Sado-Masochistic Daughters: The Mother's Fault? Mothers and Daughters in Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* and Brigitte Schwaiger's *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer*

Norgard Klages
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

> Ich schrumpfe zu einem bitteren Kern, der sich ausspucken möchte.[1]
>
> Erika spürt nichts und hat nie etwas gespürt. Sie ist empfindungslos wie ein Stück Dachpappe im Regen.[2] Ihr Hobby ist das Schneiden am eigenen Körper. (Jelinek 88)

Truly powerful and desperate words like these run throughout Brigitte Schwaiger's and Elfriede Jelinek's autobiographical novels. The central themes in Schwaiger's *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* are the protagonist's intense feelings of inferiority and helplessness, whereas Jelinek's account focuses on emotionally disturbed relationships that are leading to self-destructive behavior. Jelinek's and Schwaiger's personal stories may differ drastically from each other, yet they both show the mother's pivotal role in the protagonists' tendencies towards masochism or sadism. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love* have discussed how sadistic as well as masochistic behavior evolves from the mother-daughter relationship. Their theories of women's roles in society and in the family provide us with models for understanding the behavior of Jelinek's and Schwaiger's protagonists that we might otherwise characterize as eccentric or inexplicable.

Although the mother's impact on child development has been frequently discussed in psychoanalytic theory, the evaluation of the mother's role varies greatly depending on the importance placed on the pre-Oedipal period. Authors with diverse ideological backgrounds view the mother's influence on the child's development differently, and thus the question is raised as to how this role is defined.

Recent psychoanalytical theorists, especially feminists such as Benjamin and Chodorow, perceive their own position as being opposed to Freud's view. They extensively discuss his theory, trying to differentiate

their own efforts from his position. Whereas Freud often holds the mother responsible for the development of neuroses in women,[3] feminist psychoanalysts have rejected Freud's interpretation of child development and described it as phallocentric. They offer a new set of explanations that is supposed to deconstruct the dichotomy of Freud's thinking, with its myth of the guilty, powerless mother on the one hand and the powerful liberating father on the other.[4] In order to gain a better understanding of what neo-Freudian theory rejects, a brief discussion of those views in question, namely the parent-child relationship as Freud sees it, seems appropriate.

In most of his essays Freud does not pay much attention to the pre-Oedipal phase where the child exhibits a strong attachment to the mother. He focuses on the later developments, emphasizing the father's influence on the child's psychological development. While the first love object for both is the mother, in the Oedipal phase the boy and the girl relate to her in a different fashion. After the boy's affection for his mother becomes sexualized he sees his father as a rival for his mother's love. He fears punishment in the form of castration, which makes him repress his attachment to his mother and identify with his father. The girl, on the other hand, discovers that she does not have a penis and automatically feels inferior. According to Freud this is not the only difficulty that the girl has in dealing with her feelings towards her mother. The daughter also blames her mother for depriving her of milk in the process of weaning, and for delaying her experience of sexual gratification by forbidding masturbation. The girl's "accusations" lead Freud to the conclusion that a mother-daughter feud is inevitable, with the mother as the personification of all evil (Female Sexuality, 234).

Feminist psychoanalysts generally agree that the girl's development is far more complicated than that of the boy. However, they differ from Freud when they claim that the girl does not totally abandon the bond with her mother.[5] The girl comes to find her identity not by repudiating what Freud called an "initial masculine identity" but rather by identifying with her first caregiver, her mother. Chodorow and Benjamin claim that the rejection of the mother is not a necessary element of the girl's turn toward her father. Chodorow explains the situation as follows:

> Psychoanalytic accounts make clear that a girl's libidinal turning to her father is not at the expense of, or a substitute for, her attachment to her mother. Nor does a girl give up the internal relationship to her mother which is a product of her earlier development. Instead, a girl develops important oedipal attachments to her mother *as well as* to her father. (Chodorow 127)

Chodorow points out that this never-ending relationship "profoundly affects [the daughter's] sense of self, [her] later object-relationships, and [her] feelings about [her] mother and about women in general" (77). Her account of the mother's role within the family situation and social structure emphasizes the sexual division of labor and points out women's financial dependency on their husbands due to their non-paid domestic work. The different processes of personality development in boys and girls are the result of this socially determined division of roles in raising children. Chodorow therefore assumes that the girl develops a different sense of self than the boy. Due to her own inferior social position, the mother reproduces the feeling of inferiority that results in a submissive attitude in her daughter. In Chodorow's depiction the sense of self that the girl finally acquires through her mother's influence is, however, not very different from Freud's account of "accepting the castration."

