



Biopolitics and German Literature

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Abstract— *The connection between biopolitics and German literature provides a valuable perspective for understanding how literary works depict state authority, the regulation of human life, and control over the body. From Goethe's Faust to 20th-century dystopian fiction and modern novels, German writers have frequently examined issues related to surveillance, state influence on biology, and the political significance of health and existence.*

Keywords— *biopolitics, dystopia, German fictions, surveillance, state intervention*

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between biopolitics and German literature offers a fascinating lens through which to examine how literary texts engage with state control, the governance of life, and political power over the body. From Goethe's Faust to 20th-century dystopian literature and contemporary novels, German literary works have explored themes of surveillance, state intervention in human biology, and the political implications of health and life itself.

Goethe, particularly in Faust and his scientific writings, demonstrates an awareness of early biopolitical concerns. His concept of Bildung (self-formation) aligns with state efforts to shape ideal citizens. In The Sorrows of Young Werther, the tension between individual desire and societal norms reflects biopolitical constraints on bodies and emotions. Additionally, Goethe's engagement with biology, notably in The Metamorphosis of Plants, suggests an organicist vision that contrasts with mechanistic views of life.

Hoffmann's works, such as The Sandman and The Automata, critique the regulation of human life through science and technology. His grotesque and uncanny representations of artificial life forms (e.g., Olympia in The Sandman) challenge Enlightenment rationalism and foreshadow concerns about biopower—how the state and science exert control over individuals. Both Goethe and Hoffmann engage with early biopolitical concerns through

their romantic critique of mechanistic control over life. Goethe leans towards an organicist view, while Hoffmann offers a darker, dystopian vision of biopower in action. Together, they provide insight into the intersection of Romantic literature and the emerging discourses of life, power, and control.

In 19th-century Germany, the Grimm Brothers and Theodor Fontane engage with biopolitical themes in ways that reflect the shifting concerns of 19th-century Germany, particularly around discipline, social norms, gender, and the regulation of life. Their works encode anxieties about how power structures govern bodies and populations, whether through folklore, tradition, or the mechanisms of bourgeois society. The Brothers Grimm Brothers' fairy tales (Kinder-und Haus Märchen (1812-1857)) played a key role in moral education and social discipline. Their stories reinforced bourgeois virtues such as obedience, industriousness, and self-regulation, which align with early biopolitical efforts to shape the ideal citizen. Many tales serve as cautionary narratives about deviance and punishment, ensuring that children internalise social norms: Little Red Riding Hood warns young girls about bodily vulnerability and the dangers of transgressing social boundaries; Hansel and Gretel reflect anxieties about food scarcity, child abandonment, and state control over population health; and Snow White centres on female beauty standards, reflecting how the regulation of women's bodies operates within patriarchal systems.

Fontane's novel *Effi Briest* explores how social institutions regulate women's bodies and desires through marriage, honour, and morality. The protagonist, Effi, is married off at 17 to an older Prussian official, Baron von Innstetten, who views marriage as a form of state discipline rather than personal choice. Her eventual punishment (exile, illness, death) reflects how biopolitical structures control female sexuality and enforce compliance with bourgeois norms. Effi's exile to a health spa reflects how medical institutions in the 19th century played a role in social control. Sanatoriums, like those later explored by Thomas Mann (*The Magic Mountain*), were not just spaces of healing but also sites where the state and medical authority regulated life and death. Fontane's works critique the Prussian bureaucratic state, which sought to govern life through laws, social expectations, and institutional control. His novels illustrate how biopolitics operates not just through force but also through seemingly mundane mechanisms like marriage contracts, medical diagnoses, and social exclusion.

The 20th century saw German literature engaging deeply with biopolitical themes, particularly in response to totalitarianism, war, bureaucracy, medicalisation, and surveillance. Writers like Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, and Herta Müller explored how power governs life itself, controlling bodies, health, reproduction, and death. Below is an overview of key biopolitical themes in 20th-century German literature.

