

Gender Images in Dieter Wellershoff's *Der Liebeswunsch*

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The prolific storyteller and essayist Dieter Wellershoff can look back on a considerable number of theoretical texts and literary works he has written. Nevertheless, until recently, the author was, as Ulrich Greiner acknowledged, “nicht in Mode” (“not fashionable”).¹ For a long time, Wellershoff’s literary works were primarily considered to be manifestations of his theoretical demands and judged accordingly. Critics often blamed him for being too theoretical, and the public did not adore him; his commercial success was moderate.

This all changed when Wellershoff published *Der Liebeswunsch* in 2000. The novel brought the recognition that he had been waiting for; it became a bestseller. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive, even the term “Meisterstück” (“masterpiece”) was used.² In the television program *Das Literarische Quartett*, Marcel Reich-Ranicki praised the novel in the highest terms: “Ich habe selten erlebt, dass Liebe so vergegenwärtigt wird” (“Seldom have I seen love made present so well”). Even less euphoric critics commend Wellershoff’s exact descriptions and accurate observations and attest that he is a “Meisterrealist” (“master of realism”), particularly versed in matters of psychological realism (Greiner).³ Finally, Katrin Hillgruber declares that Wellershoff draws a “meisterliches Frauenporträt” (“masterly portrait of a woman”). Given the acclaim, it seems worthwhile to take a closer look at the reality the author presents and to ask what makes it so appealing. The novel emphasizes characters and their relations to each other: in particular, relations between the sexes. Examining the gender images presented in the novel and gender representations within the larger context of the author’s work reveals that the same distinct patterns are visible in earlier texts by the author. In *Der Liebeswunsch* the author is not saying anything he has not said before. In previous works, he presented male characters who seek new opportunities in love but shy away from consequences. They are torn between desire and fear, and ultimately, they destroy the object of their desire or abandon it without regard to the consequences. The female characters who happen to be the objects of desire suffer. In his literary works, Wellershoff conveys a world where men heal themselves at the expense of women.

In *Der Liebeswunsch*, Wellershoff tells the story of four people whose different ideas about love and life lead to a catastrophe. Two of the characters, Leonhard, a judge, and the married surgeon Paul had been best friends while Leonhard was in a relationship with Marlene, also a physician. Then, Marlene and Paul fell in love; Paul left his wife and children to marry Marlene. Of course, Paul and Leonhard's friendship suffered a terrible blow, but somehow the three of them have come to terms and maintain friendly relations. The story begins where the student Anja serves as a house sitter for Marlene and Paul and meets Leonhard. Before long, they get married and the two couples appear to establish a balanced friendship. With the arrival of a son, it seems that Leonhard and Anja can enjoy a happy family life too. However, very quickly, it becomes clear that Anja and Leonhard are incompatible; he is too reserved and too much governed by reason to satisfy Anja's emotional and sensual needs. Anja falls in love with Paul; they begin a passionate affair. When their affair is discovered, all of the characters' precarious relationships crumble. Without much regret, Leonhard divorces Anja but keeps the child, and Marlene separates from Paul. However, Anja's desire for love remains unfulfilled since Paul leaves her immediately, and it becomes obvious that he never had any intention to commit to her. Desperate, deserted, and rejected, Anja takes to drink and finally throws herself from the fourteenth floor of a building. She appears to be the victim of a hard, unloving environment where her desire to love and be loved is regarded as no more than a disturbance. The story is developed from the end; on the first page, the reader learns of Anja's death; and the novel is told from the changing perspectives of all four protagonists.

The consensus of the reviewers is that Wellershoff tells a realistic story with psychologically well-founded characters who invite empathy. This is in accordance with Wellershoff's conviction that literature should simulate life.⁴ He believes that it should provide the space to present alternative options to live, thus inviting the author to stage variations to real-life situations. Literature therefore confronts the author as well as his recipient with different perspectives of reality. At the same time, it enriches our limited experience and suggests an examination of our view of reality. Wellershoff illustrates the confrontation with a reality beyond his personal experience in the essay, "Ach so ist das!" In this text, Wellershoff describes the near-death experience of a school friend during the war. The title phrase—"Oh, that's it!"—characterizes the emotions as an epiphany. Death appeared as a simple fact, one that he had always known, yet of which he had never been aware. True to this perception of reality, the life portrayed in Wellershoff's texts is not a universal model of existence but rather an individual experience. He himself characterizes his topics in his essay "Die Gegenstände des Interesses" as "ein winziges Stück aus dem

Webmuster der Welt" ("a tiny sample of the world's design"). In Wellershoff's works, this individual experience usually unfolds as a crisis. According to the author, his goal is to show the individual and his struggle to survive in an increasingly complex reality. This struggle often results in failure and frustration.

