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# New motherhood and eugenics in German women's political and popular fiction around 1900

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## Abstract

Fictional texts have long functioned as a testing ground for new impulses in society. At the turn of the twentieth century many German feminists were demanding greater influence for women in public life not despite but because of their role as mothers. At the same time writers, scientists and activists from across the political spectrum were fascinated by eugenics, seeing this new 'science' as the answer to many social ills. Hopes and remedies for the 'new generation', formed within the paradigm of evolutionary biology and a growing faith in science, were thus the focus of much public discourse and the impetus for a range of well-documented social movements. These ideas were also shaping a new direction for prominent women writers of the day, such as Ilse Frapan and Clara Viebig. Here I examine two novels which exemplify the trend and consider the extent of these writers' involvement with the circles of influence which were helping to spread eugenic ideas in the German-speaking world around 1900.

## KEYWORDS

1900, eugenics, feminism, Germany, Monism, motherhood, women writers

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century many German feminists were demanding greater influence for women in public life not despite but because of their role as mothers. At the same time writers, scientists and activists from across the political spectrum were fascinated by eugenics, seeing this new 'science' as the answer to many social ills. Hopes and remedies for the 'new generation', formed within the paradigm of evolutionary biology and a growing faith in science, were thus the focus of much public discourse and the impetus for a range of well-documented social movements. Academics within the expanding and diversifying higher education sector, fuelled by new money from industry and private capital, were undertaking ambitious research, and there was a burgeoning interest in the social sciences (Herrmann, 1990). The turn towards science was further spurred on by the competitive colonial ambitions and faith in technology modelled by Emperor Wilhelm II (1888–1918). Equally important stimuli were the increasingly visible social problems arising from Germany's rapid industrialisation. For those who rejected the political remedy for deprivation proposed by the largest and best organised Social Democratic Party in Europe, the notions of 'racial hygiene' and 'eugenics' seemed to offer a less controversial and scientific solution. Around 1900 'racial hygiene' (or 'social hygiene') generally referred to health-promoting measures to strengthen the whole population of a country rather than interventions in reproduction. 'Eugenics', by contrast, was more specifically focused on manipulating reproduction to perpetuate certain characteristics and deselect others to avoid 'degeneration', leading to wide-ranging discussions of voluntary and coercive birth control practices.

The hope that science would improve health and remedy social ills resonated in many areas outside the scientific community, for example in the 'life reform' movement which placed the responsibility with the individual, the socialist movement which sought a broader political response, and the feminist movement. All of these areas of change activism had their parallels in Britain and other industrialised nations, but the preoccupations and priorities were often placed differently in Germany. For example, as Allen (1991) has indicated, most German feminists emphasised 'social' or 'spiritual' motherhood as a campaigning pillar for better education and employment, rather than the British focus on suffrage. Women writers who sought to convince readers about the importance of genetics would appear, then, to contradict a feminist discourse which placed such emphasis on the nurturing power of women, as mothers, teachers and social workers, but here I shall consider two contrasting examples of writers who explored impulses from eugenic thought to situate their work within the wider contemporary discourse. Ilse Frapan was aligned with the more radical strand of German feminism and Clara Viebig was an established literary name, who kept herself apart from political association, feminist or otherwise. Today both are known predominantly to scholars of the women's movement, rather than to a general or literary reading public, yet at the time of publication, these authors enjoyed great popularity. Fictional texts have long functioned as a testing ground for new impulses in society and in the examples here by Frapan and Viebig one can see female figures starting to reconsider their role as mothers, carers and professionals in the light of new perspectives from eugenic science. Although chilling with the benefit of hindsight, in these novels eugenic ideas represented the potential to humanise medical science and to add scientific rationality to the moral imperative of alleviating deprivation. After examining a key text for each writer, I shall discuss the circles of influence in which they moved to show the overlap of scientific and cultural debates and the widespread impact of Germany's prominent eugenicists between 1890 and 1910.

