

**Thomas Bernhard as Nestbeschmutzer, criticisms of society and self in
Wittgenstein's Neffe, eine Freundschaft and *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*.**

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Summary

My thesis will aim to explore the later prose work of Thomas Bernhard, in order to examine the author as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. The *Nestbeschmutzer* is an author who writes critically of his/her own country, and my thesis will aim to investigate exactly how Bernhard fulfils this role. However, this investigation will not just be a straightforward examination of themes, as the *Nestbeschmutzer* author is borne out of a specific political, social and historical environment and must therefore be placed in this context. The *Nestbeschmutzer* is a product of the German speaking literary world and is typically concerned with an examination of the legacy of the war and a confrontation of the problems the war poses for the present generation. They aim to challenge and provoke members of society into dealing with the issues of the past and accepting some responsibility for their role, or the roles of their ancestors during the war years.

Arising as they did from certain historical circumstances, I will endeavour to briefly explain these circumstances, which prompted their literary assaults on society. I will also give a brief history of the *Nestbeschmutzer* literary movement itself, and Bernhard's controversial role in it, concentrating mostly on the reception of his most controversial text *Heldenplatz*, and the scandal which it prompted.

The main body of my thesis will concern the criticisms levelled in the novellas. I have chosen the novels *Holzfällen eine Erregung* and *Wittgenstein's Nefte, eine Freundschaft*, as both were written during the turbulent eighties, further reinforcing the importance of historical and social influence on the author. I have identified three main strands of criticism present in Bernhard's other novellas, and seek to investigate if they are present in the novellas under study. These are a criticism of state, culture and the handling of the Nazi past. I also wish to explore a very interesting characteristic of both novellas, namely the presence of the author in the text as a character. Both have also largely escaped critical attention; therefore an analogy of them could yield interesting results. From the above, I intend to examine how Bernhard made his attacks on society and prove that he truly was a *Nestbeschmutzer*.

I will then investigate the legacy of Thomas Bernhard in brief, and explore his influence on the Austria of today. This will include a study of expert opinions of the

work of Bernhard, and end in a conclusion which proves his importance to the world of literature, and indeed to the world at large, beyond a doubt.

Introduction:

My thesis topic will aim to investigate the work of Thomas Bernhard as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. In order to investigate this topic, I must first explain the term *Nestbeschmutzer* and its significance for the world of German speaking literature. *Nestbeschmutzer*, translated literally, means one who dirties his own nest.¹ In literary terms, it refers to an author who writes critically of his/her own country, launching attacks on anything from the history of the country to its present day condition, its culture, traditions, values and institutions. The *Nestbeschmutzer* aims to challenge and provoke society through his/her works and these attacks very often cause serious offence and outrage in the society under attack. The *Nestbeschmutzer* is an unpopular figure, mistrusted by society and very often condemned to lack of notice, due to the repetitive and often irritating nature of their complaints. Sigrid Schmidt Bortenschlager has chosen to translate *Nestbeschmutzer* as “desecrator”,² which implies that it is the author’s intention to do damage to the topic of his/her works. He/she aims to desecrate the culture, people or values of their native land. However, the author feels that it is his/her duty to embark on this opening of society’s eyes and seems to write purely in order to provoke a reaction.

Throughout his career, Bernhard has often been decried as the worst kind of *Nestbeschmutzer*, due to his frequent literary attacks on his native Austria. On the face of it, it certainly seems that Bernhard is a typical *Nestbeschmutzer*, whose only aim is to irritate and provoke his audience. Although Bernhard is a prolific writer on many themes, including death, suicide, his childhood in Austria, the outsider in society and the isolation of illness, it is his critical writings on his native land, which will concern me in this thesis. With regard to the novels in question, *Wittgenstein’s Neffe* and *Holzfällen*, I aim to ascertain whether the common themes of criticism of state, culture and society are present in these novellas, as they are in Bernhard’s other works.

Wittgenstein’s Neffe and *Holzfällen* feature Bernhard himself as a quasi character, a fact which leads me to greatly value their message, as it is inextricably linked with

¹ Oxford-Duden Dictionary, Oxford University Press 2005.

Bernhard's own views, in a way not present in the other novellas. It is also interesting to note that Bernhard criticised himself strongly in both works, a fact which rather than questions his status as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, actually strengthens it. As Hans Helm Derfert states, the post war author was inextricably tainted by the traces of his/her past and society itself.³ Therefore, Bernhard cannot criticise society, without criticising himself, a fact which he not only realises, but embraces. In the course of the thesis, I will seek to explain why Bernhard's self-criticism does more than perhaps any other device to cement his status as a true *Nestbeschmutzer*.

If, as Derfert states, the past was so important in shaping the author we must not underestimate this past. My thesis will be based on Bernhard's work as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, a literary genre that was prompted wholly by the past and its atrocities. Therefore, we must examine the historical and social factors, which produced Bernhard and the other members of this particular literary genre, and also to examine the literary genre itself. To this end, I will first embark on a brief historical and social analogy of Austria from 1945 on, and the problems and challenges of this era. Bernhard's writings arose from a particular social and historical context; therefore the value of such an analogy cannot be underestimated. I will then aim to discuss the history of the *Nestbeschmutzer* movement, in order to place Bernhard's work in its rightful context, and also to cast light on this elusive literary term.

As the borders were opening in 1990 to former communist neighbour states, a body of articles entitled "*Österreich und Deutschlands Grosse*" was published.⁴ These articles were an attempt to discuss the shared history of both lands and particularly the time of Grossösterreich, in which Germany and Austria were united.⁵ It is a well-known fact that Austria and Germany became one land after the *Anschluss* of 1938. Gerhard

² Sigrid Schmid-Bortenschlager, "From provocation to appropriation," in Ricarda Schmidt and Moray McGowan (eds), *From High Priests to desecrators, contemporary Austrian writers* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1993), p. 11.

³ Hermann Hans-Derfert, as quoted in J.J Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function* (Camden House, New York, 2001), p. 8.

⁴ Gernot, Schmidt und Heiss (eds) *Österreich und Deutschlands Grosse; ein schläpfiges Verhältnis* (O. Müller, Salzburg, 1990).

⁵ Meinrad Ziegler, "NS Vergangenheit und österreichisches Geschichtsbild", in *Österreichisches Gedächtnis* (Böhlau, Wien, 1997), p. 30.

Botz claims that the *Anschluss* was also a process of seizing power from the inside out and he cites the high level of party membership in Austria, excessive anti-Semitism and service in the *Wehrmacht* as proof that the *Anschluss* was not an unwanted takeover.⁶ Indeed, over 99% of Austrians voted for the *Anschluss* with Germany and thousands gathered in the *Heldenplatz* in Vienna to welcome their German conquerors. According to the memoirs of Dr. Adolf Scharf, penned after the war, any affection the Austrian people had for the German Reich had been driven out of them by 1943.⁷ However, by 1942, some 850,000 Austrians had joined the *NSDAP* and most of the resistance groups, which emerged, had been small, and eradicated by the *Gestapo* early on.⁸ Therefore, it is clear that the Moscow Declaration, under which Austria was named the first victim of Hitler, was a smoothing over measure, designed to brush the past under the carpet and allows the Austrians to build their Second Republic in an atmosphere of peace and unity. The Austrians themselves clung to this proclamation in order to deny any responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazi era, be they financial, moral or political. They preferred to pretend that their state simply did not exist between 1938 and 1945 and to nourish the myth of an unblemished “*Insel der Seligen*”.⁹ Dr. Scharf also claims that the Austrian people felt that the *Anschluss* was the only way they could have a say in the affairs of the state, and that it was only natural that they should crave unity with Germany.¹⁰ These convenient mechanisms allowed them to remain blind to their past and its atrocities and also to present a guiltless face to the world and also to one another. Austria was the “*Land ohne Geschichte*” a country unwilling to confront the level of its Nazi involvement in World War II.¹¹ Lepsius even claims that the Austrians externalised their guilt, so as not to have to deal with it, while the Germans internalised their guilt, and so had more success in coming to terms with the past.

⁶ Gerhard Botz, “Eine deutsche Geschichte 1938 bis 1945? - Österreichische Geschichte zwischen Exil, Widerstand und Verstrickung”, In: *Zeitgeschichte*, Jg. 14. pp. 19-38.

⁷ Adolf Scharf, *Österreichische Erneuerung 1945-1955* (Vienna, 1955) as quoted in Hans Wolfschutz, *Modern Austrian writing* (Lanham Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, London, 1980), p. 1-4.

⁸ Mark Allinson, *Germany and Austria 1814-2000* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2002), p. 109.

⁹ Allinson, *Germany and Austria 1814-2000*, p. 109.

¹⁰ Hans Wolfschutz, *Modern Austrian writing* (Lanham Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, London, 1980), p. 4.

¹¹ Meinrad Ziegler, “NS Vergangenheit und österreichisches Geschichtsbild” in *Österreichisches Gedächtnis*, p. 30.

Bernhard's obsession with forcing the Austrian people to confront their past and the subsequent hypocrisy of their present must be considered as within the social sphere in which they arose; the less willing the people were to deal with their past, the more blatant and offensive the author must be and is perceived to be.¹²

In fact, it was not until the "*Bedenkjahr*" of 1988 that the Austrians were forced to confront their past as never before, with the emergence of two figures on to the political scene. The first of these was Kurt Waldheim, a former Nazi commander, responsible for atrocities in the Balkans, who was now standing for the presidency. Waldheim was made President, gaining 54% of the votes of the electorate.¹³ The Waldheim Affair created a sense of mistrust and suspicion between Austrians and the international community, as many wondered what role other Austrians had played during the war. Journalist Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi claims that the Waldheim Affair shattered the victim legend and forced the Austrian people to engage with their collective past.¹⁴ This increasing engagement with the past was further compounded by the emergence of Jorg Haider and his *Freie Partei Österreich (FPÖ)*, a right wing party that attracted huge Neo-Nazi support. The popularity of this party and the growing presence of its supporters in society caused great alarm and also prompted a further preoccupation with the past and a desire to investigate what really happened. This increasing sense of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can be seen by the peace marches in Vienna, and the symbolic gathering in the Heldenplatz, held in protest against the rise of the neo-Nazi movement and Jorg Haider in Austria, all of which took place in order to show that the people were finally willing to engage with their troubled history.

The contentious history of Austria and her avoidance of the questions of the past caused numerous authors to take up their pens in opposition to this sense of complacency. Schmid-Bortenschlager claims that literature has an especially important role in Austria, which sees itself as a cultured state.¹⁵ As early as 1795, Schiller claimed in his "*Über*

¹³ Allinson, *Germany and Austria 1814-2000*, p. 110.

¹⁴ Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi, "Die österreichische Doppelseele," in Oliver Rathkolb/Georg Schmidt/Gernot Heiss, *Österreich und Deutschlands Grosse. Ein schläpfiges Verhältnis* (O Müller, Salzburg, 1990).

¹⁵ Schmid-Bortenschlager, "From provocation to appropriation," in Schmidt and McGowan (eds), *From High Priests to desecrators, contemporary Austrian writers*, p. 14.

naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung”, that the satirist has the honour of criticising reality in the name of the honourable ideal.¹⁶ Though Schiller was German, his words certainly ring true of Bernhard and his fellow critics. Nearly all satirical critics, i.e. *Nestbeschmutzers*, have played this card with varying degrees of conviction. The forerunners of the modern day *Nestbeschmutzer* could be said to be Nestroy and Kraus. The famous line, “*Wenn Nestroy an einer Rose riecht, dann stinkt sie*”¹⁷ epitomises both the *Nestbeschmutzer*’s aim to criticise society, and society’s impatience with the constant tirade endured. It appears as if the *Nestbeschmutzer* aimed to bring the world to rights, and insure that any disparities were corrected. This is echoed by Karl Kraus, another infamous satirist, who claims that the role of the *Nestbeschmutzer* is concerned with the ideal, and how far society is from this ideal.¹⁸ Like Schiller, he believes that the *Nestbeschmutzer* is responsible for bringing society closer to the ideal state by highlighting its ills, and shocking its members out of complacency. This is particularly true of the members of the *Wiener Gruppe*, whose literature and plays in the 1950’s prompted editorials and reader’s letters in favour of censorship.¹⁹ This group were said to have arisen from the chaos of the aftermath of the Second World War, and marked the year 1947 as a “*Schlüsseljahr*” in Austrian history.²⁰ The raising of contentious issues such as Austrian involvement in the Third Reich, and Austrian guilt was extremely unpopular, and audiences sought to distance themselves from such uncomfortable issues. According to Lingens, the individual seeks to divert attention away from the text onto moral condemnation of the author, in order to render such texts harmless. This explains the exaggerated public reaction to the authors of this genre.²¹ This also goes some way

¹⁶ Gerald Steig “Die totale Satire, von Johann Nestroy über K Kraus zu Th. Bernhard”, in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire* (Peter Lang Publishing, Bern, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁷ Quote from Hebbel, reacting to Nestroy’s criticism of his play *Judith*, as quoted in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Karl Kraus in “Nestroy und die Nachwelt” (1912) as quoted in *Österreich 1945-2000, das Land der Satire*, p. 5..

¹⁹ Schmid-Bortenschlager, “From provocation to appropriation,” in Schmidt and McGowan (eds), *From High Priests to desecrators, contemporary Austrian writers*, p. 15.

²⁰ Hilde Spiel (ed.) *Kindler’s Literaturgeschichte der Gegenwart. Die zeitgenössische Literatur Österreich* (Zurich, Munich, Kindlers, 1976), p. 58.

