

**Mathilde Franziska Anneke's  
"Broken Chains" ("Gebrochene Ketten"):  
An Outsider's View of Slavery in America**

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Mathilde Franziska Anneke (1817–1884) was a political activist, writer, and educator whose works have been all but forgotten. As a writer she was radicalized by her own personal experiences and by the ideas of the Revolution of 1848 in Germany. Forced into exile for her participation in the revolution, she used her journalistic and oratory skills in the United States in support of the Woman Suffrage Movement and to argue the case against slavery. Her short story, "Broken Chains," is part of her contribution to the Anti-Slavery Movement from within the German immigrant community. Although her essays and newspaper articles are a powerful part of her legacy as a "Forty-Eighter," her short stories are also an interesting contribution to 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature written in German, both because of her clear political purpose, and because of her "outsider" perspective. As an immigrant writer, she is, of necessity, outside of the mainstream of American writers as she frames her story "Broken Chains" based on sensitivities and attitudes she developed in Germany. This story is representative of her fiction in that she clearly writes her stories with a political intent, and, like the effective public speaker she was, she always attempts to engage the reader's emotional response in support of her point of view.

The years of Mathilde Franziska Anneke's life, 1817–1884, spanned interesting historical times in both Germany, where she lived the first part of her life, and the United States, where she emigrated after the failure of the Revolution of 1848. Anneke participated in the heady liberal discussions of the *Vormärz*, founded a short-lived revolutionary newspaper, and even rode into battle in Germany. She actively participated in the Woman Suffrage Movement and voiced her support of the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States, using both her journalistic and

oratory skills. She was on the forefront of some of the most exciting social changes of the nineteenth century; she was a political activist, writer, and educator—yet today most of her writings are unknown even to those studying German literature.

In this paper, I will introduce the writing of this forgotten 19<sup>th</sup> century woman writer with a focus on her use of the short story to influence societal attitudes. I have chosen to analyze the specifics of “Broken Chains” because it is representative of both her style and the themes she used throughout her fictional work.

For this discussion, it is necessary to place Anneke’s story “Broken Chains” in context. The story appeared in *Der Bund* in June 1864 and one month later in the *Milwaukee Herald*. Modern readers of German can find the text in *Die gebrochenen Ketten: Erzählungen, Reportagen und Reden (1861–1873)* edited by Maria Wagner, and I have translated the text into English in my recent book on Anneke from Peter Lang Publishing. Another earlier short story dealing with the question of slavery, entitled “Slave Auction,” appeared in print in 1862. Slavery was not an issue Anneke had dealt with in Germany, but she was a strong advocate of women’s rights and upon her arrival in the United States she was almost immediately in contact with the American Suffrage Movement. In fact, she spoke briefly at her first convention, the famous “Mob Convention” in New York City in September of 1853 in passionate defense of freedom of speech and human rights.

For many nineteenth-century women activists in the United States, participation in the Woman Suffrage Movement came about as a result of earlier contact, and often involvement, with the Anti-Slavery Movement. This was certainly true of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London during the summer of 1840 as part of the U.S. delegation, and found themselves relegated to the galleries as observers while only the male delegates were seated. Susan B. Anthony was also a strong advocate of the abolition of slavery, as were many others who later fought for women’s rights. Through contact with suffrage leaders upon her arrival in the United States, especially with Stanton and Anthony, Mathilde Franziska Anneke quickly became aware of the issues and rhetoric involved. The ideals and sympathies developed during her participation in the Revolution of 1848 in Germany and her sensitivity to social injustices would not allow her to accept or ignore the practice of slavery. In fact, for suffragists in the United States, work in the Anti-Slavery Movement

was often the catalyst for involvement in the suffrage movement, confirming in women’s (and some men’s) minds the need for a change in the legal and political status of women in society.

As Eleanor Flexner puts it in *Century of Struggle*:

Thousands of men and women were drawn into the work [of the Anti-Slavery Movement]; among the latter were the first conscious feminists, who would go to school in the struggle to free the slaves and, in the process, launch their own fight for equality. It was in the abolition movement that women first learned to organize, to hold public meetings, to conduct petition campaigns. As abolitionists they first won the right to speak in public, and began to evolve a philosophy of their place in society and of their basic rights. For a quarter of a century the two movements, to free the slave and liberate the woman, nourished and strengthened one another. (41)

During the Civil War in the United States, Mathilde Franziska Anneke traveled to Switzerland, while her husband Fritz returned to America to fight for the Union side. In Switzerland, she wrote many newspaper articles supporting the North and several short stories, including “Broken Chains,” portraying the humiliating and dehumanizing conditions of slavery. As could be expected, she was especially sensitive to the lot of women under this system, where their designation as property made young women fair game for lecherous owners, and mothers subject to separation from their children. The dependent condition of women plus the debasing condition of slavery put a double burden on black women, a burden that Anneke depicted in emotional terms in her stories. While today’s readers might criticize a lack of distance or objectivity on the part of the author, resulting sometimes in an almost overwhelming pathos, the strong emotional appeal was very effective with 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences. The reader has only to think of the impact of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) to be convinced of this.