Mothering, when it is restricted to women, as it usually is in most Western cultures, ultimately also has the effect of creating blurred ego boundaries—a condition that continues into adulthood. Benjamin and Chodorow show how the phenomenon of confused ego boundaries in women is connected to the problem of identity and the concepts of selfhood. Because mothers function as primary caregivers, their daughters lack self-definition since they do not have to separate, as boys do, from the first person with whom they identify. As a result they have a less pronounced sense of self and have difficulties differentiating themselves from others. The outcome of the daughter's development is the experience of more permeable ego boundaries.

> From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others.... Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (Chodorow 169)

Connected to the lack of ego boundaries is the difficulty of developing a strong identity, the feeling of deprivation and loss of self. According to Benjamin, "[s]ince the mother is deprived of subjectivity, identification with her involves a loss of self" (171), a condition one finds in many autobiographical novels written by women.

Feminist psychoanalytic critics thus shift the "blame" from the mother as a person (Freud's argument) to the mother as a feature of the social structure (Chodorow, Benjamin). Despite this change, they hold the mother responsible for the daughter's development—for her loss of ego

boundaries and the resulting loss of identity. Marianne Hirsch comments on this phenomenon:

> What has hardly changed, between Freud and the work of Nancy Chodorow or Luce Irigaray, is the presentation of a mother who is overly invested in her child, powerless in the world, a constraining rather than an enabling force in the girl's development and an inadequate and disappointing object of identification. (Hirsch 169)

The focus has shifted from the direct accusation of the mother herself to the condemnation of the patriarchal society that imposes a role on her. Both interpretations account for the influence that mothering by women has on the development of the child, yet the shift being made is one from "fault" to "cause." How is this "identifying with an inadequate and disappointing" mother linked to masochistic or sadistic behavior? In the autobiographical novels to be addressed, is the mother or the patriarchal society accused?

Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer is the story of a young woman married to a successful engineer and living in total isolation and dependency on her husband. She is unable to develop a voice of her own to meet his patronizing behavior and submits herself to him. In her attempt to cope with his condescending behavior she continually retreats into childhood memories and escapes into an affair with her husband's friend. The young woman's life is ruled by the ubiquitous lack of self-esteem. She perceives herself as inferior and is throughout the book preoccupied with her alleged inabilities and flaws:

> Mein Mann wirft Wörter aus, und sie fallen dorthin, wo er sie haben will. Meine Wörter haben kein Gewicht. Sie schweben sichtbehindernd im Raum. (Schwaiger 58)

Her mother's subjugation to the father serves as a pattern for the protagonist's married life and appears to have shaped her self-perception. In her mother's fashion she not only is the servile wife but often the victim of her husband's psychologically vicious conduct. When she secretly breaks out of her marriage by having an affair with Albert, she is repeating her former situation, looking for strong support and control which she cannot find in herself. According to Benjamin and Chodorow, a woman's submissiveness and lack of self-respect are the result of social structures and reflect the value system of patriarchal society. In *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* Schwaiger illustrates how the protagonist sees her mother's example and is made to believe this "fact" of inferiority throughout her up-

bringing and—as a result of her alienated self-judgment—experiences a great sense of abasement in her relationship with her husband. Interfamily relationships that are based on the principle of the division of work, monetary power and mothering by women are the determining factors of family life, preventing girls and ultimately women from developing a sense of self-esteem (Chodorow 86).[6] The protagonist's family is a perfect example of this gender division. Her father is a physician and the mother, "die Frau Doktor," is the financially dependent housewife. The women who surround her let themselves be subjugated and, as a result, become preoccupied with fashion, household, manners, and superficialities. In her portrayal of the women in the family and their expected "role-model-behavior," Schwaiger uses empty phrases that express mere rituals and the absence of any meaning or value behind them: "Gutbürgerlich, das ist das wichtigste [sic]," and, "So sitzt keine Dame," are examples of how the protagonist's family is described. Social interactions are conditioned by empty phrases.