²¹ P.M Lingens, “Wieweit verdient Paula Wessley Elfriede Jelinek?”. *Profil* 48, pp. 12-16.

towards explaining not only the public's reaction to the *Wiener Gruppe*, but also to its descendants, not least Bernhard himself. Gerhard Fritsch lost his job as editor of *Wort in der Zeit*, a popular political periodical in the fifties, for printing articles by members of the *Wiener Gruppe*, while Heimito von Doderer resigned in protest at the opposition to his printing of *Wiener Gruppe* articles.²² Such hostility among the Austrian audiences can also be seen fifteen years later in the case of Peter Handke, whose *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, or "public scolding" prompted stage invasions and open hostility among members of the press. According to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 26 July 1968, the actors were helpless against the rage of the public and the *Salzburger Volksblatt* of 13 February 1968 claims that students in Maastricht invaded the stage in order to give a musical response to the play.²³ Handke seemed to welcome such hostile reactions, and the purpose of his play was to provoke the audience, and force them to think about the issue at hand.

Walter Benjamin claims that the *Nestbeschmutzer* is influenced by the world of demons,²⁴ and Canetti, known for his famous feud with Bernhard laments the power of the *Nestbeschmutzer* to make his victims disappear, or in other words, his power to discredit and disgrace his targets.²⁵ It is clear that the *Nestbeschmutzer* is concerned with the evil in society, and seeks to redress this evil, by bringing it to the attention of the public. The "*Übertreibungskünstler*" a title by which Bernhard was famously known, can be said to practise an "*Ästhetik der Negitivität*"²⁶, which aims to bring the reader around to a bleak, nihilistic view of the world they inhabit, and to imbue in them a desire to change this world for the better. The *Nestbeschmutzer* is a product of his/her time, taking the stage in order to prompt a type of public self examination and repentance, at a time when the public had become complacent and lazy in their relationships to their past. This is why an examination of the past was so important for a discussion of the

²² Schmid-Bortenschlager, "From provocation to appropriation," in Schmidt and McGowan (eds), *From High Priests to desecrators, contemporary Austrian writers*, p. 15.

²³ Schmid-Bortenschlager, "From provocation to appropriation," in Schmidt and McGowan (eds), *From High Priests to desecrators, contemporary Austrian writers*, p. 16-17...

²⁴ Walter Benjamin (1931), as quoted in *Österreich, 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 5.

²⁵ Canetti, as quoted in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 7.

Nestbeschmutzer movement, for they really were a product of particular social and historical circumstances. It is also interesting to note that the *Nestbeschmutzer* is convinced of the invalidity of traditional explanations²⁷, and therefore must write in this controversial way, as they distrust their own language and society.²⁸ The *Nestbeschmutzer* aims to unsettle his/her audience and cause them to see their own hypocrisy. Bernhard in particular, spares nothing and nobody in his attempt to force the Austrian people to confront the world around them and indeed the world of their past.

By means of his literary onslaughts on all that they held dear, Bernhard seemed determined to undermine the very fabric of their society and country. Yet Bernhard was not only shaped by the history of his country, but by his own equally turbulent past. Thomas Bernhard was born in Heerlen in Holland in 1931, the illegitimate son of two reluctant parents. Much of the young Thomas' life was spent in foster homes while his mother worked, and he was eventually sent to live with his maternal grandparents while his mother remained away. This sense of abandonment and isolation can be felt throughout Bernhard's works. This difficult relationship with his mother was to prove instrumental in the formation of his later writing style, with his feelings of being an outsider allowing him to develop extraordinary powers of observation. Indeed, many of his writings on early childhood, such as the works contained in "*Gathering Evidence*" show a keen eye for the peculiarities of society and a sensitivity and psychological awareness unsuited to his young years, but certainly borne out of his unfortunate standing in his family. Gerald Steig has further claimed that Bernhard's difficult relationship with his mother changed his "*Mutterbild*" of his country and that his hatred of his mother became a hatred of his motherland.²⁹ His writing can thus be seen as a kind of catharsis, borne out of the difficult relationships of his childhood. According to Gunter Blocker, Bernhard sought out the reality, which horrified him, and tried to explore the very nature of humanity.³⁰

²⁶ Christine Meyer, "Weisse oder schwarze Magie? Elias Canetti und Thomas Bernhard" in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 119.

²⁷ Wendelin Schmidt Dengler, *Der Übertreibungskünstler* (Sonderzahl Verlagsgesellschaft, Wien, 1986), p. 94.

²⁸ Thomas Bernhard, *Drei Tage* (Film Ferry Radax, Vienna, 1970), p. 152.

²⁹ Steig *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 9.

³⁰ Gunter Blocker, "Aus dem Zentrum des Schmerzes" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 1411, 1964.

Bernhard's early years are dominated however, by his relationship with his grandfather, the esteemed writer Johannes Freumbichler, who was Thomas' constant companion, teacher and mentor. Indeed, Freumbichler was responsible for forming much of Thomas' early views and thoughts on the world and society in general. Thomas has said that one walk with his grandfather and he was "saved".³¹ It is also significant that Freumbichler himself was a notorious nomad and outsider; completely opposed to any form of assimilation into society. From him, Bernhard inherited his love of philosophy, English and French literature, music and theatre. It is also noteworthy that Freumbichler was famous for traditional, nature loving, *Heimat* literature; a genre which is in evidence in Bernhard's earlier texts such as *Salzburger Sonette* and *Landschaft der Mutter*.³² However, he also inherited his grandfather's distrust of society and aversion to his homeland of Austria, a fact that would manifest itself starkly in the writings of Bernhard. Bernhard's childhood was overshadowed by his attendance at the *Johanneum*, a National-Socialist boarding school. It was here that Thomas first experienced the hypocrisy of his native land, as a picture of Jesus replaced the picture of Hitler after the war, without any effort being made to cover up the spot where Hitler's image had hung. The sense of isolation and disgust with his homeland caused Thomas to abandon his studies and to go to work in a lower class grocery shop, in direct opposition to the wishes of his family. It was here that he engaged with the true outsiders of society, and grew to despise the hypocrisy of the mainstream. Ill from birth with weak lungs, Thomas was a regular patient in sanatoria and often had to spend months and years in isolation while he recovered. In these sanatoria, Bernhard had the opportunity of witnessing death as an everyday occurrence and soon began to despise the typical concerns of society as being nothing when compared to the shadow of death. He also began to resent the elite of society, as represented by the doctors and was keen to criticise and challenge the hierarchy of society. His observations on fellow patients and the society of the sanatorium show a clear eye for detail and a keen awareness of both his social position and that of others.³³ It is this outsider status, which was to be so important for his future

³¹ Jochaim Hoell, *Thomas Bernhard* (Munich, dtv, 2000).

³² Steig, *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 9.

³³ Thomas Bernhard, *Die Kälte, eine Isolation* (Dtv Verlag Munich, 1984).

writings, as he utilised it to become a type of “*Kunstrichter*”, a social critic of the Enlightenment period, who criticised society from an outside position.³⁴

At the beginning of the 1960's, Bernhard is a young man, forced into the role of an outsider by family circumstances, further exacerbated by chronic illness and the isolation of boarding school. Artistic and disenchanted by his homeland, Bernhard seeks to redress the wrongs he sees, by embarking on a literary assault on his homeland and fellow countrymen, attacking all they hold dear and ultimately all he holds in contempt. Throughout his earlier works, such as the collected body of autobiographical works such as *Die Kälte*, *Ein Kind*, *Der Keller*, Bernhard sought to criticise his homeland of Austria and highlight all that he saw wrong with it. From the fatal disease that was Salzburg, to the hypocrisy of the headmaster at the *Johanneum*, Bernhard's main criticisms were levelled at the state, the standard of culture and the arts, and at society and its people in general. At the root of all his criticisms is his aversion to the Austrian neglect of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and their attempt to disown the actions of their ancestors during the war years. These themes run through all of Bernhard's works, to the point that some critics have called his work repetitive to the point of ludicrousness.

His critical voice reached its peak, however during the 1980's, for one of the reasons highlighted during my discussion of the historical and social factors which produced the *Nestbeschmutzer* movement, namely, the emergence of neo-Nazism and right wing parties into the public sphere, and the support enjoyed by these parties. It was this more than anything else, which prompted Bernhard to take his criticisms to unprecedented levels. These criticisms reached their pinnacle in 1988, with the performance of *Heldenplatz*, a stark commentary on Austrian society and its engagement with the Nazi past, and perhaps Bernhard's most famous and controversial piece of work. The play revolves around the suicide of a German Jew, Josef Schuster, and the factors which contributed to his death, namely the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and the lasting trauma endured by him and his wife following their experiences during the war years. The play is largely based on dialogue between characters, all expressing such strong views as “*Österreich ist ein Misthaufen*”, “*alle sind Judenheter*” and other such

³⁴ Matthias Konzett, “Thomas Bernhard, a life”, available on www.thomasbernhard.org viewed on

quotes, designed to provoke the public into reaction.³⁵ The play concentrated on the lingering presence of anti-Semitism in society, matched by a damning condemnation of the state and its leaders and a withering look at Austrian culture, which unsurprisingly, was found severely lacking. Bernhard's play caused outrage in Austria, with the author himself even receiving death threats. He was condemned from every level of society, with politicians speaking out against him, and critics branding him a lunatic and a cynic.

Indeed, Bernhard's play caused so much outrage that after his death, which shortly followed, Bernhard was remembered for this play and its related controversy at the expense of his other works. *Heldenplatz* and its predecessor *Ausloeschung* sparked so much controversy, that Bernhard's other literature was largely ignored, even though it contained the same themes, and same aim-to provoke and challenge Austrian complacency in the face of past and present problems. According to Bernhard experts such as J. J Long, there seems to be a dearth of critical literature written on both texts under discussion in my thesis³⁶ Bernhard's literary works of the 1980's were without doubt the most controversial and socially aware of all his writings, yet his two earlier works of this decade have been severely overshadowed by their more outrageous brothers- *Heldenplatz* and *Ausloeschung*. J.J Long is also quick to point out that most works concerning the Bernhard autobiographies rarely consider these texts, particularly *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, in any great detail.³⁷

For this reason, I have chosen to investigate these novels in order to demonstrate how they too contain the controversial criticisms of state, culture and the dealing with the Nazi past, yet in a more symbolical, understated way. I also believe that both works contain an interesting element not present in the more popular *Heldenplatz* and *Ausloeschung*, as they contain Bernhard himself, as a quasi character.

This presence of Bernhard as a character in the novellas allows us to add further weight to the opinions of the character, as they can be seen as true expressions of Bernhard's own views. Martin believes that the wide range of verifiable biographical and

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³⁵ Thomas Bernhard, *Heldenplatz* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1988), p. 108, 134.

³⁶ J.J Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function* (Camden House, New York, 2001), p. 91.

³⁷ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 89.

historical fact in this novel and indeed in *Holzfällen*, allows the reader to treat it as fact, and an expression of the author's views.³⁸ It also allows Bernhard to incorporate an interesting feature into these novellas, not present in his other works, namely self-criticism. Hermann Helms-Derfert's believed that the author of the Second Republic tries to constitute him/herself as an autonomous subject, yet is repeatedly faced with the fact that the social institutions of their country have left ineradicably traces on their subjectivity.³⁹ Peter Hamm, who claims that Bernhard is "*mit Haut und Haaren und deshalb auch mit seinem Schreiben in sie verwickelt*", captures this point vividly.⁴⁰ This further compounds the idea that Bernhard cannot separate himself from what he criticises, and explains why much of his writings seem to be self-directed.

Therefore, the writer was part of what he criticized, which poses a challenge to the author who aims to criticize what he is himself part of. The author is faced with an impossible situation, and must go against his own human nature if he/she is to truly challenge society and question its ills. However, Thomas Bernhard embraced this challenge wholeheartedly, and these novels in particular are littered with self-criticism and disparaging comments on himself and his actions, particularly towards his friends and former friends. I will endeavour to show that these features, as well as his traditional criticisms all cement his status as a true *Nestbeschmutzer*.

Andreas Gößling, author of *Thomas Bernhards frühe Prosa* and Bernhard expert Hermann Hans Derfert have chosen to read the novels of Thomas Bernhard as allegories of Austrian history.⁴¹ I have decided to incorporate a degree of separateness in my handling of both novels, as it is often claimed that Bernhard's novels are repetitive and reiterations of the same themes. I believe that although Bernhard's views did not change, we should view his novels as independent works of art and not merely as the latest instalments in a litany of criticisms.

In order to examine Bernhard's status as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, I will now consider the attacks made in both novellas. In my opinion, three main criticisms are levelled at

³⁸ Charles W Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, its portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1995), p. 164.

³⁹ Hermann Hans-Derfert, as quoted in Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Peter Hamm, "Ein Fall Bernhard oder ein Fall linker Literaturkritik?" In *Konkret*, 28/1/1971.

⁴¹ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 8.

Austria in all of Bernhard's texts- a criticism of the state, culture and lastly, the unwillingness to deal with the Nazi past. I will also analyse the interesting element of self-criticism present in both novellas, as further proof that Bernhard did not allow anything to prevent him from chastising his native land, not even his own membership of it. I will now prove that both novellas follow Bernhard's usual pattern. In both texts, the state is harshly criticised as being oppressive and hypocritical in its dealings with the people and its handling of the past and its problems. Once again, I will deal with the themes and novels separately, in order to give each its deserved attention, and also to challenge the popular view that Bernhard's novels lack any individuality or originality. As *Holzfällen* appeared two years after *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, a separate analysis also demonstrates the intensification of Bernhard's opposition to Austria and his increasingly levelled criticisms of all it held dear.