Increasingly complex is also what relations between men and women have become; in numerous essays, the author has shown himself to be an astute and thorough observer of social conditions and relations.⁵ He has noted social changes brought on by a new understanding of gender roles. In his opinion, the increasing material independence of women leads to a shift in the formerly stable institution of marriage: women do not have to stay in an unsatisfactory relationship for economic reasons. Therefore, their expectations of marriage change; they wish to be made happy. Likewise, men also expect more happiness from a marriage. Repeatedly, Wellershoff points out that he sees enormous opportunities for fulfillment in these changed conditions, but in his opinion, the over-emphasized pursuit of happiness also harbors problems, because partners expect too much from each other. The responsibility for contentment cannot rest solely on a life partner.

The conflict stemming from expectations about intimate relationships is a recurrent theme of Wellershoff's literary texts. Elisabeth Vogtmann in *Der Sieger nimmt alles* expects her husband to stay with her; Klaus Jung in *Die Schönheit des Schimpansen* takes his wife's support and unconditional care for granted; Harald assumes Barbara's unwavering friendship in "Der schöne Mann"; Elsheimer in *Die Sirene* anticipates the fulfillment of all of his hidden desires; and Böhring imagines a radical new beginning in *Zikadengeschrei*. *Der Liebeswunsch* is no exception: Leonhard expects Anja to be a model housewife and mother; Paul expects his marriage to last; Marlene expects Paul to be faithful; all three of them expect their precarious friendship to provide a stable social net; and, in the end, Anja expects unconditional love from Paul. None of their expectations are met; all four of the characters are disappointed.

The intensity with which they react to their disillusionment, as well as the form of their reaction, however, is closely connected to another of Wellershoff's essential topics, the search for new opportunities. This persistent theme is based on the writer's interpretation of Kierkegaard. According to the philosopher, people need to see different possibilities. If there is a lack of opportunity for new, different experiences, people will give up hope and fall into despair. Despair, then, is the sickness unto death. A new chance, however, will halt despair. Kierkegaard was a Christian philosopher; ultimately, he recognized God as the only foundation for any new opportunity. In his eyes, a path not based on God cannot remedy despair. Wellershoff accepts the importance of the new opportunity for people and makes the search for new possibilities an essential need in many of his characters. However, he does not

equip his characters with hope for a rescue in God. Instead, in his essay “Double, Alter ego und Schatten-Ich,” he identifies one of his topics as writing stories about people who are drawn into a catastrophe which they fight and promote at the same time, “weil in der Zerstörung ihres bisherigen Lebens eine ruinöse Lockung liegt” (“because there is a disastrous attraction in destroying their existing lives”; 54). Thus, these characters hope that they will discover new opportunities by destroying their current lives.

Frequently in Wellershoff’s works, the longing for a new, different life opportunity is tied to an erotic desire. Wellershoff’s motivation for this connection between opportunity and desire can be found in “Die Gegenstände des Interesses,” where the author notes scenes that are representative of his opinion about love and sex. In these scenes, established relationships are shown to provide familiarity and security, but they also are presented as leading to boredom. Secure but boring relations are contrasted with the irresistible fascination of a possible new opportunity in love and the ever-potent power of desire. There is, however, a significant gender-related difference in the pursuit of these assumed opportunities and in the subsequent reaction to failure: male protagonists are shown to desire the new opportunity ardently, yet they shy away when their equilibrium is at risk. Furthermore, if they see their normal lives threatened, they abandon the new opportunity, going so far as to sacrifice the female object of their desire in an attempt to save themselves. Female protagonists, on the other hand, who wish to change their lives, are not compromising and appear to be spellbound by their love. Having to abandon their plans results in profound suffering, even death. This trend is obvious throughout Wellershoff’s fictional texts and corresponds to distinct gender images presented in his works.

