The Law of the Father:

Patriarchal Subtext and GDR Literary Tradition in Selected Texts by Kerstin Hensel

By

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on three texts by Kerstin Hensel, *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal,* and *Gipshut* in which Hensel's preoccupation with the family narrative is most apparent. The aim of this study is to examine portray of Hensel's female characters, and how their depiction is typical of GDR literature. Based on the three texts examined, there is a marked trend of patriarchal dominance which underlies the texts in question. Though Hensel's work evolves and becomes more mature and complex, the subtext of the superiority of the father and the symbolic order in place remains constant in all three texts.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on three of Kerstin Hensel's texts: *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal* and *Gipshut*. These have been chosen because they are post-*Wende* works and because of their socio-political examination of the family in the GDR. Although Hensel is also a noted author of poetry and short stories, these have been disregarded because the aim of this thesis is to examine Hensel's novellas and novels. The texts chosen show the evolving exploration of a single theme – the search for identity. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, the focus will remain on the paternal narrative and the search for identity within the family.

Hensel's protagonists are situated as children within a family structure. All of the characters are in conflict with their parents and are searching for an identity separate from them. This thesis pays special attention to the role of the father or father figure. The generational conflict is explored on several levels, such as political vs. private, power vs. powerlessness, female vs. male, and normal vs. abnormal. These conflicts are all key to the feminist interpretation which calls for an exploration and deconstruction of these long held binary opposites present in the currently accepted symbolic order as established by leading feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Toril Moi; that is, that literature and language are inherently a male construction and as such by nature a tool of patriarchal oppression. Terry Eagleton finds the roots of the "symbolic order" in Lacan's claim that "in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society is structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies" (Lacan as cited in Eagleton 163). The woman, for lack of a phallus,

then embodies the "Other." This theory, which seems to repress the semiotic[1], is further developed into a modern feminist interpretation through the work of Julia Kristeva. She encourages readers of literature to focus less on the literal meaning of a text and instead on "the language of the semiotic as a means of undermining the symbolic order" (Eagleton 163).

The study begins with a look at the tradition of GDR literature and the *Vaterbuch*. These two topics are key to understanding the convention of GDR literature from which authors such as Kerstin Hensel emerged. The *Vaterbuch* as a genre was very popular in the GDR canon and permitted a veiled discourse on topics that would have otherwise been taboo under the strict guidelines of the GDR censorship that was in place throughout the literary history of the GDR. This introduction to the literary influences on Kerstin Hensel is followed by a short biography and examination of her work to date. The main body of the thesis will examine Hensel's works *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal* and *Gipshut* from the standpoint of feminist literary criticism, paying special attention to the themes of search for self and identity within the family. According to feminist scholar Lillian S. Robinson the point of this kind of reading of a text is to "emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology" (Robinson 117). Because Hensel's texts deal with women traditionally on the fringe of society (runaways and single mothers) this kind of reading becomes important as it uncovers the patriarchal structure of the literary canon.

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[1] The semiotic as defined by Kristeva is the "pattern or play of forces which we can detect inside language, and which represents a sort of residue of the pre-Oedipal phase" (Eagleton 163)

By employing such techniques of interpretation one is able to discover meanings less obvious but that relay messages greater than the "story" within the text. These messages speak to the socio-political climate for authors, both male and female, who are trapped within a symbolic order that by nature relegates women to the position of Other. Because Hensel's works are family situations, the female in the role of Other is easily achieved because the family has traditionally been the perpetuator of the patriarchal structure in Western society.

The novels are explored in chronological order of publication to show the evolving nature of Hensel's work and to examine the change in the political topics influencing her work. Chapter Two will look at Hensel's first post-*Wende* novella, *Im Schlauch.* Hensel's portrayal of daughter as "outsider" and runaway first emerges in this work and is a theme that she returns to repeatedly in her other texts and poetry. This chapter will examine the inability of the daughter to define herself outside her family role, but in particular in relation to her father.

The third chapter will examine Hensel's critically acclaimed novella *Tanz am Kanal.* Once again Hensel explores the theme of daughter as outsider, and again the protagonist is a runaway. In this work, however, these complex issues are depicted on a more substantial level. Issues such as ownership of language, patriarchal dominance and manipulation of the symbolic order are investigated. Hensel provides in *Tanz am Kanal* a biting satire of GDR society both pre- and post-*Wende.*

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Hensel's most recent novel *Gipshut.* This novel is Hensel's first since the *Wende* and provides a comparison of pre- and post-*Wende* experience for GDR culture. Although the familial construction differs in this text from

the previous two examined, it presents an evolution in Hensel's writing. For the first time her protagonist is male and the son in the family. However, the theme of the outsider in society remains the same. Hensel's observations on the day-to-day living conditions under communism lend themselves to the feminist critic because of their examination of issues such as power construction and ownership of identity, as well as the question of the power vacuum created by the absent father.

Kerstin Hensel is one of the most provocative contemporary authors from the former GDR. Her work is well respected and she provides insights into a culture without a country. The search for identity is certainly not a new or modern theme, but Hensel's approach is fresh and intriguing. The feminist visor is only one of many levels on which these texts could be examined. Her unwillingness to commit to specific polemics, rhetoric or dogma leaves the works open to several interpretations. For the sake of this thesis though the focus will remain on the feminist critical standpoint.

I History and Criticism of the Paternal Narrative: The Three Recognized Generations of GDR Authors and Beyond

I.1 The Paternal Narrative in the First Generation of GDR Literature

East German literature has earned a significant place in post-*Wende* research on the GDR. This is not just because of the new information available since the dissolution of government control and censorship, but also because of the unique phases or "generations" that developed in the GDR's brief forty-year history. Denied the benefit of modernist role models such as Kafka, Sartre, and Joyce, East German writers were forced to search out a discourse that would suit the government-ordained "socialist realist" ideals for GDR literature (Peters 305). New literary traditions, alternate dogma and rhetoric, and dictated polemics and paradigms forced a style upon writers in the GDR that seriously inhibited their creativity and forced their literature to (d)evolve into something considered a unique literary tradition. Peters refers to this government-sanctioned control of literary freedom as a "pseudo-legal prohibition of literature" (Peters 305). Julia Hell further contends that in Western society it has become accepted that literature is more about the aesthetic qualities of, rather than the information included in, a text (Psychoanalysis in the former East Germany 9). For the GDR though, the reverse became true; the tangible message or information became the central focus of the texts produced there.

Since Wolfgang Emmerich proposed the "generational model" of GDR literature it is generally accepted that three generations of authors existed in the GDR. The first of these became known as the *Aufbau*-generation. This generation provided a foundation of

literary tradition for further GDR authors to base their work on. Two major publishing houses were founded to accommodate the new literature to be produced in East Germany: the *Aufbau Verlag* and the *Mitteldeutscher Verlag*. Maximilian Nutz refers to the literature produced by these early authors as a form of "obstructed dialogue" in that authors were simply a tool for the government to brainwash the public with the ideals of anti-fascism and real-existing socialism (Nutz 65). In its promotion of real-existing socialism the GDR government of the era idealistically labeled East German literature a "marriage of labor and culture" (Smith 7). For the most part, the literary works of this generation were intrinsically a combination of politics and literature. Von Hallberg claims that, "readers of contemporary literature in the GDR understood texts as aids to life" (8), and GDR citizens were intended to understand these texts as models of how lifestyles would develop in the GDR under real-existing socialism.

A popular device for the promotion of real-existing socialism was the family narrative. This was viewed as a literary paradigm of the political situation, promoting ideology and indoctrination in the GDR. Hell contends:

> As family narratives, they [GDR authors] intertwine 'family' and 'historical' events in a linear chronological sequence. Like other traditional family narratives, the socialist realist historical novel is clearly gendered: the 'private sphere', or daily life, is the domain of the women characters; historical events are almost exclusively focalized through the male characters, and only men are involved in these events. ("At the Center an Absence" 29)

Obviously, the father as leader of the family took on the major role as the embodiment of the socialist-realist ideals. Many authors of this generation became occupied with the family as an anti-fascist/anti-militaristic tool and especially with the use of the father/children as central motif. A clear example of this in GDR literature is

Anna Seghers's *Die Toten bleiben jung*. Published in 1949 this text explores the idea of antifascist resistance from the context of the family. Although the father dies at the beginning of the book, and the mother remains the parental influence, the former remains the central device for comparison and contrast with the surviving communist hero son. In addition to this familial exploration Seghers' text is a "large-scale treatment of the Second World War and militarism" (Rapisarda 164).

I.2 A Turn Towards Modernism: the Second Generation of GDR Authors

Maximilian Nutz claims that GDR literature in the early sixties moved from "obstructed dialogue" to" counter discourse" (165). The *Bitterfelder Weg* (1959) conference and the construction of the Berlin Wall (1961) brought about changes that established the second generation of GDR literature. With contributors including such well-known authors as Christa Wolf and Erich Loest, it is arguable that this generation of GDR literature was the most widely received outside the GDR. Thomas Fox claims that this middle generation can be characterized as neither "Staatsliteratur" nor resistance Literatur (Fox 290). This group seemed to lose momentum and credibility after the controversial 1976 exile of agitator Wolf Biermann.

The real-turning point to what Emmerich refers to as the "modernist" second generation came at the *Bitterfelder Konferenz* in April 1959 (*Kleine Literaturgeschichte* 129). About 150 professional writers and 300 hobby writers gathered in *Bitterfeld* to discuss the future of GDR literature. What came out of this conference was a plan that the writers should become more involved with the working class by taking on jobs

themselves. Here, the GDR government attempted to cultivate a second stage in their Cultural Revolution. Though in the case of most authors this did not come to fruition, certain authors such as Christa Wolf became involved in the movement in the hopes of supporting a return to the "socialist working-class literature of the 1920's" (Peters 298). Instead of the protagonist as champion of the socialist-realist cause, this new generation of authors sought to claim the protagonist as fighter for "self-realization" within the socialist regime (Cohen-Pfister 153).

This second GDR generation was able to break away from the hard-line themes accepted by the first (realist) generation of GDR authors, although many of the same motifs were used to convey their particular messages. Vickie Robinson claims that there is a battle in literature that is constantly waged where "parents and children strive continually to prove that each of their voices is right" (335). The modernist second generation, children of the first, cast aside the anti-fascist themes of their parents in favor of a focus on socialist achievement. Even though their nation was still developing around them, these authors developed new and exciting (often labeled experimental) ways of creating their literature (Silberman 532). Authors were encouraged to mirror daily life and find heroics in the working class who made up the GDR. Though officially accepted by the FRG where clearly a postmodernist literary style was emerging, GDR texts remained rooted in the style of the 1920's socialist literature. It was this experimental flair that earned this generation the label of modernist.

Once again, though, the family emerges as the context for a political expression. Christa Wolf turned the whole concept of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" upside down with her novel *Kindheitsmuster*. Marc Silberman claims that in this work Wolf "is

abandoning any pretense to having 'mastered' the past" (534). Instead Wolf draws attention to the fascism existing in the present, and criticizes the "cultural amnesia" of the GDR (Silberman 534). In this work Wolf's protagonist is a child in a bourgeois household. The fascist leanings of her parents remain visible below the surface as they remain convinced of their better class in comparison to other workers portrayed in the text. This, suggests Silberman, "undermines the projected identity of the GDR citizen with the socialist homeland" (535). Wolf's texts, which were often family centred, became world-renowned as the voice of GDR literature in this era.

I.3 The *Prenzlauer Berg* and the Third Generation of GDR Authors

While on tour in the West in November 1976, GDR poet and singer Wolf Biermann was refused re-entry into the GDR and his citizenship was revoked. Most agree that this was the catalyst that marked the end of the second generation of GDR literature. Authors could no longer realistically and truthfully write about an improving society under this regime. The idealistic themes of building a better socialism were no longer persuasive under the hegemonic censorship of the *Stasi*. The third generation of authors became know as the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation because many lived in the Berlin area of *Prenzlauer Berg*. This group included authors such as Monika Maron, Helga Königsdorf and Sascha Anderson and was the last generation to exist within the nation of East Germany. Tired of the pretensions of some great *Wandlung* that was supposedly taking place, their texts employed themes that Wolfgang Müller refers to as "simply tak[ing] stock of living conditions under real socialism by observing and documenting daily life"

(90). Their themes deserted the "society as a whole" approach of their modernist predecessors and focused instead on the suffering of the individual.

In her research, Laurel Cohen-Pfister re-enforces Müller's theory of the emergence of the individual in this generation of GDR literature. She states:

> In contrast to the 'positive' hero of socialist realism, and even to the often dubious 'hero' of the sixties and seventies who battled society for his self-realization, it was the broken protagonist, an emotional ruin or failure for whom life is a struggle, who prevailed in young prose. (153)

Because many of the authors of this era had texts published in West Germany, they were not taken seriously in their own country (Hildebrandt 143). These authors' texts centred on characters being adrift without a sense of ideology, religion or greater social context. They concerned themselves with the political environment only in the context of how it affected the individual's life (Cohen-Pfister 153).

Emmerich defines the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation as the first truly postmodern generation of the GDR. This is because in their search for a new identity these authors were also searching for a new language that they could call their own. Peters claims they "consciously sought a 'different language', a language which was free and undeformed by ideology and could therefore serve as an expression of the individual search for self" (307). The use of intertextual imagery made veiled references to subversive topics and yet was ambiguous enough to leave the texts open for the judgment and interpretation of the reader. It was commonly believed that this was a defiant way in which these authors could escape the *Stasi* censors and still maintain a message of substance in their texts. New information, however, has shown the *Stasi* to be actively involved in the literary scene of this generation. Older radicals such as Wolf Biermann went so far as to label this generation "pampered children of the *Stasi*" (Peters 307).

Despite this vast difference in the collective concerns and between the generations of GDR authors, the "family narrative" remained popular amongst *Prenzlauer Berg* authors. Although in a more subtle form than in the generations preceding it, alienation from the family structure surfaced as the motif of choice for the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation. An example of this can be observed in the popular text by Volker Braun, *Unvollendete Geschichte.* Two young lovers, Frank and Karin must defy the values and mores of their families in order to be together. Karin's father, a government official provides an excellent parental contrast as the symbol of the values of the previous generation. The pressure of the family tension between these generations even leads to Frank's attempted suicide. However, it must be admitted that, because of the concentration on the individual, and the exploration of the inner self in the texts of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation the popularity of the family narrative did, to a certain extent, wane.

