

The "Fiction Meter"

Memories Told in Family Stories, Biographies and Memoirs of Contemporary Jewish Women Authors from Central-Eastern Europe Writing in German

Ida Fábián 🕩



Doctoral School of Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, Múzeum krt. 4., H-1088 Budapest, Hungary; idapalmafabian@gmail.com

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Abstract. This article is about a piece of research started in 2019 which focuses on the literary, cultural and sociological analysis of biographical and family stories by contemporary Jewish female authors from Eastern-Europe writing in German. This study investigates the relationship between the literary and lingual appearance of memories and the age, the Eastern-European origin, the socialization and the identity of the authors. The research also deals with the differences between the literary forms of the various generations of authors and the identifiable irony-fiction-reality correlation in the memories told.

Keywords: memory culture, trauma-irony-emotion, fiction and fact, contemporary intercultural literature

Introduction: starting point and goals

In family stories the creativity of the author, the linguistic rendering, and the aesthetic descriptions form a cohesive unit—from both the author's and the reader's point of view—with the cultural, historical, and geographical backgrounds and personal missions. This unity is the starting point of my literary research. The variation of literary forms between the different generations of authors can be observed in the correlation between irony, fiction and reality. These differences are the essential elements of human nature and their literary phrasing is the authors' achievement. The basis of this literary achievement in connection with the contemporary told memories resides in the opposites of East - West (especially the Eastern Bloc and Germany), Jewish - non-Jewish, immigrant - non-immigrant, man - woman, parents/grandparents - children/grandchildren, mother tongue - German language. These narratives raise the philosophical and psychological questions of identity to

a universally human level. On the one hand, the existence of these opposites in the texts suggests that there is a universally human element in them, while on the other hand it can also reinforce a segregated, monologic point of view.

In recent decades more and more family stories have been published in Germany. Among them there are emigrant Jewish authors writing in the German language who are mainly from Eastern Europe. This phenomenon is a part of the so-called Erinnerungskultur (memory culture) which started thirty years ago. According to Aleida Assmann, the European memory policy is problematic; she claims that an expansion of horizons is needed: "The new memory policy has undergone a shift from a monologic to a more dialogic structure." The practice of applying a dialogic memory is aimed at eliminating the asymmetry of European memories. These asymmetries began during the last thirty years with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the convergence of Eastern and Western Europe associated with migration and the consequences of globalization. "Memories are carried across national borders and they enter a global arena through all available channels, starting with human carriers."2 Political and social changes have brought memories to the surface. These memories have raised and are still raising questions even today. The end of World War II and the Holocaust mean different things for people brought up and socialized in the Soviet Union or in Western Europe.

Taking this idea as a starting point, the analysis of memories appearing in literary works can lead to a model from both the individual's and society's point of view. Migration literature broadens the *Erinnerungskultur* and hybridity is a main element of dialogic memory as described by Assmann. The phenomenon of hybridity comes from the Indian critical theorist Homi Bhabha: "Circulation takes a measure of mobility—the movement of languages, ideas, meanings, cultural forms, social systems—as it converges in specific and singular spaces of representation negotiated through a dialogue of difference." Multilingualism and multiculturalism in literature create a Third Space, which is neither the space of the country of origin nor that of the receiving country, but a third, new one. According to a 2015 demographic study, 34 percent of families in Germany have a migrant background, which explains the growth of German language migrant literature and readers and the demand for the literary viewing of this Third Space.

¹ Assmann, "Dialogic Memory," 206.

² Assmann and Conrad, "Introduction. Memories on the move," 2.

³ Bhabha, "Introduction. On Disciplines and Destinations," 8.

⁴ Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, Aktualisierter Datenanhang, 6.

This article presents the starting point of a research study begun in 2019. The basic assumption of this research is that with the help of contemporary German language family stories changes can be identified in the living of their Jewish identity by authors with an Eastern-European migrant background.

Analyzed literary works and their authors

The authors were born and raised to different extents in Central-Eastern-Europe: Ukraine, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia and Hungary. They represent different age groups but all of them are people of Jewish origin who emigrated to Germany with their families as children or adults. They write in German, not in their mother tongues. In their texts the narratives of their memories are characterized by different cultures and ways of thinking.

Different factors influenced the behavior of the members of the generations in connection with their search for their identity and the definition of it. Universal human motivations also affected them. The development of a person starts with the cyclical demand for recognition and understanding.

In recent decades a trend has emerged concerning the increasing number of "told memories" from Eastern-European authors in German literature. The reasons are sometimes obvious, sometimes less so.

