

On the narratives' credibility concerning the disease and the fatal end in *Fräulein Else* and *Effi Briest*

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Abstract

The turn of the 20th century was the time when the world witnessed the birth of psychoanalysis and when the psyche gained centre stage. The literature of the time was closely linked to the development of this emerging scholarly discourse, for the men of letters seemed to understand the human emotional life considerably better than medical scholars; hence, Freud, besides pursuing medical approaches, resorted to literature to originate his theory of the human mind. This paper works in the reverse direction and aims to scrutinize the narrative of (mental) disease that is woven around the female protagonists; as Schnitzler's "Fräulein Else" is considered a textbook representation of the contemporary medical views on female hysteria and Fontane's "Effi Briest" features subtle indications of hysteria. The narratives of disease in both texts include implausible elements and appear unreliable; and this question of credibility is the object of research. The findings are a subtle social critique in Effi's case and mirror an incredible reality with "Fräulein Else".

Article

"Somewhere deep down inside, we really think they're faking it."
Deborah N. Black, University of Vermont, on hysteria patients
(Kinetz 2006, p. 2)

A narrative of disease is woven around the eponymous female protagonists in the texts under consideration which end with both protagonists being dead. On several occasions, though, the narration of the disease appears unreliable; or it is hinted that the characters

feign their illness. This essay tries to detect and highlight those situations where credibility can be disputed and to frame the ensuing questions, i.e. concerning the problematic nature of clear thoughts in an unconscious state in *Fräulein Else* or the trustworthiness of a patient who obviously pretended to be ill previously in *Effi Briest*. As both Effi and Else suffer from a disease which is rooted in psychology, one inevitable difficulty is to determine if the depiction of the disease seems unbelievable because the disease itself has the connotation of incredibility in reality, thus making these overtones of pretending a mere representation of medical facts (or rather non-facts). Alternatively the implausible elements may be hints of the narrator and if so, what does this hint towards? In the case of Effi, the meaning of her death and its connection to the prior illness have to be looked at, for this is a crucial point to the story and its assertion. This paper analyses the texts separately and forgoes a comparison.

Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1894-5) is written in an elliptical narrative style that is distinctive for the book. It is a story of untold stories: the story of the Chinaman, the love affair between Effi and Crampas, or the black hen of Frau Kruse (Greenberg 1988, p. 771-4). The heterodiegetic narrator provides repeated insight into Effi throughout the book; whereas Innstetten's inner self only comes to the fore from the point of finding his wife's secret love letters (*Effi Briest*, C. 27) onwards. This insight is achieved explicitly in dialogues rather than by representation of untold thoughts or feelings. Although the narrative voice affects to be objective for long periods, it reveals itself as biased from time to time. This, for instance, becomes blatantly obvious in the scenes in Berlin where Effi feigns to be ill and the narrator pays Effi a compliment for her acting performance (ibid, C. 23, p. 200).

Effi's medical record is not mysterious and the credibility of her fatal disease is not narrowed by her prior simulation in Berlin. Feigning illness is depicted as the only way out of the claustrophobic domestic sphere and the only acceptable excuse not to pay the obligatory visits that social protocol dictates. The narration acknowledges this and is on Effi's side. This is primarily embodied in the character of Dr. Rummschüttel, who realizes Effi's "Komödie" (ibid) and who knew "... daß dergleichen auch mal zu respektieren sein könne. Denn gab es nicht zu respektierende Komödien, war nicht die, die sie selber spielte, eine solche?" (ibid).

His *judgement* after his third visit is cataphoric and anticipates the social critique of the text: "Hier liegt etwas vor, was die Frau zwingt, so zu handeln, wie sie handelt." (ibid, p. 201).

It is society and the "Gesellschafts-Etwas" (ibid, C. 27, p. 236; Thesz 2010, p. 22) that makes the domestic sphere in Effi's prison and it is the legal situation of the time that entitles the husband to suppress his wife (Greenberg 1988, p. 772). The text criticizes, in its portrayal of Effi's life, that women have to feign illness in order to gain a little freedom and, as illustrated in the aforementioned biased nature of the narrator, it defends Effi's action. Furthermore, the story reflects scepticism towards the conventional treatments

and the “Kur” in particular as it is the fresh air of the prescribed walks that make Effi ill. Her “Luftbedürfnis” (*Effi Briest*, C. 35, p. 283) leads to her fatal illness and she dies of tuberculosis (Greenberg 1988, p. 772). Thus, she is ultimately made a victim of society as she is forced into feigning illness by social circumstances (Thesz 2010, p. 22) and becomes a victim of the medical treatments of the time which, ironically, make her truly ill.