Wellershoff designs the relations between the sexes according to the needs of his male protagonists. The needs of male characters are eloquently described and elaborated. His female characters on the other hand are strangely one-dimensional and easily categorized: women characters always appear in the shape of the familiar partner, the helpless, dependent woman, the dominating mother, the very fascinating yet unattainable lover, and the immoral woman. Quite accurately, Sibylle Cramer describes Wellershoff’s female characters as figures that have been taken from “Wanderungen durch die männliche Unterwelt in fertigen Kulissen” (“excursions in the male underworld in pre-fabricated sets”; 54). The female characters are closely connected to the hidden fears and desires of Wellershoff’s male characters. Wellershoff presents male protagonists who are weak and insecure and show a deeply rooted fear of women. In this context, special attention should be paid to the figure of the mother, who is latent in many of the author’s texts.⁶ It is tempting to call to mind Karen Horney, who addressed the fear of women in her studies and, already in the

1930s, pointed out that this fear had to be suppressed and to be covered, resulting in a certain presentation of men and women in a text. In Wellershoff's case, this underlying fear of women combines with a patriarchal role expectation, leading the protagonists to a limited and often stereotypical perception of female characters.

Der Liebeswunsch follows suit. The characters are typical Wellershoff protagonists. They are governed by the search for new opportunities, and they appear to be tempted by the destruction of their everyday lives. In this case, it is important that Anja's death provides the new opportunity for Paul. Wellershoff tells Anja's story from the changing perspectives of herself, her husband, her lover, and his wife, thus claiming a more objective narration in the realist tradition. Still, the four allegedly different perspectives lead to the same outcome: Anja has to die for Paul to live. The basis for this argument lies in the structure of Paul's desire, which is a typical trait for Wellershoff's male protagonists. Accordingly, analysis of the individual characters supports this statement, and consideration of the two novellas *Die Sirene* and *Zikadengeschrei* serves to illustrate further the nature of this desire in the larger context of Wellershoff's work.

Leonhard represents a very traditional model of masculinity: he is the keeper and provider; he is a judge, a man who knows right from wrong. Laws and regulations govern his professional life, and traditions and rituals rule his private life. In one's private life one has to make "eine Grundsatzentscheidung" ("fundamental decision") by marrying a woman, and the private life afterwards is "von Regeln geleitet [wurde], die man vernünftigerweise nicht in Frage stellt" ("guided by rules which a sensible person should not question"; *LW* 81).⁷ For him, marriage is an institution that consists of "Übereinstimmung der Gewohnheiten" ("harmony of habits"; *LW* 127). Leonhard's idea of a marriage helps him to focus on his career because he is a deeply insecure man: He sees himself as

[ein] plumper, unbeholfener Mann, der sich seit seiner Jugend, als er sich selbst zu sehen begann, an seinen Defiziten vorbeigeschwindelt hatte, indem er alles andere für wichtiger erklärte.

(an ungainly, awkward man who masked his shortcomings by declaring everything more important ever since he started to see himself in his youth.)

(*LW* 199)

Marlene notes that he lives according to a plan where every detail has to fit, including a marriage that is supposed to support his image as a family man. Anja happens to be perfect for his plans. By seizing a young and attractive woman from Marlene's house, he is gaining restitution for previously suffered injuries, thus reclaiming his status as an erotically attractive man. Anja is not only a trophy; she is