Chapter 1: Criticism of the State:

Marcel Reich-Ranicki famously questioned the genre in which *Wittgenstein's Neffe* could be placed- "Aber was ist das Ganze? Ein Bericht? Eine Erzählung? Eine psychologische Studie?" He claims that the book cannot be categorised.⁴² On the surface, *Wittgenstein's Neffe* revolves around friendship and a shared passion for music and the arts. Yet underneath this, lies an equally strong passion for denigrating and condemning the above. As my aim is to investigate Bernhard as a *Nesbeschmutzer*, and to ascertain whether his three most expounded themes are present in these works, I must limit myself to a discussion of Bernhard's criticism of Austrian state, culture and movement to come to terms with the past. To this end, I will deal with not only stated fact, but also the symbolic and representative. We only have to study the *Massengeschrei* of *Heldenplatz*, the graveyard of *Holzfällen*, or the violin cupboard of *Die Ursache* to see that Bernhard utilised symbols and metaphors to communicate with his audience. In my discussion of these themes, I will also highlight Bernhard's denigration of himself, as perhaps the strongest proof that he truly was a *Nestbeschmutzer*.

Wittgenstein's Neffe bears the subtitle, *eine Freundschaft*, and on the surface, that is what the book centres on; Bernhard's friendship with Paul Wittgenstein, lunatic and wealthy aristocrat. Like Bernhard's other novellas, very little action takes place, and the text is largely dialogue or monologue, painfully self aware and intent on probing in to the problems of the present and the past. This structure allows Bernhard to give full vent to his emotions and opinions, and to criticise everything in his path. J.J Long condemns Helms Derfert's symbolic and allegorical reading of Bernhard's texts, and claims that we must not assume that all textual details actually symbolise something.⁴³ Yet, as the text is Bernhard's only means of communication with his audience, we must assume that he would not include unimportant or superfluous detail. For the purposes of this paper, I am more inclined to agree with the viewpoint of Wolfgang Maier, who claims that what the characters say is inseparable from what the author thinks; leading us to view this work as

⁴² Marcel Reich Ranicki, *Thomas Bernhard* (Ammann Verlag and co., Zurich, 1990), p. 11.

⁴³ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 8-9.

a damning comment on Austrian society.⁴⁴ In his conversations with Paul, Bernhard is able to philosophise on any number of subjects, usually prompted by everyday subjects. Paul is a trusted confidante of Bernhard's and one of the few people he can trust to be honest. In fact, Bernhard often seems to equate Paul with his significant "Lebensmensch", a fact that highlights the importance of their friendship. In fact, at significant points of his life, most notably at the presentation of the *State Prize* and the *Grillparzer Prize*, Bernhard describes himself as being left alone with his life person and Paul. He calls Paul his only true male friend, displaying a rare show of tenderness, which lends considerable importance and interest to this book.⁴⁵ Through an examination of the friendship and conversation of these men, we can establish some kind of insight into the mind and opinions of Bernhard.

However, despite this alluring idea, Franz Eyckeler claims that this is a book, "*in welchem, wie immer, Wahrheit und Lüge, Realität und Fiktion bis zur Unkenntlichkeit miteinander verwoben sind.*"⁴⁶ Once again, it is clear that Bernhard seeks to interweave the fictional and the real, and appear as a protagonist in his own work.⁴⁷ We must therefore be prepared once again, to take the words of the protagonist to be the view of Bernhard himself. The setting of the book in a specific historical context is unusual for Bernhard,⁴⁸ and allows us to see the *Nestbeschmutzer* as a true product of his time by allowing us an insight into the social and political factors of the time, which may have shaped the author's views. The fact that it was written in the turbulent 1980s; a time at which Bernhard's anti-Austrian feelings were at their height, allows us to see the true essence of his criticism.

Charles W. Martin claims that no consensus has emerged regarding Bernhard's central motivation, yet it is clear from this novella, that he aims to criticise and belittle Austrian society as a whole.⁴⁹ Bernhard's first mention of his environment is wholly

⁴⁴ Wolfgang Maier, "Die Abstraktion vor ihrem Hintergrund gesehen" in Annelies Botond, *Über Thomas Bernhard*, p. 11-23.

⁴⁵ Harald Hartung, "Ein schönes Epitaph". In *Der Tagesspiegel* 30/1/1983.

⁴⁶ Franz Eyckeler as quoted in J.J Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 90.

⁴⁸ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 7.

concerned with a condemnation of the hospital he is in, and an attack on the doctors and surgeons.⁵⁰ He claims that these men are above the law and are untouchable. He bemoans their lack of competence and claims that they sheltered behind the Latin language and scientific terms.⁵¹ Their methods are murderous, lethal and inhuman⁵² Bernhard sees these men as hindering his freedom with their false diagnosis and injuring him further with their incompetence. Bernhard creates a type of hell on earth in his descriptions of the hospital, which ties in with his view that “*In der Finsternis wird alles deutlich*”.⁵³

In the wider context of his criticisms of Austrian society, it is my belief that Bernhard is using the society of the hospital, with all its flaws, as a mini version of Austrian society. It is interesting to note that William Johnston, author of the *Austrian Mind*, cited Bernhard’s writing style as “therapeutic nihilism”, a view that suggests that Bernhard sought refuge from the world by criticising it.⁵⁴ When one considers his critique of the medical world, we see the full impact of this statement. Bernhard cannot find relief from society, i.e. the medical profession; therefore he must find it in himself. Denigration of the important figures of the hospital, who he claims ruin the lives of the patients, can be seen as an attack on the leaders of society, who keep their distance from the ordinary people and ruin their lives with their incompetence. His commentary on the privileged existence of Professor Salzer, the most famous surgeon, is very striking, as he tells the reader that the Salzer’s patients rarely survive the operation, despite Salzer being the most important of surgeons.⁵⁵ This belies the fact that the leaders of society are often the most incompetent, a fact much publicised by Bernhard.

It also brings into relief the stark image that the leaders of society are killing society itself. This is perhaps a commentary on Austrian society, in which the leaders of the time were engaged in a wilful “forgetting” of the past; in many eyes, a killing of the

⁵⁰ Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nefte* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1982), pp. 1-10.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 1-10.

⁵² *Ibid* pp. 1-10.

⁵³ Thomas Bernhard, *Der Italiener*, (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2000), p. 151.

⁵⁴ William Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, as cited in Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nefte, eine Freundschaft* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1982), pp. 1-10.

future by a refusal to acknowledge and deal with the past. The stranglehold of the surgeons on the lives of their patients can thereby be equated to the stranglehold of politicians and leaders on society. The medical helplessness of the doctors and their lack of clarity with regard to Paul's problems clearly demonstrate the inability of the doctors to place any semblance of order on Paul's life and indeed the lives of the other patients. This also ties in with the idea that the elite of society are doing more harm than good to those socially beneath them and that there can be no order in society when this level of incompetence is present among the upper echelons.

Bernhard is quick to criticise the doctors who are unable to help his friend Paul recover from his mental illness, and who seem to be unable to give him a real diagnosis. Indeed, this image of the incompetent doctor can show what happens in society when the leaders are lacking in intelligence and knowledge. It is well known that Bernhard believed the Austrian politicians to be stupid; therefore this critique allows us to see Austrian society as a place where the incompetence of the elite results in total madness and chaos in society; just as the lack of medical competence at the hospital resulted in chaos in the life of Paul.

Bernhard goes into much detail on the Wittgenstein family, outlining their high reputation, and their subsequent fall from grace. This fall was largely due to the arrival of Paul, the last of the line and the member of the family who squandered their money and tarnished the family name. Yet Bernhard seems to imply that they deserved this fall, as he draws attention to the fact that they did not appreciate Ludwig, despite his genius.⁵⁶ The image of the once great family, who flourished under the Hapsburgs, but who have since stagnated, allows Bernhard to put us in mind of Austria, who fell from being a great power to an insignificant country in Central Europe. It also calls to mind Bernhard's obsession with the Hapsburg era with all its grandeur and his present disillusionment with modern life.⁵⁷ The above interpretations are all backed up by Hans Holler, who claims that the current social and political reality of Austria seemed ridiculous to Bernhard, who

⁵⁶ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, pp. 1-10.

⁵⁷ Jacques le Rider, "Bernhard in Frankreich", In *Pitterschatzcher und Lachinger*, op. cit. from an interview with *Le Monde* 7/1/1983.

idealised the heavily romanticised “natural order” of the past.⁵⁸ Bernhard could never respect or live by rules, which deviated so vastly from the glory days of his beloved Hapsburgs. The fact that Professor Salzer, who was Paul’s uncle, never visited him shows that the elite of society engage little with the so-called “ordinary people” and by their neglect can damage the mindset and happiness of those they choose to ignore. This neglect of those who make us confront uncomfortable issues is also reminiscent of the way Austrian politicians ignored their uncomfortable past, and sought to rebuild a new life untarnished by the events of the past.

This creates a very unsavoury image of the leaders of Austrian society, yet Bernhard is quick to include himself among this group, and by his description of his own neglect of the dying Paul, shows the reader that he too is not above reproach, as he describes how we “meiden die vom Tod Gezeichneten”.⁵⁹ His description of his own neglect of Paul is an extremely interesting interlude in the novella, and makes for an uncomfortable and indeed upsetting insight into Bernhard’s own failings. His description is painfully honest and reads like a form of catharsis, leading the reader to respect Bernhard for his honesty and loathe him for his cruelty. He claims that he no longer had the courage to visit his flat and that he has not visited the grave of the man with whom he had a “wertvollste Beziehung”.⁶⁰ Once again, he has provoked his audience, which was surely his aim, and also acknowledged his membership of the society, which he criticises. On a thematic level, his account highlights the Austrian unwillingness to deal with uncomfortable issues, and also their lack of interest in the old and weak, namely the Jewish community, or those scarred by the war, which they wish to forget. Bernhard’s use of himself as a symbol of the ills of Austrian society is certainly effective and unique. He is the Austrian who does not want to engage with uncomfortable issues and who shuns those who make him challenge himself to do good. He does not let self-preservation prevent him from achieving his goal of condemning society, a fact which we must take as the highest proof of his role as a Nestbeschmutzer.

⁵⁸ Hans Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form* (Akademischer Verlag Heinz, Stuttgart, 1979), p. 139.

⁵⁹ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 131.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 59.

However, Bernhard reached new heights of social criticism and scandal, with the publishing of his autobiographical work, *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*, which aimed to describe the events of one night and its characters. This novel, like its counterpart *Wittgenstein's Neffe* showed Bernhard's determination to turn his attention to the world around him.⁶¹ Hans Haider, editor of *Die Presse*, was the first to suggest that this was a roman à clef, and produced an affidavit in which he claimed to identify the "real life counterparts" of the novel's characters.⁶² The controversy caused by the book, and its subsequent removal from Austrian bookshops, proves that Bernhard had touched a nerve, and that his analogy may have been correct.⁶³ Therefore, we must take this novel very seriously as an expression of Bernhard, the *Nestbeschmutzer*.

Bernhard launched thinly veiled attacks on key Austrian figures and actually ended up in court over his criticism of the Lampersberg couple, widely believed to be the inspiration for the Auersberger couple featured in the novella. The setting is the home of this couple and guests have been invited to an artistic dinner, at which a *Burgtheater* actor will be the star attraction. Many of the guests are also recognisable literary figures, especially "*die sogenannte Philosophienichte*" Jeannie Ebner. The dinner takes place on the day of the funeral of a dear friend of all present, especially of Bernhard's and he concerns himself with his reminiscences about her and the funeral and the guests present at the party. His thoughts make up the bulk of the narrative, yet much time is also given over to social criticism and his thoughts on the country and its people in general. From his vantage point in the living room, Bernhard bemoans the lack of talent among today's artists, and their moral deficiencies. The text also discusses human deficiencies, the difficulties of friendship and the corruption brought by wealth and fame.

Yet, for the purposes of my discussion of Thomas Bernhard as *Nestbeschmutzer*, I must limit myself to ascertaining whether Bernhard's usual themes are present, as well as investigating the importance of Bernhard as a character in both novellas. As in *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, the three main themes characteristic of Bernhard as a

⁶¹ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 164.

⁶² Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 130.

⁶³ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 13.

Nestbeschmutzer are present, as well as Bernhard's interesting self-criticism, which I will later prove cements his status as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. Mariacher speaks of the oscillation between the text as a construct and the text as a roman a clef, claiming that Bernhard uses one approach to undermine the other.⁶⁴ She claims that it is difficult to take the novel as a critique, as there is always the idea that the text is constructed. However, we should not forget Bernhard's willingness to construct stories in order to make his point. The important aspect of the novel for my thesis is theme, and what Bernhard wished to convey to society. The uproar, which greeted the novel, is testimony to its success as a response to the criticisms raised within its own pages.⁶⁵ Thomas Bernhard certainly aimed to provoke and question in this text. *Holzfällen* can be read as an intensification of the criticisms made in *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, a fact that becomes apparent before the first chapter begins, with a bleak quote from Voltaire. "Da ich nun einmal nicht imstande war, die Menschen vernünftiger zu machen, war ich lieber fern von ihnen glücklich". This quote captures the essence of Bernhard's views on the Austrian state and its people, and throughout the novel, he seeks to further denigrate and chastise them.

However, this quote is also paradoxical in nature, as Bernhard occupies a central position among the gathering, sitting in his wing chair, he passes judgement on all present. This is not reminiscent of a detached social commentator, and Bernhard's membership of the group, which he criticises, will be a theme throughout the novel. Once again, he cannot distance himself from those he criticises, and his occupation of the central chair shows his realisation that he is at the centre of what he despises namely Austrian society. His denigration of himself, which I will later analyse, shows that even his own reputation and pride will not prevent him from speaking his truth.

The novella opens with Bernhard walking through the streets of Vienna, bemoaning his misfortune to live there, yet acknowledging it as essential to his well-being. The fresh air is doing him good, yet at the same time he describes the "entsetzliche Stadt Wien" and he makes it clear that he is only out and about because his

⁶⁴ Barbara Mariacher, "Umspringbilder": Erzählen- Beobachten- Erinnern. Überlegungen zur späten Prosa Thomas Bernhards (Lang, Frankfurt/Main: 1999), p. 112.

