

GERMAN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN
THEODOR FONTANE'S NOVELS

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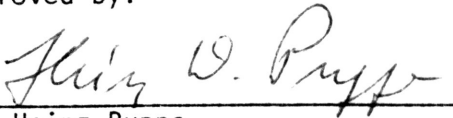
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
REVIEW OF LITERATURE	iv
GERMAN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN THEODOR FONTANE'S NOVELS	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	12
VITA	13

ABSTRACT

German Society as Depicted in Theodor Fontane's Novels

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This paper examines the personal relationships of the lesser aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie as pictured in three of Theodor Fontane's novels: L'Adultera, Frau Jenny Treibel, and Effie Briest. It was found that in both classes the predominant reason for a choice of mate was status rather than love, although the people attempted to mitigate this by putting on a facade of love after becoming engaged. In case of an aristocratic wife's infidelity, the husband's reaction was guided by the ancient feudal honor code to which the wife also adhered. The lover must be dueled and the wife must be banished from the home. The influence of this honor code was lacking in the bourgeois family, however, and the bourgeois husband had the option of forgiving his wife and reconciling with her. This relative leniency in judging adultery is also reflected in the attitude of the unfaithful wife toward herself. In regarding each other as husband and wife, the bourgeoisie had a much more equal relationship than did the aristocracy. Bourgeois women were free to hold and voice their own opinions, as compared to the childlike obedience of the aristocratic wives.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theodor Fontane has been of fairly great interest to students of literature; thus, much has been written about his works. However, little analysis has been done in the specific area with which this paper deals. Below are reviews of two articles and one book that I did find helpful.

'The Unreal in Fontane's Novels' by Lawrence O. Frye discusses Fontane's use of fate, yearnings, dreams, and symbols to hint at future occurrences. Such devices are used in all of his novels, and tend to give the impression of events being predetermined, but Fontane never fails to also justify events by realistic conflicts within the characters.

In "'Effie Briest: 'Madame Bovary': 'Anna Karenina'" J. P. M. Stern examines the motivations of those three adulteresses and the social pressure to which they are subjected. All three women are seeking happiness and try to find it in romantic affairs, but to no avail. Effie's actions are the most strongly determined by societal pressures. She is most concerned that the affair remain secret, and true to her upbringing, she remains childlike in her longings and her acceptance of realities. Fontane in Effie Briest uncritically accepts society's mores, thus reducing the moral theme of the book to a minimum.

Aristocracy and the Middle-Classes in Germany by Ernest K. Bramsted was the most helpful to me in justifying my paper and in

providing socio-historic information. He explains the sociological approach to literature and the reliability of Fontane's picture of society. Furthermore, he traces the political, economic, and social evolution of the classes within Germany throughout the 19th century.

GERMAN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN
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The latter half of the 19th century was a time of rapid social evolution in Germany due to the increasing influence of the Industrial Revolution. In the transformation of an agricultural economy into an industrial economy, a new class of people was gaining prominence in the society: the bourgeoisie. In feudal Germany, status had been determined solely by the circumstances of birth, resulting in a very rigid social configuration; but as the Industrial Revolution advanced, economics became increasingly the decisive factor in determining status. Economic opportunities allowed the lower classes to improve their situation; but at the same time, economic exigencies caused many of the aristocracy to become impoverished.

It should be emphasized that although the Industrial Revolution effected changes in the economic situation of persons, mere gain or loss of money was not sufficient to move one from the bourgeoisie to the aristocratic class or vice versa. Such broad categories were still determined by birth; but gain or loss of money did define position within the class.

What were the attitudes of the German people in this time of change? In what ways did bourgeois attitudes differ from aristocratic attitudes? This paper will shed some light on the answers to these questions by examining three novels written by Theodor Fontane, a Prussian novelist of the late 19th century. Fontane is generally

accepted as an unbiased presenter of German society, as he was championing no cause, and his close association with both the middle and upper classes, as well as his knowledge of countries other than his own, particularly England give his descriptions of society great credibility.