I.4 East German Literature Since the *Wende* – The Reinvention of the Family Narrative

In 1993 Marc Silberman made the claim that "the collapse of the GDR system because of its internal dysfunctioning is not the end of the GDR. Individuals and groups cannot cut themselves off from their past, and the work of memory will continue to form the present" ("Too Near, Too Far" 265). For East Germans a new kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* became necessary. Although the political construct of the GDR vanished more than ten years ago, the cultural and traditional aspects are still very apparent in the literature produced today. Suddenly immersed in what was essentially a

foreign culture (West Germany) East Germans had to make their way through previously banned texts. Many GDR citizens were shocked at the simplicity of the imagery. GDR author Ina Merkel commented: "and we who were used to reading the information hidden behind lines and words are now teased by the simple images that only mean what they show" (Hell 197).

For many authors of the former GDR the censorship of their collapsed nation's government was to their surprise rediscovered in the self-imposed pseudo-censorship they experienced in the capitalist West. This was reflected in their themes, styles and topic choices. Although in the GDR writers knew that support depended upon their ability to walk the party line, the benefits they enjoyed were quite substantial. For example, "The Writers' Union offered some fellowships, helped members find apartments, directed them and their families to extremely inexpensive vacation resorts, issued interest-free loans, and above all else arranged for foreign travel" (Von Hallberg 7). After the *Wende* East German authors all of a sudden were confronted with the economic reality of the publishing business. As Friedrich Ott in 1991 asserted:

> Cultural autonomy has its disadvantages; Eastern writers, used to financial security, are asking themselves whether they are being kicked from the frying pan into the fire, whether the capitalist accountant will not prove a sterner critic than the censor ever was. (Ott 236)

This, of course, bred much hostility and bitterness in the authors of the former GDR. Used to the generous support the Writers' Union had offered them in the GDR, authors felt the pinch of having to support themselves through means other than their creative skills by taking on second jobs. Bearing all of this in mind, it is easy to see why many authors harbored resentment towards the West as they attempted to make a name for themselves all over again.

One important hindrance to the smooth transition of East German writers into the West German system was the *Literaturstreit* of 1989-90. The catalyst for this controversy was the publication of Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt*? and the subsequent questioning of her frankness regarding her collusion with the *Stasi* during her years in the GDR. Friedrich Ott observes that,

> What is being attacked in her [Christa Wolf] is a supposedly typical German tendency for blending morality and esthetics, for an 'inwardness' in the shade of power that is not so much Pietistic religiosity as a way of disposing of dilemmas by covering them over with a sticky coating of sentiment. (235)

This controversy was a blow in particular to the writers of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation whose involvement with the *Stasi* was also suspected. This conspiracy theory of the artists' involvement with the *Stasi* has been called the "one of the most aggressively reiterated formulas for dismantling forty years of cultural history from the GDR" (Leeder, *Breaking Boundaries* 181). Not only did Christa Wolf's reputation come under fire but also the "integrity and self-understanding of the writer on the one hand, and the role of memory on the other" (Leeder, *Breaking Boundaries* 181). GDR citizens began to question the reality they had come to accept. As more and more *Stasi* files were uncovered, this sense of disillusionment was only deepened.

Setting aside the specific case of Christa Wolf, older GDR authors who had produced texts within the confines of the socialist state censorship were deemed supportive of the *Stasi* and the GDR state by the younger *Prenzlauer Berg* generation. The *Prenzlauer Berg* generation saw these older authors as "enmeshed in the very structures and discourses they were trying to oppose" (Leeder, *The Individual* 205). GDR authors of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation gained notoriety for leading "a kind of

marginalized autonomous existence outside the discourses of state opposition" (Leeder, *The Individual* 205). This did not end with the dissolution of the state. In fact, authors of the former GDR began to employ a postmodern discourse that drove them to "struggle to create a language fully self-conscious, and yet adequate to express the precarious aspirations and disappointments of a very specific moment in history" (Leeder, *The Individual* 205).

Members of this generation of authors included Monika Maron, Elke Erb, Sascha Anderson, and Kerstin Hensel. Many of these authors had gained a certain repute in the GDR, but now they were gaining acceptance on an international level. Karen Leeder claims that the most profound consequence of the *Literaturstreit* was the call for a re-writing of GDR history without the context of *Stasi* censorship or hegemony. Many of these young authors found a new context for their past in a postmodern examination of the standard GDR motifs. Naturally, the question of power was one that was frequently addressed in the post-*Wende* years. In depicting the history of the GDR the family narrative was once again resurrected by this new generation as a vehicle to explore authority under socialism. The father/child relationship became, and continues to be, a means for authors from the former GDR to deconstruct the power structures that existed in the GDR.

Postmodernism poses somewhat of a problem in the case of the GDR. It seems that often (as in the case of Wolf) the author essentially is the text. Marilyn Sibley-Fries has examined this at length. She claims that we do, and will continue, to "teach GDR authors as "chroniclers of a corner of history" (283). Of course, it is generally accepted that an author's polemics become apparent in his or her work, but, as will be shown, the

authors of the post-*Wende* generation have tried to have their texts regarded as less about a historical message than they were in their socialist realist day. That texts reflect a lack of identity is most certainly due to the devastating loss of a nation-state. Because the writers of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation were born in East Germany and witnessed the fall of the wall they were

> confronted only with an agonizing socialism that had lost its credibility. This age-ridden group of East Germans neither shared the conflict-ridden identification of previous generations with the antifascist state and the idea of socialist utopia, nor did it invest its stagnation and decline with a similar resignation and disillusionment. (Frölich 21)

Because of this "disillusionment," their expressions took on an even more individualist perspective and abandoned the state-centred discourses of early GDR authors.

I.5 The Paternal Narrative in GDR Literature

Kerstin Hensel has stated that there is a lack of innocence in literature in that it can never be viewed outside its political context (Steigerwald 107). Shunning naiveté about literature is a general understanding among writers of the former GDR. After years of searching for a message beyond the text, they continue to do so even though the context of that search has radically changed in recent years. Their "censor" has changed from government control to the whims of the literary critics. With this changed political situation, many former GDR authors are searching for a new discourse to better suit their new circumstances. This is not a transformation that should be over-simplified in the case of the GDR, which was a culture denied any official exposure to many of the Western

ideas and styles that developed in the second half of the twentieth century. Since 1989 citizens of the former GDR have found themselves in a somewhat unique situation of trying to become accustomed to a new citizenship while living in the same geographical location they always have.

Many authors have done this by adapting a point of reference familiar to them to suit the new discourse they have been forced to develop. For example, the family narrative has remained a strong focus for GDR writers and they continue to use it as a metaphor for the larger "politics" of the situation in which they have found themselves. Kerstin Hensel is no exception in this regard. She openly admits that her texts are about the feeling of incompatibility her protagonists have with their environment, and that she often approaches political themes by addressing discord in family relationships, especially that of parent and child. The latter are somehow set apart and try (even if unsuccessfully) to come to terms with each other.

In her 1987 book, *Die Stimme der Medusa: Schreibweisen in der Gegenwarsliteratur von Frauen*, Sigrid Weigel discusses the genre of *Vaterbücher*, written specifically by daughters. She states that while some elements of the *Vaterbuch* are quite unique, others are universal: "Da die *Vaterbücher* sich meistens um zwei Hauptfiguren drehen, den Vater und die Tochter bzw. den Sohn, sind sie den autobiographischen Kindheitserinnerungen verwandt. Und doch wird durch die Zentrierung der Schreibarbeit auf die Vaterfigur eine ganz eigene Schreibweise konstruiert" (Weigel 160). Hensel openly admits that in her texts, *Im Schlauch* and *Tanz am Kanal*, she used elements and memories of her own childhood to develop this sense of opposition between the father and daughter characters in the text (Griebner 72).

Many female writers in the GDR employed the father construction as they felt the need to challenge, "male-oriented assumptions of real socialist ideology, particularly the myth of self-realization in production and the identification of the individual with the proclaimed goals of the state (Müller 91). Women's writing encouraged them to find fulfillment in personal successes rather than the successes of the state. This kind of encouragement could only be possible under the guise of "stories" or fiction as texts. As such sentiment challenged the symbolic order of the GDR and many of the basic tenets of socialism, the Other would be deemed not acceptable.

One way of unsettling the foundation of the symbolic order in the GDR was to challenge the approved motif of the "father" in the form of the family narrative. Julia Hell asserts that much of East Germany's early literature centred on the "father as Communist disciplined body" (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 107). She further contends that this venue (the family narrative) is a very effective tool in criticizing the political because it offers, "an interweaving of personal and political history" (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 131). With this technique the author can present parent and child as a microcosmic illumination of the macrocosmic issues of the symbolic order: that is, what happens in the narrow world of the family reflects events and power dynamics in the larger world outside.

The *Vaterbuch* is an important genre for GDR authors because "it does not take the viewpoint of the ruling class, the planners, the doers, or the leaders. Rather, it is informed by the conditions and attitudes of the common people" (Müller 102). This is key to understanding the importance of the *Vaterbuch* as a GDR genre because authors used their texts to tackle the question of identity, which plagued the GDR throughout its existence. For a culture so unsure of its own identity, it was crucial that literary subject

matter appealed to and was familiar to the reader. Something that all GDR citizens could certainly identify with was family and father. Zwinger claims that "the familial power relations in the abstract present themselves, even to psychoanalytically oriented readers, as relatively uncomplex and straightforward" (12). Because of the uncomplicated power construction inherently associated with the family, the text is easily politicized by simply associating societal structures with specific family roles or characters. The father, traditionally the power holder or leader of the family, is easily cast as a representation of the greater societal father, the state.

This is perhaps what makes the *Vaterbuch* such a instinctive genre for the writers in the former GDR. With strict censorship rules enforced by the government, societal commentary and political criticism were not an option. By politicizing a family narrative such as the *Vaterbuch*, authors could exorcise societal evils and engage a normally taboo subject matter free from the creative constraints of the censor's pen. Even after the *Wende*, though, the genre of *Vaterbuch* has remained extremely popular among GDR authors because it is a convenient genre in which to "retrospectively portray the protagonist's life under real-existing socialism" (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 106).

In the founding narratives of the GDR's literature this layering of the historical and the family was useful in understanding the gender notions that pervade even current texts of post-*Wende* authors. By focusing on the father, authors within the GDR were able to achieve a level of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, whereas authors in the post-*Wende* group could employ the same style to achieve what is now being referred to as *Gegenwartsbewältigung*. Most important, however, is the ability of the *Vaterbuch* to induce a kind of "Selbstverständigung" (Wallace 16). By associating the power in their

society with the family, authors are able to criticize, praise or simply portray the power constructions without the polemic entanglements of obvious socio-political commentary.

For authors of the first or *Aufbau*-generation there was a recurring theme of the evil fascist father against whom the children of the newly formed GDR nation had to struggle. Narratives focused on the father's return from the war and the upheaval of the transition from fascism to socialism. From the perspective of the literary child the father is easily characterized as hero or villain. Because of the frequent changes in the political climate of the GDR authors often felt themselves to be children of the preceding literary, social, and cultural climates. The metaphor of opposition took the form of rebellion against the father in ways ranging from familial dysfunction to patricide. These narratives found their roots in the revolutionary literature of the Soviet Union. Hell points out that one of the best Soviet examples of this is Gorky's 1908 novel *The Mother*. When the father dies at the beginning of the novel, Mayakovsky's poem "Toi storone" is inserted as a metaphor for the indifference the son feels about his father's death.

The father
let's exchange him for some old things
we
will pour kerosene over him
and let him out on the street
for illumination
(Mayakovsky as cited in Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 31)

Hell further claims that these *Vaterbücher* served another function, not only signifying "an unconditional break with the 'fathers' but as patricide...severing all ties with 'fascist' fathers" (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 31). As a result, the *Vaterbuch* of this generation served as not only *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and a rationalization for their fathers' participation in the Second World War, but also as a kind of cultural therapy allowing children of the newly formed GDR to dissociate themselves from the Nazi past.

With the *Bitterfelder Weg* conference came the GDR's final severance from the influence of West Germany, and GDR literature gained an identity separate and unique from that of West Germany's. With this division came again the task of developing a distinct identity for East German literature. The second generation of GDR authors retained the *Vaterbuch* genre, but employed it to make a very different social commentary. These authors were born in Germany at a time when the GDR did not exist. Their focus shifted away from blaming the father and targeted instead the need to build a distinctly East German society. According to Ian Wallace, authors of this era saw themselves less as simply storytellers and more as "a partner, engaged on equal terms with his reader" (Wallace 14). He further claims that this equality meant, "the latter [the reader] is no longer treated as an object but as a subject of history" (Wallace 14). Von Hallberg has expanded on this stating that "some of them [authors] conceived of their literary labors as a help to the people of the GDR [and] they would comment on and extend texts with their own experiences and stories" (Von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals* 9). Again, because family and father are themes that connect all people in any given society, the *Vaterbuch* provided a paradigm upon which to rest the social commentary these authors were producing.

In developing a literary tradition GDR authors focused on the daily life of its citizens in producing narratives concerning the "era of construction" that their country was facing (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 107). The interesting factor of this era is the emergence of the fatherless *Vaterbuch* and the fantasy of the absent father. This fantasy can be explained on a psycho-analytical level as, "the child's imagination becoming engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing" (Freud as cited in Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 123). For example, in Brigitte Reimann's *Ankunft im Alltag*, the protagonist, Recha, takes pride in allying herself with communist mother role-models such as Rosa Luxemburg:

> A Polish comrade...once said that – with her dark eyes and small prominent nose – she looked like a young Rosa Luxemburg, and Recha experienced this comparison as a compliment ever since she had read her wonderful prison letters. (Reimann as cited in Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 16)

Hell further contends that all associations with father-imagery are associated with a Western lifestyle that was considered self-indulgent and decadent in the East (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 125). While these authors strove to encourage GDR citizens to take part in the *Aufbau* of a new, better, and unique socialism, eventually their narratives lost influence and effect as nothing appeared to change for the better in GDR society.

As previously discussed, the literary values of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation represented a radical shift from seeking a better political and societal identity to a more individualistic search for identity. Once again, the subject matter lends itself perfectly to the genre of the *Vaterbuch*. As a result the *Vaterbuch*, which at this point was common in GDR literature, was refocused to fit the concerns of the *Prenzlauer Berg* generation.