⁶⁵ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 136.

isolation had become too much for him.⁶⁶ Once again we are met with the familiar paradox of Bernhard's work- he cannot live in Vienna, or do without it. It is also clear that he associates Vienna with a type of simultaneous advantage and disadvantage, as he claims that he will have to pay a price for having benefited from the city. Clearly, he views the state as a type of overlord, from whom protection can be gained, but to whom payment must be made. He describes the city as restoring his "Geisteszustand" and states that the same Vienna, which was responsible for his physical and mental decline, has now reanimated him.⁶⁷ In a wider context, this love/hate relationship with Vienna could be interpreted as Bernhard's struggle to live in a city so beautiful, but with such a shameful history. Obviously, he loves his homeland, because it is so, yet he is forced to condemn it as he cannot close his eyes to what is wrong. This is a key element in Bernhard's work as a *Nestbeschmutzer* and can also be found in his tendency to self-criticise; Bernhard will not let sentimentality, love, or even self-preservation stand in the path of his goal- to write critically about the problems of Austria. In this sense, he is a true *Nestbeschmutzer*.

Bernhard describes how all the young girls from the country come to Vienna to seek fame and fortune, which once again is a happy image, full of promise. Yet Bernhard reverts back to his previous position and is unable to love a city so seemingly beautiful and full of opportunities. The oppressive nature of the state is further compounded by Bernhard's description of it as a ghastly city, which eats up young girls like Joanna, eager for fame and success.⁶⁸ He claims that Vienna keeps artists as petty artists, and stifles their potential. Bernhard believes that the genius of artists shrivels up and dies in Vienna, the seat of government, thereby adding further proof to the point that government crushes the people. Once again, Bernhard bemoans the state's ability to impinge on the lives of its people, and to ultimately destroy these lives with its lack of humanity and understanding. This may seem like a gross exaggeration and insult, but J.J Long is quick to point out that as the novel touched such a raw nerve in the Austrian establishment, we

⁶⁶ Thomas Bernhard, *Holzfällen eine Erregung* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1984), p. 11

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 42.

must see it as an “authentic diagnosis of cultural malaise”.⁶⁹ The Austrian government is said to ruin the lives of its people, a fact that echoes back to Nazi times, when the state was responsible for drafting its people into the horrifying reality of National Socialism.

If Hans Wolfschutz is to be believed, most Austrians were disillusioned with National Socialism by 1943, therefore, Bernhard’s point that the state has final power over the people takes on a historical dimension.⁷⁰ Clearly, Bernhard views the state as the mass destroyer of the Austrian people, an entity responsible for reducing the individual to a mere nothing, and carrying them along in accordance to its will. Bernhard engages in a long monologue on the state’s role as a patron of the arts, and his main criticisms here are the influence of state grants and money on the artist, and the power this patronage gives to the government. He views the state as a controller of culture, and the artists as petty cynics who have sold out to the state to gain money and fame. His view of the state as a supporter of culture further proves the point that the state is using culture to cover up the atrocities of the past. He claims that the state gives awards to the most “mediocre” and sees the artists who co-operate with the state, as cogs in the state wheel.⁷¹ The officials appear with bags of money and seek to manipulate culture. It is starkly evident here that Bernhard bemoans the alliance between state and culture, and sees all involved in it as destroyers of the nation.⁷² His former friends had sold out to this phenomenon, and lost all their spirit on sight of state grants and awards. This reminds the reader that the state manipulates the people for its own ends, and can use its power to create a new culture. The President is an “ekelhafte Person”, who seek to control culture through money.⁷³ Bernhard is particularly hard on his former friends, who have all gained fame and fortune through this system of state patronage. He expresses his disappointment in them, for sacrificing their talent for material gain. The image of the Schreker woman kissing the minister, who she had previously reviled, suggests the relationship between culture and state as something unsavoury, but mutually beneficial.⁷⁴ The artists demean themselves

⁶⁹ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 137.

⁷⁰ Hans Wolfschutz, *Modern Austrian writing*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Bernhard, *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*, p. 252-255.

⁷² Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 132.

⁷³ Bernhard, *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*, p. 257.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 118.

for the purposes of the state, and sacrifice their craft to satisfy state ideals and goals. For Bernhard this is the ultimate sin, and further reinforces the point that in Austria, culture is seen as an inauthentic commodity.⁷⁵

However it is also noteworthy that Bernhard himself was the recipient of many prestigious Austrian state awards including the *Grillparzer Prize* and the *Prix Séguier* which also proves the point that he saw himself as part of the establishment which he criticised.⁷⁶ However, Bernhard himself claimed in *Wittgenstein's Neffe* that he only liked to receive state awards when the award included money.⁷⁷ It is clear that he recognises his own role as a puppet of the state, yet it is also apparent that he seeks to fight this role, with his speech on receipt of the *Kleinen Osterreichischen Staatspreises* in 1968, in which he claimed that everything was ridiculous in the face of death.⁷⁸ Obviously, Bernhard occupied a paradoxical role in Austrian literary society, simultaneously revered and loathed a state writer, and a state critic. His admission that he liked receiving money prizes is very contradictory when one considers his aversion to the selling out of his former friends, yet it is this feature of the novel which most highlights Bernhard's status as a *Nestbeschmutzer*.⁷⁹ He recognises that he is part of society and its problems, and does not shirk responsibility for his misdemeanours. He is as guilty as his peers of this crime, and does not hesitate to admit that he disgusts himself, much as his friends disgust him. This element of the text can be taken as a message to the reader. Bernhard wishes for everyone to criticise himself or herself, for it is only when one is self-aware and self-critical that change can come about. The fact that Bernhard does not shirk from admitting his own faults, is also a reminder to the Austrian people that they too must delve into their own failings, namely a failing to come to terms with the past, and to examine their own conduct. It also lends validity to his criticisms throughout the novella, as he appears to be a truthful voice, sacrificing nothing in his quest to right the wrongs he sees.

⁷⁵ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 132.

⁷⁶ Thomas Bernhard *Auszeichnungen* on <http://www.wikipedia.org/thomasbernhard/auszeichnungen> as viewed on 27th May 10.23.

⁷⁷ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 23

⁷⁸ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bernhard#Auszeichnungen. viewed on 28 May 2006 at 17.56.

⁷⁹ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 77.

Bernhard uses his relationship with his former friends to make many commentaries on society, state and culture throughout the novella. His depiction of his youthful friendship with the Auersbergers and subsequent row makes some clear allusions to the relationship between people and state in Austria. Bernhard was saved by the Auersbergers from poverty and homelessness, and taken into their home. Yet he was also used by them for their own ends, and ended up leaving them, despite having received financial help from them, and building a career through his relationship with them. All of the above can be interpreted in a wider context. He claims that we “wir verfolgen sie lebenslänglich mit unserem Hass dafür dass sie uns gerettet haben”.⁸⁰ This could be an allusion to the government, who having been elected and made powerful by the people, then turn their backs on them and treat them with contempt. Like the Auersberger couple, who looked after the young Thomas, but only for their own benefit, the state looks after the interests of those who serve her best. The inequality of society can be seen as a system of patronage, whereby the state helps those who will help her, much like the Auersberger couple helped those whom they believed would help them. This is a hint that the patronage of artists in Austria is really only for the good of the state. It also shows us that the state has little time for those who will not be of use to them. Historically, it could also be a commentary on the Austrian withdrawal from the European scene in the 1950's, where its policy of self-sufficiency seemed to fly in the face of the Allied powers that had saved her from Nazi hands. The Austrians withdrew into themselves, and nurtured the idea of an *Insel der Seeligen*, an island of saints, detached from her European saviours. “We owe them everything, yet we never forgive them for owing them everything”, is a telling commentary on the Austrian debt to the Allied powers, and also her aversion to any co-operation with them after they had saved her.⁸¹ In all, it is a damning condemnation of the leaders of Austrian society, who are there to be served, not to serve.

It is also a damning condemnation of Bernhard himself, whose behaviour towards those who had helped him so much was frankly appalling, and described in great detail.

⁸⁰ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 162.

⁸¹ Allinson, *Germany and Austria 1814-2000*, p. 109.

He claims that he used his friends to gain an “ideale kunsterliche Entwicklung”.⁸² His willingness to accept financial aid from all of them, and his admission of the terrible way in which he treated Jeannie and Joanna all conspire to convince us that Bernhard himself was an unsavoury character. Once again Bernhard proves that he saw himself as part of society and also had to be called into question. This self-criticism is confusing at first, yet on reading both novels, I found it to be the most convincing proof of the truth of Bernhard’s words, and also the most interesting proof that Bernhard’s role was to criticise anything he saw to be wrong, even if that criticism fell on his own shoulders.

⁸² Bernhard, *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*, pp. 222-223

Chapter 2: Criticism of the dealing with the Nazi past

Irmtraud Gotz von Olenhusen claims that Thomas Bernhard, as a member of the “*Nachgeborenen*” generation, was motivated not by personal factors, or his difficult upbringing, but by social and historical factors.⁸³ This explains his preoccupation with criticising the ills of society, as well as criticising himself as a product of the historical and social circumstances of his country. In the case of Austria, it is clear to me that Bernhard wishes to question the capabilities of the leaders of the country, particularly with regard to their approach to dealing with the Nazi past. Klara Obermüller has claimed that repression is an Austrian phenomenon, further validating my view that Bernhard was keen to tackle this issue in Austrian society.⁸⁴

In Wittgenstein’s *Neffe, Bernhard*. Highlights Professor Salzer’s reluctance to visit his nephew Paul, who was in the same hospital as him, in order to show how Paul was ignored by his family.⁸⁵ Later in the novella, Bernhard claims that the Austrian people “*verleugnet die Geschichte und weder eine Vergangenheit noch eine Zukunft hat*”.⁸⁶ This ignoring of heritage, family ties and family history is a stark metaphor for the Austrian unwillingness to engage with the past and indeed past actions of family members. The atmosphere of the hospital is one of suppression and restraint, with the patients being kept inside as if in a prison. This is particularly clear from Bernhard’s description of how Paul was kept in a cage, when he was in the throes of an episode of insanity. The image of the cage once again calls up the image of confinement and restraint, thereby echoing the idea that the Austrian people are restrained by their past and its subsequent psychological implications. Though Paul is held to be a genius by Bernhard, he is imprisoned in a cage like an animal, largely due to his own inability to cope with reality. Amidst the music and cultural achievements, there are real psychological problems present that have not been dealt with. Bernhard and Paul are labelled “*lunatics and chest patients*”, and placed in regulation uniforms, in order to

⁸³ Irmtraud Gotz von Olenhusen, “*Nazisuppe*” oder: Pathologien der Erinnerung. Thomas Bernhards Dramen und die Geschichtskultur” in *Politik und Medien bei Thomas Bernhard* (Konigshausen & Neumann GmbH, Wurzburg--, 2002), p. 230.

⁸⁴ Klara Obermüller, “*Expeditionen ins Reich der Sprache*”. In *Die Weltwoche* 30/10/1986.

⁸⁵ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Neffe*, pp 1-10.

⁸⁶ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Neffe*, p. 162.

further constrain their condition.⁸⁷ This image shows how people are categorised, and also how people seen to be dangerous to the safety of society are imprisoned, or constrained in some way. These obsessed loners, who so often people the works of Bernhard can be seen as descendants of Grillparzer's *Thronsesselmenschen*, or those struggling to come to terms with a democratic society in which "*das Gemeine*" has won the day.⁸⁸ These people feel alienated in a world where the "lesser" people are now in charge. This image can be transferred Austrian society, where the past was suppressed and the people encouraged to lead a comfortable life, while the descendants of Nazis, and prominent Nazis themselves took over office in Austria.

It is also a commentary on the isolation of people seen as being dangerous to society, Bernhard because he was extremely ill and Wittgenstein because he was dangerously mad. The two were isolated from "normal society" and restrained in the hospital, Bernhard by his own weakness, and Paul by a straitjacket. The straitjacket image is important, as it indicates the weakness present in Austrian society at this time, and the suppression of emotions and feelings in the individual. It also hints that society was willing to punish those who spoke uncomfortable truths, and confine those who were a danger to the status quo. This is confirmed by the famous words of Grillparzer, one of Bernhard's best-loved heroes, when he stated, "*in diesem Land, wo Verstand ein Verbrechen und Aufklärung der gefährlichste Feind des Staates sei*".⁸⁹ Bernhard clearly wants to make himself the innocent victim of the piece, portraying his suffering as a penalty for knowing better than the ordinary Austrian. Bernhard was handicapped by his own weakness; a fact, which is highly important when one, considers the problems of Austrian society at the time. Perhaps the Austrians were too weak to face their own past at the time; perhaps the time was simply not right?

Bernhard greatly esteems Paul, and as I mentioned, holds him up as a genius. Bernhard's implication that Paul was crazy because he had accumulated too much intellectual wealth challenges the idea that lunatics are insane and implies that those

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp 1-10.

⁸⁸ Hans Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p. 139.

⁸⁹ Grillparzer, as cited in Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 7.

suppressed by society and condemned as mad, are often those who have the most to say, perhaps a telling commentary on Bernhard's own treatment at the hands of Austrian society. His comparison of Ludwig and Paul, a recurring theme throughout the book, implies that both men are one and the same, with Ludwig only being more famous because he was published.

