
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Self-portrayal of Günter Grass in “The Tin Drum”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines German postmodern writer Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* as an autobiography in which the writer blends history with personal narrative, merging the boundaries of fiction and history. The main purpose of the study is to bring out the use of autobiographical elements to portray truth, fantasy, realism, memory and historical discourse as seen through the eyes of the protagonist Oskar Matzerath. This research paper is based on textual analysis using a qualitative approach, drawing on postmodern literary theories. Gunter Grass uses narration as a memoir and critique of the Second World War, suggesting how historical events are remembered. This research has implications for ESL, EFL students and teachers.

KEYWORDS

Self-Portrayal, metafiction, postmodernism, memory, war trauma

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1. Introduction

Günter Grass's representation of postwar Germany in *Die Blechtrommel / The Tin Drum* (1959) challenges the conventions of postmodern fiction by questioning the nature of truth and fiction. Although many European writers have woven history into their novels, Gunter Grass, the postwar German author, seems to challenge traditional historical narratives by presenting the past through fragmented, subjective, and self-conscious storytelling. In this paper, the researcher examines the author's use of the literary technique of historical metafiction, with an unusual blend of fantasy, memory, and historical reality, to give his work a lifelike appeal. This research work also draws parallels between the world as seen through the lens of Oskar Matzerath and the life of young Grass himself. The novel is set in post-war Germany, where the author explores themes such as ideology, collective trauma, and individual experience and remembrance through historical narration.

The protagonist Oscar Matzerath tells the story from his incarceration in a mental institution, where, [Bruno Munsterberg](#) helps him keep a memoir by giving him a pen and paper. However, before Oskar begins to write, he considers a few possibilities for his narration, which cast doubt on the authenticity of his story. We also feel Bruno is watching Oskar through a peephole which represents the authoritarian grip of the state. The autobiographical elements from Grass's life, like wartime adolescence, echo throughout his protagonist's life.

Instead of presenting historical events in a verifiable and authoritarian style Grass ambulates memory and history through interpretation, omission and narrative design. *The Tin Drum* propagates the idea that history is shaped by memory, perspective, ideology, and narrative construction rather than being fixed and transparent. This research examines autobiographical strains and elements of historiographic metafiction in the novel's discourse.

The significance of this study stems from understanding literary text as an intersection of personal and collective history. It highlights those dimensions of history which are often neglected by conventional historical memoirs such as collective guilt,

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post-war trauma, identity and fragmented memory of subjective experience. By examining Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* as a historical metafiction, this research highlights the narrative as a constructive and contested representation of facts, truth and memory against a backdrop of the Second World War.

Research Question

The study seeks to answer the following question:

Is Oskar a mirror image of Grass himself in terms of memory, trauma, and postwar German identity?

2. Review of Related literature

A large number of research studies have contributed to connecting Grass's narrative strategies with other theories and insights into autobiographical traces. Ross, Robert L. (2022) explored the setting of the novel, finding reflections of two cities from the author's life from 1920 to 1950.

"the cities of Danzig (now Gdansk) and Düsseldorf (industrial hub) serve as a backdrop for the early years of Oskar Matzerath, mirroring Grass's own childhood in a bustling port city showcasing resilience amid ruins. Malchow (2021) describes "the tin drum" as a study of German corporeal memory ,trauma , guilt and art. The frame work of this novel appears to be a **subjective narrative** aligning closely with historiographic metafiction treating " history as narratively produced rather than transparently recovered.

This unreliable narration, and symbolic distortion represented through Roskolnikov and Hans Castorp and Oskar Bronski-Matzerath transforms the plot beyond probability into a believable picaresque novel." **Peter Arnds (2006)** . Recent discussions of *The Tin Drum* also continue to emphasize the novel's **myth and symbolic transformation**. O'Donoghue's approach helps explain the novel's absurdity and surrealism.

Historiographic Metafiction is a literary device in postmodern novels associated with Linda Hutcheon, where the existence of history is not denied but rather revealed through textual and interpretive forms. Since this novel was written in the context of WWII , it is believed to be a response to silence, repression.

Through the lens of historiographic metafiction, this research highlights the novel's role in challenging official historical discourse and exposing the instability of memory, truth, and representation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative literary research methodology**, specifically using **close textual , analysis and thematic interpretation**. This paper aims to examine how *The Tin Drum* represents postwar German historical discourse in narrative form by focusing on the language, structure, and symbolism of the novel

4. Discussion

Autobiographical elements

Oskar is a fictionalized consciousness through which Grass threads autobiographical history rather than reproducing it literally. Autobiographical elements correspond closely to places, memories and historical events that the Gunter Grass experienced in his childhood.

a) Place (Setting): The city of Danzig

The first autobiographical element is the use of his birthplace, the city of Danzig (now Gdańsk), as a background in *The Tin Drum*. This city is identified in 2 other works, *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*, thus completing the "Danzig Trilogy" (Britannica). This novel draws on Grass's wartime experience as he grew up under British rule. Britannica notes that *The Tin Drum* "imaginatively distorts and exaggerates his personal experiences," especially the Polish-German world of Danzig, the wartime decline, and postwar Germany.

b) Perception (Theme): Identical experiences

Oskar Matzerath is not a direct self-portrait

But he functions as a distorted autobiographical surrogate. Oskar is not Grass — but he carries Grass-like historical experience. *Tin Drum* includes Oskar Matzerath's experiences, reflecting Günter Grass's own life, particularly his controversial service in the Waffen-SS during World War II. This connection allows Grass to address personal and historical guilt. The novel incorporates

historical metafiction by blending real events, with fictional narratives, critiquing and reinterpreting history. This technique challenges traditional narratives by using magical realism to question reality and truth, thereby reshaping societal perceptions of history.