## 2 | ILSE FRAPAN, *ARBEIT* (WORK)

Ilse Frapan (pseudonym for the Hamburg-born author Elise Levien, 1848–1908) wrote many successful collections of novellas, as well as poetry and three novels. Her focus was often on student life, psychological aspects of romantic relationships and Naturalist-inspired milieu studies. There are often passing references to alcoholism and hereditary illnesses, but it is in the novel *Arbeit* (Work, 1903) that Frapan brings all these elements together in a sustained critique of social norms and a search for solutions. Frapan's depiction of the Zürich medical faculty in *Arbeit* caused

a huge scandal at the time of its publication; more recently feminist scholars have valued the novel's compelling depiction of women's struggle for acceptance as students and doctors, and the tension between work and family life for married professionals (Bland, 2016; Kraft-Schwenk, 1985; Weiershausen, 2004; Woodford, 2014). Frapan addresses these themes via the central figure of Josefine Geyer, mother of four, who studies medicine in Zürich after her husband, a doctor himself, has been struck off and jailed for an unspecified crime. Financing her medical degree by hosting student lodgers, Josefine is indisputably the head of the household and about to qualify by the time Georges Geyer is released from prison. Despite family conflicts due to role reversal and ill health caused by overwork, Josefine establishes her medical practice and, in time, also becomes an authority on child protection.

The novel has expressionist features, such as its close focus on Josefine's state of mind as she deals with her husband's conviction, the death of her daughter, or struggles with exhaustion before exams, but there are also ecstatic passages recounting her feelings for the inspirational figure of Hovannessian, an Armenian student. These heightened emotions are juxtaposed with detailed authenticity in the scenes from student life, drawn from Frapan's own relocation to Zürich in 1892 to study botany and zoology. The novel's feminist premise of a wife and mother successfully training as a doctor to support her family and help others is coupled with perspectives on social inequality and an enthusiasm for eugenics shared by Naturalist authors of the day. Frapan's own involvement in the eugenic circles of Zürich will be discussed later.

The author's conviction about the importance of genetics is apparent in many aspects of the novel. Josefine displays behaviour and choices which are unconventional for her gender and class, but are presented as understandable results of the stubbornness, honesty, work ethic and determination she has inherited from her father. More specifically, Josefine's father mistrusted his son-in-law on account of his 'dreadful lower lip that lacked all shape and definition' (Frapan, 1903, 28),<sup>1</sup> a feature which, according to the pseudoscience of physiognomy founded by Zürich clergyman Johann Caspar Lavater, indicated a strong and compulsive libido, as well as a scornful, unkind personality (Lavater, 1772); Lavater's ideas had been revived by the criminological work of Cesare Lombroso in the 1890s. Georges Geyer's crimes are merely described as unspecified 'excesses' (Frapan, 1903, 293), but once out of prison he experiences 'lust and horror' (p. 303) in reaction to violent sexualised hallucinations, and he harasses the female servants and lodger. Josefine sees similar behavioural traits of mendaciousness and misogyny developing in her son, Hermann, who has inherited his father's slack lower lip. Hermann drinks stolen wine with friends as a teenager and later embraces the student drinking culture with enthusiasm (p. 385). On an unannounced visit to his student accommodation, Josefine witnesses a drunken and abusive scene between Hermann and a sex worker: when he denies it all the next day, she fears she is being confronted with 'moral insanity': 'My gift to life is poison, my donation to humanity this cankerous plague! [...] *Moral insanity!* This is *moral insanity!* At least we have a name for it!' (p. 382). 'Moral insanity', a term which Josefine uses in English, referred at the time to innate degeneration which caused otherwise rational and healthy individuals to lack all moral compass. Such people were effectively deemed to be 'born criminals', impervious to moral instruction or correction. Immoral behaviour and alcohol abuse are closely linked in the novel and presented as inherited tendencies. Upon Georges's release from prison, he is repeatedly shown asking for wine or brandy and his sexual deviancy appears linked to its consumption, until Josefine prevents him from drinking and doses him with sedatives.

Alcohol abuse appears as a source of violence and poverty in other fiction by Frapan, such as the novel *Die Betrogenen* (1898) and short prose such as 'Papi' in *Schreie. Novellen und Skizzen* (1901), but in *Arbeit* it is presented as a problem which also affects the middle classes. Josefine and her lodgers start a temperance society for grammar school boys, only to be confronted with the drunken antics of their fellow students. When Josefine objects to one of the men inflating the stomach of a cadaver in the dissection room, her female neighbour comments darkly: 'You could have saved your breath, he'll put that in the students' beer magazine, just you watch. You shouldn't take these things so seriously. The rogue has come straight from morning drinks at the inn. That will only create bad blood towards us females. Please don't do it again' (Frapan, 1903, 67). Seemingly, the price of women being tolerated in the laboratory was that they did not question the liberties taken by their male colleagues.