Weary of the hyper-politicization of the texts of the *Bitterfelder Weg* and the *Aufbau*-generation, the *Prenzlauer Berg* placed the focus of the protagonist child's journey on self-realization through the deconstruction of the myth of real-existing socialism associated with the older generation. Characters in *Prenzlauer Berg* texts typically present a boredom with and resentment of the tales of the anti-fascist battles waged in the early days of GDR literature. In Thomas Brasch's text *Fliegen im Gesicht* the protagonist escapes what he sees as the hypocrisy of his parents and the greater issue of real-existing socialism by fleeing to the West (Müller 94). Such characters are no longer interested in denouncing their parents or building a better socialism. They are interested in developing their own situation on an individual basis. Müller further claims that these narratives resulted "in a radical new look at GDR reality and a new aesthetic sensibility" (91). This kind of rhetoric flew in the face of the narratives that had built the foundation of GDR literature.

Since the *Wende* the *Vaterbuch* has remained very much a part of the literature of the authors of the former GDR. Since the fall of the Wall the term "Ostalgie" has been coined to describe the longing for the past experienced by former GDR citizens. This sense of "Ostalgie" is often represented by depicting daily life under socialism as a historical examination and tribute to the country the post-*Wende* authors were raised in and which no longer exists. The feeling of displacement felt by these authors is apparent and expressed in the "Identitätssuche" often undertaken by the protagonists in their narratives. Because this search for identity is taking place in the past, it is typical that the theme of family and father, so popular with all generations of GDR authors, is employed again.

Finding an identity within another culture has presented a difficult task that in the years since the *Wende* appears unresolved among GDR authors. Kerstin Hensel is one of these authors whose protagonists search for a new identity distinct from that of their parents. In Hensel's 1996 narrative *Tanz am Kanal* the protagonist, Gabriela von Haßlau, runs away from home in the hopes of finding an identity separate from her father's. Time after time Gabriela unsuccessfully seeks out a self that is not entwined with her father. She finds it ultimately impossible to define herself without comparing herself to her father and his value system. "Gabriela von Haßlau also recounts the history of Germany's failed socialist experiment, documenting the corruption, cynicism and hypocrisy that led to the demise of the communist state" (Kuhn 241). This dilemma is unique to post-*Wende* authors and is "a testimony to the fact that it is possible to write GDR literature even after the demise of the GDR" (Kuhn 241). The genre of the *Vaterbuch* has come full circle and just as the *Aufbau*-generation sought to distance itself from a politically separate parentage, the post-*Wende* generation too must find its identity by first coming to terms with its failed socialist past.

I.6 Biographical Sketch of Kerstin Hensel's Life

Kerstin Hensel was born in the East German city of Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) on May 29, 1961 to a city worker and a nurse. Hensel spent her childhood and youth in Chemnitz and attended the local *Realschule* from 1967 until 1977. Hensel speaks of her childhood with a bitter disdain for her peers and the sense of being an outsider that they thrust upon her. This lack of approval was intensified by her parents'

constant criticism in the home. Hensel remarks that her mother constantly begged her to "geh doch mal in die Disko and werd, doch mal 'ne Frau! Zieh dich doch mal hübsch an, 'n Rock, und mach doch mal, und daß du auch mal 'n netten Freund kriegst" (Griebner 73). Wearing horn-rimmed glasses and possessing a boyish appearance, Hensel maintains that she just simply was not "good-looking" and had no real interest in investing much time to change that fact (Griebner 73). Instead she worked on just the opposite. In her mid-teens, to her mother's dismay, she shaved her hair close to the scalp and claimed her new image as a Radical.

By the time she turned eighteen, the pressure at home became so intense that Hensel moved out on her own. In 1980 she began a nurse's training course at the "Medizinische Fachschule" in Chemnitz. Hensel claims that this period in her life was a jump from the frying pan into the fire. Her loneliness intensified because of her feelings of being out of place at the Fachschule. She further contends that she maintained a "Schweig-Arroganz" because she had no desire "[mich] an Diskussionen über Dreifruchtmarmelade oder irgendwelche Kerle zu beteiligen" (Griebner 73-74). Once again, albeit by her own decision, she was cut off from the mainstream. Because of this she claims her studies in nursing were rarely fun for her (Griebner 74). Nevertheless, Hensel completed her studies to become a nurse and went on to work for a brief time in the profession.

It was during this time that Hensel gave birth to her first and only child, Benjamin. Hensel has spoken candidly about her relationship with Benjamin's father although he remains a very small portion of her life. She remarks that their relationship began slowly and one day she simply "noticed" she was in love with him. She further

claims that this love made her blind to his opportunistic and cowardly character (Griebner 82). This relationship continued after the birth of Benjamin in the form of turbulent romance. Hensel remarks that one day she finally realized that she must simply reject the relationship for her own sanity, and that is what she did.

Also in 1983, Hensel met and befriended a woman named Gabriele Berthel while she was still nursing. Berthel, a leading figure in the local literary scene, eventually convinced Hensel that she must attend a literature institute. Hensel made some radical changes to her life and career. She claims that Berthel taught her how to think, feel, and see (Griebner 71). With her love-life in shambles, a child, and the help of a good friend, she enrolled at the Literatur-Institut Johannes R. Becher in Leipzig. It was here that Hensel first found a sense of belonging. In late 1986 she published her first collection of poetry entitled *Posiealbum*. This was the beginning of her published writing and the long relationship Hensel has maintained with literature.

In 1988 Hensel followed up her short collection *Poesiealbum* with a longer collection of poetry titled *Stilleben mit Zukunft*. Unlike many of her other literary colleagues, Hensel did not support herself from her writing alone. These two publishing achievements earned her a teaching appointment at the Ernst Busch Hochschule für Schauspielkunst in Berlin and at the Filmhochschule in Potsdam. She has maintained her appointment at the Ernst Busch Hochschule für Schauspielkunst until the present. While maintaining a rigorous teaching schedule and raising a son, Hensel managed in1989 to publish her first attempt at fiction. The title of this collection of short stories was *Hallimasch* and was published by Luchterhand. It was so well received that Luchterhand sent it to the Frankfurter Buchmesse. Even though Hensel started out as a poet, and does

continue to write poetry, it is for her short works of fiction and plays that she is best known.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, there came a marked transition in the work of Kerstin Hensel. The imagery and metaphors she used in her work matured and became more direct. Her discourse focused more resolutely on themes of inside versus outside. Hensel claims that every author has one basic theme to which he/she always returns (Griebner 73). For Hensel this was most definitely true. Her publications in the 1990s centred around protagonists on the fringe of society, people who cannot seem to find their niche. Hensel neither confirms nor denies that this may be a throwback to her lonely youth as an ostracized member of her community and family. In the 1990's Hensel produced a poetry collection, a play, or a book of fiction almost every year. They are as follows; *Schlaraffensucht* (1990) *Gewitterfront* (1991*) Auditorium Panopticum* (1991) *Im Schlauch* (1993) *Angestaut* (1993) *Tanz am Kanal* (1997) *Freistoß* (1995) *United Colors of Buxtehude* (1996) *Neunerlei* (1997) *Klistier* (1997) *Häyena* (1999) *Gipshut* (1999) and *Alles war so, alles war anders* (1999). Adapting to the new profit-driven Western publishing houses, however, has proved challenging for Hensel. In a 1996 interview with Robert von Hallberg, she made the statement, "I have no more illusions as far as the sales of my books are concerned, because I'm not a popular author and never will be one and don't want to be one. The publisher will always only be able to 'afford' me, he'll never make money out of me. I have to live with that" (Von Hallberg 211).

Hensel's texts may not have earned her money, but they have earned her much praise and several awards (both in the GDR and the FRG). To date she has received the *Anna-Seghers-Preis (88), Leonce-und-Lena-Preis* (1992), the *Stipendium der Villa*

Massimo in Rom (1995), *Förderpreis zum Brandenburgischen Literaturpreis* (1996), and finally the *Gerrit-Engelke-Literaturpreis* (1999). Hensel's ability to consistently receive awards for her work speaks to the kind of respect she has earned as an artist in Germany.

I.7 Kerstin Hensel's Work and Reception

Kerstin Hensel has established herself as "a leading voice of the younger generation of East German women writers" (Kuhn 240). Her work is typical of the post-*Wende* identification *angst* apparent in so many of the texts produced by GDR authors of her generation. She has taken elements of the personal and used them to "make her mark as a prose writer of great originality and biting social commentary" (Kuhn 240). Interspersing autobiographical elements into her narratives of family discord, she uses the family as a metaphor for the feeling of displacement felt by the citizens of the former GDR. Although her texts are very specific to GDR life, Hensel claims her writing also tells of "Lebensgeschichten, die überall auf der Welt passieren" (Steigerwald 106). She further states that it is ineffective to write a social commentary, so instead she tries to write something every person can relate to. To achieve this in a way that is familiar to all who read her texts, she has found the backdrop of the family most effective. Her protagonists are children struggling against the values and beliefs of their parents in an investigation of their own identity. Hensel states that the GDR was a "kinderfeindliche Gesellschaft und auch eine frauenfeindliche Gesellschaft. Um es weiter zu fassen, eine Gesellschaft, die feindlich ist gegen alles was schwächer ist als die" (Steigerwald 112).

The two novellas and one novel *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal* and *Gipshut* were chosen for examination for two reasons. First, these three texts represent the only longer works that Hensel has produced since the *Wende*. As such these texts allow us to examine her evolution within a particular genre. Second, and perhaps more importantly, these works are all family narratives, which are deeply rooted in the theme of the *Vaterbuch*. Each of these narratives examines the relationship of the child to his or her parents, but especially to the father (be he biological or symbolic).

Hensel refers to literature as the "Gesinnung einer Generation" (Hammer 108). The theme of the "*Vaterbuch*" and the father as metaphor and leading reference point for literature in preceding eras becomes pointedly clear when Hensel refers to the generations of authors before her in the GDR as "Vater- [and] Großvatergenerationen" (Hammer 108). Because she further claims that literature cannot be separated from history, the concept of "father-generations" is major element of her narratives. Hensel claims that her favorite theme is that of annihilation and destruction. These three texts all examine the annihilation of the GDR from the point of view of the family (Steigerwald 112). It is a common belief that now, with no existing nation-state to identify with, the foundation of GDR cultural identity has to a certain extent been pulled apart (Boa 261). The generation of post-*Wende* writers that was born in the GDR and experienced the "stagnation, confinement and hypocrisy of East German society in ways that previous generations had not" (Kuhn 240). The realization of this has become even clearer as these authors now have a new cultural frame of reference in the unified Germany.

Kerstin Hensel's work is also important to the GDR canon because it continues the tradition of women writers there who create texts that are "the mixture of textural

pleasure and personal-social exploration" (Jankowsky 112). Her post-*Wende* texts allow readers from other cultures, and especially those who resided in the former GDR, insight into issues that were important to its citizens, but particularly women, who lived in East Germany. Since unification women's concerns have played a minor role in the emerging Germany. Hensel's genderized family roles shed light on the institutionalized policy of exclusion felt not only by women but by people on many levels of society. At one point in all the narratives, the children run away from their families in search of an identity independent from that of their parents. This idea of breaking out and leaving behind is common in the post-*Wende* literary scene. Jankowsky poses the question, "How is the GDR represented as a place implying both 'rootlesness' and 'rootedness' and actively contexting the notions of 'home' in a German 'Heimat'?" (109). Hensel attempts to bring some clarity to this issue in the theme of the runaway from the family. Although no longer active members of their family, the protagonists in all of these texts remain inextricably tied to their parents by a common history. They are, as Jankowsky puts it, "rooted" and "rootless" at the same time.

Finally, Hensel's use of the paternal narrative represents a biting critique of women's roles in the family, and the greater community. She purposefully depicts them as subordinate to the point of obviousness in an attempt to illuminate the complex issues of gender politics, power structures (both public and private) and the difficult task of female writers to navigate in a symbolic order which has traditionally marginalized them.

II Gendering the Family:

Im Schlauch's Representation of Power Dispersion in the Family

II.1 *Im Schlauch* – A Plot Summary

Im Schlauch (1990) is the first post-*Wende* novella by Kerstin Hensel. This text depicts the events of the sixteen-year-old protagonist Natalie Kulisch's three-day experience away from the family home. Although it was published in the 1990's it must still be considered GDR literature. It adheres closely to the parental narrative tradition constructed by writers of previous generations of GDR literature. Natalie's experiences are contrasted with her life and role within her family. Hensel employs a flashback technique to portray the experiences of the protagonist with those of both her parents and herself in past events. *Im Schlauch* brings the reader into contact with daily life in GDR society. Beyond that, Hensel takes a tongue-in-cheek look at the family power structure and the clear gender split in a family living in a society that promoted equality for all.

The novella begins on Natalie's sixteenth birthday as she packs her bags to leave home and move into an apartment of her own. Her parents, Siegfried and Anneros Kulisch, are unaware of this and continue with their daily routine. Her brother follows her around threatening to reveal the secret to her parents. Finally, when she has all of her belongings packed she makes her way across town to a dilapidated building where she has rented a room. As she settles in with her roommates (several rodents and a wall full

of army ants) a flood of memories begins. These memories centre on the mother and father figures and expose their characters.

The first of these accounts is a sketch of the loveless marriage of Siegfried and Anneros that drove them both into adulterous flings. Siegfried, who was a soldier in the *Volksarmee*, was being sent on a training trip to Moscow. Anneros saw him off at the train station and then sat down in the bar on her own. Before long she is tipsy and encounters a station official named Paffrath. The two make their way to the baggage handling area and have sex amongst the suitcases. For Anneros this is an awakening. Paffrath becomes an obsession of sorts for her in future situations portrayed in the novella. Having sex in the daylight with a stranger stands in stark contrast to the controlling sex she has with Siegfried. With her husband, sex is something that occurs only at his wish and only in complete darkness.

Siegfried on the other hand, has an encounter with a mysterious stranger in his hotel room in Moscow. The scene opens with him shouting, "Mach das Licht aus Duschenka" (*Im Schlauch* 21). The sex scene that follows is one with him in complete control over this stranger. They have this brief encounter and then the light comes on and the woman disappears from his room and life forever.

What is particularly thought-provoking about these two scenes is how they are woven into one another so completely. Hensel seamlessly switches between the adulterous experiences of Anneros and Siegfried. It is as if they are speaking to each other about all that is wrong with their relationship, and developing for the reader the tension that exists in their marriage.

