

Emilia Wojtczak  
Doctoral Studies, Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Warsaw  
Institute of German Studies  
Research supervisor: dr hab. prof. UW Robert Małecki

## Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

### *The Influence of Fatherlessness on Wolfgang Koeppen's and Thomas Bernhard's oeuvre*

The following dissertation attempts to show how the absence of the father was reflected in the literature of two German-speaking authors: Wolfgang Koeppen and Thomas Bernhard. What plays a crucial role in the analysis is a methodological perspective: the analytical part does not rely on the biographies of the writers but primarily on the characters created in the literary works of Koeppen and Bernhard. The objective is to present the protagonists from psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives, together with the juxtaposition and detailed comparison of the characters. Using Freudian psychoanalysis, the dissertation explores two fundamental issues: to what extent is it possible, on the basis of the literary works of Bernhard and Koeppen, to provide the conditions for a psycho-sociological analysis of fatherlessness? And what are the differences between the two writers with regard to the consequences of fatherlessness?

The dissertation is divided into two parts: a theoretical one – consisting of three chapters – sheds light on the previous research on the father's absence; the second part – the practical one consisting of three chapters – provides a detailed analysis of the literary works of the aforementioned authors. The first chapter presents the main thesis, the methodology, and the current state of research. The second chapter discusses the importance of the father in the family in sociological and historical terms, taking into consideration critical sources from the 1970s until present-day research. The absence of the father has also been examined on a psychological level, with empirical evidence often coming to the fore. The third chapter outlines three functions of the father according to Jacques Lacan: the Symbolic father, the Imaginary father, and the Real father.

The second part of the dissertation, starting from chapter four, scrutinises Bernhard's works from a sociological point of view, through the lens of the father function in Lacan's

psychoanalytic theories. Chapter five investigates Koeppen's work using the same methods. Following the conceptual questions, both chapters highlight the centrality of socio-psychological concepts in the literary studies of Bernhard's and Koeppen's works. Chapter six presents a detailed comparison and evaluation of the analysis from chapters four and five. Chapter seven, the final one, offers numerous conclusions from the study.

The analysis of Thomas Bernhard's literature includes all of his novels: *Frost*, *Verstörung*, *Das Kalkwerk*, *Korrektur*, *Die Ursache*, *Der Keller*, *Der Atem*, *Die Kälte*, *Ein Kind*, *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, *Holzfällen*. *Eine Erregung*, *Alte Meister*, *Komödie*, *Auslöschung* and *Ein Zerfall*. All of them feature characters whose biographies and psychological conditions justify the examination of fatherlessness motif. In this context, worth mentioning are also his short stories, such as *Amras*, *Der Kulterer*, *Ungenach*, *Gehen*, *Ja* and *Die Billigesser*.

The study also includes all of Wolfgang Koeppen's novels: *Eine unglückliche Liebe*, *Die Mauer schwankt*, *Aufzeichnungen aus einem Erdloch*, *Tauben im Gras*, *Das Treibhaus* and *Der Tod in Rom*. Similarly to Bernhard, all Koeppen's novels include protagonists whose psychological backgrounds provoke further discussions about fatherlessness. Additionally, the study takes into account his prose: *Ein Heizer wird toll*, *Joans tausend Gesichter*, *Jugend*, *An mich selbst*, *Angst*, *Das klassische Italien*, *Die Verlobung*, *Taugte Frieda wirklich nichts?*, *Wer bereitet den Raben die Speisen* and *Zum ersten Mal in Rotterdam*.

In summary, the investigation has shown that although the absence of the father is a recurrent motif in Bernhard's and Koeppen's works, it is not immediately recognisable. More importantly, the texts reveal different types of fathers who are present and physically absent. Research has shown that the motif of father absence is, rather indirectly, a central theme in the works of both writers. The fathers depicted in Bernhard's and Koeppen's writings have failed as parents in almost all cases.

The portrayal of the psycho-sociological interpretation of the authors' works was based on Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan's model of three paternal functions. These functions, as defined by Lacan, formed the foundation for the literary commentary, provided an interesting framework, and organised structure for the specific characteristics of fathers in the prose of both authors.

The analysis indicates that the Oedipus complex has not been worked through by some of the characters due to the absence of any representative of the social order, especially the



Symbolic father. It can be argued that the absence of the father is linked with the absence of the legislator: in the case of Bernhard and Koeppen, that results in incest, crime, and sexual abuse.

Another important observation about the consequences of fatherlessness is that the mental absence of the father, despite his physical presence, also negatively affects the child's life. These are fathers who, overwhelmed by parenting, do not know how to be a good father, or fathers who ignore the psychological needs of their children and, thus, remain out of their reach.

Thanks to the study *Still-Leben mit Vater. Zur Abwesenheit von Vätern in der Familie* by Michael Bode and Christian Wolf, the depicted fathers may be divided into different types. In the writings of Thomas Bernhard and Wolfgang Koeppen, there are four out of nine types of fathers: the perpetrator (no active participation in parenting), the star (an absent father as a successful person), the empty father (suffers from burnout), and the non-exerting father (leaves parenting to the mother). On the basis of these types, it is proved that among many father figures that appear in the works of both authors, all are essentially psychologically absent. This may stem from the fact that both Bernhard and Koeppen, due to their fatherless childhoods, could not see themselves in such situations. Furthermore, they did not want to create a healthy and satisfying literary father-son relationship because they simply had not experienced it.

The works of both authors address numerous effects of fatherlessness: the sense of absence despite the father's physical presence, mental issues, problematic relationships with women and children, incest, and the choice of a surrogate father figure. What has also been emphasised are criminal tendencies, abortion attempts, compensation mechanisms through artistic creativity, and the death of the father.

*Emilia Wejtzak*