In the story, Oskar's grandfather, Joseph, escapes Eastern Europe to hide from the police and ends up in Buffalo, New York, "filthy rich and lonely." A lot of young Germans after WW2 fled to the US to follow their American dream.

c) Symbolism

Grass explores themes of identity crisis and memory through Oskar, who experiences deep alienation and struggles with his identity. This reflects Grass's own introspection and the broader existential questions faced by post-war Germany. *When little Oskar is three years old, we'll give him a tin drum. Oskar uses the drum for shattering glass, a strong reference to the destructive power.* The novel's narrative is interwoven with symbolic elements, such as the tin drum itself, which represents both a connection to childhood innocence and a tool for confronting and reshaping historical narratives. It also serves as a universal exploration of the human condition.

d) Comparison with other works

The style of tin drum can correspond to *Peeling the onion*, *Cat and mouse*, and *Dog Years*, returning to the same biographical core with shared elements like war memory, unstable recollection, and childhood.

Metafiction

One of the most important features of *The Tin Drum* is its refusal to separate fiction from history in any simple way. The novel is deeply embedded in real historical events, the transformation of Danzig, and the violence of World War II. Yet these events are not presented through a detached historical lens. Instead, they are filtered through the strange and unstable consciousness of Oskar Matzerath.

a) Narrative Perspective:

The novel is a manifestation of Self-conscious storytelling and of the question of whether history is "discovered" or "written". Oskar's narration in *The Tin Drum* and Grass demonstrates that history, as an embodiment of private and public historical experience, is remembered in fragmented ways. The protagonist point of view is a critique of the war and nationalistic ideology. The strength of the novel lies in the fact that Grass does not use historical events as mere background; rather, he entangles them with Oskar's personal relationships, life, and psychological development.

b) Absurd Fantasy and Critique

In this narrative, Oskar Matzerath stopped growing beyond the age of three and he had an obsessive attachment to the tin drum which he got as a toy when he was three. This was a deliberate choice as Oskar beating of the tin drum not only echoes the drums of war but the aggression that led to the brutal violence faced by people. In fact the writer suggests that Oskar refused to grow psychologically when he found out the existence of violence "*My intention was not only to stop growing, but to be the greatest of all time.*" clearly indicating his rejection of society

c). Identity, Trauma, and Memory

Grass used historical metafiction to observe and comment on the socio-political landscape. He personified post-war German era as "The Black Cook" comparing it to "*a witchlike figure from a children's rhyme*" This quote is a direct reference to the famous *Hansel and Gretel* from *brothers Grimms fairytales* which coincidentally was also set in *The black forest of Germany*. This use of fantasy is paired with realistic storytelling, exposing the irrationality of historical records.

The seriousness of overwhelming mass guilt in post-war Germany endorses the grass style. Thus, the tin drum shifts between the chaotic world of Oskar, where he attempts to drown his guilt in the noise of relentless drumbeats and the official discourse of history. Recollection of memory in bits and fragments reveals the instability of events in twentieth-century Europe. This novel is a parable that suggests our understanding of history is incomplete and contested, especially in light of the violence and moral collapse of the past. So we see the protagonist struggling to recollect his traumatic past, reflecting upon his memory, casting a doubt on the authenticity and authority of that narrative presented by Oskar from the mental asylum. This connection is explored in Grass's memoir "*Peeling the Onion*," where he reflects on his past and its influence on his writing

5. Conclusion

The red and white tin drum represents human potential for good and evil. Oscar, when he found out the implications of war, refused to develop new ideas for his own further development, and this setting draws parallels to Grass's childhood, when he observed the concept of fascism in the WW2-era Germany.

Heather O'Donoghue (2022) explores how Grass reworks older mythic structures in *The Tin Drum* by mixing documentary history with mythic, fantastic, or self-consciously literary forms.

Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* is a powerful example of historiographic metafiction because it combines personal narrative, historical reality, and metafictional self-awareness in ways that challenge conventional ideas of truth and memory. Through the unreliable voice of Oskar Matzerath, the novel destabilizes official history. It reveals the extent to which both personal memory and public narratives are shaped by construction, interpretation, and trauma.

By blending absurdity with historical seriousness, Grass creates a literary form capable of confronting the complexities of postwar German identity and collective memory. Rather than presenting history as fixed and objective, *The Tin Drum* exposes it as fragmented, contested, and inseparable from the act of storytelling. The novel therefore, remains an important text for understanding not only postmodern fiction but also the ethical and political challenges of remembering history.

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