Common to many eugenic discourses was a faith in science as the key to improving future generations. In this novel, however, Frapan uses the perspective of a female doctor to criticise male-dominated science and the profession of medicine from within, uncovering the damaging power dynamics played out in hospitals where the working-class patients (or their remains) are treated as mere visual aids, with little respect for their feelings or bodies. Josefine ponders the underlying structural problems of occupational or poverty-related illness, reflecting that the money spent on new hospitals, equipment and salaries could be used to improve the patients' living and working conditions. Instead, she sees working-class patients being patched up and returned to the same miserable and ultimately fatal conditions, whilst some of the chronically ill are subjected to repeated operations as medical guinea pigs (Frapan, 1903, 136). Despite the indignant reaction of the male medical establishment to the novel, this is more of a class-based than a gendered critique: female students are equally at risk of losing sight of the power relations inherent in medicine (p. 142) and Josefine finds her male student lodgers to be supportive 'comrades who were always there to willingly push her forwards' (p. 76).

After qualifying as a doctor, Josefine starts a practice for working-class patients, winning the trust of working women with her compassion and generosity and she invokes Monism (the unity of physical and spiritual being) as the foundation of her understanding for them (Frapan, 1903, 210). Josefine's focus eventually moves towards saving abused children, in an age when children's rights were barely recognised; she is inspired to do this by a man who is bed-ridden and paralysed, thus indicating the potential contribution of the chronically ill. The eugenic convictions of Frapan's protagonist thus form part of a worldview which is also shaped by compassionate socialism and feminism.

### 3 | CLARA VIEBIG, *EINER MUTTER SOHN* (A MOTHER'S SON)

An example of how the eugenics discourse found its way into popular literature which was not explicitly concerned with science is provided by the work of best-selling author Clara Viebig (1860–1952). As I have discussed in earlier work, Émile Zola had served as Viebig's writing model since 1897, inspiring her to depict the lives of the rural poor in a hard-hitting Naturalist style, tempered by the inclusion of dialect, folk customs and topography found in the contemporary fashion for regional writing (*Heimatkunst*) (Bland, 2012). Unlike Frapan, or indeed Zola, Viebig does not attempt to address the causes of poverty, but simply presents it as a feature of life's complexity. Raised as a Protestant and with a Jewish husband, Viebig's emphasis on the power of nature and frequent criticism of Catholicism indicate her proximity to free thought: the morality and worldview which her texts suggest are pantheistic. An example of this is the short story 'Das Miseräbelchen' ('The Poor Little Wretch', 1897), which features the child of an impoverished labourer, disabled from birth: 'Among the blossom sat the poor little wretch, a discordant note in creation, a mockery of jubilant nature' (Viebig, [1897] 1998, 165). The child's death, which occurs during a huge thunderstorm after a week of brooding heat, is presented as nature righting the balance by sweeping away an unviable form of life. Elsewhere Viebig celebrates the vigorous maternal instinct of rural women and this is also the backdrop to her adoption novel *Einer Mutter Sohn* (*A Mother's Son*, [1906] 1925) which can be read as a response to the contemporary debate about environment and heredity, highlighted by a series of contrasts in location, class and ethnicity.

The novel centres on Käte and Paul Schlieben, a childless bourgeois couple from Berlin, who adopt the baby of a poor widow from the remote Belgian upland region of Hautes Fagnes (in German, Hohes Venn). In effect, however, they buy him, persuading the mother to give him up for a sum which will feed and clothe her older children for years. The mother, maddened by the stark choice, throws her log-splitting axe at the wealthy couple as they leave her croft, a moment of violence which so disturbs Käte Schlieben that she resolves never to tell the boy about his biological family.

