

German Political History Through the Prism of Hamletianism (On the Novel by A. Doebelin Hamlet)

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Abstract

Depicting of life has always been object of art. Though, in a number of literary works historic and political events are represented especially critical and specific. German history of the 20th century as well as world history are full of tragic events that changed fates of the states and millions of people. These events through the prism of fictional conscience were reflected in considerable corpus of literary works of the 20th century. The article focuses on the novel by Alfred Doebelin Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende (Tales of a Long Night) and also presents a brief review of German works created before 1980. These concepts shed light on the place of Doebelin's novel Hamlet among other literary works which address to the theme of war and motive of Hamletianism as well as the tendency of such literal appeals. Of course, literal works that reflect history are still created and recent researches prove that. The peculiar character of the novels considered in the present article is reception of Hamlet's image for reflecting and comprehending the historic situation of Germany. The aim of the research is to find out how the history of World War II was reflected in the novel by Doebelin Hamlet. To attain the aim comparative method and method of descriptive text analysis were applied.

Keywords: Hamletianism; Alfred doebelin; History in German literature.



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1. Introduction

The acquaintance of German speaking territories with Shakespeare's (1974) play Hamlet happened in the 16th century. The important benchmarks in reception of Hamlet was creative and translational work of [Lessing \(1936\)](#). In 1844 F. Freiligrath in the poem Germany – Hamlet (Deutschland ist Hamlet) proclaims emotional unification of Germany and Hamlet that was formed in the middle of the 19th century. Since then metaphor Germany – Hamlet has been used to characterize historical political state of Germany. Thus [Shakespeare \(1974\)](#) work influenced greatly intellectual life of Germany and revealed itself in various spheres from fictional and philosophical to political thought. The poem by Freiligrath reflects the notion of Hamlet's disease which is understood as suffering from one's own doubts and passivity. Hamlet's disease has been actively criticized (especially after the failed March revolution of 1848 and the victory in French-Prussian war of 1870-1871) up till the outcome of the World War I.

In the work by Freiligrath Germany – Hamlet is presented as an intellectual who had spent too much time within the walls of university in deep thoughts and missed the real struggle for democratic freedom. A famous German historian Georg Gotfrid Herwinus in his book about [Shakespeare \(1974\)](#) uses the same comparison appealing directly to German history and failed March revolution of 1848. Herewith Herwinus sees similarity of national character with Hamlet in that what sounds ideal and noble in word reveals rottenness of national nature when it comes to action. After the victory of France there emerged a ray of hope for the end of Hamlet's disease, so the comparison of Germany with Hamlet should have also run its course, but the Germans were still tempted by the chance to identify themselves with Hamlet. In 1904 Richard Meyer, a German scholar, historian of literature expressed regret that in 1848 in Paulskirche gathered too many Hamlets as a result the revolution was not a success. At the same time Meyer again raised hope that Hamletian period will end soon. Ten years later many intellectuals hoped that it would be the war that would stop Hamlet's disease.

In 1914 Julius Bab, a theatre theorist, a critic and a playwright, the follower of social democratic views, the representatives of which advocated military operations, appealed to the theme of Hamletian character of Germany. His book Fortinbras, or the war of the 19th century with the air of romanticism is strongly directed against Hamletism in Germany. Bab saw the image of a real active man in Fortinbras, unlike the image of Hamlet – the symbol of disease and fading of human existence. The political opponent Gustav Landauer, one of the leaders of Bavarian Soviet republic, in the report about [Shakespeare \(1974\)](#) in the part devoted to Hamlet, wrote that Hamlet is Shakespearian character depressingly familiar to German people, who reflects their inner dissociation. Like Bab, Landauer demands a new man of action, but not of social democratic type, but a communistic one. According to Bab, the representatives of the future should be such natures like Fortinbras.

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2. Methodology

The scientific interest of the present research is what impact the events of world history and history of Germany had on the novel by Doebelin *“Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende” (Tales of a Long Night)* (Doebelin, 2002: 15). First of all, it is certainly the events of World War II and also participation in World War I. The main method of the research is comparative method combined with a complex descriptive analysis of the text.

3. Results and Discussion

In 30s of the 20th century a number of novels connected with the image of Hamlet were created. The authors of them stick to various political views: Georg Letham: Physician and Murderer (Georg Letham. *Arzt und Mörder*) by (Harwood, 1907), *The Story of Life of one Fatty whose Name was Hamlet (Lebenslauf eines dicken Mannes, der Hamlet hieß)* by Höfele (2016), *In the Swirl of the Vocation (Im Wirbel der Berufung)* by Loquai (1993), (Shevchenko and R., 2016)), Mephisto by Symington (2005). The prelude to creation of these works was for the most part the complex catastrophic history of Germany marked by the defeat in World War I, the fall of Hohenzollern Empire, economic decline, civil war, world economic crisis and coming to power of national socialistic party of Germany. All these events make the writers in 20-s and early 30-s conceive in their works social problems of the time applying Shakespearean image of Hamlet. K. Mann registers in the Germans from time to time arising tendency to overcome Hamlet in oneself, the desire which according to the formed tradition used to develop just right before the wars.