Writing in German in the United States, Anneke’s work was intended for the immigrant community. In its intention, it can be compared to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In both cases, the literary merit is secondary to the political purpose, and the use of appeals to the emotions is primary. However, while Stowe’s work must be seen in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century religious movements, particularly Calvinism (Donovan 7), Anneke’s writing while in Germany reveals a critical attitude toward organized religion and its influence on social issues,

particularly in regard to women's rights and place in society. In its greater length and as a popular sentimentalist novel (Donovan 8), Stowe's work is a fuller exploration of the dimension of evil inherent in the institution of slavery, whereas Anneke's short story has the more modest goal of portraying the humanity of one group of slaves using a series of short scenes to reveal their plight. Anneke asks and invites the reader's participation in the joy and sorrow of the story's dramatic ending.

Because Anneke's work is not generally well known, I will briefly sketch the story line before noting Anneke's use of literary devices. The story is structured in three parts with a series of scenes in the life of the Kingsbury family and their slaves, living in the beautiful Villa Magnolia in the southern part of the District of Columbia. Because the setting is an exotic one, both for Anneke and her immigrant readers, Anneke is careful to add enough descriptive detail to give the reader a feel for the environment and enough explanation of the historical circumstances so that the significance of a slave's position and the dramatic conclusion are well understood.

The first part takes place in an elegant Villa room where, in the first scene, Lady Kingsbury is being mourned by a young woman slave of sixteen. Her special relationship to her mistress is made clear—Lelia, as she was called, was treated like a daughter of the household. In fact, Lady Kingsbury is described as well-loved and cared for by her people, whom she refers to as servants rather than slaves, and we learn that she is criticized by her daughter for "spoiling" her slaves.

In the second scene, Madame Randall, the daughter, enters and in a few words to Lelia establishes her attitude: she makes clear to Lelia that she is a slave like all the others, and she should expect no special treatment from now on. This marks a moment of shocked realization and reminder to Lelia that she was indeed a slave with all that that implied. It is clear that she had been able to somewhat ignore that fact as long as Lady Kingsbury was alive. The rest of this section fills in information on the implications of being a slave. Lelia's prior circumstances are contrasted with those of another slave, Meta, who has had to endure cruel treatment at the hands of her impatient mistress Madame Randall. Introduced into this section is the role that physical appearance played in the fate of a female slave. Lelia's young beauty—"her skin color, although somewhat dark olive, was clear and transparent; her full lips were red as cherry blossoms....The dark veil of her hair,

when loose, covered the most voluptuous forms and gave her curly locks the softest shadows"—is contrasted with Meta's appearance, sketched laconically as "the dark-skinned Negro woman" (Piepke 93-94).

Added to that is the introduction of Mr. Allen Kingsbury, whose role as potential villain is immediately made apparent. His description consists of four, carefully chosen sentences: "Mr. Allen Kingsbury, son of the late Mrs. Kingsbury, was a man of about thirty-five. His appearance was proud and masterful. The severe line around his mouth indicated great force of will and rough egoism. In his eyes there was sensuality and a sharp look, which made clear that a victim once chosen was surely in his power" (Piepke 93).

The first section ends with a longer scene in which Allen Kingsbury and Madame Randall argue about who would get Lelia as part of his/her inheritance. Lelia is both beautiful and skilled, and considered by both children of the late Mrs. Kingsbury to be the most valuable of the slaves. Injected into this conversation between the two are a clear view of Lelia's future with each of them, and also the political situation. Allen Kingsbury states: "These are difficult times. Slave ownership is becoming uncertain. The present war puts our blessed institution in such a doubtful light that we shouldn't really squabble for a long time about the questionable property" (Piepke 96). Since neither would yield to the other, it is determined that Lelia would be sold with the rest of the slaves.