The three novels to be considered are: L'Adultera, Frau Jenny Treibel, and Effie Briest. Portrayed in the first two are bourgeois families who had acquired wealth through industrial investments. The third book deals with a lesser aristocratic family. This paper will be confined to these two prototypes. All three novels are concerned primarily with personal relationships which this paper will analyze to the exclusion of attitudes toward such things as political and economic systems. We shall begin with summaries of each book.

L'Adultera

The story centers around the van der Straaten family in Berlin. Mr. van der Straaten is a successful businessman of decidedly bourgeois extraction. His wife Melanie de Caparoux, much younger than her husband, is also from the bourgeoisie; however, she is much more refined than van der Straaten and married him only because of her own impoverished state. Their marriage of ten years has produced two daughters.

Although having a seemingly successful marriage Melanie is desperately unhappy. Van der Straaten's loud, opinionated ways frequently embarrass her, and his prolific use of cliches bore her.

Sensing her unhappiness, van der Straaten expects her infidelity.

The van der Straaten's lives alter after the arrival of Ebenezer Rubehn, a wealthy banker's son. He and Melanie soon fall in love and determine to run away together. Shortly before they are to leave, van der Straaten hears of their plans and entreats Melanie to stay, but to no avail. Soon Melanie and Ebenezer are together in Italy.

Just as the criminal traditionally returns to the scene of the crime, the couple finally returns to Berlin, but life for them there is far from pleasant. They are ostracized by friends and family, so they must endure a lonely existence. Melanie finally decides that she must see her daughters and succeeds in doing so, only to find they too have rejected her.

At this point Ebenezer's father cuts off his allowance, forcing him to find work in order to live. He takes a humble job in a bank, but apparently true love binds the couple, for they stay together, content to live austere.

Frau Jenny Treibel

Two families are central to this story: the Treibels and the Schmidts. Mr. Treibel, a wealthy bourgeois industrialist, and his wife Jenny have two sons: Otto (married to Helena) and Leopold, eligible but dumb. The Schmidt family consists of only two: Mr. Schmidt, a good, wise high school teacher and his daughter Corinna, sharp and ambitious.

Two romances take place between a Treibel and a Schmidt. Mr.

Schmidt is Jenny's young love, but she rejects him to marry a man with possibilities of a more lucrative career. In the younger generation, forming the central conflict of the book, is the desire of Leopold and Corinna to marry. Corinna, like Jenny, wants to marry for money and status, but the wedding never materializes.

Both parents are against the match. The Treibels feel Corinna is too far below their station to marry their son. Mr. Schmidt feels Leopold is too dull for his daughter. At last Leopold succumbs to the wish of his parents, and he marries a girl of a higher status.

Effie Briest

At the beginning of the book *Effie Briest*, the daughter of a lesser aristocratic family, begins married life. Her parents have arranged a match between their 16 year old daughter and 38 year old Geert von Instetten.

Instetten takes his new bride to his home in a small town in Prussia. Although fascinated by the exotic flavor of the place and proud of the daughter Annie born to her, Effie is unhappy there. During Instetten's frequent and prolonged absences, she suffers boredom by day and fear by night. It is during the Instetten's life in this town that Effie had a short-lived and shallow affair with a Major Crampas.

Instetten does not know of the affair until six and one half years later at which time the family is living very happily in Berlin. Although he says he could easily forgive her, he insists on dueling

Crampas and banishing Effie from his life. Crampas is killed during the duel.

The remainder of Effie's life is lived in virtual solitude. Her friends categorically reject her, and even her parents reject her until it becomes evident that she does not have long to live. Like Melanie in L'Adultera, Effie too feels compelled to see her daughter once again at which time she finds that Annie has also rejected her. Soon Effie dies never having seen her husband again.

