

When Father's Love is More than Fatherly Love: Heinrich Jung-Stilling's Autobiographical Novel

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Abstract - Heinrich Jung-Stilling's autobiographical novel *Heinrich StillingsJugend, Jünglingsjahre, Wanderschaft und häusliches Leben* describes his childhood and teenage years and his development from child to young man. In this novel, the reader is confronted with unexpected death, erotic love for a son, an ungendered boy, crossing of gender boundaries, and reversal of gender roles. The boy is oblivious to women, does not see himself as a sexual being in any way, and is ignorant of anything post-pubescent. However, as a result of his upbringing, he is able to cross given gender boundaries of the time and perform acts usually reserved for women. His position in life and society, and his development cannot be assigned or attached to any given norm, and he is a free spirit who can do things no one else can.

Keywords- Jung-Stilling, Childhood, Gender, Patriarchy, Crossing of Gender Boundaries

During the 1770's, Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling authored an autobiographical novel entitled *Heinrich StillingsJugend, Jünglingsjahre, Wanderschaft und häusliches Leben* (Heinrich Stilling's Youth, Teenage Years, Travels, and Domestic Life). In 1777, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe edited and published the first part of Stilling's autobiography without the author's knowledge, and it immediately became a great success.¹ In 1844 it was translated into English and published with the title *The Autobiography of Heinrich Stilling, Late Aulic Counsellor of the Grand Duke of Baden*.² This title is deceiving though since Jung-Stilling purposely called it an autobiographical novel indicating that parts of it are pure fiction. The plot is quickly told: It is a story of a young boy, who is referred to as Heinrich, who grows up in a family presided over by the patriarch, his grandfather Eberhard. After the death of Heinrich's mother, his father Wilhelm is incapacitated by the loss and the grandfather takes on the role of mother and caretaker for Heinrich. During an extended period of mourning, his father Wilhelm retreats with Heinrich to the seclusion of a room, where they reside together in total isolation. The father does so to protect himself from his sexual desires which he is unable to control any other way. Because of the isolation in which the boy grows up and the restrictions put upon him by his father, he withdraws into a world of unreality and fantasy which hinders "normal" gender development.

Jung-Stilling's autobiographical novel is especially interesting because the description of his childhood and youth seems exceptionally unrealistic and out of any given norm of the time. What is described as an average or normal childhood is eccentric behavior pushed to the extreme. The reader is confronted with crossing of gender boundaries and reversal of gender roles. A son becomes his father's substitute wife, morphs into his own mother, and has to metaphorically give birth to his own self. For this reason, gender development, as described here, does not follow the prescriptive literature of the time. The outcome seems to be a boy who remains in a prepubescent childhood stage indefinitely. The child is set on a track early in his childhood from which he cannot or chooses not to deviate. Given a chance to change his life, he opts to continue on this given path without hesitation. He is oblivious to women, does not see himself as a sexual being in any way, and is ignorant of anything post-pubescent. However, as a result of his upbringing, he is able to cross given gender boundaries of the time and perform acts usually reserved for women. The description of Heinrich's life can thus also be read as a liberation from and a re-definition of given norms and constraints of society. Heinrich is happy in his world of oblivion, and he is ignorant to prescribed gender. His position in life, in society, and his development cannot be assigned or attached to any given norm, and he is a free spirit who can do things no one else can. Jung-Stilling, by publishing his life story, advocates a life like his and he advertises it as a happy childhood.

In this family setting of three generations, Grandfather Stilling rules the house with an iron fist and his controlling style of government is very apparent in one scene when the Stillings take a family stroll one afternoon. The old Stilling carries a crude thorny stick, a “dickenDornenstock,” while walking behind his family.³ It is not just a simple walking stick, but it is thick, heavy, and has thorns. With this rod or stick—whose phallic symbolism is hard to deny—he herds his family like cattle. The Patriarch observes and directs them from behind with the help of his stick. Just as the old Stilling rules over his children aided by a symbolic rod, so too does Wilhelm later direct Heinrich’s life with a “Rute,” a switch.⁴ The “Rute” is also a stick, but much smaller than the large thorny staff father Stilling carries. They all live under one roof in the old Stilling’s house and, although he has some power over his son, Wilhelm, Heinrich’s father, is still in the position of a child as he submits to his father, Heinrich’s grandfather. He obeys the hierarchical order of the family, and when he is unable to care for his son, the old Stilling takes over.