Anneros and Siegfried, mother and father figures, are very well developed at this point while the protagonist, Natalie, still remains for the most part a mystery. It is important, though, that the parental figures are developed first, as Natalie's character development depends on it. As is common in Hensel's texts, the child protagonist identifies him/herself through comparison and contrast with the parental figures. In this case Natalie is reflected in the character development of her parents.

No matter how Natalie tries to distance herself from her parents, in the end, she is exactly like them. The book continues by returning to the present day and Natalie's choice to go out on the town to celebrate her sixteenth birthday and her freedom. After wandering around the streets of Stinopel she decides to go into a bar/restaurant called *der Schlauch*. It is here that perhaps the greatest parallel between parent and child can be seen. Natalie drinks alone in the bar until she befriends Noppe, a bar regular. They get drunk together and have sex at the bar. She staggers to the toilet to vomit and by the time she gets back Noppe is sitting with some other women.

When Natalie confronts Noppe the next day he pretends he doesn't know who she is. She tells him the police are looking for her. She is sure her parents have noticed she is missing and will have called the police. In the middle of their conversation, though, a police car comes up the street and drives right by. Natalie realizes no one is looking for her and it is likely her parents have not noticed she is gone.

The text then takes a sharp look at the Kulisch parents' marriage again. Short sketches of the life and relationship shared by Anneros and Siegfried reveal an underlying resentment of each other and a complete disregard for their daughter. After the birth of their son, Natalie became almost invisible for her parents, especially her

father. Anneros sinks deeper into her fantasies about the sexual experiences at the train station with Paffrath.

At the end of the novella there is a two-fold disappointment. First, Anneros wins a train trip and begins to visualize a sexual reunion with Paffrath. Although it is now many years later, she is sure he will just take her in his arms again. Much to her dismay, after looking for him all day, Paffrath does not even recognize her. An event that has been another cherished memory to her whole life meant absolutely nothing to him. Natalie also experiences disappointment. After her building is condemned she packs her things and goes home When she arrives, things are exactly as they were. Nothing has changed. Her parents appear not to have missed her or even noticed that she was gone.

Hensel's texts often succeed in presenting an accurate portrait of life in the GDR as well as a deeper satirical look at the power construction within the family. *Im Schlauch* is focused almost solely on these relationships. The reader is shown the lack of identity established by the female characters in the novel. They are subordinate to the father and he maintains a strict control over their identities.

II.2 Editing the Canon:

Revisiting GDR History Through Depiction of Authority in the Family in Kerstin Hensel's *Im Schlauch*

The canon of East German literature of the eighties and even continuing into the nineties is centred on the Oedipal style of the male writer challenging his literary father.

Some women writers of the GDR have taken issue with that notion, as it implies that their work was as a result "different but minor to the male-authored canon or as but mimicking male forms" (Schmidt 257). Although this issue was not generally tackled in an overt manner, the subtext of women's writing attacked a male-centred bias in literature. Patricia Howe has made the claim that, "[readers] find new ways of reading to uncover the defiant subtext in women's writing. And we can now celebrate not Oedipal battles, but the richly intertextual dialogues between contemporary women writers" (Howe as cited in Boa 259). The commonly accepted definition of patriarchy is a male-controlled authority based on or residing in the father figure. In launching such dialogues East German women had to mask their intent in the irony of the everyday, often basing their story on the daily life of the GDR family. Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft claim that, "In revisiting the 'canon', contemporary authors found that concepts of 'woman's nature' were based on naturalized historical, cultural constructions that assured the continuation of privileges for a certain portion of the population and sustained power relations that disadvantaged women" (Kosta & Kraft 80). Because GDR writers (especially women) could not directly engage a polemical stance, many simply satirized GDR life in their portrayal of it.

Kerstin Hensel's first short work of fiction *Im Schlauch* follows this pattern. Through Natalie's experiences as a runaway, not only does she realize how insignificant she is in the world, but also at home. *Im Schlauch* presents a disdain for the confines of GDR existence. Anna Kuhn claims that this contempt for the GDR lifestyle is born out of "never having known the GDR as anything but a cordoned-off, insular state" (Kuhn 240). Assuming that it is possible for a cultural literary genre to continue after the demise of a

country, texts may be produced that have special or unique meaning to its former citizens. Hensel achieves this through tongue-in-cheek references to her GDR heritage. For example, the narrative *Im Schlauch* takes place in a town of her own invention called *Stinopel, 'stino'* being GDR slang for *stink normal* (Kuhn 241).

Hensel does not deny the autobiographical components in all of her texts, and Hensel herself claims her "my texts are mainly specific to the GDR. I always took the trouble to make them more all-embracing, concerned with things that are common to the whole of humanity, or with things that are general and take place in social orders. In spite of this, people in the GDR – because they have different knowledge and different experiences – reacted differently to the texts" (Hensel as cited in Von Hallberg 208).

This need for a special discourse is especially strong in the society that once was the GDR. Because of the stringent censorship in the GDR, understanding alternative means of communication was key to being exposed to new or even different thought. As Herminghouse claims, "One of the strongest taboos in most systems of censorship is the mention of censorship itself" (Herminghouse 89). Simply walking away from this style of writing in the post-*Wende* era has not been possible for GDR authors. What it does offer the reader is a narrative that can be understood on various levels and may be interpreted using more than one method.

True to the paternal narrative style of the GDR, Hensel incorporates several familial plot lines into the narrative. In the case of *Im Schlauch*, she follows not only Natalie's escape from the family home but also the infidelities of her parents throughout their marriage. In doing so Hensel is able to present a distillation of life throughout the time of the GDR. It is clear that "the collapse of the GDR system because of its internal

dysfunction is not the end of the GDR. Individuals and groups cannot cut themselves off from their past, and the work of memory will continue to form the present" (Silberman "Too Near, Too Far 265). This statement encapsulates perfectly the style that Hensel employs in the examination of the history of the GDR. The work of memory is the prevailing theme in *Im Schlauch.* As a novel that was published after the end of the GDR it is only logical that it encapsulate the typical themes of GDR literature.

II.3 Establishment of Identity: Mother and Daughter as Other in the Symbolic Order

In Hensel's narrative *Im Schlauch*, as in her other works, the female members of the family are unable to define themselves except in relation to the father character. This is a literary manifestation of the woman writer's perceived limitations based on, "the order of language as instated by the Law of the Father: the symbolic order, predicated on lack" (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 217). By situating the female family members as mothers and daughters Hensel explores power constructions in GDR society on both the political and personal levels, depending on the reading of the work. For example, just as East German citizens defined themselves in relation to their western neighbors, Natalie and her mother remain unable to define themselves in any way except in contrast to the father. Just as the GDR was born from the German nation and retained the name in its name Deutschland, so did both Natalie and Anneros retain the name Kulisch. This idea of name and identity is highly developed in *Im Schlauch* and a main vehicle with which Hensel cultivates the idea of belonging versus not belonging.

An excellent example of how important names are in *Im Schlauch* occurs repeatedly throughout the text when the female characters introduce or describe themselves. Anneros is not described in her own right, she is referred to repeatedly as "die Frau des Genossen Kulisch" (*Im Schlauch* 12). She is not even described as the wife of Siegfried Kulisch, but rather of the Genosse Kulisch. The irony lies in the fact that the GDR was theoretically a society free of the entrapments of class, yet Anneros is described in comparison not only to the private power Siegfried has as the father in the family, but also to his public power as a party member. She is portrayed as unimportant and as lacking in power. This positioning of the woman as lacking is a clear illumination of the ineffectual role of women in the symbolic order.

For Natalie the delineation is the same. After leaving home she still defines herself in relation to her father. In a scene depicting Natalie's memories of the *Feste* in Stinopel she had visited in previous years, she is cast in contrast to the authoritative backdrop of her father's image. This overt illustration of the imbalance of the familial power balance is established in the following passage:

> Es war ein hohes Gefühl auf Vaters Schultern, und die Bonbons, mit Honig gefüllte Wiener Bonbons, die hatte sie zerbissen, daß die Zähne schmerzten, Stinopel aber tröstete darüber hinweg, weiche Wiener Bonbons, Fahnen Tücher, die, wich der Vater nicht aus, Natalies Gesicht umklatschten, dann erschrak sie und ließ die Honig zwischen den Mundwinkeln am Kinn herunterfließen, und daraufhin war alles wieder gut bis Natalie den Wunsch äußerte, absteigen zu dürfen, um mitzulaufen auf der Straße, nach Haus, wo es keine Bonbons gab, nur den gläsernen am Revers von Vaters Jackett, aber Genosse Kulisch hatte breite Schultern, die ließen Natalie nicht absteigen. (*Im Schlauch* 31)

The father is securely in place as the power-holder: he is portrayed as an immense figure from which one cannot simply climb down because his shoulders are so wide. Also, this

portion of the text confirms Natalie's position as powerless. She is not in control of her life or identity. She is dependent on her father and cannot escape from the places to which he is taking her. Moreover, at the end (of this quote) he is no longer simply her father but "Genosse Kulisch," that is, he has assumed his public function as his identity.

Although Natalie is the protagonist in *Im Schlauch*, her life remains the secondary plot thread in novella. The text focuses instead on the power imbalance between the mother and father, and the parents and children. Although Natalie is the main character she is shown to be completely powerless and insignificant both in the text and in the family. Kuhn claims, "Interspersed into the story of Natalie's short-lived 'emancipation' is the narrative of her parents' life, specifically their sex life – their unimaginative, routine marital couplings being contrasted with their rather flamboyant infidelities" (Kuhn 241).

One of the key concepts of feminist criticism is examining the binary oppositions that underlie literature. Feminist criticism contends that, "these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine' is always seen as the negative, powerless instance" (Moi 211). In the case of *Im Schlauch* the female characters are defined as the "Other" and a kind of non-entity in the plot and the lives of the male characters. For example, in the beginning of the novella, the reader is only briefly introduced to Natalie's character before an in-depth character exploration of the father and his journey to Moscow is undertaken.

A second example of this can be seen in the relationship between Siegfried and Natalie. Although they are depicted in scenes together, they never speak to each other.

Natalie is so unimportant to her father that he does not even address her when she is in the room. Siegfried remains preoccupied with his son and the side-effects of his baby's premature birth. Siegfried blames his wife for the latter and expects her to build Alojescha up into a respectable size. He leaves, shouting, " Machs ihm warm. Füttere ihn. Und wenn ich zurückkomme, will ich einen ordentlichen Säugling sehen!" (*Im Schlauch* 46). Siegfried is the personification of the "Feindlichkeit" Hensel claims is ever-present in society. He has no concern for his wife or daughter's needs, only that if his son "ein Hänfling bleibe, sei es nicht von ihm" (*Im Schlauch* 46).

Sex also plays an important role in defining the woman as Other. Natalie follows the example set forth by her parents. As noted above, her parents' sex life is one of mundane repetition. Siegfried controls when and how their sexual relations will occur. He forbids sex to occur in the light. He does not want to see Anneros (or any partner) during the act of sex. That is how little his partners mean to him. He wants to make them invisible and meaningless. This meaninglessness of the woman in the act of sex is further perpetuated in the Anneros's encounter with the Reichsbahnführer, Paffrath. Throughout the rest of her marriage Anneros dreams of that one sexual encounter and the feeling of meaning it gave her. In many instances in the text she longs for that feeling again. For example, prior to their encounter Anneros is drinking beer and Kräuterlikör at the train station after dropping off Siegfried. Years later after a confrontation with Siegfried she suddenly has "heißen Appetit auf Pilsener Bier und Kräuterlikör" (*Im Schlauch 40).* When Siegfried once again refuses her request for sex with the lights on, she begs him to have sex with her on top of a suitcase, just as she had done with Paffrath in the baggage area of the train station.

This craving for the feeling Anneros had during her experience with Paffrath is shattered when she meets him again years later. Unable to control herself any longer Anneros goes to the train station and looks for Paffrath. It takes her the entire day to find him and when she does he treats her as he would any other passenger. She waits hopefully as he hands her the suitcase she brought with her. The only words he says to her are "Nehmen Sie es" (*Im Schlauch* 64). What had meant so much to Anneros and been a source of meaning for her is suddenly nullified. The sexual encounter meant so little to Paffrath that he could not even remember her. He tells her to take it, just as she has been doing her entire life. She simply takes what is offered to her without demanding more.

Natalie, as the only other female character, also takes what is offered to her without regard for her own wants or needs. The sexual encounter with Noppe is an example of this. Noppe manipulates the whole situation so that he will end up having sex with her. When he is finished he simply moves on. Natalie also experiences the same lack of recognition by her former sex partner that Anneros faced with Paffrath. When she meets Noppe on the street he says, "Verschwinde. Ich kenn dich nicht" (*Im Schlauch* 58) Just as her mother before her, Natalie is powerless and simply accepts what is dealt to her. The female characters have no power over their sexual destiny. They are the receivers of sex who only partake in sexual behaviour when it is permitted by the men in their lives. It is one more way that Natalie is controlled by her father and all male figures in her life.

In constructing Siegfried as the possessor of his daughter, Natalie, Hensel's character development is undertaken in a somewhat non-traditional manner. In order to

establish the father as dominant and daughter as subordinate Natalie is often described in a comparison setting. She is cast as an appendage without an identity of her own. Although her father does not converse with her, his influence over her is made quite obvious. As mentioned above, Natalie is rarely described as simply Natalie. She is more often referred to as the daughter of comrade Kulisch.

An example of the interweaving of the father into Natalie's identity can be observed in the first pages of the novella, when she is running away. As she steps out onto the Straße der Nationen this scene follows:

> Natalie befand sich auf der Straße, auf der breiten Straße der Nationen, die der Vater mit erbaut hatte, einundsechzig, drei Tage vor ihrer Geburt. Natalie zog den Koffer, die Wegplatten bröckelten, lösten sich aus den Fugen. Genug! Rief sie, stolperte, bog die Leninstraße rechts ab. (*Im Schlauch* 10)

Her father had built the road that takes her away from home. This imagery makes it clear that she has not only run away from home but also especially her father. He started building that road three days before she was born and now it was finally leading her away from him.

On her first night out after leaving home, Natalie views the city in a whole new way. She comes to recognize the influence her father had on her:

> Genosse Kulisch hatte immer eine Runde gedreht, jetzt drehte Natalie, die Tochter, ganz allein diese Runde, verweilte vor St. Petri, der finster veschlossenen Kirche, seit Jahren wegen Kirchdachschadens gesperrt. Kulischs Tochter blickte auf: über der Kreuzspitze schitterten Sterne. Sie sah sie zum ersten Mal. Unbekannt war Stinopel in diesem Moment, hoch in den Himmel wies der Ort ihrer Geburt. Ihr schwindelte. (*Im Schlauch* 32)

This is a moment of rebirth for Kulisch's daughter, as she referred to in the text. Although it does not last and she ultimately returns to her father's home, she has a brief

vision of the world through her own visor and viewpoint, unfettered by the influence of her father.