Marriage in the German society was seen as an indissoluble bond between two people, not to be broken by divorce under any circumstances. Neither infidelity nor life-long separation prompted Instetten or van der Straaten to seek a divorce.

The reason for the choice of a mate differed somewhat between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Among the aristocratic families, the parents chose, or at least accepted, spouses for their daughters. Girls were normally married to men much older than themselves, and indeed they desired this. Effie, when 16, feels that her 25 year old cousin is much too young to be considered a suitor. Although they did not go to the extreme of having the bride and groom meet for the first time only on their wedding day, the couple might meet for the first time on the day they became engaged, as did Effie and Instetten. Effie approved the match although she obviously did not love the man. Love was not the criterion for accepting or rejecting a mate. Rather, one was judged by his status, income, and appearance. These were the qualities that mattered.

Yet love was not forgotten. The aristocracy was still imbued with the idea that an engaged couple should be in love. In order to resolve the conflict between the real and the ideal, the couple, upon becoming engaged, put on a facade of love which, however imperfect, served to conceal the truth. This is not to say of course that no aristocratic couple was in love, but only that it was often the case that they were not.

Were the aristocratic marriages arranged in this way happy? In Effie Briest they did seem to be, but happiness did not depend on love, but resignation as in the case of Effie's parents. The partners accepted the lot and did not demand much more from a marriage than kind treatment.

Neither did the bourgeoisie have the basic value of marrying for love, although young people ideally chose their own mates who were usually their contemporaries. Jenny married Treibel for money and status; Corinna wanted to marry Leopold for money and status; and Melanie married old van der Straaten for money and status. Of course these people too tried to convince themselves and others that they were marrying for love. Jenny, perhaps the most ambitious female portrayed in the books, continuously espoused her indifference for money and declared that love was all that mattered.

One certainly cannot say, however, that love played no part in the choice of mates within the bourgeoisie. It certainly was a more acceptable reason for marriage than within the aristocracy, as is shown by Leopold's desire to marry Corinna. Likewise, the idea that individuals had a right to love is shown by Melanie when she leaves van der

Straaten to be with Ebenezer permanently.

If the aristocracy and bourgeoisie had similar attitudes toward marriage, they certainly did not have similar attitudes toward infidelity. The dichotomy can be drawn strictly along class lines.

Male infidelity was not unusual in either class, however in the aristocracy it was tacitly accepted. Oftentimes an aristocrat would take a maid of the household as a mistress. No mention is made of male bourgeois infidelity in the three novels.

Female infidelity was viewed much more severely. Instetten's reaction to Effie's infidelity is guided solely by the feudal aristocratic honor code. Despite his love for Effie, the years that had elapsed since the affair, and the fact that no one else knew of her affair, he feels obligated to duel Crampas. He views the unfaithfulness of his wife as an almost physical affront to his honor which could be removed only by a duel. The fact that many more people would know of Effie's affair if a duel took place makes no difference. Even Effie herself, after a few rebellious thoughts, comes to agree that Instetten had responded in the correct manner and that she is getting only what she deserves.

In the aristocratic society all blame for Effie's liaison is placed on her. Instetten never considers that he is neglecting her, and her parents brush off any blame for letting her marry too young. Even Effie does not try to reject blame. The world of morals for them was simply black and white.

The bourgeoisie was not quite so rigid. When confronted with Melanie's infidelity, van der Straaten tries to take blame on himself. He considers that he is much older than she and that she does not love him. The aristocratic honor system did not apply to the bourgeoisie. Van der Straaten almost comes to the point of begging Melanie to stay. Melanie herself did not feel that she was in the wrong. She emphasizes that she would rather live in sin than continue the hypocritical life she has with van der Straaten.

This shows the more practical attitude of the bourgeoisie as compared to the aristocracy. Instetten condemns himself as well as Effie to a life of bitter loneliness when he banishes her, all to defend his honor, which only three people knew had been offended. Van der Straaten, on the other hand, is not willing to spend his life alone for some intangible sense of honor. His practical logic comes to the fore.