also the means he uses to heal his injured pride. Anja's youth and their difference in education and life experiences are an additional advantage for Leonhard because she does not challenge his sense of superiority. Leonhard needs to feel superior to feel safe. After the debacle with Marlene, he had been looking for an "abhängige und prägbare" ("dependent and impressionable"; *LW* 87) woman. The concept of a wife as a partner is foreign to him. From the beginning, he never shows any interest in Anja's thesis or in her work. There is no indication that Leonhard loves Anja; furthermore, he is not even very interested in her sexually. This is shown in the descriptions of their wedding night, where there is no sign of passion. Instead, he just seems to be glad to have been able to perform. As becomes apparent later, Leonhard has a conflicted sex drive: first, Anja reports that she tried to be a good lover, but he seems to object to her advances, and he even scolds her for using "ein obszönes Wort" ("an obscene word"; *LW* 97) in the bedroom. Obviously, his sexually active wife frightens him. He experiences a feeling of desire only when she occasionally appears in the bathroom in the morning and she does not seem to know why she is there. At that moment, she seems helpless and not yet herself. In this situation, he imagines picking her up and carrying her to bed to take her. Clearly, there is an element of power and even violence in his fantasy. However, he never follows through with it because he is afraid of appearing "lächerlich" ("ridiculous"; *LW* 125). When he tries to approach Anja sexually during their Florida vacation, she does not totally reject him. Rather she satisfies him manually. Leonhard describes this situation as comparable to a sexual encounter with a prostitute (*LW* 181), and he admits to being enormously aroused by the thought. Evidently, Leonhard must be with a prostitute to experience sexual pleasure; he needs Freud's split image of woman as mother and prostitute. In general, his wife should conform to the image of the mother. However, due to her responsibility for their son Daniel's accident, Leonhard regards Anja as a failure as a mother. Hence, she can fulfill only the role of the prostitute. With Anja being incapable of taking care of Daniel, Leonhard takes in her mother. Now he has the mother figure at home, taking care of the child, and he can enjoy the prostitute, the woman he despises. It is only natural that he feels a sense of higher moral standing. To bolster this claim of moral superiority, he shows Anja a crime scene, telling her, "Ich wollte dir nur einmal zeigen, was für unterschiedliche Problemlösungen es gibt" ("I wanted to show you other possible means to solve problems"; *LW* 292). Self-righteously, he not only points out just treatment for useless spouses, but he enjoys Anja's fear, because it gives him a sense of dominance. By telling her the story of an abused pregnant woman who killed her husband to defend her unborn child, he highlights Anja's failure as a mother. By referring to his role as judge, he again emphasizes his position of power and

righteousness while confirming Anja as inferior. When he learns about Anja's infidelity, he immediately dismisses his marriage as "ein gescheitertes Projekt" ("a failed project"; *LW* 266). Thus, Anja is completely objectified. With the trusted mother at home, Leonhard can concentrate on his career. It is no coincidence that he receives his promotion after his separation from Anja.

It is certainly no accident that the relationship between Leonhard and Anja appears reminiscent of Fontane's *Effi Briest*, and that, in particular, Leonhard's character is reminiscent of Innstetten. Like Leonhard in *Der Liebeswunsch*, Innstetten, the man opposite protagonist Effi in *Effi Briest*, pursues marriage with the young daughter of his former lover because he needs to project the image of the family man to advance his career. Like Leonhard, he uses the young girl for personal satisfaction and to achieve and keep his sense of superiority. In his novel, Fontane describes the cold and rigid atmosphere in Innstetten's house to explain Effi's infidelity. Fontane shows compassion for Effi's conduct, but he does not condone it. Ultimately, he sides with Innstetten who upholds the values, norms, and rules of society and is also rewarded with a promotion. In the end, Effi even admits her guilt, accepts her punishment, and forgives Innstetten for his behavior toward her because "dass er in allem recht gehandelt" ("he was in the right in everything"; Fontane 294). However, righteousness comes at a price. Although Effi concedes that Innstetten had "much good in his nature," she nevertheless adds, "Denn er hatte viel Gutes in seiner Natur und war so edel, wie jemand sein kann, der ohne rechte Liebe ist" ("He was as noble as possible for someone without real love"; Fontane 294). In his reflections of his "Literatur des Begehrens" ("literature of desire"),⁸ Wellershoff also examines *Effi Briest*. He identifies Fontane's characters as "Menschen, die Konventionen folgen statt ihre Probleme zu konfrontieren" ("people who follow conventions instead of confronting their problems"; *Der verstörte Eros* 160). Then he continues to explain that everything happens "ohne Leidenschaft, ohne die Kraft zu verurteilen oder zu bereuen" ("without passion, without the strength to condemn or to repent"; 160). In Leonhard, Wellershoff creates a character who also has to pay the price for righteousness and success. Having banished passion from his life, and having denied or repressed all erotic desires, Leonhard seems devoid of life.