Comparing a famous philosopher and a madman certainly hints that philosophy and madness is one and the same thing, but more importantly, it hints that those we repress often have something worthwhile to say, as worthwhile in fact, as those that we revere. Once again, Bernhard seems to attack the Austrian unwillingness for public debate, and its blind neglect of those that have something important to contribute. The fact that Paul was a popular figure when well, and an elegant and well established figure in society, implies that Austrian society only respected those willing to conform to its particulars and ideals. Paul's fondness for Knize jackets and Bernhard's description of his strait jacket are a stark warning to anyone wishing to engage in public debate Austria. It seems as if anyone deviating from established form would have his Knize jacket exchanged for a straitjacket, like Paul. This rather exaggerated image does however capture the lack of openness in Austrian society and a fear of uninhibited, truthful speech. Those who were different were to be feared and restrained, lest they damage the fragile sense of normality created in society. Indeed, one author has claimed that the Austrian people feared the unstable men in their midst, and feared an outbreak of Nazism.⁹⁰

A recurrent theme throughout much of Bernhard's work is sickness and death, based largely on his own ill health. In this novella, he clearly focuses on illness and the sick. His differentiation of the world into those who are sick and those who are well also hints at the division in Austrian society, between the majority who want to forget the past and the minority who want to engage with it. He claims that the sick are always alone, thus the social critic is always alone.⁹¹ This isolation image captures a sense of the other in society and reminds us that those who spoke for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Austria were truly in the minority. It is interesting to note that Walter Vogl claimed Thomas

⁹⁰ Ferry Radax, "So ist Thomas Bernhard wirklich". In *Wochenpresse* 21/10/1988.

⁹¹ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 57.

Bernhard opened the eyes of society to its problems.⁹² In light of this novella, it is significant that the sickly opened the eyes of the well. Perhaps Bernhard is reminding us that the outsider observes more and has more to say.

Bernhard also describes Paul's wealth in great detail, claiming that he has inherited much from his family, and has lots of possessions. The theme of inheritance is also present in *Verstörung* and *Korrektur*, novels of the 1960s, in which the character is burdened by the legacy of the past, and eventually destroys this legacy or goes mad. Paul's wealth and amount of possessions also serves to illustrate the point that the individual is burdened with the past. The wearing of suits passed on to him by dead relatives, suggests that Paul cannot escape the past, and is hounded by history, yet it also suggests that the family are now decrepit and shabby, once again reiterating the image of Austria's fall from power.⁹³

Bernhard describes how he and Paul spent most of their days sitting in a café accusing the world of all kinds of evil. Anything, however small could prompt this litany of accusation, even a "dicke Deutsche Frau", who prompted a debate on Germans, and both men enjoyed putting the world to rights, with Bernhard claiming that "Kunststücke unseres Kopfes" kept them alive.⁹⁴ Bernhard and Paul frequently "hat jdm angeklagt" this Austria, a choice of phrase, which implies a legalistic element to their conversation and reminds us that most Austrian war criminals were never sentenced. It is clear that Paul is often superfluous to the conversation and seems to serve as a pretext for self-exploration on the part of Bernhard, and serves to confirm Bernhard's views on Austria.⁹⁵ The amount of intellectual energy expended by both also reminds us of Bernhard's characters, which reminds us simultaneously that the novel is both fact and fiction.⁹⁶ Bernhard claims that he accused the world in order not to be annihilated by it, which suggests that Austrians must deal with the past, in order to advance into the future. It also implies that we must challenge society and its flaws, or be annihilated by them. Their vantage point

⁹² Walter Vogl, "Durch und durch verkommen, tief verrottet" as quoted in Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 166

⁹³ Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 110.

⁹⁴ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 131

⁹⁵ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 95.

⁹⁶ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 166.

in Sacher's implies that Bernhard can clearly see the guilt of the people and is willing to pass judgement on it.

Once again, this does not reflect favourably on Bernhard himself, as he comes across as being arrogant and judgemental. He obviously does not seek the good opinion of the reader, and seems to unwittingly self criticise in this passage. It is also interesting that those he criticises are members of the literary, café culture, much as he himself is. The similarities between himself and those he attacks, with respect to background, occupation and favourite pastimes, is no accident, and clearly shows that Bernhard acknowledges the frivolity and indeed ridiculous nature of his own life. Yet again, Bernhard does not let himself stand in the way of the righting of wrongs.

The fact that Paul's aunt had been a Reich Peasant Leader shows that he had a shameful connection of his own, yet he was willing to judge other people; clearly nobody in Austria today can claim to be without connection to the NS time, not even those sitting in judgement.⁹⁷ Clearly, Bernhard is playing with the reader here, as he invites them to pass judgement on certain people, while being acutely aware that the author is one of those whom we are being asked to condemn. This has the effect of placing the reader in the uncomfortable position of seeing guilt everywhere, and being asked to condemn even those who seem to be innocent. This is a fitting example of the effect Bernhard perhaps wished to achieve in Austria, a complete confrontation of the ills of society and its past, sparing nothing or nobody. His Jewish grandmother would place Paul in the victim bracket, yet his Nazi aunt places him in the aggressor bracket. Clearly, Bernhard wishes to express the view that nobody is without guilt, even those who have a claim to innocence. All Austrians today are tainted with the guilt of their ancestors. Wolfgang Maier claims that the characters in Bernhard's novels are frequently in possession of *Erbschaften*, which confirms the individual's ties to the past, and serves to restrain their future growth.⁹⁸ It is clear that the individual must relinquish these ties to the past, i.e. engage in *Vergangeheitsbewältigung*, if he/she is ever to move forward.

⁹⁷ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 72.

⁹⁸ Wolfgang Maier, "Die Abstraktion vor ihrem Hintergrund gesehen" in Anneslies Botond, *Über Thomas Bernhard*, p. 11-23.

Bernhard also makes more obvious attacks on society, by seeking to denigrate the image of Austria abroad through a series of pointed remarks on provincial towns and nature itself, which can also be viewed as a type of Austrian commodity. He describes how he “hasst Natur, sie bringt mich um”⁹⁹ It can also be said that Bernhard may find the outer beauty of the land incompatible with the horror beneath- he has often compared Austria to a graveyard, where everything on the surface is beautiful and everything underneath horrifying. He describes the population of the provincial towns as being old and crippled, which suggests that these people are burdened by their past, and indeed are burdened by the very fact that they are Austrians. They seem to be afflicted by the very location they live in, which can be taken at literal value, and also seen as the effect Austrian society can have on its people. When the past is not discussed, there can be no future; therefore these crippled figures illustrate perfectly the emotional state of those who suppress the past and their emotions. Bernhard states that one has to be very strong to survive here, which implies that one has to be strong to withstand life in Austria. Paul loved the region, as it was the region of his childhood, yet it depressed him more and more, which implies that the past was a continual source of affliction to many Austrians and that memory had the power to dramatically depress the mind.

Bernhard returns to his denigration of nature in the following pages, by claiming that nature is “killing him”, even though the doctors have said that he must have nature around him in order to survive.¹⁰⁰ He fears the malignancy and ruthlessness of nature, yet it is essential to him. Once again, Bernhard is questioning the judgement of those in charge and seeking to chastise the Austrian love of nature, in favour of social discussion and engagement with the past.

Holzfällen can also be read as a critique of Austrian culture and society. Once again, Bernhard utilises his former friendships and their problems to make wider comments on society and its problems. He describes the artists at Joanna’s funeral and later at the artistic dinner as “artistic corpses”, who should be held in contempt and are reminders of all that is wrong with Austrian society.¹⁰¹ The awkward description of the

⁹⁹ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 45.

artist's inability to time their responses and movements correctly in the graveyard and church suggests that they are always putting on an act, and are inauthentic, a key argument of this text.¹⁰² It also reminds the reader that culture is really a show, there are more important things in life, and we must not allow ourselves to be diverted away from them by the trappings of culture. Bernhard is clearly pointing the finger at Austrian complacency and preoccupation with culture in the face of more serious issues.

His admiration of John, Joanna's partner, who as a "nicht kunsterlicher Mensch" was able to give a grisly account of Joanna's body, shows that Bernhard wishes to take the pretty surface away, and force the people to confront the atrocities of the past.¹⁰³ His curiosity about the body horrifies him, yet he seems to be instructing the reader to probe into the horrors of the world, even though we may not want to. Hans Wolfschutz claims, "*The history of modern Austria is above all, the record of a people who have learnt to live with the past.*"¹⁰⁴ There is a certain amount of cultural baggage inherited by the citizens of the country, and it is clear that Bernhard believes that Austrians must take the bad with the good, and must pay the price of being Austrian. The image of the Austrian devouring the past implies that it is finished with and invisible, they have hidden it inside, and no longer have to deal with it.

One of the key features of *Holzfällen* as a text is its attempt to restore temporal difference via a process of remembering and writing, i.e. to study the past objectively and separate it from the present.¹⁰⁵ This would result in an objective scrutiny of the past, which is clearly something Bernhard is keen to see take place in Austrian society. Bernhard is pointing out the incapacity of the Austrian people to deal with the past and to recognise it.

The first image of the novellas sees Bernhard out and about in Vienna, relatively satisfied with himself, when he is accosted by his old friends. The image of the Auersberger couple coming forth from the mists of Bernhard's past conveys the idea that the past is not dead, and that the Austrian people must face it in everyday life. The image of Bernhard enjoying the fresh air and sights of Vienna, while meeting with ghosts from the

¹⁰² Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 136.

¹⁰³ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfschutz (ed) *Modern Austrian writing*, p. 1.

past suggests that the Austrians cannot merely enjoy the culture and landscape of Austrian, they must also face its darker side, i.e. its past. Narrative beginnings involve a rupture or crisis within a stable situation, and it is no coincidence that the subtitle of *Holzfällen* is *Eine Erregung*, an irritation.¹⁰⁶ It is suggested therefore, that Bernhard has been awoken from a sense of complacency and forced to deal with his past. The return of the past and Bernhard's attempt to deal with his repressed feelings is the main theme of the novel and is certainly important for our discussion of Bernhard as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. Obviously, he wishes to use himself as an example, or role model for the Austrian people, who too should confront their past.

Bernhard seems to pity himself in the novella and claims that he is the "victim" of his former friends, who force him to socialise with them against his will. Bernhard claims to be "the weakest person, and at the mercy of everyone", which implies that man is never ready to engage with the shortcomings of their state, but they must do so nonetheless.¹⁰⁷ The past will not wait until one is ready to deal with it, it will resurface when one is at ones weakest. Bernhard constantly reiterates the fact throughout the novella that Joanna killed herself in her parent's house.¹⁰⁸ The fact that her suicide took place there suggests that sometimes the past can be too much to bear, and that the young are still paying for the crimes of their parents. Bernhard reiterates the fact that Joanna went home to die many times throughout the novel, which indicates that the past is ever present and that it will continue to exert an effect on the individual throughout his/her life. There is also a hint that Joanna was trying to escape her past by moving to Vienna, yet her return to her home place to die suggests that the past will not go away, despite one's best efforts to ignore it. Joanna's suicide suggests that she could not handle her confrontation with the past, and that she despaired of ever being reconciled with it.

The holding of an "kunstlerischen Abendessen" the day of Joanna's funeral is an attempt by her former friends to deal with the unpleasant reality of her death and their inability to come to terms with it. In the wider context of Austrian society, it also suggests that culture is used to gloss over the ugly reality of everyday life and that the

¹⁰⁵ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁷ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 12.

Austrian people would rather immerse themselves in culture, than engage with the past. Bernhard seems to focus on small details a lot during his novellas, and his focus on Jeannie's wreath at the funeral mass seems at first glance to be ridiculous, yet like many of his symbols it holds more meaning than meets the eye. It suggests that there is an effort to beautify the ugliness of society, as Jeannie placed a beautiful, yet ostentatious wreath on the coffin of Joanna's ugly and hopeless death.¹⁰⁹ This is consistent with Bernhard's frequently used image of the beautiful surface of a graveyard, and the horror beneath. Jeannie sought to gloss over Joanna's death with flowers and beauty, yet underneath the surface, the truth lies. The description by Joanna's partner John of her body being placed in a plastic bag by the undertaker, yet retrieved by him and placed in the most expensive coffin further reiterates this image, and conveys the idea that the Austrian people do not want to be confronted with the ugly images of death and suffering, but want to mask everything with an opulent and beautiful façade. John is appalled by the reality of Joanna's dead body and is clearly traumatised by it. He seeks to make the scene bearable by placing the body in beautiful surroundings, and thereby makes the reality bearable by placing it within the superficial. In the same way, the Austrian people sought to cling to a superficial myth and idea about the past, in order to make the horror of it bearable.

Bernhard's internal battle over who betrayed who, and where the blame lay in the relationship between himself and the Auersberger couple also serves as a fitting commentary on Austrian dealings with the past. He seems unable to let go of the past, and his constant repetition of various scenes throughout the novel serves two purposes. Firstly, it shows the reader that one must continue to engage with the past, if one is to have closure. Secondly, each time Bernhard relives an incident, he adds more detail and brings it to life more fully. This attempt to come to terms with the "eruption of the past" is highly symbolic for our reading of the text from a historical standpoint.¹¹⁰ Bernhard is keen to let the reader know how badly the Auersberger couple treated him, and his drawing up of a balance sheet to determine whether or not to visit them, clearly suggests

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 35

¹⁰⁹ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 234.

¹¹⁰ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 139.

that he is investigating the situation methodically, in order to come up a concrete sense of who the perpetrator is. He keenly defends his own behaviour in a striking internal monologue, in which he forcefully claims to be the victim. They betrayed him, and used him; they were the traitors, not he. His monologue has the tone firstly, of the victim confronting the perpetrator, asserting their own victim status and demanding the right to be considered in a sympathetic light. He repeatedly reviews the reasons for the breach between them and goes to great lengths to prove the badness of their behaviour towards him.

J. J Long claims that Bernhard is seeking to overcome the stagnation of life through writing, i.e. he seeks to investigate the past and its problems in order to move on into the future.¹¹¹ In the light of Austrian history, this could be viewed as a possible allusion to the Jewish descendants of the *Shoah*, confronting the Austrian state and demanding recognition and compensation. It is also noteworthy that Austria did not engage with the question of war guilt until the late 1980's, therefore Bernhard's monologue could be viewed as a sign of things to come. The Austrian form of compensation to the Jews was also monetary; therefore Bernhard's constant allusions to the amount of money the couple spent on him are highly significant. He truly seeks to paint himself as the victim of the couple. The silent accusations made by him are also reminiscent of the silent accusations made by the Jewish descendants, who realise that they are not strong enough to take on the state, yet still feel a keen sense of injustice.

