GERM03100 – Masterpieces of German Literature in English Translation

Assignment 5 – Midterm Paper

**Assignment 5 - Midterm Paper.** Discuss some of the narrative elements in 'Signalman Thiel' that make the story representative of the genre of Naturalism. For example, what role do detailed descriptions play in suggesting how social conditions, heredity, and the environment influence or shape human character? You may want to explore your ideas about Hauptmann’s descriptions in order to answer the question about whether social conditions, heredity, and the environment lead Thiel to commit his murderous acts or whether he as an “individual” is solely responsible.

Please construct your submission well, and make sure that it is grammatically correct. Three paragraphs are the minimum, but your submission can be as long as you wish in order to explore your ideas/your argument.

See the Assignment5\_8\_WritingScale.pdf for grading criteria.

This assignment must be typed and submitted electronically in MS Word (.doc or .docx) format. The file must be named in the following format: *Lastname\_Assignment5.doc*. Submit your completed document to *Assignment 5*, listed on the *Modules* and *Assignments* pages, as a file attachment.

*Signalman Thiel* is a famous naturalist novel in which signalman Theil is first depicted as a hardworking and persistent Christian. He attends church as often as he can. After the death of his first wife, however, his life steadily spirals out of control, leading him down a dark and resentful path. At this point, a strong parallel can be drawn between *Signalman Thiel* and the biblical story, *Cain and Abel*, wherein despite Cain’s efforts to please God, he was not rewarded, became resentful, and ultimately was led down a murderous path. Notably, however, while *Cain and Abel* includes moral judgments, *Signalman Thiel* is quite lacking in this regard.

This complete lack of moral judgment and strictly objective narration is what makes *Signalman Thiel* a naturalist novel. Naturalism and other sub-genres of realism began to take root at about the same time as socialist thought and observation of class struggles were becoming popular in academic and literary circles. While naturalism does point out class struggles, it does not attempt to make moral judgments, favoring a strictly objective point-of-view In this way, all moral decisions are left to the reader.

This strictly objective point-of-view makes for a quite interesting narrative, however. While reading, it can feel like watching someone’s life play out before your eyes. Importantly, the narrator nor the reader has any influence on what the characters do. Contrasting a more traditional novel with a naturalist one is like comparing scripted television to a security camera feed. Within a scripted television show, only the important details are included and are given focus, while security cameras show everything and provide a very objective lens in which to view the world.

Keeping with the security feed analogy, if a security guard were to witness a murder over the live feed, certainly he would make a moral judgment and handle the situation accordingly. Therefore, as a security guard, the reader is left to make a moral decision regarding whether or not Thiel was individually responsible for the murders.

To answer this moral question, there are a number of factors that must be taken into account that accumulated upon each other leading up to the murders. Surely, not all of them he can be fully accountable for. Nobody can control their heredity or any environmental factors, but the question remains: was there anything that signalman Thiel could have done to put a stop to the downward spiral of his life?

Well, just as Cain could have made better sacrifices to please God, Thiel could have been less rash in his second marriage decision. Even still, if free will truly does exist, then Thiel could have taken his first son and left Lene before things got out of hand. Theil could have communicated better with Lene rather than simply allowing her to verbally abuse him and his son. There are an endless number of things Theil could have done differently to put a damper on things, but he chose to just take the nagging and lectures. He chose to speak out less and less. And, ultimately, in a fit of rage, he chose to murder Lene and her son. Therefore, despite the lack of moral judgments made by Hauptman, moral decisions can still be made, and responsibility must still be enforced.