Section two is devoted to the slaves and is set in the kitchen of Villa Magnolia, where, to quote Anneke, "Juno the cook had ruled with undisputed power for many years" (Piepke 96). Anneke sketches descriptions of each in turn and indicates their situation now that their mistress has died. Juno, her husband, and her son form one unit, and that allows Anneke to indicate the plight of a family which could be separated by sale. Juno does not worry for herself or her husband, but her son Jon is "headstrong and impertinent" (Piepke 97) and that is likely to cause him problems with an owner less tolerant than the late mistress. A young housemaid and manservant who were to be married soon now see their hopes gone. And finally the laundress Nancy is given special consideration. She is especially dark-skinned and mother to a young baby. Her life has been very hard—"constantly passed from one slave handler to another" in a life of "work, misery, humiliation, and want" (97). She is sullen and disagreeable, but Anneke makes the reason for her despair clear: "She had been a mother five

times and each time, except for this last one, her child was torn from her heart in its most tender youth and alas—sold into slavery!” (Piepke 97).

They all think at the beginning of the scene that they will either go with Mrs. Kingsbury’s son or daughter, but the central moment of the scene occurs as son Jon bursts into the kitchen with the news that all of them are to be sold the next day at auction. Their anguish is portrayed, as is Jon’s moment of defiance where he announces he will run away to Canada at the first opportunity. Juno fears for his life in such a case, and we discover that Nancy had apparently once attempted escape and suffered heavy consequences. Anneke’s strength in writing this short story is her ability to evoke attitudes and circumstances with a few well-chosen sentences, leaving the rest for the reader to supply.

The final dramatic section begins with Lelia rushing to Madame Randall and begging to be kept in her service. Madame Randall sends her away, and a brief encounter with Allen Kingsbury emphasizes Lelia’s probable fate. The center of this section is the moment of deepest despair for all of the slaves, which is then abruptly broken by a shout of joy as son Jon brings the important news: the President has declared all slaves in the District of Columbia free. Lelia is called on to read the announcement from a newspaper Jon has brought with him—once again her exceptional status stands out in that she had been taught to read by her former mistress. Amid the scene of joy, Lelia goes to her former mistress’ grave to consider her future. Her new confidence allows her to look Allen Kingsbury in the face as he meets her along the path, and he realizes he has no more power over her.

However, Anneke saves the final emotional high point for the last scene: amid all the joy it is discovered that Nancy has killed her child rather than let it be sold into slavery. Anneke writes the scene as a mini-drama in which she contrasts Madame Randall’s guilty conscience and Lelia’s new confidence. The pathos of that final scene is very effective as Nancy realizes that they are now free—a totally unexpected event—and dies of shock with her child at her side.

With an excellent understanding of her 19<sup>th</sup> century audience, Mathilde Anneke was able to weave a human tragedy to illustrate the abuses of slavery. While she was equally capable of writing an essay or a powerful speech to make her points, the use of a short story was also an effective vehicle for her. She could detail the causes of individual suffering by imagining the consequences of the lack of freedom.

Women such as Lelia and Nancy were especially vulnerable: the attractive young woman vulnerable to the predation of the master of the house or his sons, the mother to having her children condemned to a life of slavery, even sold off to another family and separated from her. Having painted the intolerable picture of slavery through a specific example, Anneke was also able to use the power of fiction to dramatize the precious moment of freedom. For the young mother, freedom came only through death, but for Lelia and the others, the ending of the story holds hope for a better life in this world. As Anneke saw parallels between slavery and the legal condition of dependence forced upon women, her ending with the freeing of slaves also contains her hope that women’s legal condition might also change. After all, her women characters clearly carry a double burden because of their position in society as women and as slaves. Historically, Anneke believed that change—as was the case with the abolition of slavery—was inevitable (see Piepke, Chapter 6).

It is against this background that Anneke’s controversial stand with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton against the Fifteenth Amendment should be understood. She was not opposed to the franchise for newly freed slaves, but rather was opposed to enfranchising only former male slaves and excluding all women. She agreed with Stanton’s opinion on the question when she wrote for the *Revolution* October 21, 1869 (cited in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 333–334 by Frost & Cullen-DuPont 202):

All wise women should oppose the Fifteenth Amendment for two reasons:

1. Because it is invidious to their sex. Look at it from what point you will, and in every aspect, it reflects the old idea of woman’s inferiority, her subject condition. And yet the one need to secure an onward step in civilization is a new dignity and self-respect in women themselves. No one can think that the pending proposition of ‘manhood suffrage’ exalts woman, either in her own eyes or those of the man by her side, but it does degrade her practically and theoretically, just as black men were more degraded when all other men were enfranchised.
2. We should oppose the measure, because men have no right to pass it without our consent. When it is proposed to change the

constitution or fundamental law of the State or Nation, all the people have a right to say what that change shall be.