What were the attitudes of husbands toward their wives and wives toward their husbands? In the three novels, both the bourgeois and aristocratic men largely regarded their wives as props for their careers. Van der Straaten even goes so far as to lie about his wife's background in order to increase his prestige in the eyes of his peers. He claims that her father had been an impoverished aristocrat.

The aristocrat did not expect his wife to have much of an opinion on anything and certainly never expected her to be able to contribute anything meaningful to a conversation among men. This attitude might be viewed as male chauvinism, and certainly indicates a male dominated

society. Effie and Melanie did not know anything about politics, economics, business. They had been taught that knowledge was unfeminine. (In this respect Melanie demonstrates the attitude of the aristocracy, as she is playing the role of an aristocratic lady.)

The aristocratic women, as represented by Effie, saw their men as leaders and teachers, and they were expected to be very submissive to their husbands. Ideally, complaining about or questioning the actions of one's husband was not allowed. His word was law. Effie, for example, does not complain of Instetten's neglect of her, and it occurs to neither Effie nor Instetten that she should defend herself against Instetten's judgement.

Bourgeois couples had a somewhat different relationship. Men were regarded as the leaders in this class too, but the bourgeois women played a much more dominant role than did the aristocratic women. For example, Jenny Treibel and her husband disagree about whether to oppose the marriage of their son and Corinna. With no hesitation Jenny voices the opinion contrary to that of her husband, that they should oppose the marriage; Treibel tells her to do as she pleases. We see the same manipulative ability in Corinna. Leopold does not propose soon enough to suit her, so instead of waiting patiently she drops strong hints and all but proposes to Leopold herself.

Likewise, the attitude toward knowledge within the bourgeoisie differed from that of the aristocracy. Women were not expected to be ignorant of the world. Corinna was invited to a dinner party of the

Treibels because of her knowledge of politics and economics. Thus we see that bourgeois couples were much closer to viewing themselves as equals and companions than were the aristocratic couples.

The Germans were extremely concerned with status; thus, what may seem to us superficial distinctions took on great importance in the society. Money supposedly made Leopold better than Corinna, and it was the sole reason for Jenny's opposition to their marriage, although Corinna fit in perfectly with the Treibels social circle. Likewise, Melanie and her lover had no trouble adjusting to the life of the lower middle class after the cessation of Ebenezer's support from his father. The distinction between lower and upper middle class depended heavily on material circumstances, not a personal quality, yet was of utmost concern.

As stated in the introduction, change in material circumstances was not enough to transfer one from the bourgeoisie to the aristocracy or vice versa. Both the van der Straatens and the Treibels remained decidedly bourgeois even after the acquisition of their wealth and the assumption of their auspicious life styles. In the 19th century it was stylish to strew conversations with foreign phrases, which the van der Straatens and Treibels do; but instead of using prestigious French, they use industrial English. Van der Straaten's loud, opinionated manner and use of cliches firmly plants him in the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, impoverishment did not reduce an aristocrat to the bourgeoisie. The Briests have a friend who is an impoverished aristocrat and is forced to live off of her charity; nevertheless, she

is definitely classed and treated as an aristocrat. Likewise, van der Straaten, though lying, brags of his wife's aristocratic background. That her father was supposedly impoverished does not reduce his prestige.

As one reads Fontane's novels, it is easy to see why the bourgeoisie eventually usurped political and economic power from the aristocracy. The Industrial Revolution put power into the hands of businessmen, who mainly derived from the bourgeoisie. Concern with money was considered low class, and the true aristocrat never mentioned it, while the bourgeois businessman thought of it constantly. Manifestations of the aristocratic attitudes are certainly still with us, but the economic dominance of the bourgeoisie has served to produce the dominance today of many of the attitudes held by the bourgeoisie of late 19th century Germany.

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