After World War II the resorts to the image of Hamlet continue in the context of interpretation and comprehension of history. One of the 1st works of this kind was the novel by Doebelin (2002) *Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende (Tales of a Long Night)* which will be the object of consideration in the present article. Later, such works like *Incorrigible* by Wünsche, *The Black Swan* by Walser, *On Behalf of the Hats* by Joke and Petra (2017) were created. The novel by Doebelin *“Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende” (Tales of a Long Night)* (Doebelin, 2002) was started in 1945 in California and finished in 1946 in Baden-Baden. For the 1st time ever it was published in GDR in 1956. Doebelin (2002) writes about recent events though using metaphors and ahistoric analogues. The plot-forming link in the novel is the story of the Ellisons family and central character of the novel, i.e. Edward Ellison who had lost his leg at the very end of WWII and experienced deep psychological trauma. At the heart of the novel there is the search for the truth quite typical for the German writer of this period. The plot develops under the pressure of Edward's question, who is guilty of his becoming a cripple. Throughout the action of the novel in the process of searching for truth, Edward identifies himself with Hamlet. The process of revealing the truth comes from the world problem of war which had an impact on a particular case, i.e. on Edward's health, and turns into solving family drama. Through manifesting hidden family conflicts it again gives upon international level to global common human guilt in the existence of wars. Edward aims not to convict, but to find the guilty, as well as the core of the crime, i.e. reveal the truth: He is not going to judge anyone, he only wants to clear out an important and urgent question: he wants to learn what has made him and surrounding people disabled and rotten hearted.

The search for the guilty in the war turns into the investigation of a hidden family conflict. Family as the initial stage of the state development may become the scene where relations of violence and exploitation emerge which could lead to formation and possession of the humans by fascist ideology. Hidden conflict inside the family is visualized through the image of crooked house, which appears in the novel as allusion of the famous phrase from Shakespeare's (1974) *Hamlet* (Something is rotten in the state of Denmark). House is initially connected with the family and in the context of the whole novel the Ellisons' family house damaged in bomb attack is the indication how two calamities, personal and historic are tied with each other. Historic catastrophe became a catalyst to Edward remember the fear from his childhood. A young man started the family investigation to get the answer to one key question: who is guilty in wars, deaths and injuries, and why people have become so rotten.

Marcel's saying in Doebelin (2002) novel in a paraphrased way pronounce various characters; some accidentally for themselves, others (e.g. Edward) do it intentionally: Gordon (... if my house in London was not damaged...), Katelin (... something is not good in our house, Mackenzie in the story about King Lear, i.e. allegorically about the Ellisons family (something has got rotten in the state, Edward citing Shakespeare (1974) and his famous line (Something is rotten in the state of Denmark...)). In what situation and for what occasion do the characters say this phrase? Gordon remembers the house damaged in the war in relation to the idea of desired escape because here he is constantly followed by searching look of Edward, the son presses him with questions and burdens with suspicions. The idea of escape comes to mind when family conflict is judged by Edward in light of recent tragic events of his life, and is limited to the search of the guilty in his becoming a disabled and it does not touch upon deep problems in his family (Salim et al., 2018).

Katelin in the conversation with her brother means particularly home environment. She draws Edward's attention to the secret struggle between her parents and to the fact that their house is only the show of family relations where each pronounced word does not correspond to genuine opinions. However, unlike her brother Katelin does not aim to take a close look at the reasons. Mackenzie on the one hand wittily comments on Shakespeare (1974) *King Lear* plot by the words from another of his plays and on the other hand allegorically describes the situation in the Ellisons family. Consequently, the phrase pronounced apparently intentionally got several shades of meaning. Edward again reads Shakespeare (1974) in the house of his dead friend Jonny after the revealed break-up of his family (parents do not conceal their conflict any more, Gordon has left the house). Now Edward views the earlier adopted Hamlet's role as the past which he has no tie with any more. Again the young man

tries to analyze relations in his family and his personal hamletianism with a fresh eye. Thus, the notion of home becomes a crucial allusion in understanding the novel making a reference to [Shakespeare \(1974\)](#) Hamlet.