A motif of health and strength, associated with the harsh climate and wild landscape of the Venn runs throughout the novel. The couple are drawn to the baby boy because of his 'clear gaze', 'strong fists', and apparently 'hearty constitution' (Viebig, 1925, 38) but anxiously interrogate the village mayor about the deceased father's health, drinking habits and employment. Back in Berlin, the Schliebens rename the child from Jean-Pierre to

Wolfgang and are initially delighted in his strength and energy. As he grows older, however, Wolfgang chafes at the restrictions of his bourgeois Protestant upbringing, preferring working-class playmates, wild outdoor games, simple food and Catholicism. Later, when he comes home drunk one night, Käte immediately fears an inherited tendency towards alcoholism, imagining 'a rural tavern of a type she had never seen—rough fellows sitting around a wooden table ... oh, there was his father, and his grandfather, all of his ancestors were sitting there!' (p. 256). The more Käte tries to restrict and remodel her son, the further she drives him away. Hearing rumours of his illegitimacy, Wolfgang suffers an identity crisis and falls ill with a heart condition. Käte finally relents and tells him the whole story during an unsuccessful convalescence trip to Italy.

Using a personalised narrative perspective which moves between characters allows Viebig to introduce some ambivalence to the text: tastes in food and company, which Käte interprets as a sign of Wolfgang's 'peasant' genes, appear from the son's perspective as straightforward pleasures, whilst the adoptive father, Paul, sees his son's behaviour as normal for an adolescent boy. Further elements of ambiguity are the benefit of the adoption (to both child and parents) and the causes of the son's fatal heart condition. Physically, his weak heart resulted from scarlet fever as a young adolescent, but psychological factors such as his rebellion against the bourgeois milieu of his adoptive parents and his obsessive desire to know more about his origins are shown to weigh more heavily. The upbringing by a Protestant German couple in a wealthy Berlin suburb lays only a fragile veneer over genes selected by the harsh environment of the Belgian uplands and the tough physical labour that shaped Wolfgang's forebears. To underline this message, Wolfgang is shown to be a child of nature who seeks refuge in the woods and is always powerfully drawn to the sun. Indeed, at several decisive moments in the text the figures turn towards the sun, with Käte finally telling Wolfgang the story of his adoption in the face of 'the same huge red sun, which she had once seen sinking below the waves of the wild Venn' (Viebig, 1925, 338) and ultimately it shines on Wolfgang's deathbed as the Schliebens 'with one voice whispered in deep remorse "Forgive us our sin!"' (p. 347). The emphasis on nature and faith in the restorative power of the sun resonates with the life reform movement. The premise of the text that humans—like animals—are adapted to a particular location and circumstances, which determine their ethical and psychological state as well as their physical beings, is also consistent with a Monist position. Transplanting the child resulted in a misalignment of environment and inherited characteristics which had devastating consequences, hence the Schliebens' request for forgiveness (from whom is not clear).

Although *Einer Mutter Sohn* was reprinted in 1925 and serialised in 1932, it was not as successful as much of Viebig's other work. Albert Soergel, a contemporary critic normally positively disposed to her writing, called it a 'caricature of the laws of heredity', and bemoaned the 'tasteless' episodes which show the 'brute passions' and 'commonness' of Wolfgang's 'lowly origins' (Soergel, 1911, 253). There are certainly too many of these examples, and Viebig's attempt to elicit the reader's sympathy for all the figures whilst also condemning the Schliebens' actions is laboured and wearisome. However, the novel does start powerfully, with brutal details revealing the cultural chasm between the urban bourgeoisie and the rural poor, and the hypocrisy at the root of middle-class charity. The novel deals with issues that informed much of the eugenic debate: concerns about alcohol, and the 'nervous exhaustion' of bourgeois city-dwellers who fear the vigorous and rapidly expanding poorer classes are presented as understandable preoccupations of middle-class life. Although there are no explicit references to Monism, the novel's implication that people must be attuned to their environment to thrive is clearly influenced by Ernst Haeckel's ideas, discussed below. *Einer Mutter Sohn* also deals with the legal barriers, stigma and class prejudice surrounding adoption in this era.