Three days after her escape Natalie is back in her father's home. Hensel writes: "Am dritten Tag nach ihrem sechzehnten Geburtstag ging Natalie an Vaters Seite" (*Im Schlauch* 66). This ending makes it very clear that Natalie was able to function only for three days on her own. She is portrayed in a very subordinate way walking along beside her father at the festival. Nothing has changed. Nothing is different. Natalie remains as unimportant as ever.

This manipulation of character development may in many cases not even be apparent to the reader but it presents women as possessions. It perpetuates a symbolic order that regards women as the Other and as such the subordinate. Hensel has satirically cast a critical look at this by making the associations between the daughter and father figures. By situating Anneros and Natalie constantly as wife and daughter instead of persons in their own right, the inherent flaws in the symbolic order are illuminated. Natalie's return home underlines the nearly impossible task of breaking away from the father – becoming something besides Other. Her return home, even after her rebirth experience at St. Petri, sends a clear message of women compromising their ideas in order to be accepted in a patriarchal society.

III Tanz am Kanal: Father as Dictator

III.1 *Tanz am Kanal*: Plot Summary

Tanz am Kanal is a short work of fiction by Kerstin Hensel, which depicts the life history of a homeless woman named Gabriela von Haßlau living in the GDR town of Leibnitz. This text presents Gabriela's life in the context of the paternal narrative, highlighting her relationship to her father at all stages of her life from small child to adult. *Tanz am Kanal* is a text that examines GDR life on its most human level, the family. As is the case with much writing by GDR authors, Hensel's text reveals family life in GDR society by incorporating Gabriela's experiences with characters that span the GDR social order. Through her interaction with these people *Tanz am Kanal* offers not only the story of Gabriela's life but also an illumination of life in the GDR.

The narrative begins with Gabriela as an adult living as a homeless person under the bridges on the canals surrounding Leibnitz. In her quest to discover her own identity she decides to write her life history on some scraps of paper she finds scattered on the ground. What begins as a simple need to document her life becomes something much more. Through a series of chronologically organized flashbacks Gabriela embarks on a journey of self-examination and exploration of her own identity.

Gabriela recounts the isolation and loveless childhood she endured growing up in Leibnitz. Her father, Ernst von Haßlau saw himself as her indoctrinator and made much of the focus of his life, correcting what he perceived as Gabriela's shortcomings. He is

critical of her use of language, her choice of friends and especially of her mental state, which he on more than one occasion calls into question. Gabriela spends her early childhood being made painfully aware of all her inadequacies while trying to maintain a level of prestige her father has set out for her. She is bound to fail because it is clear that she never really understands what is expected of her and is simply parroting the feelings of her overbearing father.

When she is thirteen her parents get divorced and Gabriela is left to contend with her father all on her own. Although her relationship with her mother was superficial at best, Gabriela now becomes the focal point for her father's rage and disappointment at the direction his own life is taking. He is sinking into a depression. He is a divorced man and an alcoholic. His fantasies of prestige and superiority are being dashed against the mundane reality of his life. Until the time she runs away in her late teens, Gabriela spends her teenage years either cowering from her father's overbearing nature or cleaning alcohol and broken glass off the floor after one of his drunken episodes.

The clear break in the text comes when Gabriela makes the decision to run away and live on the streets. She spends her days either wandering the streets or writing, and her evening's entertainment varies between sleeping in a movie theatre or hanging around with the other street characters at the pub, Die Drei Rosen. As at home with her father, Gabriela does not fit in. In this environment too, she sets herself apart from the homeless people who are living on the streets of Leibnitz and sleeping under the canal bridges. She distances herself from others through her arrogance, just as her father did. She feels that the writing she is doing somehow separates her from the others and makes her superior.

The climax of the book, though, is a rape she suffers and its repercussions. This is perhaps the best example of the control Gabriela's father has over her identity and self. After a concert Gabriela is brutally raped in the park and the perpetrator cuts a cross-shaped symbol into her arm. This wound is the only real proof that the assault occurred. Because the assailant is a member of the police department, the government launches a cover-up of the incident and calls upon Gabriela's father, as Chef der Chirurgischen Klinik, to make a skin graft over the scar. Her father and the authorities try to convince her that the attack never happened.

This is the catalyst for Gabriela's spiral downward into self-doubt, depression and a sense of futility in her search for an identity. She questions her own sanity and cannot cope with a normal lifestyle. She becomes a street person with, literally, no home and no identity. She gives up on finding an identity, and the narrative concludes with her moving in with the policeman who raped her. There is no closure, and no sense of better understanding herself. She simply resigns herself to being an appendage of the men who dominated her; first her father and then her rapist.

Most of the text concerns itself with the relationship between Gabriela and her father. His constant need for more power and prestige are acted out in the private sphere of his family and especially in relation to his daughter, Gabriela. Most of Gabriela's anecdotes speak to the domineering nature of her father and the methodical indoctrination he imposes on her in an attempt to completely mold her identity as he sees fit. The effects of this relationship are echoed in all of Gabriela's subsequent interactions with other characters. For example, other characters in the text play less of a role and serve mostly to highlight the difficulties in the father-daughter relationship. The first and perhaps most

obvious contrast for the father-daughter relationship is found in her mother, Christiane. Gabriela claims that her mother was "eine Fremde" (*Tanz am Kanal* 12). In contrast to the father, the mother character is very poorly developed, She simply plays along with her husband's quest for prestige and when she finally claims that: "mein Mann hat sein Prestiesch verloren," she quickly leaves him for the actor with whom she is having an affair (*Tanz am Kanal* 50).

The character of Katka, Gabriela's best friend, also provides an important contrast to Gabriela's character. While Gabriela is from an affluent single-child family, Katka comes from a single-parent mother, living in a run-down apartment with numerous siblings. Although it would seem that Gabriela has the better of the two situations, she remains envious of Katka's freedom to be who she is without the worry of disappointing a parental figure. While outwardly Gabriela has fallen under the indoctrination of her father and his need for superiority, she seems somewhat envious of Katka's carefree lifestyle.

Several other characters including Frau Popiol (Gabriela's piano teacher), the group of homeless people who assemble at the pub, Die Drei Rosen, and the man who rapes her, serve to define Gabriela's character even more. While on one hand she sees herself as superior, she associates only with those people, such as a rapist and the homeless, who do not have an accepted place in society. Gabriela is an outsider in both the private sphere (her family home) and the public one (living under the bridges).

In the character of Gabriela, Hensel has managed to reflect the concerns of the displaced GDR citizens since the fall of the Wall. Just like Gabriela, they too are homeless and in search of their identity. They also have to contend with the dominant

father country of West Germany, which has, since the *Wende*, dictated everything that has transpired politically and culturally in the new reunified nation. *Tanz am Kanal* provides a commentary on the effects of the *Wende* on citizens of the former GDR in the first five years since it happened. It offers insight into the construction of identity both personal and cultural. Most of all, it offers a powerful example of the family narrative in the tradition of GDR literature that has continued even after the demise of its nation-state.

III.2 The Symbolic Order:
Feminist Criticism and the Liberation of New Meanings from a Text

Kerstin Hensel's novel *Tanz am Kanal* is a text questioning not only the construction of identity within the GDR, it is a work that questions how women in general develop their own identities with in the framework of the traditional symbolic order. Regardless of the author's original intentions for the text, feminist literary theories encourage readers and critics alike to "liberate new meanings" from a narrative (Kolodny 185). This can be antagonistic to the proponents of the traditional literary canon, but opens up works such as *Tanz am Kanal* to interpretations that may have otherwise been less obvious to the reader and perhaps even the author of the text. In fact, Kolodny further asserts that this kind of interpretation is not only an alternative to traditional theories, but necessary for women to develop a voice and a literary tradition. She claims that: "If literary inquiry has historically escaped chaos by establishing canons, then it has only substituted one model of arbitrary action for another...this was at the expense of half the population" (Kolodny 186).

This kind of belief rests on the foundation that language itself is composed of symbols. French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan stated that:

> It is the world of words that creates the world of things and in doing so, introduces an order into what would otherwise be disparate units. This process of ordering is motivated by a series of impulses and desires that are not usually available to the conscious mind (Lacan as cited in xrefer).

"Liberating new meanings" within a text requires the careful reading and exposure of themes in a text. The author's grand vision for the work's meaning becomes less of a priority than the meaning that may be derived by the reader. East German writer Maxie Wander defines the role of the writer as "the agent who enables this meeting [meaning and reader] to take place rather than the mastermind who guides us through it" (Bassnett 73). By letting go of what Toril Moi describes as the "phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize and rationalize our conceptual universe," the reader becomes not only open to, but is encouraged to find multiple meanings within a single text (Moi 219).

In applying this theory one becomes aware of the multiple levels on which *Tanz am Kanal* deals with the theme of identity. It is commonly held that most female authors of GDR literature did not wish to ally themselves with the dogma of separatism that they considered present in feminist literature. These authors often undermine themselves because a duality, which is inherently political, occurs:

> A division of the whole into two parts recurs again and again in East German women's writing. At times it is the duality of the Nazi past and the socialist present, at other times it is the divided Germany, the two halves that do not make up a whole. (Bassnett 76)

Tanz am Kanal is an excellent example of the exploration of this idea of division. As previously mentioned, Kerstin Hensel herself has proclaimed that all literature embodies political elements whether or not intended by the author (Steigerwald 107). An example

of this division in Hensel's work resides in the division between the male and female ability to communicate within the symbolic order. Hensel's description of Gabriela's relationship with her father restates the common complaint of feminist writers: how do women portray themselves as something besides the Other and as such the inherently subordinate of the masculine, or opposite, within the symbolic order? Gabriela, the main character in *Tanz am Kanal* constructs her identity through contrast with the characters around her. One of the key issues Hensel approaches in the text is the various levels of self-awareness gained by the protagonist through her interaction with other characters. A good example of this can be seen in Gabriela's identity construction within the father-daughter relationship.

Gabriela's relationship to her father illuminates her only sense of identity, which is a construct created by her father. *Tanz am Kanal* is written in the first person and yet the reader never gains a sense of what Gabriela thinks or feels, only how her character is presented in relation to her father. Some feminist critics may interpret this as a failing in the text, as it is in danger of falling into the traditional symbolic order, which is considered only to further the literary oppression of the female writer. *Tanz am Kanal* though, while navigating within the symbolic order also casts an ironic light on this tradition.

III.3 Language as the Perpetuator of the Symbolic Order

Language is the element that constructs the symbolic order: it is what feminists consider the source of the power that male discourse asserts over the female one. *Tanz am*

Kanal illuminates this in a variety of ways, from the subtle to the open statement that language is a commodity foreign to the main character, Gabriela. Although the feminist concerns regarding the symbolic order are not explicitly confronted, language and the ownership of it play a very large role in the dynamics of the relationship between father and daughter. Eva Kaufman comments on Hensel's style saying, "She [Hensel] does not use an 'open visor' or direct polemics to engage with existing reality. She creates suggestive images, metaphors and plots" (Kaufmann 171).

Ownership of language is a not easily comprehended because of the inherent its intangibility. Without consideration of this problem, however, women subject themselves to a characterization that is, for all intents and purposes the product of male conceptions. In accepting an argument like this, one comes to realize that the whole traditional construct of female identity could in fact be just that: a construct. Gabriela, as will be shown, addresses this dilemma by openly admitting that her language, and indeed many words in it, do not even belong to her, but instead belong to her father.

In the first pages of the book the misgivings Gabriela has about her language are brought to light. Gabriela refers to words that "belong to her father" (*Tanz am Kanal* 10). These words depict his desire for class standing. This conveys a possession of language by the father. One of the main tenets of feminist literary theory claims:

> The history of Western thought has been based on the belief in the power of the word, and in literate societies the word is an instrument of power for men, who control the legal, educational, military and civil systems that are the world in action. (Bassnett 80)

The male ownership of language is perpetuated throughout the text. Words are singled out as the possession of the father. He "owns" words such as "septisch," "Violine," "Himmel und Hölle," "Pastete," "Mozart," "Varizen," "Staat" and

"Prestiesch." Words that delineate nobility, his medical education, dominance and disease are his. By contrast Gabriela is permitted to retain words such as "Dackel," "Huppekästel" and "Muskschein." These words are purposely intended to appear benign and less powerful and even childish in comparison to the language of the father. Gabriela laments: "Fern war mir das gute Deutsch meiner Eltern, und ich sielte mich in den Ausdrücken der Kinder" (*Tanz am Kanal* 27). It is clear that Gabriela understands that language does not belong to her, but that she may use or borrow it, but only when it is permitted by her father. Thus, by excluding certain words from Gabriela's vocabulary, her father has contributed to the exclusion of herself from the male world. He is shaping her identity as Other and indoctrinating her into a position of powerlessness.

These are his tools of indoctrination. Father and daughter represent on a personal level the public issue of power inequality within the construction of the symbolic order. Just as Gabriela is expected to function with words that do not belong to her, so are women expected to convey their issues with a language that does not belong to them.

The process of indoctrination can be read on many levels in this text. In examining how Gabriela constructs her identity in relation to her father, the most obvious example is his insistence that Gabriella repeat certain words after him. He slowly and patronizingly orders her to repeat words such "Vi-o-li-ne" and "Sai-ten." Gabriela prefers to call her violin a "Dackel." This is a term that she has invented. This incongruity between father and daughter is a metaphor for the confusion felt by women trying to communicate in a system that marginalizes them. Although it is perfectly clear that Gabriela is referring to her violin, her father feels the need to brainwash her into the symbolic order that he deems acceptable.

Acceptability remains for her father, quite simply, his superiority. He maintains a sense of distinction when relating not only to those around him but especially to his daughter. He achieves this in a variety of ways, but one of the most blatant is by constantly labeling his daughter with pejorative nicknames such as "Binka"[2] or "Ehlchen." Both of these names carry with them an air of condescension. Gabriela claims to have only been called by her correct name "wenn sie mich haßten" (*Tanz am Kanal* 8). The name Binka remains a leitmotiv throughout the work. It serves to denigrate Gabriela. It resurfaces at times when she is being dominated or alienated; for example during her rape, or when she must deal with authority figures. Not only is it an insult, but it also perpetuates domination over her identity cast upon her originally by her father. At one point she even asks herself, "Heiss' ich Binka? Heiss' ich Ehlchen? Heiss ich vielleicht Gabriela?" (*Tanz am Kanal* 80). Because her father has indoctrinated her in this way, even she is unable to separate her identity from it. This in turn has an effect on all her relationships to figures of power in the narrative.