Franz Kafka's works are deeply intertwined with biopolitical themes, particularly the way power structures regulate life, control bodies, and enforce discipline through bureaucracy, law, and surveillance. His novels and stories anticipate Michel Foucault's theories of biopower and biopolitics, where states and institutions exert control over individuals not just through direct violence but through administrative mechanisms, classification, and regulation of life itself. Kafka's fictional worlds depict opaque bureaucratic systems that have total control over people's lives, reflecting how biopolitical power operates through legal, medical, and governmental institutions. These systems do not just punish but also define who is included or excluded from society—who is allowed to live and who is condemned. In his *The Trial* (1925), the judiciary is presented as a biopolitical machine. The protagonist, Josef K., is arrested without explanation and subjected to an endless legal process where the court holds power over his body and fate. The law functions not to deliver justice but as a self-sustaining machine that classifies individuals. The court's arbitrary authority mirrors how modern states regulate populations through surveillance and legal mechanisms, deciding who is "guilty" or "unfit" for

society. Josef K.'s execution at the end, without ever knowing his crime, reflects biopolitical sovereignty—the absolute power over life and death. Franz Kafka's *Penal Colony* (1919) presents a torture device that inscribes sentences onto prisoners' bodies, illustrating how the state exerts power through physical discipline. The execution machine symbolises biopolitical violence, where punishment is not merely about crime but about enforcing bodily conformity to authority. The officer's unwavering loyalty to this brutal system reflects how biopolitical regimes justify control through ideological necessity.

Similarly, *The Metamorphosis* (1915) explores biopolitical exclusion through Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect. Rendered biologically worthless because he can no longer work, Gregor is rejected by his family. Their gradual withdrawal of care highlights how biopolitical systems devalue individuals who can no longer contribute to society. His death is treated as an administrative matter, reinforcing the idea that those who do not fit into the system are silently eliminated.

Thomas Mann's works engage deeply with biopolitical themes, particularly the regulation of health and illness and the intersection of medical authority and state power. His literature examines how social norms are shaped through medicine and the ideological implications of disease and cure. *The Magic Mountain* (1924) exemplifies this engagement, portraying a tuberculosis sanatorium as a microcosm of state control over life and death. As protagonist Hans Castorp becomes absorbed into its world of medical observation and institutional discipline, the clinic emerges as more than a place of healing—it functions as a biopolitical institution, where the classification, surveillance, and treatment of bodies mirror broader mechanisms of governance. The medical authorities determine who is fit for society and who must be isolated, reflecting state practices of quarantine, medical intervention, and the social construction of health. The sanatorium, existing in a liminal space between life and death, transforms individuals into subjects of medical power rather than autonomous beings.

In *Death in Venice* (1912), Mann explores another biopolitical landscape where disease and state intervention shape human fate. The protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, arrives in Venice amid a cholera outbreak, but the authorities suppress information about the epidemic to maintain order and protect tourism. This concealment of disease reveals the biopolitical tension between public health and state interests, demonstrating how governments regulate bodies not only through medicine but also through the control of knowledge and fear. Aschenbach's physical and psychological decline, driven by both illness and repressed desire, represents the

breakdown of the disciplined bourgeois self, exposing how individuals are subjected to both biological and political forces. The novel suggests that decay and mortality are not merely natural processes but are deeply entwined with power structures that govern life and death.

Mann further interrogates biopolitical ideologies in *Doctor Faustus* (1947), which explores themes of genius, disease, and national decline. The protagonist, composer Adrian Leverkühn, makes a Faustian pact that grants him artistic brilliance at the cost of his sanity. His syphilitic illness, which leads to his mental and physical deterioration, resonates with early 20th-century anxieties about degeneration, eugenics, and the biological fate of nations. The novel critiques biopolitical ideologies—such as racial purity, controlled reproduction, and the medicalisation of geniuses—that shaped Nazi-era policies and intellectual thought. Through Leverkühn's fate, Mann exposes the dangers of sacrificing individual well-being for the promise of progress, power, and ideological supremacy.