The first publication of the analyzed text corpora was between 2009 and 2017. The authors were born in 1960, 1970, 1971 and 1985. Regarding the family generation, they belong to the second and third generation whose parents and grandparents lived through World War II and the Holocaust. They were raised in these families partly in Central-Eastern Europe, partly in Germany. Regarding their work, they belong to the third literary generation. In Table 1 you can see the summary of analyzed authors.

The text corpora consist of family stories with biographical elements, their own *told memories* or those of others. All four texts can be understood on two levels. The first level is about the present and concerns the lives of the authors, their memories and emotions. The second level deals with the past, interpreting the memories and stories of parents and grandparents as well as the information based on the authors' research and documents. The levels are closely linked to each other: all the authors suggest that the interpretation of the present is only possible through the recognition and understanding of the past.

The chosen literary works can be categorized as Intercultural and German-Jewish Literature within Contemporary Literature. These novels are autobiographies and family stories intertwined with historiographical elements and many changes of

Author, Title, First published	Date and place of birth	Mother country	Common features	Time of immigration to Germany
Adriana Altaras Titos Brille (Tito's Glasses), 2011	1960 Zagreb	Yugoslavia (Today: Croatia)	 female author Jewish East- European immigrant writing in German 	1967
Katja Petrowskaja Vielleicht Esther (Maybe Esther), 2014	1970 Kiev	Soviet Union (Today: Ukraine)		1999
Sasha Marianna Salzmann Ausser sich (Beside Myself), 2017	1985 Volgograd	Soviet Union (Today: Russia)		1995
Johanna Adorján Eine exklusive Liebe (An Exclusive Love), 2009	1971 Stockholm	Hungary	 female author Jewish father writing in German (her mother tongue) 	Father escaped with his parents to Stockholm in 1956.

Table 1 Summary of analyzed authors

perspective. The story line runs through different spaces and times in chapter after chapter. In one chapter the I-narrator tells the story in the present in Germany, then in the next chapter we are in the past in Russia. In *Außer sich* (*Beside Myself*) Sasha Marianna Salzmann frequently changes from I-narrator to third-person narrator even within the same sentence. In the texts many genres appear; coming of–age story, family story, travelogue or metropolitan literature. Self-narration works as a process of identity creation. The literary forms of irony, reality and fiction alternate in the novels and their relative ratio has an important role.

Irony: Adriana Altaras "Titos Brille" (Tito's Glasses)

Adriana Altaras was born in Zagreb (former Yugoslavia, today Croatia) in 1960. She is an actress, director and author who lives in Berlin. She was brought up in Italy by her Jewish aunt and her Italian husband until 1967, when her parents obtained German residence permits. During World War II her father had been a partisan in the mountains of Yugoslavia while in 1942 her mother and aunt had been sent to a labour camp in Yugoslavia; they had been rescued by Italian soldiers. *Titos Brille* was published in 2011 and made into a documentary film in 2014. The main motif of the novel is the writer's processing the demise of her parents. Their deaths (first her father's, then her mother's), her subsequent duties and the process of mourning take place chronologically. Autobiographical stories are inserted into the main

story line, not in chronological order but sometimes from the present, at other times from the past, which are memories and self-reflections. The I-narrator mainly uses irony and jokes when dealing with the topic of identity. Regarding her parents' death, the I-narrator defines connection points which she "inherited": identities. Her relationship to these identities brings up memories from the past. The past connects to the present as a scope of interpretation. Her sometimes traumatic relationship to her Jewish not-Jewish, German not-German, Croatian not-Croatian, mother-child identities are described with irony. She speaks ironically about her Jewish identity in scenes when she talks about the quality of Wiener schnitzel with her friend Raffi rather than about the Talmud of Jerusalem, when she speaks about her therapist, who has never heard about the problems of "second-generation" Jews, when the rabbi arrives at her father's funeral carrying a shopping bag bearing the ALDI logo or when she calls herself "deutsches Exportgut"—a German export of the Goethe-Institute.

Adriana Altaras finds the solution to her personal problems through irony and humor in her writing. She separates herself emotionally from her own unpleasant childhood memories of her family. Regarding her socialization, Altaras differs from the other three authors in several ways. The most important difference, analyzing her novel, is that she is from South-Eastern Europe, and not from a Russian-speaking country. She was the youngest, at seven years old, when she reached Germany from Italy, where later on during her school years she spent her summer vacations with her aunt, who had an important role in her upbringing. *Titos Brille* became the center of this research because it is a collection of all the stereotypes which cover all the important individual and social aspects of the discourse about non-orthodox Jewish identity in today's Germany. The author belongs to the second generation of Holocaust survivors, while her literary style is closer to that of the so-called Third Generation.

Altaras, the oldest of the four authors, is not the only one to use irony in scenes where she cannot be the outsider in the given situation, but this literary method is most characteristic of her work.