His withdrawal from the society of the room also suggests the marginalisation of the Jew in Austrian society, and the lack of interest in their plight. Bernhard has no audience for his internal mutterings, and the others are not even aware of the anger he is feeling. The others are engaged in cultural pursuits, and have little time for the serious issues preoccupying Bernhard. Once again, we are faced with the idea that the Austrians care more about culture than they do about facing up to the problems of the past. Once again, culture is used to mask all that is wrong with Austrian society. The fact that Bernhard claims to be weak and virtually at the mercy of everybody when he accepts the

¹¹¹ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 137.

invitation alludes to the weakness of the victim, and their inability to stand up to the perpetrator. Through the entire evening, Joanna's death is present, another reminder that the past is ever present, and cannot be glossed over by cultural achievements. The confusion over whether the dinner was held for Joanna or the actor reminds the reader that in Austria, culture and death exist side by side, in the horrors of the past, and the attempt to hide them with culture.

Bernhard's constant claim that he is hated by all present because he takes them apart unscrupulously also hints that the Austrian people has something to hide and be ashamed of, and that they do not take kindly to those who focus on the bad. Bernhard seems to believe that man is worth little when broken down into all his constituents, and it is this denigrating of man that annoys the others. They do not want to confront all that is base and mean about themselves and prefer to focus on the present and what is good. Bernhard shows the reader that the Austrian people are unwilling to confront the wrongdoings, yet it is noteworthy that the Auersberger couple invited Bernhard to the meal. It is as if they unconsciously want to engage with the past, and be forced to confront their own shortcomings.

However, Bernhard is left in isolation all night, which clearly shows that the Austrian people are unable to engage with the past, when it comes down to it. For those present, he seems to represent their guilt, and the uncomfortable nature of their pasts. He is an unwelcome reminder that all is not well in Austrian society, and that they must turn from their much loved cultural pursuits, and confront their pasts. Yet Bernhard claims to be too tired to engage with those present; he is too tired after the funeral. I believe that Bernhard is alluding to the Jewish community, who are too weak after the *Shoah* to confront the perpetrators, yet remain an uncomfortable reminder of the past.

Another reminder of an uncomfortable past is the furniture in the room, which Bernhard frequently describes as overbearing and full of shadow, a fact, which illustrates the eerie nature of the past, and the ability of its events to haunt us.¹¹² He believes that the Auersberger family have surrounded themselves with the furniture of an era, which doesn't concern them, in order to divert themselves from their own age, with which they

¹¹² Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 242.

cannot cope. They cannot endure the hardness and brutality of their own age, and so seek to live in an age gone by. This remark conveys the fact that the Austrian people cannot confront the problems of their age, so seek solace in the glories of their past. They only remember what they want to remember, and shun the rest. Human memory is selective, and here we see that the Austrian people are keen to emphasize all that was honourable about their past, while forgetting what was not. The presence of the furniture itself suggests that the past is inescapable, and that the Austrian people must live in its shadow. The furniture is most likely inherited, inheritance being a favourite motif of Bernhard, and as such, represents the handing down of guilt from generation to generation.

The fact that the Auersbergers have no children suggests that the process will end with them, a fact which bodes ill for the future of Austria, as they seem to have no idea of the significance of their past and its problems, preferring to concern themselves with cultural matters, which Bernhard warns, will not hide the troubles of the past. Bernhard's final scene with the Auersberger woman also reminds us that the Austrian people prefer to avoid the problems of the past, and engage in active forgetting. Bernhard is polite and courteous to her, even kissing her. The kiss is a type of Judas betrayal of his key principles and suggests that the Austrian betrays him/herself everyday by not addressing the issues of the past.¹¹³ It also suggests that we are compromised as human beings by not speaking out against what is wrong with society. Bernhard is disgusted with his behaviour and his deliberate lies, but admits he acted so in order to save himself from embarrassment. It is clear that the Austrian people acted in a certain way in relation to their past in order to be free from the uncomfortable nature of it, and to shirk responsibility for their actions. He is therefore criticising himself again, which once more proves his determination to right wrongs at any expense. His kissing of the Auersberger woman equates him with his fellow Austrians who prefer a quiet life to engaging with the past, once again placing him in the category of those he criticises. It also shows the ability of human beings to forget the horrors of the past in favour of a "quiet life" and a comfortable existence.

¹¹³ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 318

His act of running through Vienna as if escaping from a nightmare shows that Bernhard is aware of his shortcomings, and his inability to confront his past. He is one of those whom he criticises, who also cannot face up to their past. He was trying to escape the fifties by escaping into the eighties. He is clearly trying to escape the burdens of his past by escaping into the “brainless” present of the eighties.¹¹⁴ Much like the Austrian people, his is seeking to bury the past by preoccupation with the present. Yet he knows that this city which has brought him nothing but misfortune is still the best city for him, implying that he is engaged in a love/hate relationship with Vienna and its people. This city would always be his city, and these people would always be his people, a comment that shows us that one cannot escape the legacy of history.¹¹⁵ As an Austrian, Bernhard too must face up to the shared past of his people. As he criticises himself throughout the book we are keenly aware that he too is guilty. In this final scene, we see that he too finds it difficult to confront the past, and that he tries to escape into the future. In the closing scene, we see Bernhard, the idealistic social critic, as being no better than those he condemns. As stated above, Bernhard’s criticisms of Austria arise from his belief that the populace and state have made no effort to come to terms with their troubled past. Bernhard sees culture as a masking force, which the people use to both distract themselves from the horrors of the past and also to justify their, in his opinion, undeserved, reputation abroad. It is in this light that we must study his seemingly exaggerated comments on culture and cultural institutions, for only by understanding the social and political currents of the time, can we really understand the words of Bernhard.

¹¹⁴ Bernhard, *Holzfüllen*, p. 320.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 319-320.

Chapter 3: Criticisms of Culture

Paul's devotion to music, as described by Bernhard in great detail is typically Austrian. He describes their wordless musical evenings and claims that both were soothed by the power of music and "Kunststücke".¹¹⁶ Throughout the novella Bernhard seems knowledgeable about music and has great admiration for certain performers. This praise of culture is typical of many Austrian novellas of the "*Heimatliteratur*" genre, which concern themselves with culture, and an appraisal of the value of Austrian culture and institutions. However, Bernhard largely seeks to condemn the culture of Austria, claiming it is frivolous and lacking in any real talent or style. He aims to destroy the image of Austria as a cultured land, and has earned himself the title of "*Anti-Heimat*" author. Yet Marcel Reich-Ranicki is quick to point out that Bernhard's work is no less valid as a type of *Heimatliteratur* just because it is motivated by rage, anger and despair.¹¹⁷ He is as obsessed with culture, as the many who praise it, yet he seeks to desecrate it instead. Therefore, the focus of his work is still his homeland, but a condemnation, rather than appraisal of it. This coupled with his intense love of music proves that once again Bernhard is not letting his feelings get in the way of his truth, and speaks out against culture, even though he obviously loves and has profited from it. By criticizing culture, Bernhard is almost criticizing himself again, as he is a member of this cultural elite, and has spent his life immersed in this culture. We can clearly see that he is a true Nestbeschmutzer, who will let nothing stand in his way.

In *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, Bernhard is often cast into a fury over very trivial occurrences. Many of his outbursts arise from simple incidents. He claims that Austria is a "hinterwalderische abstossende Land", an attack prompted by the fact that he was unable to get the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in any of its towns.¹¹⁸ This is the beginning of a long monologue criticising the provincial nature of Austrian towns, and their negative effect on all who live in them. However, these attacks are once again prompted by the circumstances in which he grew up, as well as a desire to right what he himself has experienced as wrong. His damning appraisals of provincial Austrian towns, most

¹¹⁶ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 131.

¹¹⁷ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Konfessionen eines Besessenen" In Anneliese Botond, *Über Thomas Bernhard*, p. 96.

notably Salzburg, hints back to his childhood trauma in this town, and the sense of disgust he felt at it in the post war years. For Bernhard, Salzburg is the root of his autism, i.e. withdrawal from mainstream culture, and he seeks to overcome the town while condemning it.¹¹⁹ He seeks to desecrate the traditional image of the homely Austrian town and its lively culture in order to gain revenge for the traumas he endured there as a child. He implies that true culture is not present in Austria, and that there is little there for the thinking man. What Austria presents as culture is merely a façade; under which there lies nothing of substance.

In his depiction of the Wittgenstein family, which casts them in a very bad light, Bernhard makes a very powerful attack on the institution of Austrian culture, and its respectability. Paul's family is described as wishing to be seen as patrons of the arts, although Bernhard thinks they are not. Bernhard is perhaps implying that Austrian society is more concerned with the arts and aims to gloss over the contentious issues of the day by constant emphasis of cultural achievements and values. However, Bernhard's view of the family is inaccurate, as they were indeed a cultured family, with Ludwig's mother and sister being accomplished musicians, and his brother having a career as a concert pianist.¹²⁰ I have already mentioned that Bernhard did not let his own feelings or reputation stand in the way of speaking his truth, yet in this instance we see that he did not let the truth stand in his way either. It is clear that Bernhard sought to attack the culture of Austria at all costs, even sacrificing truth. His denigration of the Wittgenstein family makes one wonder how far he will go to force the Austrian people to engage with their shortcomings. J. J Long claims that throughout the novel, he alters fact to create the type of story present in his other works, which shows us that he is not to be diverted from his aim of making the Austrians, confront what he perceives to be wrong in society.¹²¹

In keeping with his inclination to be provoked into speech by seemingly trivial occurrences, Bernhard is angered by Paul's love of motor racing into making an attack on the wider cultural values of Austria. His focus on Paul's love of motor racing shows us that crudeness can exist alongside culture, and he laments the existence of motor racing

¹¹⁸ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, p. 90.

¹¹⁹ Kindler's *Literaturgeschichte der Gegenwart. Die zeitgenössische Literatur Österreichs*, p. 226.

¹²⁰ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The duty of genius* (Penguin, London, 1991), p. 8-9.

and music in the one world. Here, he is hinting that the Austrian people themselves cannot escape their less sophisticated side by hiding behind culture. This is a typical Bernhardian view of Austrian society, and it is clear that he despises those who engage in base pursuits, while also immersing themselves in music.

This insult is also reminiscent of the view of Sigmund Freud and other artists that culture ended in 1938 with the arrival of the Germans.¹²² This idea of “*Finis Austriae*” could be demonstrated by Paul’s obsession with motor racing in comparison with the cultural excellence of his uncle.

Bernhard’s painful descriptions of Paul’s breakdowns amid a cultural and wealthy backdrop present a picture of Austria where all is not as it should be. Paul is a typical Bernhard character,¹²³ coming from “*einer der drei, vier reichsten Familien Österreichs*”.¹²⁴ Bernhard’s description at the start of my analysis of the Herr Baron in a cage clearly demonstrates that problems cannot be masked by culture and wealth, and that even the elite of society must confront their problems. He describes how Paul gave away his valuable furniture, thereby reinforcing his typical theme of the burden of inheritance and family legacy.¹²⁵ This suggests that the past is a burden borne by many Austrians, and trying to shirk responsibility for it can only lead to madness, as it did in the case of Paul. In light of the cultural critique, it suggests that commercialization of culture, which has resulted in its debasement. This is also reminiscent of one of Bernhard’s beliefs that Austrian cultural life is on the demise.¹²⁶ Austria can be seen as a land where culture is a commodity, on sale for the willing tourist. The cheap price given for these valuables shows that culture can be bought and sold nowadays, and that Austrians are willing to sell their culture. It also shows the real lack of worth of cultural items, when compared to human beings. Obviously Bernhard wants his audience to place more value on human concerns than on cultural ones.

¹²¹ J.J Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 56.

¹²² Von Olenhusen, “Nazisuppe” oder: Pathologien der Erinnerung. Thomas Bernhards Dramen und die Geschichtskultur” in *Politik und Medien bei Thomas Bernhard*, p. 230.

¹²³ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Neffe*, p. 43.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 28

¹²⁶ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 92.

This is also echoed vividly in his description of the prize giving ceremonies, which he attends with Paul and his *Lebensmensch*. The *Grillparzer Prize* is described as being a genuine piece of Austrian perfidy and a cunning nonsense. At first Bernhard was honoured at being offered the award, yet his exultation soon passed, and he left the ceremony highly insulted. It seems that his attempt to engage with Austrian high culture was fruitless, and that one would be better off not bothering. He claims that prize ceremonies are a degradation and humiliation, as they are always awarded by incompetent people, which shows his contempt for Austrian culture. He claims that one always pays for the receipt of prizes, therefore implying that engagement in culture is dangerous and evil.¹²⁷ It also shows how people can be sucked in by this culture, as indeed he was, and how any association with this culture made one vile and mean. Once again, his attendance at the awards ceremony shows his compliance with the society he criticises, and shows him to be as bad as those he condemns. His description of his excitement at the Grillparzer Prize ceremony further compounds his membership of the cultural world he hates, and his guilt by association to the people he loathes. Yet Bernhard does not shy from this, and actively exclaims his happiness at the receipt of the shameful prize. As Bernhard is in control of the words, which appear in his books, we must take each line as significant, thereby proving that Bernhard saw himself as part of the problem and not the solution.

His description of his reception at the Academy of Sciences for the *Grillparzer Prize* not only demonstrates Bernhard's contempt for the Austrian cultural scene and all associated with it, but also gives us an insight into the other side of the *Nestbeschmutzer* controversy. If Bernhard is to be believed, the whole awards ceremony was a gross insult to him.¹²⁸ His narration of the whole scene, from the lack of reception and recognition on his arrival, to the lady minister who slept through the speeches, seems to illustrate his view that most Austrians held him in contempt and that the cultural scene was indeed a farce. He claims that none there recognised him and that the lady minister asked "wo ist denn der Dichterling".¹²⁹ He also discusses the awards ceremony, which was to earn him

¹²⁷ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Nefte*, p. 108.