Leonhard's female counterpart is Marlene. She is in this position not only because she was also betrayed by her spouse and likewise decidedly terminated her marriage, but because, like Leonhard, she lacks passion. Marlene is one of Wellershoff's typical female protagonists: the "Good Wife." In Wellershoff's work, this character type is intelligent and self-sufficient, yet totally committed to her husband. Brita Elsheimer and Ina Böhring, the respective wives of the protagonists in *Die Sirene* and *Zikadengeschrei*, fit the same "Good Wife" character type. They are not lovers

or newlyweds anymore; they are the women with whom the protagonists live in peaceful coexistence. There is no noticeable sexual interest, but rather an atmosphere of harmony. The protagonists are content, but they do not desire their wives. In her study, Sibylle Cramer appropriately recognizes these female characters as models of socially acceptable femaleness (Cramer 49). She points to Freud and his model of a split mother image and concludes that the “Good Wives” represent the Freudian good mothers, the asexual caring ones. They identify with their role as mother and conduct themselves accordingly. It is therefore necessary that in *Die Sirene*, the author finds rather convoluted means to characterize Brita as a sexual being by introducing comments from an outsider (Cramer 49).⁹ An analysis of Wellershoff’s other texts shows similar techniques involving other characters like Ina Böhring.

Such a “Good Wife” is Marlene. A successful physician, certainly well educated and intelligent, she is materially independent and, at the same time, she is dedicated to Paul and their marriage. Even though she is not a real mother, she at least shows the tendency to nurture. When Leonhard asks her to look after Anja, she states:

Er hätte mich eigentlich gar nicht erst motivieren müssen. Ich bin ohnehin geschlagen von meinem Gefühl, für schwächere Menschen in meiner Umgebung verantwortlich zu sein.

(He actually did not have to motivate me. Anyhow, I am inflicted with a feeling of responsibility for weaker people in my environment.)

(LW 90)

In *Der Liebeswunsch*, the story of Marlene and Paul’s affair serves to characterize Marlene as a sexual woman. Only in the context of this affair is Marlene portrayed as passionate. In her determination to win Paul, she displays traits of another typical Wellershoff character, the “Loving Woman,” whose entire life is centered on her husband or lover. However, by being willing to leave him if he does not commit to her, she retains the attraction of being the new opportunity in Paul’s life, unlike other characters in Wellershoff’s texts where the typical character of “Loving Woman” drives her lover away.

In this novel, however, Marlene and Paul’s affair had happened long ago, and passion seems to have all but vanished from their marriage. Marlene turned into the “Good Wife.” At the beginning of the story, Paul and Marlene appear to be good friends, and they both seem to be satisfied with their relationship. Marlene describes her dream relationship in the image of two towers that stand side by side. Characteristically, the image of the two towers excludes touch. To take that image further, one could conclude that the ardor of their love has turned to the solidness of brick with the approval of Marlene (LW 322). From the initially passionate loving

woman, Marlene has changed into an asexual being, and she appears happy in this role. Confronting Paul for his infidelity, she attempts to disparage his relationship with Anja as purely sexually motivated. After her separation from Paul, she reacts in a fashion similar to the way Leonhard reacts to Anja. Not only does she remove Paul completely from her life, but she also starts to focus entirely on her career, exploring new professional possibilities. However, she does not take refuge in her profession until her marriage fails. Even though she is not presented as a helpless woman who despairs when she is left behind, one has to note that she is merely reacting. Marlene herself concedes that she had been prepared and willing to live the life of her parents and continue on a traditional path, but now she is determined to give up everything that reminds her of her relationship with Paul. At the same time, she denies any inclination for erotic relationships or marital bliss.

Paul, on the other hand, is portrayed as a man who is not prepared to give up anything. Already the history of his affair with Marlene indicated that he was comfortable having a wife and mistress. He had no desire to leave his first wife as long as his mistress did not pressure him. Paul even suggested that Marlene not mention his name or their affair when she broke up with Leonhard. Not only does he shy away from conflicts but he also is contented with the idea of a new opportunity in his extramarital affair rather than actually seizing it. Despite the fact that he ultimately embraces the new opportunity, he does not actively pursue it but rather reacts when Marlene forces him to choose between her and his family.

