

## History: Re-written, Revised or Revisited in Gunter Grass's *Crabwalk*

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### Abstract:

*The paper aims at exploring the German guilt to the acknowledgement of German war suffering in Gunter Grass Crabwalk who is Germany's greatest post war voice. Set within the context of miseries of East Prussian Germans by revisiting the tragedy and forming another collective consciousness of the German historical memory, from perpetrators to victims, Grass poses his nationalistic stance by re positioning the German's identity and re affirming that past has strong ties with the present. The study highlights Crabwalk as depicting the consequences of perpetual suppression where reality becomes a changing entity as discussed by Grass.*

**Key words:** German guilt, collective consciousness, German identity, history

...the History we Germans have repeatedly mucked up is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising...But now, after all, we Germans have come up with expressions to help us deal with the past: we are to atone for it, come to terms with it, go through a grieving process." (Crabwalk 122)

Gunter Grass is Germany's greatest post war writer and country's most political and creative voice that has never ceased to warn that the Nazi's brown ideology remains a perpetual

danger to the German land. Grass's novel *Crabwalk* chronicles and explores the terrible sufferings inflicted on East Prussian Germans who fled or were driven from their homeland during World War II. Danzig of 1945 is the region from where Grass voices his stance with poignancy and breaks the taboo of post war historians and writers of Eastern and Western Germany. He attempts to re write history with a better understanding that re vises the German historical memory and conception for the German masses and for this he revisits the happenings of past that engrave the plight of German land upon the pages of history (Mason 63). Grass, through his fiction, dwells upon the fact the Germans need to refresh their memories so that they do not live a life of oblivion as far as their nationalistic consciousness is concerned. He probes into the collective guilt of Germans and becomes their voice, no doubt bitter and ironical in tone. Grass's *Crabwalk* is a docu novella that chronicles a broader German tragic event by revisiting and revising it. Crabs as the title symbolizes are scavengers, drawn to carrion or, as Paul in the novel puts it, '*the scents and similar exudations of history*' (*Crabwalk*)

In *Crabwalk*, Grass seeks to reclaim the topic of German's wartime sufferings by projecting Germans not as perpetrators but victims. He addresses two other long-buried wartime memories, that of the Germans who were expelled from or fled territories once under Nazi occupation and, more specifically, the sinking by a Soviet submarine of a German ship carrying thousands of German refugees. He writes "...but still it seems as though nothing can stop the *Titanic*, as if the *Wilhelm Gustloff* had never existed, as if there were no room for another maritime disaster, as if only the victims of the *Titanic* could be remembered, not those of the *Gustloff*" (*Crabwalk* 63). The story of *Crabwalk* therefore is a symbol of broader tragedy that chronicles the time of 1945 and 1946 when the Germans were driven out of the lands like Banat and Bohemia where they were settled and were living since centuries. It was also

the time period when Germany had to lose a quarter of its territory (Anderson 24).

As always, though, Grass is most interested in the impact of a distant memory on attitudes by warning particularly a German reader of the dangers posed by consciously repressed memory. “*The only way writing after Auschwitz, poetry or prose, could proceed was by becoming memory and preventing the past from coming to an end.*” says Grass (“Social Mnemonics of Style: A Comparative study of Günter Grass' novella *Crabwalk* and the Vietnam Veterans Memori / Jaroslava Gajdosova”). *Tin Drum*, first part of Grass's Danzig Trilogy explores the life of Germans before the war, during it and after it and relates how quality of life changes as time affected by war moves on. *Crabwalk* just like *Tin Drum* points to the limits of the premise of guilt and it calls attention of German left, literary, intellectual, and political, to the limits of its own memory which excluded those Germans who suffered during the war. This exclusion was not without consequences. Many expelled Germans considered themselves the last victims of Hitler and did not participate on the revision of Germany's war past in the sixties. Not only they ignored their Nazi affiliations they did not even view them as morally doubtful. In their political and cultural seclusions, the expelled Germans fostered the memory of an undifferentiated victimization of Germans - the memory which erased the boundaries between Nazis and their opponents. Grass' novella draws attention to the effects of this collective memory on today's generation of young Germans for whom guilt is an obscure and a detached concept. This then functions as a prominent factor as to why Grass aimed at re visiting German history in the first place. It says in the novel “...there are fewer and fewer witnesses to the disaster...this time only two hundred had come which caused Mother to whisper to me... “Soon none of us will be alive anymore, only you...” (Crabwalk 100).