III.4 Father as Indoctrinator and State: The Politics of the Family

The concept of a name being a part of identity construction in the father/daughter relationship is important because it inevitably links the identity of father and daughter. Ernst von Haßlau (the father) insists on the retention of the aristocratic "von" in their family name. In his quest to maintain a sense of superiority over everyone including his daughter he is almost fanatical about the use of this portion of his name. Both father and

[2] Binka is a nickname meaning "silly little girl" (Hensel, personal interview)

daughter make repeated references to their superiority over others in their same socio-economic stratum. This insistence is quite absurd since they are living in a theoretically classless society. Gabriela, however, holds firmly to this piece of her father's indoctrination. She corrects her fellow street people who inhabit the area under the bridges where she sleeps (*Tanz am Kanal* 22). The lack of understanding for this amongst her community becomes clear on her first day of school. As the teacher calls out the roll, Gabriela corrects her and insists on being addressed using the "von" form. The students and the teacher laugh at this illogical demand. As she is telling her father later the story of what happened at school she lazily pronounces "sozialistisch" as "sossalistisch" (*Tanz am Kanal* 23). Gabriela is corrected and the matter of their name is taken even more seriously. Gabriela feels that because her father is a doctor and not a blue-collar worker like many of the children's fathers, she is something better than they are. Her father defends this feeling by visiting the teacher who made the error to ensure it would not happen again. Gabriela's identity is already presented to her as an appendage of her father's. Whether or not she takes pride in this, she accepts it. The character Binka von Haßlau remains a construct of her father but is a key element of Gabriela's construct of her own identity.

Annette Steigerwald asserts that Gabriela struggles throughout the work to discover her identity (4). Because Gabriela is presented in the role of daughter as protagonist, the most logical place for this identity search to take place is the parent. Gabriela openly admits that her mother is a stranger to her (*Tanz am Kanal* 12). As a result the search for identity takes place against the backdrop of the patriarch of the family. While many of the texts during the time of the GDR focused on the father as

"Communist disciplined body," *Tanz am Kanal* seeks to completely unseat that notion (Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* 107) Although Gabriela's father may appear disciplined in his obsessive desire for social status, he is, in fact, completely undisciplined in his personal conduct. He is an alcoholic, he throws wild parties, and he openly expresses his disdain for the government. Ernst von Haßlau is the personification of the anti-hero of the communist state. He is placed in the work as a means of mirroring the political through personal experience.

Gabriela takes her lead from this. She remains out of place in her state just as her father did. She maintains an outsider status in an enclosure. Just as Dr. von Haßlau was confined by the doctrines of the socialist state, Gabriela is confined to the streets she lives on by the canals that surround her city. Confinement and frustration over the lack of recognition for "who they are" is a resulting leitmotiv. Both complain they are not perceived as something greater in their social milleu.

An example of this desire for status can be observed in the way in which both attempt to gain social standing. Ernst von Haßlau does this by deciding to throw parties for the people he considers cultured. He explains his actions to his wife and daughter and exclaims that by impressing these people they will finally "be somebody" in their town (*Tanz am Kanal* 36). Once again, he is deluding himself with visions of a grandeur that is not possible under the regime in which he lives. His daughter, while contemplating the work she is writing on some scraps of paper, deludes herself as well. She dreams that this work will become an enormous success and will bring her a more important place in society. Gabriela writes, "Es könnte etwas werden mit meiner Geschichte, ein Erfolg, der mich von diesem Punkt auf einen höheren versetzt" (*Tanz am Kanal* 36). Gabriela

consistently follows the lead of her father because he has indoctrinated her to act in a way that he has constructed as appropriate. She embodies the vicious circle in which all women dance. How do they find a new identity in a system into which our fathers have socialized them? Gabriela's search for an identity as something she can posses is a figment of her imagination. Her father fueled her obsession with it by telling her they would become important only when they achieved some sort of elevated cultural status.

III.5 Establishing Identity Through the Inferences of Colour: Father as the Godlike

The concept of father and daughter desiring to be something that they are not is developed in the text on another level as well. There is a provocative use of colour to indicate similarities and differences in power. For example, Gabriela and her father are described in terms of black and white, she being black and her father white. These two shades are commonly considered the opposite of colour and in a way a kind of non-colour because they do not occur in the colour spectrum. In a short scene two female reporters visit from the West. To enhance their foreignness they are described in exotic colours such as aubergine and lilac. An overwhelming amount of blue is used to describe the worker.

The most striking use of colour is in the use of white surrounding the characterization of the father. White is traditionally the colour of truth and purity, or sometimes even related to sainthood or heaven. Gabriela's father is almost always described in this way. As a child Gabriela characterizes her father in the following manner: "Groß und weiß stand er vor mir und roch nach fremdem Cognac" (*Tanz am Kanal* 18). As he observes her class one day, Gabriela remarks: "Weiß und schön strömte

er den geheimnisvollen Geruch von Krankenhaus aus" (*Tanz am Kanal* 34). Gabriela's father is constantly presented in a God-like manner. He is large and white and full of mysterious smells. Clearly he is the master of her universe, and she accepts the world and her place in it as truth.

Whenever Gabriela calls her father's construction of her identity into question she is examined for her mental health. This is a common theme among feminist writers. Some theorists, such as Shoshana Felman, stress that madness is the one way for women to escape the symbolic order.[3] First, when Gabriela does not perform according to her father's desire in school, she reports that: "Vater schleppte mich zum Psychologen" (*Tanz am Kanal* 28). Then, in a confrontation with state authority, she is again seen by a psychiatrist (*Tanz am Kanal* 118). When hitch-hiking, instead of being driven to her destination, she is this time delivered to a psychiatrist and declared a "schizo" (*Tanz am Kanal* 117). As soon as her identity escapes the bounds of the system her father originally constructed for her, her coherence is questioned.

This questioning of her ability to rationalize independent behaviour leads to perhaps the most frightening doubt of her own judgment. After the rape she begins to question if it really happened at all. Her father plays an important role in her inability to know her own mind. Since he is a doctor, he is called upon to cover up the physical evidence of the rape (the cross-shaped scar cut into her forearm). Because both the authorities and her father have dismissed this event as an invention of Gabriela, her

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[3] Shoshana Felman theorizes that in order for women to be able to conceptualize themselves as something besides 'Other' in the symbolic order, madness offers them a vehicle in which to present themselves and their ideas. She further claims that a "revaluation of madness is in order as a legitimate form of feminist discourse." (Felman 36)

confidence in her own mind begins to waver. She states: "Fast glaubte ich schon, daß ich mich wirklich geirrt habe und, in einem Anfall von Unbeherrschtheit, mir selbst die Verletzung zugefügt und den Rest geträumt hatte" (*Tanz am Kanal* 73). The system has totally failed her and even managed to blame Gabriela's torment on herself. Gabriela represents a familiar literary situation. As women struggle to be believed and understood in the traditional symbolic order, their failure to communicate often results in frustration and self-punishment. This occurs to the point where women are perceived as inferior because they are unable to function in a literary system that does not facilitate them.

The only character in the text that believes the rape took place is Gabriela's friend Katka. Katka presents an important contrast to the father-daughter relationship. Early in the work Gabriela comments that "einen Vater kannte Katka nicht" (*Tanz am Kanal* 27). Katka had no indoctrinator as Gabriela did. Because of this Katka's free life is a stark contrast to the constructed one in which Gabriela maneuvers. Katka provides an image of independence. She is fat and funny and free. Her autonomy and power over her own identity and destiny highlight Gabriela's dilemma of having her identity so encased in her father's. Katka asks Gabriela where she is going, to which she replies: "wohin ich will" (*Tanz am Kanal* 64). She knows this is not true. Gabriela goes only where she is told and permitted to go.

The results of Gabriela's indoctrination by her father are apparent until she makes a break from her enclosure. She breaks through the canals surrounding Leibnitz and goes to Mecklenburg. Steigerwald cites this as the point at which she "gradually seems to realize the false premise of identity as a monolithic entity to be possessed" (Steigerwald

4). She comes to the conclusion that the search will be an unending one. Her identity is realized not as static but as something fluid and volatile, and beyond her possession.

This leads to the final scene, which at first is confusing. Gabriela, back in Leibnitz, has consensual sex with the man who raped her earlier in the text. According to Kaufmann, one perspective on this might be that it "depicts how the old and new roles of women have become entangled" (Kaufmann 171). By having sex with the man who raped her, Gabriela shows how the situation has not really changed. Whether resisting sex or partaking in it women are being objectified because it is not something they actively do, but rather something that is done to them. After having sex with Paffrath, she describes it in the following way, "Schlimm war es nicht. Schön war es auch nicht" (*Tanz am Kanal* 119). Gabriela has become incapable of emotion of any sort.

It is also important to note that the colour white comes to the forefront in these two scenes. When she is being raped, everything appears before her eyes bathed in white. When she consensually sleeps with Paffrath again she sees "weiße Beine, Bauch, Brust, weiß, alles weiß" (*Tanz am Kanal* 118). The dominating white figure of her father is replaced by the next man to dominate her – her rapist and her sex partner. Those who are inside her both physically and mentally take on a superhuman quality enhanced by the colour white, just as her father stood before her in a white and untouchable way. It is the intertwining of her identity with her father that makes her incapable of developing an independent self-image. She is held in this order that she did not create, which her father perpetuated, and from which she cannot release herself.

The patriarchal nature of the world has created an order separating the woman as the "Other." That is because this world has been constructed by men. Gabriela's situation

is a model for the conditions women have had to face in a symbolic order that is not capable of meeting their needs for communication. They are trapped, as is Gabriela, in a world constructed for them. They find their identities in this order by identifying with something foreign to them because they have been socialized to do so. It is only when, just as Gabriela, women dance beyond the boundaries of the canals surrounding the order they have always known, will they be free to realize their identities are a construct. As such they are not static, they may be torn down and rebuilt with linguistic tools more suited to the feminine voice. Perhaps this is why Hensel has ended the work the way she has – by not ending it at all. There is no great epiphany for the protagonist. There is only the reality of her situation. She is defining herself in relation to all authority in her life. Her identity has proven to be something she cannot possess. Steigerwald comments of this ending that "Gabriela's search is shown to be an unending one" (4). Clearly Gabriela is still searching for herself and this need not be resolved with the end of the narrative, just as it has not been resolved for women seeking to make their thoughts and protests understood in the symbolic order.

IV *Gipshut*: the Gegenwartsbewältigung of a Disappearing Culture

IV.1 *Gipshut* – A Plot Summary

Kerstin Hensel's novel *Gipshut* begins in 1950 as Veronika Dankschön is riding her bike toward Siethener See on the outskirts of town. She is experiencing a significant amount of stomach pain and is not sure exactly what is happening to her. In the water of the lake she gives birth to a baby boy she names Hans. She is not upset by the birth, in fact she is quite happy to be a mother. "Soviel verstand sie: sie war Mutter geworden...Veronika kicherte in sich hinein. Stellte sich die Begrüßung vor: lautes Hallo und Gratulationen, Kuchen wird es geben, ein Fest!" (*Gipshut* 35). As she returns to her workplace and home she is confused by the lack of acceptance of her baby by those close to her. However, once the forklift-driver at work, Jochen, offhandedly proposes marriage to her and there appears to be a father figure in the child's life, the situation becomes acceptable to the general public.

Veronika is not an intelligent woman, but she is loyal and loving and in search of someone, anyone, to feel that way about her. Unfortunately for her that is not to be and she seems to repel everyone she comes in contact with. After only a few years, her husband leaves her. To her son Hans she is perhaps most repellant. He feels she does not have the ability nor the desire to understand him and at one point screams at her, "Verdammt noch mal, kannst du mich nicht wenigstens einmal verstehen wollen" (*Gipshut* 68). This feeling increases with time and his distaste for her becomes almost

unbearable for him. Hans is extremely intelligent and shows interest in intellectual pursuits from a very young age. He grows up with strong beliefs in the GDR dogma of the day. He blissfully takes part in all institutions of the GDR like the FDJ and the NVA.

At eighteen he enthusiastically begins his journalism studies in Leipzig. He is very keen and works hard at the university. When he finishes, he earns a post as reporter for the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. He settles down in Leipzig in a working class neighbourhood with his first girlfriend, Illona, who eventually leaves him broken-hearted when she returns to the Soviet Union.

Hans carries on and throws himself into his work harder than ever. He leaves on a working trip to Moscow. While he is there, not only is the political climate changing with the fall of the Wall becoming imminent but his personal life is changing too. Veronika remains in East Germany and has an encounter with a female figure in white called the Pschepoldnitza. After a short discussion with the Pschepoldnitza, Veronika hangs herself in the living room of the house where she raised Hans. When he returns home he finds a strange new woman resembling the Pschepoldnitza living there and is denied entrance to his childhood residence.

Everything changes for Hans with the fall of the Wall. He is no longer qualified to work as a reporter in the united Germany. He goes to the employment office to apply for whatever job he may be eligible for as he is no longer able to live in the working class residence. He is granted a job as a security guard in the Palast der Republik. The story of Hans' life has been intermittently interrupted with the story of two geologists studying a volcano in 1997 in the same lake where Hans was born. At this point the novel loses all sense of continuity and devolves into a chaotic assortment of disconnected scenes and

images. Norg and Anna are from very different backgrounds (he from the East and she from the West). They are constantly referred to as the "deutsch-deutsches Geologenteam." Norg and Anna have supernatural experiences at the lake, including a visit from the same figure that visited Veronika on the day of her death. She directs them to the Palast der Republik where Hans is now working. He is fascinated to the point of obsession with the plaster statues and figurines housed there and even creates some of his own.

In the Palast der Republik the three of them uncover an underground volcano that has been dormant for quite some time. At this point Hans is diagnosed with cancer. He spirals down into a quasi-hallucinogenic state and in this dream-like world that he meets the figure in white that visited his mother and Norg and Anna. He makes a miraculous recovery and evolves into a kind of reluctant hero. When he returns to the Palast der Republik he discovers a hairline crack in the basement floor right over the spot where the underground volcano is located. Hans becomes empowered with super-human strength. Using a crowbar he works tirelessly to pry open the crack, which begins to spray a stronger and stronger stream of volcanic gas.