Benjamin claims that dependency, both social and financial, leads to submission and masochistic behavior in women and makes it impossible for them to break away. Deriving her theory from Hegel's concept of the Master-Slave dialectic, Benjamin argues that the submissive tendencies—of women, in her opinion—ultimately represent a transposed desire for recognition (56). It is only through the recognition of another person that this desire can be fulfilled: "The assertion of one individual (the master) is transformed into domination; the other's (the slave's) recognition becomes submission" (Benjamin 62). Through total submission and loss of self, the protagonist "is gaining access, however circumscribed, to a more powerful one" (Benjamin 61). She envisions her existence through the connection to somebody else, namely men. Whereas she defined herself through her father in her childhood she now only lives through her husband. In writing "Ich bin nicht ich. Ich bin Rolfs Frau" (Schwaiger 34), she manifests a total lack of her own identity and thus shows that her ego boundaries are blurred. This phenomenon is also reflected by the fact that the protagonist does not have a name. Her self-perception is revealed by her anorexia, which is aimed at preserving the physical appearance of a girl. By acting like a girl she hopes to gain love and affection, a prolonged childhood desire that the mother did not fulfill. This lack finally resulted in her daughter's lack of self-esteem and led to the masochistic behavior. Although the protagonist becomes aware of her mother's shortcomings, she does not express her anger directly. Rather, she directs it against herself, because she has been convinced about her own worthlessness, and through internalization leads a life characterized by the destruction of her physical as well as mental self: self-abasement, anorexia and suicidal

thoughts become part of her life. It also seems as if she unconsciously apprehends the inescapable conditions of her mother's role within a society controlled by men, and therefore redirects her anger away from her mother towards herself. The role behavior is thus passed on from mother to daughter. At the end of *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* the protagonist realizes that she has always been the daughter of her mother's imagination as she begins to see the disparity between her mother's and her own interpretation of reality and past events. The comments written in the photo album describe her mother's illusionary interpretation of reality and clash harshly with the way she, the daughter, feels about her childhood.

In *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* the emphasis lies on society's impact in defining the protagonist's and her mother's self-understanding. The protagonist's dependency on her husband is due to the domestic sphere to which she is limited; her submission to him has its roots in her weak ego boundaries and low self-esteem caused by her own mother's position. The blame here is put not on the mother herself, but rather on the norms and conventions with which women have to deal.

The mother in *Die Klavierspielerin* exercises overwhelming and all-controlling power over her daughter, Erika, a piano-teacher well into her thirties. The domination of the mother is omnipresent. She imposes control on all aspects of Erika's life, forces decisions on her, demands to know where she is at all times. A separation of mother and daughter has obviously never taken place and this configuration takes the shape of an extended pregnancy, since the mother-child unity is never severed. In fact, the mother is the active party in preventing it, aided by her daughter's passivity. Because the mother takes total possession of her, the daughter can develop no identity, no ego boundaries. When she cuts her genitals she sees herself through a mirror image, a reflection of herself which prohibits access to her inner self. The distortion of her identity is facilitated by the lack of a father figure. Her father was committed to an insane asylum and does not serve as the dominating power in the family. Apart from her mother Erika never had a person to turn to and remained attached to her, preserving the pre-Oedipal relationship. To a certain degree this does explain the close mother-daughter bond. But how can we interpret her voyeuristic tendencies or such pathological behavior as stabbing herself, putting glass into the pockets of a piano student and sexually degrading Klemmer, a male student of hers?

Writing a letter to Klemmer helps her to create an imaginative self as well as to establish boundaries. It is an attempt to separate herself from her mother. In this letter she demands to be sexually dominated by Klemmer, to be bound and beaten. In this instance she is trying through sub-

mission and masochistic behavior to achieve the recognition she has never received from her mother. By inflicting pain onto herself either by her own hand or through the actions of others, she attempts to escape the sadism inflicted upon her by her mother. In having control over the pain she also gains a sense of control over herself. On other occasions her masochistic desire for punishment leads to voyeuristic behavior: When she watches people having sex in the park or when she goes to peep-shows and porno-movies, she is actually fantasizing about the punishment she can expect if she is caught.