Throughout the novel there are hints towards hysteria as Effi is described as nervous on more than one occasion (*Effi Briest*, C. 2, p. 18; C. 6, p. 48), sexual deprivation is implied (ibid, C. 13, p. 102). Sidonie calls her “nervenkrank” (ibid, C. 19, p. 157) and Dr. Rummschüttel prescribes “keine geistigen Anstrengungen” (ibid, C. 23, p. 200). After the birth of Annie there is a tendency towards “illness and unrest” (Thesz 2010, p. 26) in Effi and “[i]ndeed, hysteria was linked to a crisis in motherhood and to sterility” (ibid). The hysteria depiction culminates in Effi's nervous breakdown after Annie's visit.

All these can be taken as indicators for hysteria, but Effi is nervous in situations where young, naïve, and inexperienced girls are likely to be nervous. Sidonie's statement is more or less an insult, and according to the narrator, Dr. Rummschüttel is participating in the comedy. The rest remains but does not prevail; it rather contributes to the narrative of disease being a deciding reason to the course of the disease and its treatment. Society's morality and its mechanisms lead to her death. According to Krause (2010), hysteria depicted as a female disease in Victorian literature can be read as a protest against patriarchy (Krause 2010, p. 32-3) and shows “female resistance and male suppression” (ibid, p. 442). This study of English literature supports the reading of the narrative of disease in *Effi Briest* as protest, thus making the hints of hysteria a subordinate part of the greater narrative which aims to criticize the pressures of society and medical treatments of the time.

Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else* (1924), although written some thirty years after Fontane's *Effi Briest*, is set in the same time period and provides insight into a few hours in young Fräulein Else's life. Written as an interior monologue the “Erzähldistanz” (Aurnhammer 1983, p. 501) is nullified. It is the distinctive character of this narrative situation that everything succumbs to subjectivity. Thus everything is only reliable insofar as it is the protagonist's view of things, but it is not objectively reliable. Although the affair of Paul and Cissy is proven as existent in their behaviour at Else's bedside (*Fräulein Else*, pp. 74-6), it was not clear up to that point, for Else might as well just have imagined the affair. Hence, the narration concerning the outer world is not reliable as it is not verifiable for the reader and is in part merely based on Else's presumptions. The typographically denoted lines of the other characters offer other perspectives which are to the same extent subjective as Else's own perspective. Arguably, these lines of direct speech that seem to intrude on Else's mind can be viewed as distorted, for it is Else's perception the readers have to rely on and mishearing or misunderstanding cannot be

excluded; nevertheless there is not one instance that hints to this lack of credibility. In another regard, the text is completely reliable: as a protocol of her thoughts that is not designed by her, every thought is her thought and the text is a glimpse at the world through her eyes.

As *Fräulein Else* is one of Schnitzler's most famous texts, there is a wide academic discourse about it. Commonly, it is viewed as a Freudian novella with a medical focus depicting hysteria (Aurnhammer 1983, p. 500) including interpretations based on the Oedipus complex or for example Else being abused by her father (Lange-Kirchheim 1998). Although, these readings make Else's hysterical bout seem more comprehensible, there is no immanent proof in the text.

Regardless of the causes for Else's bouts, it is the depiction or narration of the bouts themselves and their incredibility that this essay revolves around. After exposing herself naked to the guests in the music room of the hotel, Else collapses and is carried to her room (*Fräulein Else*, pp. 70-3). Lying on her bed Else is in a supposedly unconscious state as the surrounding characters state: "*Es ist ein Ohnmachtsanfall' ... 'Du siehst doch, Mama, daß sie ohnmächtig ist.'*" (ibid, p. 71, emphasis in the original). Yet, Else still has clear thoughts, perceives what is going on around her and claims not to be unconscious: "Sie halten mich alle für ohnmächtig. Ich bin nicht ohnmächtig" (ibid). The question at issue is the incredibility of the narration that includes a conscious mind in an unconscious body; only a detailed analysis can clarify if this is a hint towards something or what it is and means.

Cissy labels what happens as "*ein hysterischer Anfall*" (ibid, p. 76) and she is the one who thinks Else is feigning everything, thus branding her as a fake in a manner that was customary with hysteria patients (Lange-Kirchheim 1998, p. 285). Lange-Kirchheim calls Else's state "*teilohnmächtig*" (ibid, p. 286) and argues that the hysterical protagonist *speaks* the truth for she exposes Cissy and Paul as "Schwindelbande" (*Fräulein Else*, p. 74), thus exposing them as liars. This argument, though, is not valid, just because they kept their affair from the others does not mean Cissy lies about everything else; and their lie and Cissy's evaluation of Else's medical state are not matters which mutually exclude each other.