¹²⁸ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, pp. 80-85

¹²⁹ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Nefte*, p. 113.

the title of *Nestbeschmutzer*; the awarding of the *State Prize for Literature*. Bernhard views this whole ceremony as being a huge insult to him, claiming that the Minister called him a Dutchman and a writer of adventure novels, both of which are not true.¹³⁰ If this philosophical digression was in line with his famous comment that “*es ist alles lächerlich wenn man an der Tod denkt*,”¹³¹ it is little wonder that all present were offended. In comparison to this casual statement, the Minister’s reaction seems grossly exaggerated, and Bernhard himself seems surprised by it. He claims that those who ran after the Minister were opportunists, and seems to despise them more than the Minister himself. This ties in again with his view that in Austria, the artists “*prostitutieren sie sich*”.¹³² They are slaves to the cultural realm, and use it to gain advantage. On the other side of this, the cultural realm exploits the artists. The symbiotic relationship between state and culture, so often praised in Austria is denigrated severely by Bernhard.

Once again, he seeks to denigrate Austrian culture, by claiming that the newspapers only labelled him a *Nestbeschmutzer* as they were dependent on government subsidies. Abroad, the truth was reported.¹³³ It is clear that Bernhard did not see himself as a *Nestbeschmutzer* in the traditional sense, but rather as a writer driven to social criticism by the lamentable state of the country and its people. Martin has described how Bernhard’s characters are often people rebelling and taking action against a world not made for them.¹³⁴ Once again, this implies Bernhard’s keen sense of isolation and opposition to the society in which he lived. However, despite his own views, the tone and content of *Wittgenstein’s Neffe* is certainly objectionable to the Austrian people and whether Bernhard desired it or not, a piece of writing designed to cause offence and upset.

We see Bernhard’s simultaneous participation in, and rejection of Austrian society in his digression on the café culture of Austria. He vents his spleen on the much-famed Austrian cafe culture, claiming that the uneducated people of Austria gather there to vent

¹³⁰ Ibid, pp. 112-115.

¹³¹ *Dankesrede 1967*, Österreichische Staatspreis, zitiert nach *Die Weltworte* 22/3/1968.

¹³² Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Neffe*, pp 156-7.

¹³³ Bernhard, *Holzfällen, eine Erregung*, pp. 85-86.

¹³⁴ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 26.

their social steam, thus implying that the cafes were home to pretentious and arrogant people, with little of importance to say. Once again, Bernhard reiterates the theme of an impressive exterior, with little of worth beneath the surface. It also captures his view that the Austrians cannot engage with the past because they are too stupid, they merely engage in frivolities instead.¹³⁵

Diana Kempff has described Bernhard as possessing an art of looking through things, and this becomes very apparent during his denigration of the frivolities of Austrian culture.¹³⁶ Yet despite his aversion to cafe culture, Bernhard is still a cafe regular, despite his best intentions.¹³⁷ This proves that Bernhard is still part of the cultural scene, much as he despises it. He even claims that all who attend such cafes are writing and philosophising types like himself. Even though Bernhard despises such people, he is aware that he is one of them and he does not try to deny this fact.

Some of his attacks however, are typically over exaggerated, and can be seen as proof of Renate Wagner's point that Bernhard merely sought to "*gegen alles blindlings loszurennen und möglichst jeden zu verletzen*".¹³⁸ It also captures Eduard Heinisch's point that Bernhard's provocation of Austria was now just unsurprising and systematic.¹³⁹ Bernhard's hatred of Austria takes on a ludicrous note in his critique of café culture, which he describes as the "*erabschuungswürdigste aller Welten*".¹⁴⁰ However, in general, Bernhard's criticisms are direct and well thought out, and must be treated as serious chastisements of a corrupt society.

In *Holzfällen*, Bernhard's criticism of culture takes on a new and personal aspect. J. J Long, who claims that we cannot take a text at symbolic level only, also has something to say about the link between the characters and their real life counterparts in this novel. He claims that noting the correspondences between Bernhard's fiction and the reality it depicts is a sterile occupation and will lead to a critical dead-end, a point with

¹³⁵ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 167.

¹³⁶ Diana Kempff, "Der Mensch plus Buckel" in *Der Spiegel* 14/2/02.

¹³⁷ Kempff, "Der Mensch plus Buckel" in *Der Spiegel* 14/2/1983.

¹³⁸ Renate Wagner, "Nichts weiter als ein schlechtes Stück". In *Vorarlberger Nachrichten* 1988, precise date unknown.

¹³⁹ Eduard C Heinisch, "Ungenach- Ein Zustand". In *Die Furche*, 21/12/1968.

¹⁴⁰ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, pp. 140-1.

which I must strongly disagree. Bernhard obviously went to great lengths to base his characters on real people; his substitution of *Maria Zaal* for *Maria Saal* is a thinly veiled disguise, which shows his intention to incriminate these people in his novella. Such open and unmistakable criticism must be taken seriously, once again, Bernhard's only means of communication with his audience is his text, and therefore what he puts down on paper is hugely significant. Also, the bulk of the text is concerned with this criticism, further proving the point that it must be important.

While a pairing of character and person, a la Haider is certainly mundane, we must not allow this to distract us from the central theme of this work; Bernhard wished to criticise the key cultural figures of Austria.¹⁴¹ In this sense, he is certainly a *Nestbeschmutzer*. Some have seen this criticism as little more than a settling of personal scores,¹⁴² and an "uninteresting report about disputes with colleagues".¹⁴³ Whatever the opinion one holds on the novel, it is clear that Bernhard aims to criticise and condemn the cultural figures of Austria.

Bernhard is quick to mock the culture of Austria, and the cultural engagement of its most famed artists. He describes the Auersberger couple, a highly cultured couple as horrible destroyers and killers, who are disgusting and always drunk. He describes how they "bought everything of Wittgenstein, in order to concern themselves with Wittgenstein for a while", a fact which reiterates the view that culture is a commodity in Vienna, and can be bought and sold.¹⁴⁴ Barbara Mariacher describes how this "*Verschlüsselung von Figuren*" points not only back toward the concrete person, but also away from them.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the author aims to criticise these people personally, and also to turn attention to a criticism of Austrian culture in general, through an utilisation of some of its most famous and renowned figures.

¹⁴¹ Hans Haider, editor of *Die Presse*, was the first to notice the similarities between the characters of the novel and real life literati.

¹⁴² Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his prose works*, p. 167.

¹⁴³ Kay Glans, "Den dodliga foreställningen (Die todliche Vorstellung)". In *Svenska Dagbladet* 28/8/1986.

¹⁴⁴ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 8

¹⁴⁵ Mariacher, "*Umspringbilder*": *Erzählen- Beobachten- Erinnern. Überlegungen zur späten Prosa Thomas Bernhards*, p. 112.

We have already seen in our reading of *Wittgenstein's Neffe* that Bernhard does not mind lying about real life people in order to open up a forum for the discussion of the problems of society. The fact that Auersberger is a renowned composer, yet an alcoholic portrays the artist in a new light, and suggests that external appearances do not betray the reality within. Clearly, Auersberger is made respectable only by his artistic merits, which is a telling insight into Bernhard's views of Austrian artists in general. He sees the cream of Austrian artistic society at this dinner and seeks to denigrate each in turn. The most beloved Austrian institution, the *Burgtheater* is dominated by "theatrical nitwits" and "mindless yellers", who have turned it into a playwright destroying and shouting institution of absolute brainlessness.¹⁴⁶ The Viennese audience are the most ruthless and infamous in Europe, with very fixed ideas of what they consider good theatre.

This is a particularly interesting set of insults, as it is well known that Bernhard had nothing but contempt for his audience and readers, claiming to write only for actors.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, his lack of respect for both shows that he truly only writes for himself, as he has often stated.¹⁴⁸ This is perhaps the ultimate proof of his lack of respect for the institution of cultural and the world of the arts. Indeed, the purpose of creating literature is for it to be read. It is evident that Bernhard does not value his readership, and therefore does not value art. Bernhard's damnation of the *Burgtheater* is especially offensive, as it is the institution most beloved by the Austrians. In an interview with Krista Fleischmann, Thomas Bernhard expressed views about the theatre in Austria, which allows us to take the views expressed in the novel as his own.¹⁴⁹ Once again, Bernhard seeks to destroy the comfortable view of something beloved by the Austrians. His reiteration of the fact that the Austrians love the *Burgtheater* actor and see it as an honour to be acquainted with one follows his condemnation of the theatre and its actors and serves as a statement of the stupidity of the Austrian people. Bernhard claims that their love of the actor is "ridiculous and perverse", which could also tie in with

¹⁴⁶ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ "Bernhard Minetti". *Theater Heute Sonderheft* (1975): 38-9.

¹⁴⁸ Andre Muller, *Andre Muller im Gespräch mit Thomas Bernhard*. Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1992.

¹⁴⁹ Krista Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard- eine Begegnung* (Verlag der österreichischen Staatsdruckerei, Wien, 1991).

Bernhard's impatience with the Austrian people, who concern themselves with art, when the realities of the past need addressing¹⁵⁰

He also seeks to belittle the author Jeannie Billroth, by claiming that she is mediocre and believes her own publicity. He once again implies that that which is beloved by the Austrian people is really mundane, mediocre and ridiculous. The artists of Vienna are really only highly decorated provincial artists who believe their own hype. They are only empty shells of people, larvae, who have not achieved anything worthwhile in the last thirty years.¹⁵¹

In the cream of Viennese society, Bernhard sees only depression, and a reminder of the mess they had all made of their lives, himself included. In these celebrated people, Bernhard sees an empty, soulless congregation, who have wasted their lives. Once again, we see Bernhard's lack of respect for the Austrian state, and an attack on its culture.

We must also see here, the hypocrisy of Bernhard the writer, as he has also been honoured by the state and accepted awards. He also claims to have been flattered at first to receive the *Grillparzer Prize*.¹⁵² He sees only mediocrity in the state and its artists, claiming that the Austrian artist will never reach the "peak".¹⁵³ Obviously Bernhard is trying to reduce the cultural importance of Austria, by painting it as a provincial state, where anybody can achieve fame, and where the most famous are really only mediocre. This seems to imply that he too is mediocre, as he is a member of this elite. He is presenting the reader with a challenge, for if he is so mediocre, should one listen to his views? This implies that in Austrian society, nobody is fit to judge anyone else, as all are equally guilty. In the wider context of Austrian society, this has clear implications for the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It also once again, puts Bernhard into the category of self-righteous victim and arrogant perpetrator.

However, he also admits that his own life has been a process of role-playing, which shows us that Bernhard accepts his own status as one of the number, which he criticises.¹⁵⁴ He tells the story of how he saw Auersberger with another woman, and how

¹⁵⁰ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 129-147.

¹⁵² Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Neffe* (1982), p.

¹⁵³ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, pp. 118-119

¹⁵⁴ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 136.

he used to read to Jeannie while she sat half naked on the bed, while her husband was in work. He also claims that all her husband is interested in is his work and the bed he shares with Jeannie. He also criticises Jeannie's work and claims that she is a mediocre artist. Bernhard despises the state, which sees its culture as a commodity and holds those artists who work for the state in contempt. His disgust at Jeannie receiving a life long pension for her work proves the point that in Austria, culture is a commodity, and a vital part of the identity of the state.

By insulting its writers and institutions, Bernhard is insulting the state itself, a fact which is reminiscent of one author's view that in Austria, he who insults the theatre insults Austria itself. Bernhard aims to denigrate the characters of these famous artists by digging up questionable stories about their pasts. It is obvious that Bernhard aims to show that everyone has a past, and that nobody can escape it. He clearly objects to the untouchable status of Austrian artists and seeks to bring them down to human level. Once again, we see Barbara Mariacher's view that the use of real life models for characters turns attention to these characters and their faults, and also to society in general.¹⁵⁵

As Helms Derfert stated, the narrators of the Second Republic are burdened with the "*Last der Geschichte*" and are tainted by the problems, which they write about.¹⁵⁶ While criticising these artists, he also criticises himself and his own weaknesses, a fact, which contests his status as a typical *Nestbeschmutzer*. Martin believes that Bernhard criticises himself merely to add credibility to his criticisms of Austria, yet I disagree strongly with this.¹⁵⁷ Bernhard criticises what needs to be addressed, and does not care whether the subject is his worst enemy, or himself. He sees that he cannot be separated from the institutions, which have shaped him. He sets himself up as an object of hatred throughout the novel, by highlighting the aversion of the other artists to him, and stating that he has behaved badly towards some of them.

¹⁵⁵ Mariacher, "*Umspringbilder*": *Erzählen- Beobachten- Erinnern. Überlegungen zur späten Prosa Thomas Bernhards*, p. 112.

¹⁵⁶ Derfert, *Die Last der Geschichte: Interpretationen zur Prosa von Thomas Bernhard*, p. 223.

¹⁵⁷ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his early prose works*, p. 182.

Gerald Steig claims that Bernhard allows no compromise, and realises that he is one of those whom he criticises.¹⁵⁸ In his descriptions of the way in which he mistreated his former friends, Bernhard's self-criticism is more effective than ever. He claims that he left them all at critical times, in order to avoid being destroyed by them, yet he makes it abundantly clear that he hurt these people, and used them for his own purposes.¹⁵⁹ Like the Austrian people, he is at once a victim, and a perpetrator. Charles W. Martin sees Bernhard as a type of social climber, an analogy, if believed, truly places Bernhard in the role of a hypocrite, who criticises what he cannot do without.¹⁶⁰ He seems to understand that he is no better than the others, as he describes his behaviour at the funeral as unsavoury. He also seeks to make himself an object of disgust to the reader, as his descriptions of his disgust at John's appearance, and his abandonment of Joanna lack compassion and real humanity.¹⁶¹ His position as an observer and his blatant bad manners at the meal are not passed over by Bernhard, and he constantly reiterates the fact that he was watching all present. The lack of attention paid to Bernhard by those present, and their obvious dislike to him compounds the belief of one writer that Bernhard rendered his critics "*mundtot*".¹⁶² It is clear that Bernhard is not writing in order to be liked, and it is also clear that he wishes to show the faults and failings of his own character, as well as those of his subjects.