At the end of the novel the reader gets no sense of closure. Hans returns to his apartment, uncorks a bottle of champagne and pours himself a glass. He retires to his balcony to watch the gas rising from the Palast der Republik. A dizzying array of images follows as he describes the plaster figurines that were housed in the Palast der Republik swirling around in the sky above him.

> Dinge werden aus unbekannter Tiefe über die Stadt geschleudert, in wirbelnden Eskapaden Widderköpfe Adler Genien Putten Säulen Portale, eine glühende Venus, die Maske eines Unbekannten, alles aus Gips, der weißstäubig das Licht bindet für kurze Zeit, um Raum zu schaffen für

> neue gigantische Energien, rasende Nukleonen, die alles herausreißen, was versunken vermauert vergessen war. (*Gipshut* 226)

The gas and the figurines create a magical scene above the city and the reader is left with a sense that Hans takes pride in being the creator of this scene.

The postmodern combination of the past and present is quite dramatic and effective. The destruction of a monument to a culture that is disappearing reflects perhaps the mixed emotions of all citizens of the former GDR as their society is swallowed by the more powerful nation in their new unified Germany. Nevertheless, *Gipshut* presents a powerful look at both GDR society and the ten years since the fall of the Wall.

IV.2 Child as Father's Possession – Mother as Outsider

At the present time Germany is thought of as a "unified" nation. But this notion requires some solidification in the literary consciousness of both citizens of the former eastern and western "Germanies." It is impossible for the literature produced by citizens of the former East Germany to be understood on the same level outside of the culture that produced it. Though the signs may be the same, what they signify is radically different because of the experience of the reader. Kerstin Hensel claims that in East Germany, "The word had meaning, and painting too, had greater emphasis" than in the West (Von Hallberg 212). As previously stated, it can be hypothesized that reading behind the meaning is very important to understanding GDR literature. GDR literature, by its very nature, is intended to be a commentary, a source of information and not simply a story.

A recent on-line critique SAT3 claimed that in Kerstin Hensel's texts, "[sie] erzählt von sonderbaren Menschen." Although this can be said of all her work, *Gipshut*,

her most recent book, is perhaps the best example of this. Once again through the dysfunction of a family, Hensel provides a kind of group therapy for the culturally displaced citizens of the former GDR. Even though her characters are out of the ordinary, they are also somehow familiar. In the case of *Gipshut*, Hensel changes her approach slightly with the main power struggle in the family existing not between father and daughter but instead between mother and son. The struggle does remain one of oppositions whether it be male/female, inside/outside, private/public, etc. In this case the choice of character opposition successfully depicts the female (mother) character as the "outsider" searching for her identity. As this chapter will show, the female outsider may be understood on the previously referred-to levels. Much of Hensel's technique remains consistent with her other works; for example, the manipulation of language, the daring use of colour and the ultimate lack of closure at the end of the text.

Where the first two texts examined in this thesis were examinations of life in the GDR, *Gipshut* illuminates not only the period in which the GDR existed but also well into the years following the fall of the Wall. In total this text spans 46 years of Hans Kielkropf's life. In addition to the story of Hans, as with many authors raised in the GDR, Hensel now lives in a culture/society has been quickly swallowed up by the capitalist West. This style leaves the room for multiple meanings in a text. Thus, *The Kieler Nachrichten* has said *Gipshut* is written, "ganz in der Tradition der DDR-Literatur, wo entscheidende Aussagen geschickt verfremdet werden mussten, sollten sie vor der Zensur bestehen." In order to achieve this ambiguity of meaning, Hensel's characters are once again characterized in opposition to what they are not, instead of simply described as what they are.

Gipshut immediately establishes itself as a historical commentary on the first events that take place in the narrative. The dramatic underwater birth of sixteen-year-old Veronika Dankschön's son Hans takes place in the Siethener See in the first months of the newly established GDR. This metaphor thinly veils the commentary of the difficult and unexpected birth of a separate East German nation. Veronika does not even realize she is pregnant until she gives birth in a vividly described birth scene

> Mit der letzten Schmerzwoge rutschte das Kind aus Veronika heraus. Sie griff unter sich, faßte, was da zwischen ihr und dem Neugeborenen hing; die spiralig gedrehte Schnur faßte sie, riß, drehte, zwirbelte sie, half mit den Fingernägeln schneidend nach, bis die Schnur nachgab und das Kind abgenabelt, mit Hilfe der Mutter, auftauchen konnte. (*Gipshut* 21)

Immediately after the birth the focus shifts to justifying the existence of this child. Although the focus should be on mother and son, here it is immediately diverted to the father. As in her previous works Hensel sets the tone for the woman to be cast as "Other" by calling into question Veronika's legitimacy as a parent. The metaphor of the illegitimate child as the emerging new nation of the GDR mirrors the insecure and dependent beginnings of this fledgling country.

Jane Gallop writes of this, "patriarchal law, the law of the father, decrees that the 'product' of sexual union, the child, shall belong exclusively to the father, to be marked with his name" (499). Because of this Veronika is immediately confronted with the question of who the father is. When she comes across a group of children on a campout their leader asks, "Wer ist eigentlich der Vater?" to which she replies "Wieso Vater?" (*Gipshut* 33). Later in the hospital the image of woman as hysterical is further perpetuated in a scene of a doctor searching for a psychiatrist to examine Veronika because she has no concern for who the father of the baby is. The doctor presses her for

the information and even implies her behaviour borders on criminality, "ob sie denn nicht einen Psychiater im Haus fänden. Es gab keinen. Die Jungendfürsorge wurde informiert. Auf die Polizei verzichtete der Arzt. Die Nacht verbrachte Veronika Dankschön in der Luckenwalder Frauenklinik" (*Gipshut* 34). Because she doesn't know who the father is, she is considered to be insane.

This contempt toward her evolves into a more patronizing tone when, after not being able to find a psychiatrist, the doctor calls in her boss. Although she is overjoyed at the prospect of being a mother, she is met only with disapproving responses from all the men around her in positions of authority. The reaction from her boss is: "Veronkia erzählte ihm alles ein drittes Mal; und ein drittes Mal wurde die Geschichte mit 'unglaublich' kommentiert" (*Gipshut* 35). He further patronizes her by exclaiming not to her but to his colleague: "Wir werden das Kind schon schaukeln und den Vater finden, nicht wahr, Genosse Gotsche, nicht wahr" (*Gipshut* 34). His response to the whole situation is to "find" a father. This will legitimize the birth and rationalize the situation to the power-holders interviewing her. When he further claims, "Wir werden alles für dich tun, mach dir keine Sorgen," Veronika is confused because she "wußte nicht, welche Sorgen überhaupt anstehen könnten. Sie freute sich auf das, von dem sie glaubte, was ihr bevorstünde" (*Gipshut* 35). In the first 35 pages Hensel has already established the major female character as the "outsider" and her child as illegitimate. Veronika Dankschön's feelings and thoughts have been completely nullified in opposition to the male figures of power around her.

This situation mirrors what was occurring historically in the newly formed nation of East Germany. Nations holding power over the GDR observed it in a patronizing way

because of its lack of paternal ancestry and its inherent association with the USSR; the outsider when opposed to the powerful western countries of the day, East Germany had looked to "Mother Russia" for her cultural and historical influence. Completely severed from its "Fatherland" at this point, East Germany was a culture which for future generations would have no history of its own, no ancestry. As already pointed out, legitimacy is only achieved through identification with a paternal past and East Germany had a difficult challenge of finding an identity. Hensel has married the issues of the female lack of voice with the political loss of voice for the entire nation. Unclear of where they are going on both levels, the personal and the private spheres of 1950's East Germany struggled to define an identity free from its past associations.

Hensel takes these connections to an even deeper level. The announcement of the father's identity brings about an even greater loss of power for Veronika. The symbolic order, which perpetuates the view that only men have valid ideas, also casts women as the passive and men as the active. Although Veronika was not in any hurry to disclose the father's name, nor did she indicate a desire to have him involved in her or the baby's lives. However, when Jochen (the father) offhandedly states, "Heiraten wir...ich bin nun mal der Vater" she passively submits (*Gipshut* 39). Veronika is described as being "zufrieden" with the idea. Not happy. Not distraught. She is simply satisfied, much like Gabriela von Haßlau is simply "satisfied" with her sexual experience.

The decision for them to get a divorce comes about with the same lack of input on her part. After living together for a few years Jochen simply announces: "Ich laß mich scheiden" (*Gipshut* 44). It is as if the decision affects Veronika in no way at all. The statement in itself is a subtle use of irony. "I am getting divorced" implies that no one

else is involved in the process. Realistically one would say "I think we should get divorced." Hensel has purposely created a scene in which the patriarchal influences over text can clearly be seen.

This scenario, too, embodies a greater historical commentary. Just as Veronika's child bore the name of both her father, and the baby's father, the new East German nation bore the name of the "Fatherland" that preceded it. For a time, Veronika remains married to the baby's father and they try to raise the baby together, just as the two Germanies continued to function together until their political situations made this no longer possible. For example, the *Bitterfelder Weg* of the 1950's forced the separation of German culture by proclaiming East German literature to be a literature in its own right and that production of it would proceed without any more influence from the West German government. It was a divorce of sorts for the cultures of these two nations. Just as Hans' father divorced Veronika, the West divorced itself from the culture of the east and it was left to develop under the guidance of the mother (USSR) alone.

IV.3 Role Reversal – Son as Father Figure in the Absence of the Father

Hensel succeeds with *Gipshut* in observing the GDR traditional literary style of the Parental Narrative by constructing it in a unique manner. Typically, texts "highlighted the father as a traditional representative of history, the public sphere, and the state" (Kosta & Kraft 75). *Gipshut* turns this aspect of the symbolic order around to create a situation where the child represents these aspects of culture. As with other GDR authors, the conflict with the father is established even in his absence. In the case of *Gipshut* the

mother becomes established as the "Other" and thus inferior element within the symbolic order simply by placing her in binary opposition to the absent father. Very early on, when naming the child, the father figure in Veronika's life is cast as the role model for her son, even though he is never developed as a character in the work. Hensel writes, "Veronika nannte ihr Kind Hans. Dieser Name fiel ihr einfach zu. Sie hatte ihn wohl einmal gehört, von der Mutter, die den Vater so genannt hatte. Zu Weihnachten glaubte Veronika sich zu erinnern, zu Weihnachten hatte Mutter den Vater Hans genannt, sonst immer nur Vadder" (*Gipshut* 22). From the very beginning Hans is infused with father-like qualities. As recognized earlier, the father figure encapsulates culture, society and state. In naming the son after the father, the symbolic order which constructs those ideals is exposed.

As Hans enters childhood it is already clear that Veronika is set apart from Hans. He is seen as foreign to her and again this reminds her of a dominant man in her life; the man who claimed to be Hans' father:

> Auch der Sohn war ihr fremd, mit einer fremden schallenden Stimme. Nur manchmal, wenn er mit dem Reden innehielt und Nachschlag nahm, wenn er die Augen zukniff und, als lächele er, die Lippen über die Zähne zog, glaubte sie, in ihm etwas von der lustigen Art seines Vaters zu erkennen. (*Gipshut* 63)

Once again Hans is likened to a man who had control over her at one point in her life. Perhaps even more humiliating than a daughter dominated by her father, is a mother dominated by her son. Veronika laments to herself, "Prima Veronika. Was hatte sie damit zu tun. Wer half ihr, die Liebe des Sohnes zurückzugewinnen" (*Gipshut* 63). Roland Barthes once claimed that all narratives are "a staging of the (absent, hidden or hypostatized) father" (Boone 1068). Veronika struggles against the paternal authority of her own son.

Hans too is aware of this distance between him and his mother. He even encourages it and through this serves to further enhance the image of woman as "Other." He is obviously much more intelligent than his mother and this causes difficulty in their relationship. This becomes very clear when Hensel writes, "Hans begann, Mutter aus dem Weg zu gehen, soweit das in der engen Wohnung möglich war. Doch manchmal stand sie einfach vor ihm, plötzlich, in der Küche oder in dem finsteren Flur; dann drückte Hans seinen Kopf an ihre Brust und sog den warmen Duft ein und ließ sich das Haar streicheln, ohne Widerspruch, ohne Aufstand" (*Gipshut* 49). In what should be tender scene between mother and son, there is a sense of distance and misunderstanding between them. Hans avoids her the best he can, but when confronted he allows intimacy. He remains the figure in control of the situation and the emotion. The mother, and female, is "permitted" intimacy at the desire of the son. She is not cast as the initiator, but rather as the receiver. She remains the passive character being acted upon instead of doing the acting.

The inequality of power between mother and son is illuminated when Veronika bakes a cake to celebrate Hans' 18th birthday. Instead of writing 18 she instead writes 81

> Veronika hatte ihrem Sohn einen Napfkuchen gebacken, einen Festtagskuchen mit Rosinen und Mandeln, den sie zu gegebenem Anlaß mit Zahlen aus weißem Zuckerguß verzierte, mit einer 8 und einer 1, wobei sie die 8 vor die 1 setzte, so daß Hans ein Alter von 81 Jahren hätte haben müssen, um von dem Kuchen essen zu dürfen. (*Gipshut* 67)

This is perhaps more telling than it originally seems. She claims that in order for Hans to be "allowed" to eat the cake he must be of the age 81. She has inadvertently turned Hans into the "older" and "wiser" individual in the scenario. She has made him an age that

conceivably her own father would be. When Hans notices the mistake on the cake, he flies into a rage and reprimands her in a way reminiscent of a father chastising a child:

> Hans hebelte mit dem Brotmesser die falsch gesetzten Ziffern vom Kuchen, erst die 8 und die 1. Der Zuckerguß klebte und ganz besonders gut klebte er über dem Tisch an der Kuchenwand, woran Hans jetzt sein Alter befestigte, erst die 1 dann die 8: 'Achtzehn', sagte er. (*Gipshut* 67)

At first glance, the scene seems a simple mistake on Veronika's part. It can be interpreted though as further developing Hans' role as the literary "father" and establishes the mother character's place as inferior within the symbolic order.