As a result of analysis of his family Edward comes to conclusion that the reason of wars is cowardice and lie when everyone is eager to convict of war whatever and whoever except himself, i.e. relieve oneself of responsibility, whereas for Edward the questions about the guilt circulate round such notions like truth, responsibility, and honesty. Edward went off to war, but in fact he escaped from his family distracted by inner contradictions, understatements and lack of understanding. In such a thing the character has become a victim of parental irresponsibility both in family and political sense. The main thesis of the novel is Edward's deduction: ... war has not been a natural phenomenon. We have organized it ourselves. At the end of the novel Edward's parents associated with Gertrude and Claudius die being not able to endure the family tragedy. Edward himself gradually recovers but Hamlet dies in him: Let us do away with Hamletism with this devilry, in staging of Hamlet I do not participate any more. After the family drama and clearing of some dark sides the long hoped-for liberation did not follow. Edward outlived the role of Hamlet and rejected it: Let us do away with Hamletism with this devilry, in staging of Hamlet I also do not participate any more, I am waiting for Prince Fortinbras and his strong forces from the north, let them come into my Denmark. Young Fortinbras appealed to Shakespearian Hamlet, the latter was ready to give him his country: ... but I do prophesy the election rights on Fortinbras ([Nurgalieva et al., 2018](#)).

At the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century in Germany there has already been the experience of opposing Fortinbras as active principle to Hamlet. However the image of Fortinbras of the turn of the century embodied aggressive features eventually aimed at war. In [Doebelin \(2002\)](#) novel the image of Fortinbras is intended to symbolize a more recent and fresh, spiritually young essence capable of building new life. This essence can be in someone else and in Edward himself. In such a case, Denmark is Edward's soul as well as a small world where he lives, and also the whole world of people which has just survived in terrible tragedy and started to recover. Edward shifts his attention from himself to surrounding people. For [Doebelin \(2002\)](#) a man with the whole complexity of the inner world is the part of general mass of people. Consequently, the actions of definite people and family conflicts are specific reflection and more likely a prototype of world events. There is no need to organize expeditions to foreign countries, Edward says, there is also no need to go to the war, even to go to the cinema you do not need to: everything can be found in your native house. Here are the reasons of wars. Recovery and emotional consolation the main character achieved not because of punishing the supposed guilty, but by revealing the true reasons of guiltiness that ran according to the scenario of Shakespeare's Hamlet. One of the German critics, ([Loquai, 1993](#)) expressed his astonishment of the fact that events in [Doebelin \(2002\)](#) novel happen in England but not in Germany, and in the analysis of the guilty of the war National Socialism and the Third Reich are not mentioned. The reason of it was probably the author's desire to generalize the theme of guiltiness of the wars. On the other hand, we can assume that if in this novel Edward was German Hamlet, it is likely that the first publication of the novel came not earlier than ten years later.

4. Summary

The image of Hamlet announced in the title is presented in transversal action and in organization of this action, as it is connected with the process of Edward's investigation who like Hamlet is interested in the question of the truth. This investigation inside the family carried out by the main character according to Hamlet scenario is projected on the search for global guilt, thus narrative compositional level merges with ideologic philosophical one. On the ideologic philosophical level Shakespearean reminiscences base upon the principle of projecting the world on a definite family and family problems on world collisions and suggest the ways of solving the problem of guiltiness and responsibility. Moreover, on the compositional level ([Doebelin, 2002](#)) structures his novel consisting of five books in a similar way to the five acts drama by [Shakespeare \(1974\)](#). Dramatic character of the novel is strengthened by almost full compliance to the unity of place and time of the action (the Ellisons' house by [White \(2009\)](#)) and by relatively small amount of key characters. Not taking into account inserted stories, the novel is rich in dialogues. The theatre in theatre device is performed multiple times in composition of the novel. One of the central and emblematic Shakespearean allusions for the meaning of the whole novel is the image of home being the symbol of family and peace. In this novel Hamletism is associated with disease and demonic (devilry) even in a more intensive way than in previous works about Hamlet and is opposed to positive Christian humanism ([Antúñez, 2017](#)).

5. Conclusions

The study of the novel showed that identification of the main character of the novel Hamlet... by [Doebelin \(2002\)](#) carries on a German tradition on identifying the Germans and Germany with the image of Hamlet. Under the influence of global events such identification evolves on the scale of negative connotation from conviction of inaction (as it was since the beginning of the 19th century) and sense of guilt (as in the novel Lethham) to the association with disease and opposed to the spirit of Christian humanism. Though the scene of the story is transferred to England, it is specific German interpretation of historic events inspired by [Jaspers \(1999\)](#) that makes the main character of [Doebelin \(2002\)](#) novel viewed as German Hamlet.

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