Nevertheless, it is this complex and controversial stigma of hysteria patients that is at stake (Lange-Kirchheim 1998, pp. 285-6; Kinetz 2010). Apart from Lange-Kirchheim's incomplete argumentation, Else's self-imposed prohibition to speak ("*Ich höre, aber ich schweige. Ich bin ohnmächtig, ich muß schweigen.*" *Fräulein Else*, p. 76) and her suddenly regained control over her body when she reaches for the Veronal indicate simulation.

Other implausible elements, like Else noticing her aunt tiptoeing to her side (ibid, p. 74), knowing who kisses whom (ibid, p. 75), or *sensing* Cissy in front of the mirror (ibid, p. 76),

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may just as well be imagined for we are bound to Else's perception without being able to distinguish her dreams from reality.¹ "In traumhaft-disparatem Erleben reagiert sie zwar noch auf Berührungen, Gerüche, doch ihre assoziative Wahrnehmungen können die Situation nicht mehr organisieren" (Aurnhammer 1983, p. 508).

One attempt at an explanation to clarify the contradictions is to resort to Schnitzler's own medical (psychological) conception. Contrary to Freud, Schnitzler did not believe in the dichotomous concept of conscious and unconscious but added what he called the "Mittelbewusstsein" (Tweraser 2003, p. 152), a permeable stratum between consciousness and unconsciousness that is influenced by both of the aforementioned (ibid). Furthermore, he viewed the "psyche as an essentially open system" (Herzog 2003, p. 235) partly due to his experience with hypnosis. Although the hypnotic state is not an unconscious one, it is this concept of the psyche and its always accessible quality that makes the post-breakdown depiction of Fräulein Else more comprehensible.

Finally, the *protocol* of Else's mind reveals more to the reader than is accessible to the protagonist herself. The text contains her first dream of her suicide and her dead body lying on a bier (*Fräulein Else*, pp. 43-4), but this dream is afterwards concealed to herself or can only partially be recalled: "Was hab ich denn geträumt? Ich glaube ich war schon tot" (ibid, p. 44). Therefore, there is another layer of narration that is accessible to the reader, but only partially to the protagonist. By implication, we cannot conclude whether, or to what extent, Else is conscious in the final scene. It is external ascriptions that allege her to be unconscious, whereas she claims to be conscious. It is possible that the mind processes the various stimuli, but if Else gained consciousness again she would, similar to the first dream, not be able to remember this information. The fact that Else is not able to move (for most of the scene) and not able to speak, reverts to typical attributions of female hysteria and hysterical paralysis.

The narration after Else's exhibition remains unreliable, but this is due to the unbelievable nature of the depicted bouts which are rooted in the psyche. Although the suspicion is legitimate and the author's conception of the psyche matters, the narration does not suggest that Else is feigning; rather, it depicts the complex nature of *hysterical* bouts. The search for the cause is "ein zu weites Feld" (*Effi Briest*, C. 36, p. 296) and cannot be determined based on the text alone.

Both female protagonists are young and pushed into adulthood through life-changing decisions made by their parents; in the course of their stories they try to cope with their new situations, but in the end both of them are dead. It is due to the idiosyncratic

¹ In fact, as Aurnhammer unveils in his article, reality and dreams merge in the course of the text and Else herself cannot distinguish them (Aurnhammer 1983, pp. 503-8).

narrations that one becomes suspicious and looks for indications of a hidden meaning. The general gaps in *Effi Briest* make the narration appear unreliable or at least ambiguous. The narrative of disease is taken up again and again, loosely arranged with long passages in between, thus making it more a persistent theme. Due to this casualness of the recurring theme and the fact that Effi is feigning illness in Berlin, her real disease and her sudden death seem implausible. Only on closer inspection is the causal relation clear and reveals the social critique. The narration does not include unreliable elements, rather it is a subtle representation of society's pressure and its fatal implications.

In *Fräulein Else* the depiction of the protagonist after her nervous breakdown is riddled with unreliable elements regarding Else as unconscious. This notion is nourished by the other characters who believe Else to be unconscious and state that. Else herself claims otherwise, but she cannot move and is not able to speak even when she tries to. The great difficulty of the text is that from a certain point onwards we cannot distinguish between reality and dream, because Else herself cannot tell them apart anymore. As the first dream shows, the narration includes more than is accessible to Else's conscious mind. Thus, even the clear thoughts in her *unconscious* state might appear as conscious thoughts, but may be dream sequences or thoughts triggered by her surroundings. For all we know, they might not be accessible to Else later. Although the sudden ability to move her hand is incredible, the whole representation is just a mirror of reality; for the medical world still struggles with this renamed but not less mysterious disease and the scholarly world is torn between believing and denying.

It is the incredibility that all patients of such *hysterical bouts* are confronted with and have to fight against. Despite it seeming incredible, one, even from a modern point of view, has to accept the fact that their actions are not based on their free will, but are psychologically triggered.

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