#### 4 | MATERNALISM AND EUGENIC THOUGHT IN A FEMINIST CONTEXT

Frapan and Viebig, although approaching their material from different points on the political and feminist spectrums, both tackled the pitfalls and struggles of parenting at a time when motherhood was idealised for a variety

of reasons. In political terms, Germany's fears of encirclement led to a focus on the size and strength of the population for military purposes, which underlay many public health campaigns. Statistical evidence that middle-class fertility was in decline provoked alarm in the bourgeoisie but also heated debate about birth control in socialist circles (Weindling, 1989). Meanwhile the Protestant establishment, aware of its limited influence in the Empire's Catholic territories, was seeking a counter-narrative to the revived focus on Marianism and pilgrimage in popular Catholicism (Blackbourn, 1993). A new, secular context for the cult of motherhood was provided by publications such as Ellen Key's *Century of the Child* (which appeared in German translation in 1902) and by the doctrine of 'spiritual motherhood' with which the moderate majority of the bourgeois feminist movement justified women's expanding public influence. Further to the left, August Bebel, Friedrich Engels and Lily Braun all drew political conclusions from the interest in matriarchy sparked by the popularisation of J. J. Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*, 1861). Against this backdrop, it would initially appear surprising that Frapan and Viebig wrote novels rejecting—on eugenic grounds—the idea that the maternal instinct is the solution for social and individual ills. This position was, however, in step with the discussion of eugenics in more radical sections of the women's movement: the League for the Protection of Mothers (*Bund für Mutterschutz*), founded in 1905, was an organisation that aimed to combine practical help for single mothers with a forum to discuss the reform of sexual moral standards. Criticising the social norms which enforced money-based marriages or celibacy for middle-class women, the League's members argued for 'New Ethics', to enable people to choose marriage partners freely on the basis of mutual respect and rational selection criteria. The 'New Ethicists' advocated Neo-Malthusian birth control to benefit individual families and limit population size. In practice it proved challenging to bring these competing priorities together in the League (Wickert, 1991): at one end of the spectrum was activist and schoolteacher Ruth Bré (1862–1911), who defended women's 'right to motherhood' and proposed that the state should give healthy sole mothers housing and land in rural areas to form self-supporting mothers' settlements or *Mutterkolonien* (Bré, 1905a). At the other extreme were male doctors and scientists with little interest in women's rights, who saw this organisation as a forum to discuss public health, and sexological and eugenic ideas (Allen, 1985). In the middle were a group of more radical feminists, led by Helene Stöcker (1869–1943), Maria Lischnewska (1854–1938), and Adele Schreiber (1872–1957) who wanted to promote open discussion of sexual morality and end the stigma surrounding sole mothering and adoption (Schreiber, 1912). Bré was soon disillusioned with the League she had initiated: her strong views on racial and health selection criteria for the mothers' settlements alienated more compassionate feminists, whilst her articles claiming that hysteria and cancer in women were caused by celibacy irritated the evidence-based scientists (Bré, 1903, 1905b). Bré did set up two self-supporting mother-and-child homes, in Berlin and Silesia, but her early death in 1911 and contentious views meant that her influence was soon eclipsed by Stöcker, a better educated, better connected campaigner, who led the movement into the 1920s. Stöcker's biographer Christl Wickert has emphasised her wide intellectual connections with scientists and politicians, whose involvement in the League she encouraged by renaming its periodical from *Protect the Mothers* to the *New Generation* (Wickert, 1991). Stöcker was opposed by many moderate feminists, who equated her 'New Ethics' of sexuality with free love, but her focus was much wider and included discussion of non-coercive eugenics, such as the ethical decision to refrain from having children (Dickinson, 2001). In this latter respect Stöcker anticipated the position of moderate feminist leader and 'liberal humanist' Gertrud Bäumer, who had been inspired by the ideals of Christian Socialism in her youth and had become an enthusiastic advocate of 'racial reform' by 1914 as a way of bringing benefits to the whole of society, in a non-exclusionary fashion (Repp, 2000a).

## 5 | THE APPEAL OF MONISM

The broader context in which essentially libertarian and progressive writers and campaigners, such as Frapan and Stöcker, explored eugenic ideas was the growing influence of Darwinian theory in Germany, underpinned