Indeed, Bernhard himself has admitted that he wrote to provoke.¹⁶³ He seeks to find fault with society, yet does not ignore the fact that he is a member of this society, and is therefore, also guilty of its crimes and shortcomings. He is deeply interested in himself and loves/hates/criticises and tortures himself, as he does his subjects.¹⁶⁴

Bernhard also comments on the high level of suicide in Austria and is quick to point out that Salzburg has the highest level in Austria. In Bernhard's words, the people of the most beautiful region in Austria commit suicide on a greater scale than anywhere

¹⁵⁸ Steig, "Die totale Satire, von Johann Nestroy über K. Kraus zu Th. Bernhard" in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁰ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, a portrayal of existential and social problems in his prose works*, p. 181.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 52.

¹⁶² Karl Heinz Bohrer, "Es gibt keinen Schlussstrich" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7/8. 12. 1970.

¹⁶³ Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard- eine Begegnung*, p. 180.

else in Austria. The region of culture and beauty is populated by people who cannot bear to exist in it any longer. It is clear that Bernhard wishes to demean the reputation of this area, an area much hated by himself, and to show the horror, which lurks beneath the surface of this town. Its culture and beauty do not prevent it from being a town of misery and depression, which further reiterates Bernhard's view that culture cannot be used as a smokescreen.

Finally, the *Burgtheater* actor's repetition of the words "*forest, tall forest, cutting timber*", which also lends the book its title is highly symbolic. This comes at the end of the novella, and greatly impresses Bernhard, who had long become weary of the nonsensical conversation at the table.¹⁶⁵ However, this quote excites him and animates him; therefore we must study it seriously. This ironic longing for nature captures perfectly the ironic nature of Bernhard's critique; he simultaneously loves and hates Austria.¹⁶⁶ The past, the Austrian state and Austrian culture are all towering constructions, which repress and constrain the people. In order to be free of all three, one must break them down into "their constituents", as Bernhard does with people. Bernhard's message is that we must not just accept these institutions because they are powerful, but we should question them and challenge them, and reduce them down to their smallest parts in order to understand them.

This would engage the reader in an active battle to understand some of society's most fundamental institutions, and would result in the individual robbing them of most of their power, as anything analysed in its smallest parts becomes suddenly digestible and manageable. Bernhard wants the reader to rob these entities of their power by exploring them. In view of the past, Bernhard wants the reader to take away the shroud of mystery and confront it in all its horror. Only then, can we emerge from the woods of forgetfulness and repression and move into the future. In view of the state and culture, Bernhard wishes to rob them of their air of infallibility and power and make them accessible to the average person. In doing so, their mystique and intrinsic power will be

¹⁶⁴ Kindler's *Literaturgeschichte der Gegenwart. Die zeitgenössische Literatur Österreichs*, p. 386.

¹⁶⁵ Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p. 311.

¹⁶⁶ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his prose works*, p. 181.

redundant, and the individual will no longer be a cog in the state wheel, but an active member of society.

By reducing institutions, and chopping down myths, we gain a better understanding of society and history, surely in itself, a key aim of Bernhard's works. J. J. Long claims that the Austrian authorities served to highlight their own absurdity by confiscating the novel *Holzfällen*, and also claims that taking a realist approach to the text is ridiculous.¹⁶⁷ However, as Bernhard's fame lies in his reputation as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, and the literary style of his works, I find that his themes and a study of those themes is the key to understanding his message.

¹⁶⁷ Long, *The novels of Thomas Bernhard, form and its function*, p. 145.

Chapter 4: Legacy of Thomas Bernhard

Having studied the themes of Bernhard it is obvious that his work could not fail to cause offence. It is clear that he was a *Nestbeschmutzer* and also clear that his work would be highly controversial. While his writing was incendiary, it is clear that it was shaped and influenced by social, political and historical factors. We must also bear in mind the time in which he wrote, troubled as it was with historical, political and social concerns. Such works could not fail to cause offence appearing as they did in the midst of such turmoil. . From the above, it is little wonder that Thomas Bernhard was an unpopular and controversial figure in his time. It is well known that Bernhard believed that Nazism corrupted Austrian society at all levels, but by levelling such accusations as he did, he could hardly fail to alienate and anger the majority of Austrians. In his last will and testament, finalised two days before his death, Bernhard prohibited any performance of his work in Austria for a duration of ten years, because he “*mit dem österreichischen Staat nichts zu tun haben will*”.¹⁶⁸

However, on the tenth anniversary of Bernhard’s death in 1998, the green light was given for the production of many of his plays and works in Vienna, a move which was greeted with much enthusiasm. The once hated *Nestbeschmutzer* was now being hailed as one of Austria’s greatest authors and a writer to be celebrated. According to Jacques le Rider, this change can only be explained in social and political terms.¹⁶⁹ Like his writing, his title seems to have been influenced by the social climate of the time.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw a huge change in Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and an increased drive to deal with the current manifestations of the Nazi past. In an article published in the *Irish Times*, Conor Cruise O’Brien claimed that there was a total absence of *grossdeutsch* sentiment in Austria in 1988, yet the following evidence will serve to show that this was a gross miscalculation.¹⁷⁰ Bernhard’s tirades may seem outrageous and even exaggerated, yet it

¹⁶⁸ Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, Hamburg, 1993), p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ Jacques le Rider, “Unpolitische Satire bei Thomas Bernhard” in *Österreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire* (Bern, 2002), p. 166.

¹⁷⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Intimations of angst in a front line state” in *The Times* 1988 exact date unknown.

is important to note that other authors shared the same views, with one claiming that Bernhard's "*braunes Traum ist die Realität*".¹⁷¹ Here we see compelling evidence that Bernhard may have had a point.

As already mentioned, the neo-Nazi movement was growing in Austria, and civilian marches were taking place to counter this. The success of the Austrian *FPÖ* under Jorg Haider, and the problem of racist attacks on *Gastfamilien* and foreign nationals had prompted an urgent engagement with the past, and an attempt to insure that the climate of the Third Reich did not emerge again in Austria of the 1990s. The election of the former Nazi commander Kurt Waldheim as *Bundespräsident* also sparked controversy and divided Austria into two camps.¹⁷² It was a well-known fact that Waldheim had been a prominent Nazi during the war years, and that he was personally responsible for firing commands issued in the Balkans. It was also widely believed that he had knowledge of deportations of Jews from Salonika, a fact which the Austrian press chose to ignore.¹⁷³

Bernhard saw these two men as "*weitere Symptome für die gestige, kulturelle und politische Verfassheit Österreichs*".¹⁷⁴ It certainly seems that Bernhard's harsh criticism of Austria were not as ludicrous as first thought, as these men seemed to represent an amalgamation and indeed, concrete representation of all that Bernhard thought wrong in Austrian society. Indeed, amidst the controversy caused by their participation in public life, arose a particularly shocking example of the deeply embedded racial prejudice among a minority of Austrians. Robert Edwin Herzstein describes how one Austrian wrote an angrily worded letter to Newsweek magazine expressing regret that the men who had attacked Waldheim (in a small, isolated incident), had not been gassed by Hitler.¹⁷⁵ More worryingly, the deputy mayor of Linz, Carl Hödl wrote to the President of the

¹⁷¹ Ingrid Seibert, "Mitmassungen über Thomas Bernhard" in *Das Magazin* (Wien Juli/Aug, 1985), p. 50.

¹⁷² Von Olenhusen, "Nazisuppe" oder: Pathologien der Erinnerung. Thomas Bernhards Dramen und die Geschichtskultur" in *Politik und Medien bei Thomas Bernhard*, p. 230.

¹⁷³ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard, the portrayal of existential and social problems in his prose works*, p. 214.

¹⁷⁴ Von Olenhusen, "Nazisuppe" oder: Pathologien der Erinnerung. Thomas Bernhards Dramen und die Geschichtskultur" in *Politik und Medien bei Thomas Bernhard*, p. 230.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Edwin Herzstein, *Waldheim, the missing years* (William Morrow & Co. Publishing, London, 1988), p. 23.

World Jewish Congress, drawing similarities between the attacks on Waldheim, and the persecution of Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁶ In 1991, the FPÖ overtook the ÖVP to become the second strongest party in Vienna, a fact which proved that Bernhard's worries about the level of neo-Nazi support in Austria were not unfounded.¹⁷⁷ It also proved that the past needed to be dealt with, if its problems and horrors were not to be repeated in the present.

In this light, the work and words of Thomas Bernhard become particularly important. Georg Hensel believes that *Heldenplatz* brought about public debate about the repressed past for the first time in Austria.¹⁷⁸ The famous march on the *Heldenplatz* to protest against the success of the neo-Nazi movement was attended by thousands and was symbolic on more than one level. The significance of the *Heldenplatz* from a political and historical vantage is well-known, yet I believe that by gathering there to protest against the rise of the right, the Austrian people were lending, if unconsciously, validation to the work of Bernhard. Though an unpopular figure, it was becoming apparent that his views and words had not been without foundation, and the Austrian people seemed to adopt him as their champion and a representative of the will to resist and fight the threat posed by the far right. His criticisms, which had been viewed as a stupid ritual by some, were now gaining new value in the face of this huge political and social threat.¹⁷⁹

It was now abundantly clear that the Austrian perception of Bernhard as a *Nestbeschmutzer* had a lot to do with time, place and circumstance. In February 2000 a type of *politische Wende* took place, in which many Viennese theatres, most notable the traditional theatre of Josefstadt, saw the staging of many Bernhard plays, all of which were greeted with acceptance and as "*nichts Schockierendes*".¹⁸⁰ Le Rider sees this as evidence of the new political climate in Austria, which renders the work of the previously controversial Thomas Bernhard as "*harmlos*".¹⁸¹ As public debate over the past became more acceptable, the work and views of Bernhard lost their offensive edge, and became

¹⁷⁶ Herzstein, *Waldheim, the missing years*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁷ Anne McElvoy, "Austrian far right sweeps ahead" in *The Times* 12/11/1991.

¹⁷⁸ Georg Hensel, "Gelächter im Lebenskafig" in *FAZ*, 17/2/89.

¹⁷⁹ Jacobi Hansres, "Echo Prosa" in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 5/12/1986.

¹⁸⁰ Le Rider, "Unpolitische Satire bei Thomas Bernhard" in *Osterreich 1945-2000, Das Land der Satire*, p. 167.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

widely accepted, and even shared in Austrian society. The *Nestbeschmutzer* was truly a product of his/her time. Lastly, it is important to remember that Bernhard, who often expressed his love for Austria and its people, wrote such works out of a perceived social necessity and a wish to open the eyes of the people to problems they did not wish to face. In a fitting and accurate tribute to Bernhard, Hans Mayer claimed that when Bernhard wrote about the problems of Austria, it was meant seriously and sadly.¹⁸²

It is sad that Bernhard's intentions should only be vindicated after his death, but it is perhaps the most convincing proof at hand, that the *Nestbeschmutzer* really was a product of social and political origins.

¹⁸² Hans Mayer, "Im Grunde hat Bernhard immer mit dem Tod zusammengelebt" in *Der Standard* 17/2/1989.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it is clear that the criticisms of state, culture and the Nazi past, so typical of Bernhard's other works, are also present in both novellas. Bernhard discusses all three in order to provoke a reaction and make the reading public engage with the problems of society today. The presence of Bernhard himself in the novels is the most explicit proof of his role as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, for it is evidence that he will not let any aspect of society escape his notice, not even himself. As I have demonstrated throughout my thesis, his self-criticism is the feature of his work, which truly cements his status as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. He is a true social critic who condemns what needs to be condemned with no sentimentality. Though his work may be inflammatory in tone, and often downright offensive, Bernhard had the best intentions of his country at heart, and merely sought to redress the wrongs he saw. That this was an unpopular occupation was undeniable, and we must therefore see the labelling of Bernhard as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, as a product of the time in which he wrote. The more sensitive the issues, the less willing people were to discuss them. Bernhard's unpopularity was thus assured, yet as we can see from my paragraph on Bernhard's legacy, his work soon came to be appreciated as the valid challenge to a corrupt social order that it was. As the mood of society changed, the once hated *Nestbeschmutzer* took his place as a popular national author, thus vindicating his arguments and lending credibility to his strident anti-establishment views. Bernhard has come to be seen as an author who spoke the truth at a time when nobody wanted to hear it. Strong proof in support of this statement is given to us by Hans Mayer, who has also given me an extremely appropriate final argument for my thesis. In a stark contrast to the anti-Bernhard feelings of the 1960s and 1970s, Mayer has summed up the aim of Bernhard's literature and the aim of the man behind this literature. The comment was made in Bernhard's obituary, which once again proves that his label and its connotations were all products of the mood of society. Mayer claims that "When Bernhard wrote about the problems of Austria, it was meant seriously and sadly"¹⁸³ It now seems that the intentions of Bernhard have been vindicated, and that his work is being seen as the attempt to redress social wrongs which it was. However, one can also see this change of

attitude towards Bernhard and his works in a more cynical light. In an ironic twist, Bernhard seems to have thrown one final criticism at the Austrian establishment. His popularity today seems to prove one of the most fundamental points of his literary works. The memory of his attacks on state, culture and residues of Nazism in Austrian society have all been eclipsed by his post-humus popularity, thus proving the fact that in Austria, the past is too easily forgotten!

¹⁸³ Hans Mayer, "Im Grunde hat Bernhard immer mit dem Tod zusammengelebt" in *Der Standard* 17/2/1989.

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