Although she can play only one side at a time, there are scenes that diverge considerably from what would be called masochism, for instance when she viciously attacks Klemmer's genitals (Jelinek 181-82). She abuses Klemmer sexually and attempts to control him just as her mother controlled her. In her efforts to rebel against her mother's domination she tries to establish her own identity at Klemmer's expense. Because "the desire to hurt and reduce the other as [she] has been hurt [her]self comes into being" (Benjamin 69) the protagonist breaks out in violence and acts sadistically. Since the descriptions of masochistic tendencies are much more prevalent in *Die Klavierspielerin*, critics have often ignored Erika's sadism in their discussion, focusing instead on the protagonist's self-abusive behavior, which better fits the stereotype of the female masochist. Kecht works within this common paradigm of female masochism and male sadism, which leads her into false assumptions: she discusses cause and effect of sado-masochistic behavior, but uncritically talks about the masochistic protagonist (357-372). As Benjamin points out "The complement to the male refusal to recognize the other is woman's own acceptance of her lack of subjectivity, her willingness to offer recognition without expecting it in return" (Benjamin 78). This "willingness to offer recognition" explains the masochistic tendencies of the protagonist, but it does not offer an explanation for her sadistic side that is described in some places. Benjamin's model (to which Kecht refers) might be applicable in most situations; however, in the case of *Die Klavierspielerin* it has its limitations. The situation has to be viewed from a different angle, because we have a different kind of family situation here, with a strong non-submissive mother and a weak and finally absent father. With her sadistic fantasies the protagonist tries to overcome her childhood disappointment and find a surviving other to replace her weak father. In a strange duality her pleasure depends on her desire for assertion by degrading Klemmer and on her subconscious wish to find a surviving other to replace her weak father. In a strange duality, her pleasure depends on her desire to assert herself by degrading Klemmer and on her subconscious wish to find a

strong individual who will resist her sadistic abuse and, in fact, abuse her in turn.

Some of this intricate conduct, especially the protagonist's suicidal tendencies, can be explained as melancholia following the loss of something withdrawn from consciousness, something that is not concrete.[7] Although the father has been lost as an object of love, the loss was not as obvious to Erika since he did not die. With the absence of the father, Erika internalizes not only the love but also the loss. The melancholy outcome of Erika's feelings of loss is portrayed in *Die Klavierspielerin*: sadism, masochism and suicidal tendencies. Judith Butler links melancholia to the establishment of gender identities and the Oedipal situation, which are both predicated on the loss of the mother (64). Drawing on Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Butler argues that a set of sanctions and taboos regulates masculine as well as feminine identification. The daughter must relinquish the first object of love, the mother, due to a set of taboos that forbid homosexual attachment. Butler describes the set of social rules responsible for the occurrence of melancholia and does not blame the mother herself for it. In *Die Klavierspielerin* Erika internalizes the bondage to her mother not only because of her mother's forcefulness but also due to the fact that she does not have a father to turn to. Thus, in her emotional confusion she is a victim of both society's sanctions against homosexual gender identification and of her mother's overbearing demands rooted in her social position.

Some critics have been concerned about the disturbing autobiographical accounts of these writers. In the age of feminism they perceive the portrayals in these works as anachronisms. We must, however, keep in mind that responsibility for the sado-masochistic behavior of the daughters rests with the social conventions of a previous generation and reveals the self-perpetuating mechanisms of society. Domination and sadism in Jelinek, for instance, are to be understood as a synonym for patriarchal society (Höfler 155). The accounts of Schwaiger and Jelinek are not anachronistic, because by portraying women's private lives they deal with social history in a feminist way. They make their private lives public and assume an active role through their writings. As a result, these authors become agents: with their narrations they name, define, and interpret female experience. They are thus providing a way for women and men to understand and possibly change gender polarity and the frame of domination.

● NOTES

I am very grateful to Professor Alice Kuzniar for her encouragement and scholarly advice. I would also like to thank Matt Kaplan, who carefully read drafts at various stages and made many valuable suggestions.

[1] Brigitte Schwaiger, *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer?* (1977; Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1979) 51.

[2] Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983; Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986) 77.

[3] In "Female Sexuality", Vol. XXI (1927-1931), for instance, Freud sees in the child's dependence on the mother the roots to hysteria and paranoia in women (see p. 227).

[4] See, among others, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Women*, Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, and also Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin.

[5] See, for instance, Chodorow, Benjamin, and Hirsch.

[6] At a later date, in her essay collection *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, Chodorow admits of having made the "early feminist mistake of implying that women do not work in the paid labor-foce" (15), thus making assumptions about white middle-class families only. The universality of her investigations clearly suffers because of this flaw. However, the family structures found in the autobiographical works to be discussed here closely resemble the ones that Chodorow had in mind when she wrote *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

[7] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" 251.

● WORKS CITED

Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love. Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering. Pychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983.

Höfler, Günther, and Kurt Bartsch, eds. *Elfriede Jelinek*. Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 1991.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Women*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Jelinek, Elfriede. *Die Klavierspielerin*. 1983. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986.

Kecht, Maria-Regina. "'In the Name of Obedience, Reason, and Fear': Mother-Daughter Relations in W.A. Mitgutsch and E. Jelinek." *German Quarterly* 62.3 (1989): 357-372.

Schwaiger, Brigitte. *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer?* 1977. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1979.