by the genetic experiments and theories of Gregor Mendel in the 1860s and August Weismann in the 1880s on plants and animals. Central to this development was Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), professor of Biology in Jena, who coined the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘phylogeny’ and captivated both the public imagination and *Jugendstil* artists with his series *Art Forms in Nature* (1899–1904). Haeckel's intention to share ‘the ennobling insights which are hidden everywhere in Nature’ became part of a much wider ambition to shape public perceptions of wider social and philosophical questions (Haeckel, 1899, Vorwort, n.p.). Haeckel sought to overcome the mind/body duality with his theory of Monism, which advocated a worldview and new system of ethics based on evolutionary theory and his work as a Naturalist. He was influenced both by Herbert Spencer and by older ideas of evolutionary change put forward by German author and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1748–1832). In his best-selling and widely translated work, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the 19th Century* (1899), Haeckel asserted that ethics were naturally determined because there was a symbiotic relationship between self and community and that evolution was an intrinsically progressive force which could be harnessed for good if society adopted a Monist outlook (Haeckel, [1899] 1909). The Monist League, founded in 1906, attracted freethinkers from right across the political spectrum and produced a fortnightly journal, *The Monist*, which dealt with philosophical, social and religious issues as well as important scientific developments. Haeckel's Darwinism attracted many progressive and Socialist advocates, as Repp (2000b) points out, including Ludwig Büchner and August Bebel, and his books were popular in Socialist lending libraries. In the text by Frapan, we see Josefine's Monist belief in the indivisibility of mind and body as an inspiration for compassion with people of all classes and thus sympathy with Socialism. However, Viebig took a different message from Monism, understanding people as being subject to the same laws of adaptation and survival of the fittest as animals and plants. Her concept of (rural) people being adapted to and rooted in their environment at times comes close to a ‘blood and soil’ form of nationalism. By extending biological principles to human society Haeckel himself produced a further, highly, problematic legacy, namely his identification of different human races and assertions that some were more evolved and superior to others. The racist aspects of the socio-biological discourse already had appalling consequences during the decade under discussion here. Before and during the Herero and Nama genocide in German South-West Africa and the Maji Maji war in German East Africa (1904–1907), which were racist actions resulting from a policy of colonial expansion, anthropological data and even human remains were collected and sent back to Haeckel's collection as well as to other research institutes in Germany (Fischer et al., 2020). While Haeckel's Phyletic Museum is still open in Jena, biologists at the university there have recently stated unequivocally that ‘the concept of race is the **result** of racism, not its **prerequisite**’ (Fischer et al., 2019).

Haeckel's impact on the social scientists and doctors of the next generation, including the two leading German proponents of ‘racial hygiene’ Alfred Ploetz (1860–1940) and Wilhelm Schallmayer (1857–1919), is undeniable. Ploetz was the founder of the journal *Archives of Racial and Social Biology* (1904) as well as the Society for Racial Hygiene (1905), and shared Haeckel's view that some races were more highly evolved than others. Even before the popularisation of the ‘Nordic-Race Theory’ in the 1920s, 19-year-old Ploetz and his friends had formed a secret Society for Strengthening the Race (Tempel, 2006). Then, after short periods studying economics and law, Ploetz turned to medicine in order to understand and influence hereditary transmission; later he would advocate eugenic selection and euthanasia for children with physical defects. His Society for Racial Hygiene also demanded that its members submitted to racial profiling upon application and promised to undergo pre-marital medical checks (Engstrom, 2011). According to Weindling, Ploetz did not publicise his idealisation of a Germanic race until the 1930s, when he was appointed as a special adviser on National Socialist racial policy in recognition of his life's work (Weindling, 2011).

Ploetz's contemporary Wilhelm Schallmayer was a doctor who won a Krupp-funded essay competition in 1900 on the theme: ‘What can we learn from the theory of evolution about internal political development and state legislation?’ (Weiss, 1987, 69). Schallmayer pointed to the consequences of the poor reproducing at a faster rate than the wealthy, resulting in greater potential burdens on the state, a less efficient workforce and more potential



Social Democrats. These concerns were also apparent in Viebig's novel: the nervous exhaustion of Viebig's heroine and the couple's infertility are suggestive of degeneration in the wealthy and contrast with the unchecked fertility of the poor. Schallmayer's 'racial hygiene' concentrated mostly on positive measures, such as health passports and tax incentives to encourage the educated bourgeoisie to reproduce, but he also discussed issues such as sterilisation of hereditary criminals, although he advised caution since medical science could still not be certain which conditions and characteristics were inherited (Weiss, 1986). Frapan's protagonist is similarly exercised by heredity, identifying the 'moral insanity' of her own son and reassuring a friend that it would be fine to marry a suitor with a curvature of the spine, since the condition could not be passed on. Schallmayer's work repeatedly revealed the conflation of ostensibly progressive ideas with an alarming disregard for human rights; in his most influential publication, *Heredity and Selection in the Life Process of Nations* (1903), he proposed a state-financed health system but also recommended medicine should not interfere with the process of natural selection by enabling the weak or sick to survive (Weiss, 1987). However, he expressly rejected racial hierarchies as proposed in J. A. Gobineau's *Inequality of the Human Races* (1853), which had recently been translated into German, preferring to speak of 'race' rather than 'racial hygiene' meaning the 'human race' as a whole—although it is safe to assume that his model for the human race was white European.