Grass believes that Germany's past cannot be separated from its present. For decades, Grass has dealt extensively with German war past and has been an outspoken proponent of the thesis about German guilt. Grass says, "Never...should his generation have kept silent about such misery, merely because its own sense of guilt was so overwhelming..." (*Crabwalk* 103). However, in *Crabwalk*, Grass also returns to a war past in order to address the theme of German war suffering. Naval disaster, assassination, death, betrayal, hate-filled chat-rooms – all feature in *Crabwalk*, a clever interpretation of a historical event of sixty years ago. *Crabwalk* tells the story of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, a Nazi cruise ship refitted for war time service, torpedoed by a Russian submarine while carrying escaping German refugees, a platoon of submarine trainees and many injured servicemen and women. Grass reiterates the memories of an old woman who survived the sinking of a ship that toward the end of war transported German refugees from Polish territories. Woman's story is framed with the interpretations of her son, a leftist journalist and a former follower of the Students' Movement who has consistently refused to take his mother's memories public. By intertwining these two contradictory discourses - one that recalls war as a period of German suffering and the other that de-legitimizes those memories by highlighting the suffering that Germans inflicted upon other people – Grass opens up a dialogue between two mnemonic communities that for decades have stood in a stark opposition to each other.

Grass is often referred to as Germany's conscience because of his persistent agitation over what he considers the unfinished business of de-Nazification as well as other strong national level causes. The novel though is not purely about the portrayal of Germans as victims as stated above; it is about the consequences of suppression; an unwillingness to confront these happenings from a generation of Germans which chose to black out the Nazi past, who begat a generation which threatened to

address the issue did not attempt to do so. His attack on historical suppression is heavily focused on the 1960's generation, whose demand for truth he sees as only partial. They were content with finger-pointing and scapegoating and, as such, made no attempt to acknowledge the immense suffering endured by their civilian parents during the war, choosing instead to ignore it. As treaties with Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were signed in the 1970s, the better relations that these represented made it more difficult to discuss what happened to German civilians in Eastern Europe (Bloomster 75).

This shift, therefore, in the leftist memory of war, from the emphasis of German guilt to the acknowledgement of German war suffering, is in *Crabwalk* facilitated by the use of irony which is the novella's main narrative trope. Irony, which Hayden White characterizes as the most assimilative trope, shows a tentative mode of inclusion of the narrative of suffering in the leftist discourse where those memories were disregarded, or not permitted at all. Generally, ambivalence in artworks has a mnemonic function. This functional perspective reveals an analogy between the ironic tropes in Grass' novella that addresses the causes that, for decades, have divided the collective memories of both societies. German war past and the collective memory about it is undoubtedly a more complex issue and its moral weight raises legitimate concerns that the reiterations of war past from the perspective of German suffering may reinforce a contested legacy of German inability to mourn or that they may blur the boundaries between Jewish and German victims of war.

The story of *Crabwalk* is told from the view of three generations. The year is 1996 and the narrator is a journalist by the name of Paul Pokriefke, in his 50s in West Germany, who is urged by his mother, a survivor of the tragedy to write about the maritime disaster before it is too late. As is usually the case in Gunter Grass novels, Grass personalizes the

history. In the novel, a woman named Tulla gives birth to the novel's narrator Paul after she has been moved from the sinking ship to a rescue boat. The narrator himself was supposedly born on the night of the sinking, after his mother had been rescued. However, he suspects that she is not being entirely truthful as Grass considers the selectivity and manipulative elements of memory. Paul has in fact been commissioned by Grass to write a report on the sinking and its aftermath. Research for the story though proves frustrating as Paul finds that he cannot approach the question head on but must sidle round it to make any headway. The irony is that the best material is from neo-Nazi websites. This is because the ship was named after an NSDAP *Landesgruppenleiter* in Switzerland, who was murdered in 1936 by a Jewish medical student and was made a martyr to the Nazi cause. As such, they can claim the sinking was a huge injustice, precisely because other generations choose not to. Even worse, Paul suspects that one of the key websites has his estranged son as the webmaster. Essentially, the mother, running out of patience with her son, has turned her attentions to her grandson to get the job done and he has responded. Here we return to the criticism of the 1960s generation where Paul represents its impotence, further suppressing events with the consequence that the next generation reacts in some cases by becoming neo-Nazis.

But the more than four thousand infants, children and youths for whom no survival was possible were not filmed...they remain and will remain an abstract number, like all the other numbers in the thousands, hundred thousands, millions...what does it matter? In statistics, what disappears behind rows of numbers is death" (Crabwalk 145).

Grass' concern is that if these miseries are/were not properly aired which is the point where virtual reality projects relative truth, there is immense political and nationalistic

damage caused by this suppression of reality as this injustice amounts to be mightier than the actual misery.