If women understood this pending proposition in all its bearings, theoretically and practically, there would be an overwhelming vote against the admission of another man to the ruling power of this nation, until they themselves were first enfranchised. There is no true patriotism, no true nobility in tamely and silently submitting to this insult. It is mere sycophancy to man; it is licking the hand that forges a new chain for our degradation; it is indorsing the old idea that woman's divinely ordained position is at man's feet, and not on an even platform by his side.

By this edict of the liberal party, the women of this Republic are now to touch the lowest depths of their political degradation.

During the Civil War, as previously mentioned, Mathilde Franziska Anneke focused much of her writing while in Switzerland on the horrors of slavery, but she never ceased fighting for women's rights as well and often combined arguments for improving the lot of both. When the slaves were finally free, and the Civil War ended, Anneke returned to Wisconsin and focused her considerable talent and energy on a final project she felt would improve the lives of young women. She took progressive ideas about women's education and applied them to her own school.

As can be seen, Anneke falls into the tradition of the use of literature as social critique. The political relevance and impact of her short stories can be seen as an extension of her newspaper articles, essays, and public speeches. As a Forty-Eighter, Anneke has always used her writing as a political tool; she clearly sees her writing as a vehicle for social change. "Broken Chains" provides a narrative set in an exotic setting, which is informed by those revolutionary ideas and passions.

The almost two decades of Mathilde Anneke's life spent in Milwaukee after the Civil War were dedicated to her work as a teacher, and, in terms of her immediate impact, that may well have been her most important work. However, today she is known, if only as a "footnote," for her pioneering work as a journalist (Marzolf 12), and she is also noted as an important early proponent of women's rights, as well as an active member of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the United States (Faust 172-174; Eigler & Kord; and similar reference literature). Her work, like that of so many 19<sup>th</sup> century German women writers, is marginalized, in her case due in no small part to

consideration of her work under the category of German-American-immigrant literature, itself on the margin in comparison to mainstream German literature of the 19th century. Her life and work participate in both the negative and positive connotations of marginality with its double bind: "The benefits of other unique perspectives" along with "the disadvantage of being out of the center" (Joeres & Burkhard 5). Today the literary value of her writing is often seen as less interesting than her social activism. She would have been considered "out of line" in the sense that she did not conform to patriarchal expectations for her gender in her political attitudes, which were, of course, very much "in line" with those of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Like other women writers of the 19th century, she suffered the penalty for her nonconformity. Although she was a strong woman with firm beliefs about improving the lot of women, at times she would also show sensitivity to ridicule by male liberals, many of whom shared her views in areas outside of the "woman question." However, her literary works, especially those short stories reflecting her sympathy with the Anti-Slavery Movement, demonstrate the positive side of Anneke's perspective from the sidelines in that she strongly identified with the plight of women slaves, and was able to portray their suffering with genuine and effective emotion.

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## Peter Henisch's Modern-Day Mary and Joseph Story: *Die schwangere Madonna*

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"In pursuit of another, one encounters oneself."  
*Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*

Peter Henisch has been a visible fixture on the Austrian literary scene since the 1970s. His major breakthrough occurred in 1975 with the publication of the novel, *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*,<sup>1</sup> which has been followed by a steady stream of widely read novels, texts, and poems up to the present day. Much of the author's work is a self-proclaimed work in progress. Often incorporating intertextual references to history, culture and artistic forms, interspersing music and musical overtones within his texts, and reworking earlier publications—*Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*, for example, was revised and republished in 1987—Henisch invariably writes about imperfect characters on society's fringe as they encounter cultural, gender, and generational obstacles in their search for identity. In *Morrison's Versteck*, his novel about Jim Morrison, the nonconformist lead singer of The Doors,<sup>2</sup> for example, Henisch confronts established societal norms with his treatment of homo- and heterosexual themes and mediates between an abstract modernism and a popular and populist realism. Henisch's discourse invariably allows for considerable ambiguity, flux, and variety in the multiple voices expressed in his irony-laden writing.

Himself a product of the turbulent 1960s, Henisch treats both historical and fictional characters who arguably often reflect his own personal experience or with whom he at least easily identifies. From his own father Walter Henisch, to Jim Morrison, to Hamlet, to E.T.A. Hoffmann, to Baronkarl, to Black Peter, Henisch views life and society through the eyes of eccentric and exceptional characters caught up in the conflict between traditional societal values and individual freedom,