The notions of selective breeding and the underlying assumption of racial superiority apparent in the work of Ploetz and Schallmayer were invoked by nationalist 'Pan-Germans' to justify aggressive colonial expansion. Whilst there were critics who voiced moral or scientific objections to racial hygiene and eugenics in the German-speaking world (Weindling, 2011), people across the political spectrum gave serious consideration to eugenics as an objective and rational means to ameliorate social problems. Socialist politician and doctor Alfred Grotjahn, for example, campaigned for economic reforms and public health, but also proposed birth control as a means of controlling the spread of alcoholism, and sex reformer Magnus Hirschfeld, who wanted to decriminalise homosexuality, also advocated eugenic abortions (Weindling, 1989). Such interventions were not condoned by the more conservative Christian ruling elite and were not put into practice (Weindling, 1989). Nonetheless, the eugenic debate in Germany was lively, with ideas circulating not only via specialist periodicals but also in more mainstream journalism. Other important channels of dissemination were personal connections developed through study groups, literary circles, mentoring or scholarly relationships and friendship. By tracing some of these spheres of influence, it becomes possible to see the intersections of different areas of public life and to examine their connection with the authors discussed earlier.

## 6 | TRACING THE CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

Berlin had boomed in industrial and political terms since becoming the capital of the new German Empire in 1871 but was inducing 'civilisation fatigue' in the middle classes by the 1890s. Writers drawn to the capital for its literary scene were soon seeking respite in the nearby forests, rivers and lakes *Behind the Metropolis* as author Wilhelm Bölsche (1861–1939) called his review of Naturalist literature. Bölsche was a central figure in the Friedrichshagen Naturalist Writers' Circle in the late 1880s and early 1890s, at a time when Friedrichshagen was just a small village idyllically situated on the shore of the Müggelsee. Bölsche is a vital piece of the jigsaw in understanding the intersection of science and culture: as editor of the prominent cultural journal *The Free Stage* (later the *New Review*), he was very well connected. His numerous correspondents included authors Ilse Frapan, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Arthur Schnitzler, but also scientists such as August Forel and Ernst Haeckel, and he was regularly published in Bäumer's journal *The Woman* (Bölsche, 2010; Repp, 2000b). As a communicator of science with a background in philosophy and art history Bölsche played an important role in spreading evolutionary ideas. His numerous popular science volumes on evolution and *Love Life in Nature* were much admired by Haeckel and soon became standard items on the shelves of book-owning families. Bölsche was also able to embed evolutionary science in a longer tradition of ideas, since he had written successful biographies of Goethe, Darwin and Haeckel, the holy

trinity of evolutionary thought for free-thinking Germans (Saul, 2015). This mediation between the older discoveries of gentleman scientists and new specialist knowledge emerging from the academy was mirrored in his literary publications: Bölsche edited the collected works of major nineteenth-century authors such as Heine, Büchner and Novalis but he also participated in the avant-garde, contributing to Naturalist literary theory with his early publication *The Scientific Foundations of Poetic Literature* (1887), in which he discussed how authors might approach the subject of heredity, pointing to Zola as an example (Bölsche, 1887). Bölsche became a founding member of the Monist League in 1906 and also joined Ploetz's Society for Racial Hygiene.

Bölsche became acquainted with many Naturalist writers, including later Nobel prize-winner Gerhart Hauptmann, through Bruno Wille who had initiated the New Free People's Stage movement to make uncensored new theatre available to the working class via cheap subscriptions. Alongside their cultural pursuits, many of the Friedrichshagen Circle embodied aspects of the middle-class 'life reform' movement which encouraged vegetarianism, temperance, sun-bathing, clothing reform and naturism. Reformist initiatives included the Eden colony, a vegetarian fruit-growing co-operative and social housing experiment set up in Oranienburg near Berlin in 1893 (and considered by Ruth Bré as a possible mothers' settlement location) (Repp, 2000b).