It is this event that sparks the departure of Hans from his childhood home. The mental distance between him and Veronika is replaced by physical distance. He announces it to her in a dramatic and declarative way:

> Er erläuterte seiner Mutter, daß er beschlossen habe, von seinem alten Leben Abschied zu nehmen und alles dafür tun, daß die Fortsetzung der revolutionären Tradition der Arbeiterklasse in Übereinstimmung mit den Prozessen der geschichtlichen Entwicklung unserer Epoche, die entwickelte Gesellschaft mit ihm, Hans Kielkropf, erfüllt ist von dem Willen, unbeirrt auch weiter den Weg des Friedens, der Demokratie und Völkerfreundschaft zu gehen, und aus diesem Vorwärtsschreiten abzuleiten, daß es der Umsetzung einer Theorie... (*Gipshut* 63)

The exaggerated manner in which he takes his leave from his home and mother show the lack of meaning behind the rhetoric of the GDR nation. Veronika and his childhood home are seen as the opposite of the communist ideals he is trying to perpetuate. She stands for a society present before the inception of the GDR. Hans sees this life as something he needs to separate himself from. In true GDR tradition the personal has become the political by expressing a simple good-bye in pompous and ritualistic language.

Hans sees himself as the "new" and better way, just as authors of the second generation found the message of their texts more socially constructive than those of their

first generation predecessors. Hans asks himself, "Warum verstand ihn die eigene Mutter nicht? Was hatte sie überhaupt zu schaffen mit ihm?" (*Gipshut* 152). His inner torment of not being understood accurately mirrors the collective feeling in GDR texts of the late sixties and early seventies that asserted, "there was nothing left with which to identify" (Müller 100). Müller further claims it is this lack of connection with the previous generation, which focused the texts of many GDR authors on a search for identity, that they were "impatient with social conditions they were simply born into" (101). Hans is no exception. At the first possible opportunity he leaves his home to go away to school.

It is this time away at school which fully transforms him and again mirrors the political/social transformation of the GDR and its values. After he develops a relationship with the first woman other than his mother he proclaims his freedom. He is finally, "frei von Nudows Güllerträumen und den Lupinen, frei von Mutter" (*Gipshut* 109-10). In this freedom the language of the text changes for the time that Hans continues his relationship with Illona. Instead of comments about living in the "engen Wohnung" with his mother, Hans now feels, "als er Illona liebte, rückten die Zimmerwände auseinander, und durch die Fugen konnte Hans den Himmel sehen" (*Gipshut* 110). He has lost himself in the individual pleasure of sex and a relationship he chooses to be in, instead of one that society imposes on him (the family). Ultimately his relationship with Illona turns out to be an illusion and she leaves him to go to Russia.

IV.4 The Pschespoldnitza as Divine Catalyst for Change

As mentioned above, Hensel interweaves a second narrative into the story of Hans and Veronika. This portion of the text is dedicated to two geologists who experience a supernatural event at the lake where Hans was born. The common thread that binds these two narratives is their experience with the entity known as the Pschespoldnitza. The Pschespoldnitza is a female figure described as glowing and dressed in white linen. She is the vehicle through which major life changes occur for all the main characters. She forces them to study their lives and through this investigation forces a larger examination of the cultural environment in which they are living. She appears to them only at the time of the *Wende* or thereafter. She is a powerful yet extremely mysterious figure. Whenever she is present she brings about either peace or chaos.

The Pschespoldnitza is the only female figure in the narrative with any power. Her power, though, is all-encompassing in that she is not a true "woman" but in fact a divine figure of some sort. She makes her first appearance in one of the scenes dedicated to the two geologists. Once again, with these two characters it is interesting that much of the plot dedicated to them and certainly most of the character development is done through opposition to parental figures. Their mystical meeting in the woods with a female figure dressed in white leads to a strong development of the parental figures in their lives. When the woman demands that they speak on one subject for an hour or face the penalty of death, both immediately think of their parents.

Norg, who is the first to reflect upon his childhood launches into a long description of the days he spent helping his father at work. His mother is never

mentioned. Norg describes his father using him as a human ladder so that he could paint without having to get down and move the ladder. His father uses him in this way until he finally injures Norg. Instead of worrying about the health of his child, he is annoyed that he will have to again use a conventional ladder. Norg, however, in complete awe of his father, sees only the positive side of the relationship between his father and himself. He recalls feeling useful, if even only as a human ladder.

> ...sollte er vielleicht erzählen, von den unzähligen Tagen, an denen er seinem Vater helfen durfte, als lebendige Leiter oder als Rührgehilfe für die Eimer voll Kreidewandfarbe. Oder wie er den Kleister mit der Bürste auf die Tapetenbahnen streichen durfte, diese bräunliche Masse, und wie der Vater auf ihn unendlich stolz war, und wie er als Belohnung für alles das Eiscafe im Palast der Republik aufsuchen und soviel Eis essen durfte, bis ihm schlecht wurde; denn von diesem Haus aus, hatte der Vater immer gesagt, von diesem Haus aus wird einst unser Volk in die Welt hineinreichen und seine Idee der menschenwürdigen Zukunft zur Zündung bringen. (*Gipshut* 86)

At a moment of extreme pressure, the only way Norg can define himself is as a disappointment to his father. His father is revered and held up as the measurement for himself.

Norg's counterpart, Anna, is also developed through a long description of her childhood with her runaway single mother-turned-prostitute, and finally her search for a replacement father in her romantic encounters. Anna is looking for a person in a position of authority to "save" her. The first is a police officer named Paffrath. He enters the scene when she has a breakdown at the kiosk where her mother used to work. She immediately becomes calm and passive and leaves with him. Someone has taken control of her. She settles into the role of being "kept," allowing him to take over. He sends her on a retreat to try and relax. It is here that she meets the second, and even more vivid father figure. She has an affair at the retreat with a Professor she affectionately refers to as Polti,

unaware at the time that he is married. When Anna leaves Paffrath to be with Polti, she comes to his house only to come face to face with his wife.

Anna moves into the studio behind the house, all the while hoping that Polti will somehow remember their time together and leave his wife for her. She becomes obsessive, craving the attention of this married man and the illusion of the security she thinks he can offer her. She thinks to herself:

> Jeden Tag hoffte ich darauf, Polti möge einmal den Pavillon betreten, allein, warm und zärtlich, und mich vor allen Lügen dieser Welt beschützen. Er möge mir sagen: Jetzt ist die Zeit mit meiner Frau zu Ende und du bist ab heute meine Frau und wirst ab sofort neben mir essen und alles tun, was ich schon einmal versprochen habe. Aber Polti betrat den Pavillon nicht. (*Gipshut* 102)

Polti works non-stop and never revisits the romance that occurred between the two at the retreat. Finally, one day he appears with yet another woman, named Lilli, who will share the guest house with Anna. This is too much for Anna and for Polti's wife, Frau Hörnel. The latter kills herself and Anna flees for fear that she will be suspected of having killed her. As she leaves she promises herself, "Nie wieder [sich] retten zu lassen" (*Gipshut* 105).

The Pschespoldnitza extracts all this information from the two geologists and then leaves them in a new-found peace. In discussing their pasts they accept their present and future. In their discussion the Pschespoldnitza is described as white, the colour of redemption, peace and purity. Anna and Norg on the other hand are described in terms of blue, being the colour of tranquility and unity. Anna and Norg are the present Germanies, the East and the West with their very different pasts.

Viewed in light of Hans and Veronika's experiences with the Pschespoldnitza, *Gipshut* takes shape as a true historical narrative. For Hans and Veronika the

Pschespoldnitza brings about death and destruction. The Pschespoldnitza visits Veronika in her home and again requests that she speak about herself. Veronika does not. She chooses instead to die. Using the cable that she had long ago purchased as a Christmas gift for Hans' father, she hangs herself. Her death is explained quite matter-of-factly:

> Als ihre Urlaubszeit herum war und sie auch drei Tage danach nicht zur Arbeit im Warenlager der Konsumgenossenschaft erschien, machten sich zwei Vertreter des Kollektivs auf den Weg zu ihrer Wohnung. Sie mußten eine Drahtschere benutzen, um das Kabel zu durchtrennen, das Veronika Dankschön zu ihrem Ende gedient hatte. (*Gipshut* 180)

Hans is away on a journalist's tour in the USSR. Coincidentally this all takes place as the *Wende* is occurring.

When Hans returns he finds the Pschespoldnitza living in his house and gets the message that his mother is dead. None of his belongings are there and he is refused entry to the house where he grew up. After avoiding his mother the best he could all his life he is suddenly overcome with grief:

> Dann brach er in Weinen aus, in ein rauhes wölfisches Heulen, daß das ganze Dorf Nudow erschütterte und am meisten ihn selbst, weil er von sich noch lange nicht alles kannte und Furcht aufkam, daß dieser Ausbruch nicht der letzte sein könnte. (*Gipshut* 191)

He relives his childhood, skipping and playing childhood games in a morbid anguish ritual for his dead mother. Everything that he hated in his childhood has instantly become dear to him. The Pschespoldnitza has for each of the main characters in the story been the catalyst for their acceptance of life change. The Pschespoldnitza is for these characters a vehicle for their own personal "Vergangenheits- and Gegenwarts-bewältigung."

Hans becomes representative of all children of the GDR. Just as has Hans had, so did GDR citizens lament its very existence. They complained of living within her confines. When faced with the death of the GDR, though, the loss seemed unbearable.

Everything they had grown up with disappeared, including, just as in Hans' case, their home. Norg and Anna on the other hand, meeting the Pschespoldnitza in 1997, have had time to come to terms with the shock of the changes in their lives and are beginning to accept their relationship to one an as members of a new nation. Christian Jopke claims, "Nations always present themselves in the primordial form of language, ethnicity or history, [and] they are also constructed and thus amendable to reconstruction and change" (218). That is exactly what makes the case of the GDR so interesting. As a nation it simply ceased to exist. It was not conquered or settled, it simply disappeared in a single day, much like a death.

V Conclusion

The texts *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal*, and *Gipshut* have been examined in detail to show how Kerstin Hensel deal with the theme of search for identity. The density and obscurity of Hensel's texts reveals their lineage from a time when GDR writers were forced – if they wished to comment at all critically on aspects of the society they lived in – to hide their meaning behind a literary veil. By employing familial relationships as the central motif, Hensel is able to provide a commentary on the former GDR as well as its recent history. Within the *Vaterbuch* genre these novels present the GDR family in various constructions but with one common theme: the search for identity through interaction within the family and society. By applying a feminist focus to Hensel's work it has been shown that her texts make clear statements about women's ability to communicate through literature within the construct of the symbolic order, and their powerlessness in the personal, the public, and the political realms. Hensel's use of the *Vaterbuch* proves a dominance of the father in literature and life, be he biological or symbolic.

In the three texts examined, Hensel situates all of her protagonists as children in a family setting. Generational conflict is examined through the interaction (or lack thereof) between the children and parents. The focus of this thesis has been on the father or father figure in this construction. Because he is male, and by tradition the power-holder, the females in the texts are cast as the symbolic "Other" and powerless characters. Terry Eagleton claims, "the ideologies of modern male-dominated class-society rely on such fixed signs for their power (God, father, order, property and so on)" (Eagleton 163).

Because these things are so rarely associated with the female or femininity, the discourse in Hensel's texts takes place by contrasting the female characters (runaways, mentally unstable, single-mothers, victims and so on) against these power motifs.

Although the theories of feminist criticism are relatively new, Hensel's topics are not. Family conflict and the parental narrative in general have a long-standing tradition in the GDR. Authors from Anna Seghers to Christa Wolf to Brigitta Reimann have all used the family to articulate a social commentary. Hensel's texts expose the rhetoric of equality in the GDR as hollow and superficial. She explores power disparity between men and women by casting her female characters as outsiders. Because the GDR existed in an enclosure of sorts, the theme of outsider is particularly effective as it mirrors inequality, not only in the feminist context, but also in the greater socio-political context. Hensel's texts *Im Schlauch, Tanz am Kanal*, and *Gipshut* provide commentary on spheres as wide-ranging as the public, the personal, authority, gender conflict, and abnormality.

Perhaps the most common motif in Hensel's work is that of the outsider. *Im Schlauch*, the first work examined, presents the daughter as outsider and runaway. In this text father and daughter are set up as binary opposites. The protagonist Natalie Kulisch defines all aspects of her life in relation to her dominant father. He is strong, a military man, and as such a respected member of the GDR community. As Hensel's first text published after the *Wende, Im Schlauch* renders a satirical look at the inequalities at hand in a society that had lived under the socialist mantra of equality for all its citizens. Though the mother and daughter characters attempt to find their identities separate from the father, Hensel illuminates the futility of their search.

Tanz am Kanal takes an even more critical look at the power disparity between the father and daughter. Mary Jacobus claims, " women's access to discourse involves a submission to phallocentricity, to the masculine and the Symbolic" (Jacobus 216). *Tanz am Kanal* examines this in the question of "ownership of language." Gabriela von Haßlau, the protagonist, is completely dominated by her father. He eclipses her identity and owns her language. He is an educated man (a doctor) with God-like qualities. In his desire for superiority he dominates his daughter, going so far as to dictate what words "belong" to her. *Tanz am Kanal* offers not only a look at daily life in the GDR, but also a biting commentary on the symbolic order and its exclusion of a feminine discourse.

Gipshut, the final text examined, presents a departure from Hensel's typical daughter-as-victim construction. In this instance the mother is cast in the role of "Other." Because the father is absent in this case, the protagonist son, Hans Kielkropf, is cast as a kind of pseudo-father. His domination and patronizing attitude towards his mother completely discredits any authority or power she may have been awarded as the adult of the household. In contrast to her son, Veronika Dankschön, is portrayed as nonsensical, unintelligent and completely marginalized within her household. She has no ownership of her identity and is simply subject to the power of the men in her life. Although *Gipshut* is an evolution in Hensel's writing (male as protagonist) is also a return to her common theme the inability of women to have control over their own identities and lives.

This thesis has shown that Hensel draws on the traditional GDR technique of casting the protagonist as a child living in an unhappy family setting. Particular emphasis has been placed on the examination of the father figure as the all-knowing and all-powerful figure who creates the laws, which dominate the household. By using this

approach, Hensel successfully uses the family as a metaphor for the greater issues facing society. Kerstin Hensel remains an author who challenges the "norms" of the society in which she lived (GDR) and the one in which she now lives (united Germany). The topic of identity and the exploration of it are examined in her works in thought-provoking ways, which dare the reader to discover meaning on his/her own.

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Patriarchal Subtext and GDR Literary Tradition in Selected Texts by Kerstin Hensel

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