seeking. Ideologies, moral codes, culture, and all sanctities lie broken and strewn about a wasteland of despair and selfishness, in which it is just as good to laugh as to cry. Perhaps Grass by his satanic exaggerations would make his people aware of the dizzy plunge they are taking from one evil (enthusiastic idealization of militarism) to an extreme of despair and apathy just as bad.

However ghastly and depressing his caricature of Germany may seem, whatever his motives may be, Grass's novels present a nonetheless important message to the German people and, by extension, to the world. If the German must become responsible to his fellow man, then all men everywhere must become responsible to each other in the same way. If the German can be held accountable and deemed guilty for standing idly by while his neighbors were being persecuted, then every man can be condemned for allowing his fellow man to undergo maltreatment--whether it may be in Africa, in the Middle East, or in Vietnam as well as in the ghettos of Los Angeles or Detroit. In a large, crowded, greedy, quarrelsome world, every man must be his brother's keeper.

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