Like Bölsche and Gerhart Hauptmann, Clara Viebig was part of the generation born around 1860 who became active in Berlin's literary scene after moving there from the provinces in the 1880s. Parallels between her novellas set in Eifel villages and Gerhart Hauptmann's early dramas set in rural Silesia at the other side of the Empire are unmistakable. Although not at the forefront of the literary avant-garde or part of the Friedrichshagen Circle, Viebig was certainly influenced by the currents of scientific rationalism and did participate in the literary club 'Die Kommenden' at the Nollendorf-Casino Café. Club records list a Haeckel discussion evening in May 1900 and a Nietzsche evening in September of the same year, whilst Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, was a regular speaker there (Stern, 1974). Viebig was also a friend of Ludwig Jacobowski (1868–1900), critic and editor of the journal *Society* (*Die Gesellschaft*) who was a leading committee member in Bruno Wille's 'New Free People's Stage'.

Another hub for these connections was Zürich, frequently visited by both Bölsche and Gerhart Hauptmann. Gerhart's brother, Carl Hauptmann, went to school with Alfred Ploetz in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland); the two brothers were part of Ploetz's secret Society for Strengthening the Race and remained life-long friends, with Carl following Ploetz as a student to Jena (attending lectures by Haeckel) and Zürich. Ploetz had moved to Zürich to escape the anti-socialist laws in Germany, due to the utopian-socialist elements of the young men's secret society (Tempel, 2006). As a medical student, Ploetz was strongly influenced by the work of Auguste Forel on alcoholism, mental illness and degeneration at the Burghölzli clinic and was part of a study group formed around the philosopher of 'empirio-criticism', Richard Avenarius. Gerhart Hauptmann and Bölsche frequently visited Carl Hauptmann and Ploetz in Zürich during the 1890s. Ploetz also formed a temperance association with Ernst Rüdin (later a leading eugenicist who was centrally involved in National Socialist sterilisation and euthanasia policies) and was married to Rüdin's sister, medical student Pauline, 1890–1898 (Tempel, 2006). One of Frapan's biographers asserts that she, too, was part of the Avenarius circle, which certainly included female students such as Agnes Bluhm and Pauline Rüdin (Kraft-Schwenk, 1985). Under the influence of Forel, this group all became temperance activists: this trend is depicted in Frapan's novel, where the formation of a temperance organisation including students and school pupils echoes the initial meeting of Ploetz and Ernst Rüdin. Frapan presented temperance and eugenic ideas alongside initiatives for socialist and feminist reform. She herself had moved to Zürich in 1892 to be able to study and remained in Switzerland, dying in Geneva in 1908. When Ploetz then moved to Berlin around 1905 to find a better arena for spreading his ideas of racial hygiene, he was one of the first people to join the League for the Protection of Mothers, as well as founding his own Society for Racial Hygiene; Agnes Bluhm became a member of both associations. Ploetz's many connections were clearly an important channel for the transmission of ideas between Jena, Zürich and Berlin and he retained his friendship with the Hauptmann brothers, Bölsche and Bluhm into later life.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The paradigm of evolutionary biology and a growing faith in science—albeit sitting in an uneasy truce with religious belief for many—characterised very many areas of public life in the German-speaking world around 1900. The new science of eugenics appeared in writing of different genres and was invoked by people from across the political spectrum with varying degrees of depth and accuracy. By tracing some of the circles of influence and examining some of the widely read fiction arising from them, we can see how elements of the eugenic discourse were dispersed into wider society and incorporated into a range of agendas for change. The specific examples of fiction examined above demonstrate how eugenic ideas influenced representations of socialist-inspired feminism by Frapan and more strictly Darwinian Monism by Viebig. Setting their writing in its discursive context also facilitates a more nuanced understanding of their eugenic themes, which are alienating for twenty-first-century readers. As commercially and critically successful authors, who were keen to address topical themes, their work is a good barometer of how socially acceptable such discussions had become. Yet their fictional texts also show how some women refocused eugenic discussion on the lives of individuals, particularly women and children, rather than following the scientists' Olympian view which sacrificed individual fulfilment and welfare for an abstract notion of population strength rooted in competitive geopolitics.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> All translations from German are my own.

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