Heinrich’s mother Dorthchen, who plays a very small part in the novel, fulfills her duty of giving birth and nourishment to little Heinrich until he can survive on his own. As she is nursing him, she becomes weaker, and Heinrich in turn gains in strength, thus he is literally consuming his mother. Clinging to her breast, the child slowly incorporates the mother who becomes a part of him and as soon as he can survive on his own, Dorthchen dies.⁵

Heinrich’s father Wilhelm suffers terribly from the loss, and he is unable to function. He not only retreats into his own private sphere, but he also vows celibacy. In a strange conversation with his friend Niclas, who is a practicing member of a Christian Society, we learn that the desire to have sexual relations is seen as the source of much evil. As Wilhelm is utterly depressed and unable to function, his friend simply lectures him: “Thus it happens, Master Stilling, when we attach ourselves, with our desires, to anything of a transitory nature. . . . But still how useful it is, to exercise ourselves in mortifying even this pleasure, and denying ourselves in it! —the loss would then certainly not be so grievous to us.”⁶ Niclas points to a clear connection between the feeling of loss for a person and the desire for sexual involvement. He explains to Wilhelm that he is in complete despair only because he misses the pleasures of the flesh, which were fulfilled by Dorthchen’s body. Dorthchen then, was an object and was not exactly regarded as a person or companion. Her absence and the consequent lack of her services cause deep melancholia. Only through great self-control can this problem be overcome, and Wilhelm attempts to resolve the problem by withdrawing from the world.

In their retreat, in their own distorted reality, his father Wilhelm rules with an iron fist over Heinrich, because, “Wilhelm’s intention was to bring up his son to be docile and obedient, [. . .] Wilhelm was very strict; he punished the smallest transgression of his commands most severely with the rod.”⁷ We already discussed the symbolic meaning of the “Rute, the switch,” but the “Rute” takes on significance for other reasons. Within their retreat, Wilhelm exercises power over his son, just as the old Stilling does over him.⁸ His mourning, according to his Christian friend, is the result of his sexual desires because he misses Dorthchen’s body. In this same conversation, though, Wilhelm elaborates that he is driven by a strong desire to have physical relations and he is certain that living a life of abstinence is close to impossible for him. Interestingly, at this point we learn that Heinrich resembles his mother: “In the face of his son he (Wilhelm) recognized Dorthchen’s features.”⁹ Recognizing the resemblance, in an instant, causes Wilhelm to dramatically change his attitude toward Heinrich: “He took his son in his arms, he cried until he was wet, pressed him to his chest and slept with him.”¹⁰ The ambiguous language used in this passage, such as Wilhelm “sleeping” with his son, could lead us to a new interpretation of their isolation, especially in light of the fact that Wilhelm is in possession of a “Rute” the switch or stick. Bearing in mind that the stick the old Stilling is carrying is, of course, a symbol for his phallus, signifying his power and authority over his family, then Wilhelm’s Rute, although it is much smaller, symbolizes the same masculine power, just less potent.

Considering that Wilhelm is driven by his sexual desires, we must ponder yet another meaning for the term “Rute.” In German vulgar language, it often refers to the male sexual organ. It is entirely feasible then that Wilhelm’s involvement with his son, in light of his drives, goes beyond the father-son relationship. Here, symbolically, Heinrich is not a male offspring who is threatening the father’s position or who longs to acquire the father’s place in society, but he is in the position of a dependent, suppressed female. **As a consequence, Heinrich is left in gender limbo because he is taking his mother’s place for the father since he resembles her so much.** Though he is the son, and his physical gender is male, he takes this morphing process even further and eventually becomes his mother by simply falling in love with his deceased mother as he learns more about her. The narrator tells us “Heinrich fell in love with his mother so much so that he made all he heard of her his own, which pleased Wilhelm so well that he could not conceal his joy.”¹¹ From here on the narrator refers to them as “die beiden Liebhaber” the two lovers.¹² Slowly, first

under force by father's "Rute," and then voluntarily Heinrich occupies his mother's place. Wilhelm is elated about this change—in some strange way having his wife back—but he still treats Heinrich with little respect.¹³

Then, in an instant, their world as they knew it is completely uprooted and their relationship becomes even stranger when Heinrich finds a knife,¹⁴ which he realizes belonged to his mother. As he reads the engraving, "Johanna Dorothea Catharina Stilling," he faints. He recognizes this utensil to be special and it seems to be endowed with certain powers. Knives, thus far in the text have been symbols of male power and domination. Now he finds a knife with his mother's name, which was given to her on her wedding day. Not only was the mother in possession of a knife, but it was given her the same time she consummated her marriage to Wilhelm. Thus, as Dortchen married Wilhelm, she was endowed with some of his masculine power, because as his wife, she shared some of that authority. The fact that a woman could possess a knife, and that he himself does not have one, is inconceivable to him and he loses consciousness. This epiphany, the recognition that even his mother was in possession of some patriarchal power, but that he is not, emasculates him completely.