In the character of Paul, Wellershoff has designed an insecure man who learned to compensate for his feelings of inferiority through erotic conquests. While married to Marlene, he feels inferior to her. He feels that he has been chosen, and that he is only a guest in her house. Marlene is financially independent; and from her position as intellectual equal, she does not look up to him. Paul is depicted as a man who takes care of his physique and his virility; it is the only aspect in his life where he can truly shine. For this reason, it is not surprising that he tries to compensate for his failures in the operating room or in his marriage with engaging in meaningless sexual adventures. In order to restore his confidence as a capable, potent male and to conceal his anxiety, he needs female admiration. On the other hand, he craves the safety and security of his marriage to be anchored.¹⁰ After the confrontation with Marlene about his affair with Anja, he has the sensation "Marlene's Schutz verloren zu haben" ("to have lost Marlene's protection"; *LW* 262). For him, marriage is supposed to offer protection. Consequently sensuality has to be removed from his married life as it is too dangerous. Paul defines himself too much through his virility to risk his image being destroyed by the strong woman. In his study *Männerphantasien*, Klaus Theweleit examines male fear of women and concludes that

it is based on the “nicht-kastrierte beängstigende sexuelle Potenz der Mutter oder Frau” (“non-castrated fearsome sexual potency of the mother or the wife”; 250). Again, here is the split image of women. To a certain extent, the split mother image that governs Leonhard’s behavior also influences Paul. Paul has accepted Marlene as superior but in order to live with her, the wife has to be asexual in order not to endanger his fragile male identity. However, unlike Leonhard, Paul does not desire the prostitute. He simply needs female admiration to bolster his virility.

In this sense, Anja represents the ideal partner for Paul: she adores him and is devoted to him. By taking another woman from his friend, Paul can turn back time and prove to himself that he is still the same erotically potent man he was when he met Marlene, that he can seduce a young woman as easily as Leonhard can. Paul never considers leaving Marlene to live with Anja; she is interesting only as long as the affair is a secret. He does not love her because she cannot offer him the security that Marlene can, but he desires her in a very typical way: he wants her as long as she is unattainable.

Anja is an example for another of Wellershoff’s recurring female characters. I call this type the “Imaginary Lover,” the one who can be charged with all desires, for love, for extremes. As long as she is not a real person, she can serve as a projection field for all of Paul’s desires, especially for his desire to be completely understood. The unknown caller of *Die Sirene* is such an “Imaginary Lover,” as is the nameless Medusa of *Zikadengeschrei*. They represent the promise of complete fulfillment, the promise to render the protagonist complete and whole. When Elsheimer listens to the siren, when Böhring looks for his neighbor, or when Paul thinks of Anja, they experience an encounter with their own unconscious. Jacques Lacan describes it this way: “The unconscious is that discourse of the Other, where the subject receives, in the inverted form which is appropriate to the promise, his own forgotten message” (qtd. in Bowie 93).¹¹ Paul echoes Lacan when he describes his feelings for Anja, saying that during intercourse with her, it is

als schriebe sie etwas in ihn ein, einen fundamentalen Text, in dem geschrieben stand, wer er war und wer er sein könnte, dessen Geheimschrift aber nur sie lesen konnte und der ohne sie erlöschen musste.

(as if she were inscribing a fundamental text into him, which stated who he was and who he could be but the writing of which only she could read and without her, it would disappear.)

(LW240)

In his commentary to *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, Wilden explains Lacan’s interpretation of a newborn as an “absolute subject” (Lacan, *Speech* 163).

As the infant does not distinguish between herself and the world, she discovers the object through its absence; for example the child feels the absence of the mother's breast. The experience of this lack leads to the primordial desire of being reunited with the mother and is the basis for the desire for unity. When the small child sees her image in the mirror she perceives a corporeal unity, which she herself is lacking at that developmental stage. However, the child anticipates her own maturing to a corporeal unity by identifying with this image. This means that the "subject identifies his sentiment of Self in the image of the other."¹² Lacan then concludes that the mirror stage is the source of all later identifications. The acquisition of speech introduces the child into the system of signifiers, the symbolic order. Access to speech enables the child to find a subject position in relation to others (as son or daughter of father and mother). The child learns to define herself through difference, that is, in contrast to others: I am "son" because I am not "daughter." However, as a negative definition is never unambiguous, it always leaves gaps in meaning; for example, I am also "daughter" because I am not "mother." Quite obviously, in the novel, Paul identifies his idea of self through Anja. The ambiguity creates the space for the "fundamental text" Paul mentions. In their sexual union, Anja, the "Imaginary Lover"¹³ seems to promise to fill the gaps to give Paul his unity. It is evident that Anja cannot fulfill this promise as no real lover can fulfill it; that is the reason why these lovers must be unattainable. The real woman does not play any part in this. Paul is drawn to Anja because she is the wife of another man and, for that reason, unavailable. She is sensual, and in her dreamlike presentation of herself she appears to him as somebody new and unknown. He is always attracted to her when she is sleeping or sleepy, that is, when she is in a sense absent. This absence allows him to project his desire onto her. He says himself that what he is looking for and what he actually finds in the embrace with Anja is "Selbst-vergessenheit" ("self-oblivion"; *LW* 241). He meets her only in a secret room, trying to create a private world outside the reality of his daily life. When having to make a decision, he has no interest in a future with her.