Grass believes that the Germans have never got to grips with Nazism and its aftermath. Instead of portraying the Nazis simply as maniacs which is what Grass believes has happened in the post war period, *Crabwalk* tries to explain that the Nazis came to power legally and that there was a social element to their policies, most notably the fact that the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was initially a *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength Through Joy) ship, providing a leisure experience for German workers and was truly a 'classless ship'. As Grass himself says to Paul, "...for years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence, with the result that they abandoned the topic to the right wing. This failure was staggering" (*Crabwalk* 103).

When Grass writes his version of history in *Crabwalk*, he re visits, re vises and re writes the German history. According to Hayden White, who is a cultural historian, while writing history, the writer must be well aware of the human working of imagination or the "coloring of imagination" as the Romantic school of thought called it. This addition of a writers fancy and imagination into the realistic historical events adds a heightened subjectivity to the narrative. White states in his work *Metahistory* that a historian takes events from past that have already happened and makes a story out of them ( White 25). Moreover, imagination allows the events to move beyond being unintelligible or meaningless. Grass in *Crabwalk* does the same; he fits into what White calls a historian.

Grass's challenge to historians to offer multifarious perspectives of the past by overtly employing the imagination to fill in the blank spaces, a task he assumes for himself by inventing "more exact facts" than the one usually stressed, is also a call to acknowledge and promote the literary nature of historiography... (Anderson 25).

With Grass what is irretrievably lost is the *reality* of the past event but not the past itself. The past leaves the trace

which represents it but not in the sense of *Vorstellung*, of a direct representation in mind, but in an indirect sense of *Vertretung*, as a trace which takes place of the past but which is not identical with it. According to Hayden White, the meaning of the past is encoded in a particular trope which we choose to tell the story. In his analysis of the historical narratives White identifies four tropes in which historical accounts are presented - metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony - and argues that each trope has an explicitly representative function. According to White's typology, metaphor is re-presentational, metonymy is reductionist, synecdoche is integrative, and irony is negational) In other words, it is no longer only the epistemology of the event, such as the collection of the historical facts, but the *tone* of the narrative, the chosen figure, which opens up or closes our access to the past (White 29).

*Crabwalk* is often called as docu-novella as in this fictional work, Grass has attempted to amalgamate both fact and fiction and mixed past with the present effectively. The fictional narrator, with Grass, continues to describe the factual events for example the narrator relates "...the total number of people on board...remain uncertain for many decades...it was somewhere between 6,600 and 10,600" (*Crabwalk* 162). According to Grass himself, fiction has a superior place when it comes to the depiction of history because the very fictive mode of fiction contains in it the multiplicity of perspectives. With Grass, the portrayal of history or the re writing of history is accurate just like the historical events found in history books. He invites his readers to confront and digest reality grounded in fiction. Grass asserts that fiction has the potential to overtake and clarify the otherwise meaningless and unintelligible events of past. Grass never allows the historical sections of the book to be dry and impersonal but constantly brings the events into the present by showing how his present-day characters are affected by them. The narrative is passionate and personal because the main characters feel so



deeply about the events of sixty years ago and act out their own responses with devastating effect. The work hovers in that realm between fact and fiction acts as a revealing light on German society, east and west, since the war.

*Crabwalk* is writer's construction and an artifact. It is a kind of contemporary metafiction which is a response and contribution to the idea that history or reality is provisional and no longer a world based on fundamental truths. Grass does not believe in the absolute nature of history or past as it is a matter of perspectives. Grass's fiction thus poses question about the relation between fiction and reality. Grass depicts Germans on the basis of the literary information that he has as well as the official documentation of that time. Not all of his characters are fictional. In fact, historical figures in *Crabwalk* include for example David Frankfurter, a Jew who assassinated Gustloff in Davos in 1936 while fictional characters include Tulla Pofriefke, her son Paul and his son Konny. Grass uses montage and baroque technique to write history. His version of German historical event in *Crabwalk* is not round by predicable, complicated and elaborate in its shape. He presents multiple perspectives of reality just like a cube and this is how truth becomes relative from generation to generation.

Grass aims at warning the contemporary readers against reoccurrences by consciously drawing parallels between Seventeenth and Twentieth Century Germany. "Grass's history is a critique of a historiography that diverts attention from the personal needs from the maintenance of the privileges of certain power elites" (Anderson 36). What makes Grass' text sociologically interesting is that while plotting his story Grass conveys meanings which are latently present in the structures of the German leftist memory but not yet articulated.

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