Holding the knife, which is incidentally still as shiny and new as it was on their wedding day, now puts Heinrich even more in Dortchen's position for the father. Though he used Heinrich before this incident as a Dortchen substitute, now Heinrich takes a position still closer to Dortchen, endowed with the same symbolic power she possessed. Wilhelm acknowledges this transformation by pouring out his love for him/her. He "believed to have gone to heaven and have seen Dortchen among the angels."¹⁵ The entire relationship is transformed to a spiritual level and Wilhelm feels like he has entered heaven. He now fully acknowledges Dortchen in Heinrich, and the replacement is complete. Affections flow freely and emotions are strong. Heinrich, who is surprised and stunned by this outpour of affection, asks: "Father, do you love me?"¹⁶ whereupon Wilhelm replies, "ja," and then cries profusely. Heinrich is not an object anymore but finally accepted as the child—but only as an image of the mother.

The entire incident, however, changes Wilhelm's outlook on life and he now desires to live a normal life again. In an instant, he overcomes his melancholy, he has Dortchen back, and he ends his mourning. Heinrich is also profoundly affected. For the first time he felt that he was a human being – a *Mensch*, because he is loved by his father. Heinrich occupies a position similar to that of his mother's, and he identifies with it, because it makes him feel like a human being. Mistakenly, he now believes that he is treasured and accepted by his father as his son and therefore considers himself a member of the human family. Unfortunately for Heinrich, Wilhelm, does not perceive or accept him as his progeny, but "When finding the knife, Wilhelm recognized Dortchen's entire character in him."¹⁷ Only now, believing that he resembles and represents Dortchen, does Wilhelm accept him as person, not an object. He, however, is just a replacement or substitute for Dortchen, and most importantly, he is by no means a fully functioning male. Whereas the grandfather carries a cane and Wilhelm a "Rute" or switch, he has no such symbol because shortly after finding the knife he loses it, and it cannot be retrieved.

When describing Heinrich, the narrator uses some traditionally feminine terms to depict him. When he meets a young girl by the name of Dortchen, Heinrich suddenly faints. In this particular scene we get a very important glimpse of his physical build. The girl was very surprised to notice that he had very soft skin and a pale face. He is unable to work like a man and it is the source of much contention between him and his father. His father needs a strong man to help him in the fields, but Heinrich is physically too fragile to fulfill this job.¹⁸

Not only is he physically unable to work like a man but also his actions exemplify behavior that is generally attributed to the feminine realm. Heinrich certainly deviates from the given masculine norm of his time. On numerous occasions, he faints when he is overwhelmed with sorrow and self-pity. Frequently he breaks out in tears, even at the age of seventeen. When his grandfather's table is removed from the living room, he cries. In girl-like manner he cried until his eyes were red. There are countless examples in the text of Heinrich breaking out in tears when other boys or men in the same situation might have reacted defensively, with anger, or very offensively. Heinrich, however, retreats into this world of self-pity and cries until he feels better. His description, his actions, and his inability to work like a man make him appear more feminine than masculine.

The insinuations about his femininity continue when he speaks with his grandmother about his unhappiness. One of Heinrich's hopes throughout the novel is that his sorrows will come to an end. As he discusses this point with his grandmother she replies: "I know that thy fate will be like that of a travailing woman; with much pain, thou will bring forth that which thou art to become."¹⁹ Like a pregnant woman, Heinrich has to give birth to that which is to

become of him. His grandmother uses this metaphor to explain that his life is difficult and that he is destined to suffer. Through a process that resembles labor, Heinrich has to become who or what he is supposed to be.

Her statement, though, is ambiguous and allows for two possible interpretations. "Which thou art to become" can mean that his future, his destiny is predetermined by a higher power and that he has no influence over it. Its fulfillment, however, is a difficult task and is connected to much suffering. Yet her words could also mean that he does have influence over his destiny, and that Heinrich has to decide what is to become of him. In both cases, pain and suffering are prevalent and inevitable. Thus, Heinrich gives birth to who he is to become, to his future self. Fittingly, he does become his own mother for his father, and in this light, he is able to birth himself. Unlike a biological woman, Heinrich cannot give birth to genuine children, of course, but he can give birth to that what is to become of him. Heinrich, the ungendered boy, is in a position to cross gender boundaries and perform acts usually reserved for women.

Because of his unique position, Heinrich is alone and very much oblivious to the realities of life. He is happiest not in the presence of adults but when he is surrounded by children whom he can teach. In their presence, there is no hint of sexuality, and Heinrich can remain the ungendered child that he is. Surrounding himself with children is one way of escaping reality and the social imperative to grow up.