Anja, on the other hand is portrayed to be desperate when Paul rejects her. This behavior is typical for the "Loving Woman," who is helpless, unable to make her own decisions, and incapable of leading an independent life. Anja aimlessly drifts through life until she marries Leonhard in order to find a place for herself. However, due to the fact that Leonhard is an asexual being and Anja is very sensual, he cannot become the object of her desire and therefore cannot be the center of her universe. In accordance with Wellershoff's usual character categories, Anja is unfit to be a mother because she is a sexual being. When the situation arises, she becomes Paul's mistress and concentrates all of her desires on him. Unlike Wellershoff's male

protagonist who is always dissatisfied with his specific lover, the “Loving Woman” is portrayed to be absolutely devoted to her lover. When she is with him, she is happy; when he is absent, she is not. The “Loving Woman” exists only through her love. This “Loving Woman” is of absolutely no interest to Paul, who thus follows Wellershoff’s other male protagonists. It seems that the male protagonists can be interested only in “Imaginary Lovers.” As soon as such an “Imaginary Lover” shows interest, she changes into a helpless, dependent woman whom the male protagonists despise and reject. The more the women beg for affection, the more they are despised.¹⁴ Paul hides behind conventions when he argues with himself that he would never leave an intelligent and beautiful woman like Marlene for her. It is the conquest that serves as the interesting challenge and that holds the promise. When he obtains the woman, he immediately loses interest: reality cannot live up to the ideal. Coming from Anja, Paul meets his colleagues by coincidence and is immediately attracted to another woman, because he has the feeling “dass das Leben in den Geheimfächern der Zukunft immer neue, andere Möglichkeiten für ihn bereithielt” (“that life continued to offer him new, different possibilities in its secret compartments of the future”; *LW* 235).

With the character of Paul, as well as with Böhring or Elsheimer or others of his male protagonists, Wellershoff draws an image of men who are marked by their inability to brave life. It is surprising, however, that despite his obvious sensitivity for social change and his observations regarding the results of the changing role of women, the author never discusses this aspect. Deprived of his traditional role as provider and keeper of the family, the man is holding on to the patriarchal prerogative of conquering women while he is looking for his ideal to give him back his sense of identity and unity. As no real existing woman can fulfill this ideal, the man must look further.

Similar to Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva has studied the development of the child. Some of her findings can offer an additional explanation for the motives of Wellershoff’s characters. Kristeva identifies an important semiotic experience as she calls the undifferentiated continuum in which the small child perceives herself, her surroundings, and her mother’s body “chora” (Kristeva 36). This developmental stage is characterized by undifferentiated perceptions that later are structured by drives and are associated with pleasant or unpleasant memories. With the mirror-stage, thethetic stage also begins, which leads to the positioning of subject and object as different within the symbolic order; the child recognizes herself as defined unity, frees herself from the mother and finds her own identity in the symbolic. Kristeva calls this process “castration” (46). Even though she ultimately considers this castration as liberating for the child, she admits that it is also very painful. The

subject can never completely separate from the chora, the connection remains in the unconscious as a desire to re-merge with the maternal body. The intensity of this desire is individually different and also depends on other factors.

Applied to the text, it is possible to conclude that Wellershoff's male protagonists, unconsciously, but very strongly, desire the way back to the mother's womb and to their origin. They long for the place where they can find total acceptance, total satisfaction, and total contentment. This is the state before birth. However, it is also the state after death and, as a result, this desire must be frightening to the protagonist due to its affinity to death. It is therefore essential that the woman onto whom all these desires are projected is unattainable. Only in this way can the male control his desire. In *Die Sirene*, Elsheimer succeeds in silencing the voice of desire; in *Zikadengeschrei*, the protagonist flees because he only has the choice between being petrified and bursting. In *Der Liebeswunsch*, Paul tries to contain his desire by looking for other opportunities. In the end, Anja kills herself, thus removing any danger for Paul. Ironically, through her death, Anja regains her status as object of desire. Paul can admit his frustration and declare Anja to be the possible ideal match for him. In the beginning of the novel, while Paul is visiting the building where Anja committed suicide, he somehow senses her presence, and he discovers "etwas wallt in mir auf wie die Ankündigung von Glück" ("something is rising inside of me like the announcement of happiness"; LW 25). Through her death, Anja will always remain the ideal lover because she is unattainable.¹⁵

