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Die Brunnengäste

Malwina as a Female Heroine

This story, *Die Brunnengäste*, was actually an intriguing, entertaining read. I read in anticipation along with the characters who waited to discover the reason for Malwina and Adelbert's secret marriage. Although the resolution of the story didn't match the action-packed movie "thrillers" of today, it satisfied me and was believable. Since I enjoyed the story, there are several things that I can think to write about. As I began the story, Malwina seemed a little like Jutta in *Jenseits der Mauer*, in the descriptions by others. As it progressed, I found less correlation between the two. It would still be interesting to analyze and compare the two characters. But that will have to wait for some indefinite later time.

I guess what I probably really thought about and would like to write about has to do with the character of Malwina as the female heroine. First of all, Malwina is the only female who is developed to any satisfying degree. Knowing that this is a short story, I understand that the characters can't be as developed as much as maybe I'd like them to be. But the characters of Adelbert, the Baron, and even the English officer are more developed than that of Malwina. She is a central figure in the story, and yet I still feel a little let down by how she turns out to be.

At the beginning, I had this feel of a very strong woman, which is likely why I began to compare her to Jutta. But the resolution of the story includes de-shaping Malwina into more of a likeable, "typical" female character. To me, it was as if the author reinforced the idea of the "role" of a woman. I found Malwina most intriguing in the beginning. Doktor Braun tells us that she speaks English, French, and possibly Italian. Her actual beauty is not overly astounding, and seemed "mehr aus inniger Lust am Leben, aus überströmender Fülle geistiger

Ueberlegenheit und ächter Originalität, als aus niederer Gefallsucht zu entsehen" (Schopenhauer 165). In society, she presented herself as "leicht und frei" (Schopenhauer 166) and always to act on her own desire and will rather on that of others or care what others thought of her. Her insight into the society is immense when she says to the Baron, "So seydt ihr Männer... ihr habt euch nun einmal das Vorrecht angeeignet, von Einer zu der Andern zu flattern, und wollt uns dennoch es gewaltig übel nehmen, wenn wir euch zuvorzukommen suchen und euch den Abschied geben, ehe ihr für gut findet, ihn von selbst zu nehmen" (Schopenhauer 174). It is a daring comment about a male dominated society. I was also impressed when Malwina refused to pass around Doktor Braun's "Teller" and found out that she had instead quietly done something herself, in person, to help the family in need.

Just as I was furiously going to work highlighting passages that seemed to me to capture the essence of such a strong female character, the scene on the boat took place. This led to the events that eventually explained the whole story. For the most part, once the secret was out, Malwina drifted into liquid form. Instead of all of her strong traits shining through in her character, she seemed to resort to a man's dominance, even her husband Adelbert. She proved herself to be a virtuous woman and one whose ultimate wish was to please. She spent much of the second half of the story in tears, not saying much except for backing up Adelbert's explanation. I must say that I was disappointed. Gone were the comments and the passages I enjoyed from the beginning of the story. Instead of a strong female character, I found myself thinking of Malwina as more of a typical, submissive character. Her "real" life, the one she had lived in secret that was now in the open, almost seems more of a bondage than the "fake" life had been. Although I am happy that Malwina and Adelbert loved each other and were married, Adelbert is still a strong male character, and it seems that in literature of this time, you can either

have a strong female character or a strong male character, but not both. Look at *Jenseits der Mauer*. Eventually, Jutta discovered the strong male character of Herger, but they couldn't be together without one submitting to the other. Since Malwina accepts this, Adelbert's character seems to take over in the last part of the story. She explains to the Baron at the end that, "ich bedurfte einer Maske, denn ich hatte ein Geheimnis zu verbergen; ich wählte vielleicht nicht die passendste, aber mir war eben keine bessere zur Hand" (Schopenhauer 243-244). It is almost as if, by taking on this mask, Malwina felt free to live a more decisive life, a stronger personal life. The mask could hide what the world wanted because it was only a mask. Once the mask was off, however, her "real" self had to be the self that would agree with the society she lived in. I am not saying that she was not an interesting character, or not a character that was much more than the other women in the story (maybe I'll discuss that at a future time). All I am saying is that I think there is an obvious difference between the two Malwinas we see in *Die Brunnengäste*. I think this would be an intriguing concept to look into further, if I can someday find the time... ☺