Karl Philipp Moritz, a contemporary of Jung-Stilling and author of *Anton Reiser*, praised this autobiographical novel as an authentic reproduction of Jung-Stilling's life. The entire novel, however, presents an utterly strange family dynamic. Heinrich remains in a pre-pubescent phase of his life where, according to Rousseau, gendering has not yet taken place. "The child brought up in accordance with his age is alone . . . is unconscious of his sex and his species; men and women are alike unknown."²⁰ We are confronted with a son who becomes the wife for his father and then is removed from reality for an extended period of time. By becoming his father's substitute wife, he morphs into his own mother. He takes the places of a female and even has to give birth to his own self. The boy, who can mimic the attributes of a woman but is unable to be a male, is ill prepared for life; consequently, he becomes a complete failure. He cannot hold a job, is oblivious to women and their feelings, he does not see himself as a sexual being, and returns to the protection of his father's authority. Heinrich is ill prepared for life, and he constantly returns to his father's lap, submitting himself to his authority, even at an age when others have successful careers. For this extended period of time, he remains under the rule of his father and is unable to escape the role of the dependent minor. Consequently, the title *H. StillingsJünglingsjahre*, therefore, is deceiving. Heinrich's biological age would indicate that he has graduated from childhood to youth, but the circumstances and his dependence on his father make it clear that his childhood years are prolonged.²¹

We clearly see that Heinrich Stilling's life is clearly determined by his childhood. From an early age, he was programmed to be an outsider and even a failure in the society of the day. Although Heinrich Stilling appears to be a unique specimen of a young boy, he is actually not alone. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* experiences very similar problems, which result in almost identical outcomes. Despite the odd development of his life, the first two parts of the autobiography were well received by the public, and contemporary readers considered them accounts of a happy childhood. The positive reception of this work indicates that the general perception of a happy childhood did not at all match proposed idea of what childhood should be. Suppression of individuality and the surrender of the self were regarded as accepted parts of a happy childhood.

Yet his unique upbringing enables Heinrich to live and develop outside of any given norm with regards to his age and gender. It might be that the liberation from and a re-definition of given norms and constraints of society must have appealed to readers and critics alike. Heinrich is happy in his world of oblivion and ignorant to given gender norms of the time. His position in life, society, and development cannot be assigned or attached to any given norm and he is a free spirit who can do things no one else can.

REFERENCES

- [1] According to Jung-Stilling, Goethe eliminated long passages dealing with religion. Essentially Goethe shortened the manuscript but did not add to it. See "Nachwort," *Stilling* 398.
- [2] H. Jung-Stilling, *The Autobiography of Heinrich Stilling, Late Aulic Counsellor of the Grand Duke of Baden*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844

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- [3] Jung-Stilling, 14.
- [4] Jung-Stilling, 53.
- [5] Schindler S.K, "Homosocial Necrophilia: The Making of Man in Jung-Stilling's Idyllic Patriarchy," *Outing Goethe and His Age*, ed. Alice Kuzniar, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 61-76. Consuming the mother is one important step in the process of becoming his own mother.
- [6] Jung Stilling, 14.
- [7] Jung Stilling, 15.
- [8] Interestingly, father Stilling is opposed to Wilhelm's use of the "Rute." "He, the superior male, might see his position threatened.
- [9] Jung Stilling, 44.
- [10] Jung Stilling, 44.
- [11] Jung Stilling, 16.
- [12] Jung Stilling, 57.
- [13] Schindler believes, "this incestuous reinscribing of (fe)male identity reaches a climax when the homophile organization of the father-son relationship breaks the armor of the pietistic denial of the body in an Urszene of physical affection" ("Homosocial Necrophilia" 73).
- [14] The first and only other reference to this particular knife is on page 19.
- [15] Jung Stilling, 58.
- [16] Jung Stilling, 85.
- [17] Jung Stilling, 59.
- [18] His hardship and physical weakness is also described in these words: "Sobald er anfang zu hacken oder zu mähen, so zogen sich alle seine Glieder an dem Werkzeug, als wenn sie hätten zerbrechen wollen" (123). "Feldarbeit war der Anfang von Stillings schwerem Leiden" (122). "Er bekam die Hände voller Blasen, und seine Glieder zitterten für Schmerzen und Müdigkeit" (170).
- [19] Jung Stilling, 48.
- [20] Rousseau, J-J. *Emile*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995, 180
- [21] For this reason, I believe that *Jugend* and *Jünglingsjahre* should be read together as a unit since Heinrich is in a dependent child-like relationship with his father in both parts. This contradicts Schindler's statement which reads: "Der von Goethe herausgegebene erste Teil der Lebensgeschichte 'Heinrich Stillings Jugend,' wird als in sich geschlossener Teil betrachtet, in dem [. . .] Kindheit in der patriarchalischen Idylle inszeniert wird" (*Subjekt* 129). One would overlook the extended childhood by limiting one's investigation to only the first part. The "Jugend" is not a youth in the conventional sense but simply childhood extended indefinitely. See Schindler, S., *Das Subjekt als Kind: Die Erfindung der Kindheit im Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin: Schmidt, 1994.