In short, one can conclude that the female character must die to remain desirable and non-threatening. While this is certainly true for the protagonist Paul, the success of the novel suggests that Anja's death is appealing to the reader. On the one hand, Anja fascinates through her desire for love; yet, if her uncompromising striving for the fulfillment of desires had led to a happy ending, the novel would probably be considered among the implausible romance novels or might stir up a controversy regarding morals. On the other hand, Anja's death invites compassion without posing questions. By letting Anja commit suicide, Wellershoff places himself in the tradition of Fontane's *Effi Briest*. He allows the reader to empathize with Anja's desperation and the lonely misery of her death without having to consider moral issues or questioning personal values. He also stays within traditional realist values, which say that passion has to be overcome and does not provide the grounds for marriage.¹⁶

Finally, reading this novel along with other fictional works of Wellershoff allows placement of the story of rejected love in the context of desire and its containment. With this aspect in mind, Wellershoff indeed did not break new ground, but told yet another story about the search for new opportunities. Again, he presents a fe-

male character who devotes her life to the man she loves whereas the male character follows an unconscious desire he needs to contain by abandoning her, which, in turn, ultimately allows him to place his desire in a realm safely outside of reality. Actually, one might infer that the author, true to his claim of staging alternative life options in literature, has again attempted to free himself of the danger of losing himself in desire. ✱

Notes

¹ All translations into English are mine.

² The term was used by Volker Hage. Likewise, Peter Mohr speaks about Wellershoff's "literarisches Meisterwerk" ("literary masterpiece").

³ Werner Jung declares that Wellershoff "unter Beweis [stellt], daß der psychologische Realismus seine Sache ist" ("proves that he knows psychologically based realism"; 161).

⁴ Wellershoff addressed the connections between literature and life throughout his career. In this context, I am referring to his essay "Double, Alter Ego und Schatten-Ich. Schreiben und Lesen als mimetische Kunst."

⁵ An article of particular interest in this context is Wellershoff's essay "Der Treibsand der Gefühle und die Freiheit, glücklich zu sein."

⁶ For example, in the essay "Double, Alter Ego und Schatten-Ich," Wellershoff himself discusses the importance of the mother for the killing in *Die Schönheit des Schimpansen*.

⁷ *LW* will serve as abbreviation for *Der Liebeswunsch*.

⁸ *Literatur des Begehrens* is the subtitle of Wellershoff's essay collection, *Der verstörte Eros*.

⁹ In this novella, an old friend is shown to court Brita in order to demonstrate that she is attractive to men.

¹⁰ With Robert Bly, one could argue that Paul wants his wife to give him back the "golden ball," his wholesomeness; a demand that is in vain because the wife does not have it. Bly argues that until a man accepts his "Wild Man" inside, he will try to find socialization through other means, but in the end these efforts are futile (Bly 8).

¹¹ Jacques Lacan discusses this in his paper, "La psychanalyse et son enseignements."

¹² This is Anthony Wilden's translator's note 27 in Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (100).

¹³ My use of the term "imaginary" is not related to Lacan's "Imaginary."

¹⁴ In *Der Sieger nimmt alles*, Jovanca, the first mistress of Klaus Vogtmann, turns into

a weak creature. His future wife, Elisabeth, is portrayed as a "Loving Woman" from the beginning, and accordingly Klaus does not show any personal or romantic interest in her.

¹⁵ Similarly, the siren regains her status. Despite the fact that Elsheimer stages the "Drachentötung" ("slaying of the dragon"; *Sirene* 209) to free himself, he immediately is aware of the void inside of him. The siren had "alles an sich gezogen, alles mit fortgerissen in ihr Dunkel, ihre Unerkennbarkeit" ("drawn everything to her and carried all into her darkness, her imperceptibility"; *Sirene* 214).

¹⁶ In *Love as Passion*, Niklas Luhmann writes extensively about the combination of freedom, happiness, social order, and marriage (Luhmann 129f).

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