Across his novels, Mann reveals how life, illness, and death are regulated by medical, political, and ideological forces. His works examine institutions of health and governance, questioning how they define who is fit to live, who is excluded, and how bodies become sites of control. Whether exploring sanatoriums, epidemics, or the myth of genius, Mann's literature critically engages with biopolitical mechanisms that shape human existence, offering a profound reflection on the entanglement of power, medicine, and societal order.

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy also intersects with biopolitical thought, though in complex and paradoxical ways. While Nietzsche did not use the term "biopolitics," his critiques of modernity, power, the body, and life's regulation have significantly influenced later biopolitical discourse. His works challenge conventional ideas of sovereignty, health, degeneration, and the management of life, making them central to discussions about biopower, eugenics, and the will to power.

At the core of Nietzsche's thought is the will to power, which he views as the fundamental driving force of life—a struggle for strength, vitality, and self-overcoming. Unlike later biopolitical theorists such as Michel Foucault, who examine power as a regulatory mechanism of the state, Nietzsche envisions power as organic, existential, and deeply embedded in life itself. From a biopolitical perspective, the will to power can be understood as a rejection of state-imposed norms that discipline bodies and regulate life. Nietzsche critiques institutions—whether religious, medical, or political—for domesticating and weakening individuals, suppressing natural instincts in favour of social control. His genealogical approach to

morality, as explored in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, exposes how concepts of "good" and "evil" are not neutral but rather biopolitical tools used to condition populations and enforce obedience.

Through his critique of institutional power, Nietzsche offers a radical perspective on biopolitics, one that challenges the mechanisms of state control and the ways in which societies regulate life and health. His philosophy, though not explicitly biopolitical, provides crucial insights into the tensions between individual vitality and systemic governance, making him a foundational figure in the broader discourse on power and the body.

After World War II and the Holocaust, German literature increasingly dealt with biopolitical themes of genocide, surveillance, and state control over the human body. Günter Grass's literary works critically engage with biopolitics, particularly in the context of postwar German identity, historical memory, and the regulation of life under authoritarian and democratic regimes. His novels explore how power structures discipline bodies, control reproduction, and shape collective memory, revealing the deep entanglement between state governance, social norms, and human life itself. Grass's most famous novel, *The Tin Drum* (*Die Blechtrommel*), serves as a biopolitical allegory of postwar Germany, exploring themes of normalisation, deviance, and state control over bodies. Throughout *The Tin Drum*, Grass critiques Nazi biopolitics, particularly the regime's focus on racial purity, eugenics, and reproductive control. Oskar's mother, Agnes, engages in a forbidden affair with a Polish man, breaking the racial laws of the time. This reflects the Nazi state's biopolitical obsession with regulating sexual behaviour and determining which lives were deemed "worthy" of reproduction. The character of Jan Bronski, Oskar's probable biological father, represents a body marked for exclusion under Nazi racial policies—he is Polish and ultimately executed in the 1939 invasion of Poland. His fate illustrates how Nazi biopolitics determined life and death based on racial classification.

In *Dog Years* (*Hundejahre*), Grass explores how biopolitical violence extends beyond war into the postwar era, shaping national memory, guilt, and collective identity. The novel uses the training of dogs as a metaphor for state discipline over human bodies. The Nazi regime trained both humans and animals to serve ideological purposes, reflecting how power extends into the biological realm. Grass critiques the way state ideologies shape individuals through coercion, surveillance, and bodily discipline—a theme that anticipates later biopolitical theorists like Michel Foucault.

II. CONCLUSION

German literature has consistently served as a vital medium for exploring biopolitical concerns, shedding light on how states regulate life, control bodies, and shape identities through political and ideological mechanisms. From the Romantic era to contemporary narratives, literary works have interrogated the structures of power that dictate human existence, whether through surveillance, legal frameworks, medical authority, or social norms. Ultimately, German literature not only reflects biopolitical realities but also challenges and critiques them, offering alternative perspectives on human agency, ethical governance, and the limits of state power. By addressing the regulation of life and death, bodily discipline, and the politics of exclusion, German authors provide profound insights into the tension between individual freedom and systemic control. Through these narratives, literature continues to serve as a crucial space for questioning the ethical and political dimensions of biopower, ensuring that such discussions remain relevant in the modern world.

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