The emotions created by the events of childhood are re-evaluated in adulthood. Altaras as an adult looking back on her child-self and her expectations understands and accepts her mother's behavior with empathy. However, she remembers the emotion which she experienced as a child and which probably determined her adult life as well:

And me? Mom always seemed so scary and cold to me. When I hugged her, she became stiff and held her breath until I let her go. At those times I often thought she might not like me. There were times when I didn't even want to touch her, I found her disgusting. Today I think she was really overwhelmed; she was 15 when racial laws were introduced in Yugoslavia, she had to leave school, had to wear the yellow star,

her ordinary life ended. She hid and escaped. She was only 17 when she got to the camp. Disgusted by the indignity, the other inmates, herself, something froze in her forever. Only in resistance and struggle could she feel. My emotions around her were her own emotions. We have taken over our parents' traumas very properly and perfectly.⁵

Not just as a child but also as an adult Altaras could only have guessed what her mother might have felt. She tried to find an explanation for the events. The trauma the mother lived through was passed on to the child, in this case to the author. Her mother never talked to her about the past.

Altaras' aunt's phrase simply and eloquently describes the reason for and the value of the unveiling of these family stories: "Die Vergangenheit ist jetzt" ("The past is now"). The title *Tito's Glasses* refers to a memory in connection with the author's father, who was a partisan hiding in the mountains during World War II. Tito did not wear glasses; however, her father proudly told her as a child that he had once repaired Tito's glasses. These are all memories linked to scenes, objects, spots, events and emotions. Maybe the described events happened that way and maybe they did not. Nevertheless, this particular story is linked to the author as it was her own memory, a memory of her father's stories, a family legend.

It is the strategy of the author to give this particular title to a family story. There are three external elements occurring in the event: a real historical figure, a legendary personal object and the story *told* by her own father. The internal element is the given memory of the author as a child. A visual image of her father fixing Tito's glasses and the pride he might have felt at that moment, as well as the adult author who realized that Tito had never worn glasses in his life.

Katja Petrowskaja uses a similar strategy with the title *Vielleicht Esther* (*Maybe Esther*). The author's father told stories of her great-grandmother, whose name had been forgotten. Due to the uncertainty of her grandmother's name, the book carries the title *Maybe Esther*.

[&]quot;Und ich? Meine Mutter wirkte auf mich immer abweisend und kalt. Umarmte ich sie, erstarrte sie, hielt den Atem an, bis ich wieder losließ. Oft dachte ich damals, sie könne mich nicht leiden. Irgendwann wollte ich sie auch nicht mehr anfassen, ekelte mich. Heute denke ich, wie überfordert sie gewesen sein muss: Als sie 15 war, wurden in Jugoslawien die Rassengesetze eingeführt, sie musste die Schule verlassen, den Judenstern tragen, ihr gewohntes Leben aufgeben. Sich verstecken, fliehen. Mit 17 kam sie ins Lager. Der Ekel vor den Demütigungen, vor den anderen Inhaftierten, der Ekel vor sich selbst. Etwas war in ihr erfroren, für immer. Nur im Widerstand, im Kampf, konnte sie sich noch spüren. Mein Unbehagen in ihrer Nähe war ihr eigenes. Wir hatten die Traumata unserer Eltern übernommen, sehr gründlich, sehr vollkommen." Altaras, *Titos Brille*, 61–62.

⁶ Altaras, Titos Brille, 5.

Both Altaras and Petrowskaja deal with the memories as facts, both *Tito's Glasses* and the stories about the great-grandmother. They heard the stories themselves and developed their own memories as a result. Therefore, the level of fiction is low because these are the authors' own memories, which can be considered as facts. This strategy highlights the fact that the novel is about the lives of the authors through the stories and memories of others which can alter the present. All in all, they are in connection with the present.

Katja Petrowskajawas was born in Kiev (former Soviet Union, today Ukraine) in 1970. In 1987, after the Chernobyl disaster, she left Kiev with her family and emigrated first to the USA and the in 1999 to Germany. Her collection of short stories *Vielleicht Esther* (*Maybe Esther*), first published in 2014, was written in German. In her book the different languages and the stereotypes which belong to them play a crucial role: "My German, truth and illusion, the language of the enemy, was an outlet, a second life, a love that does not leave if it does not get, a gift and a goad, as if I had set a bird loose." Petrowskaja writes the story of tracing the history of her family, which is the frame story of the whole book. As the I-narrator moves forward in time it becomes more and more obvious that there are gaps and blurred memories. There are three factors affecting the content of the book: historical events, family anecdotes and the pursuit by Katja Petrowaskaja, grand-daughter of a Holocaust survivor, of the whole family history, or at least of the feeling of this wholeness.

Petrowskaja uses irony in cases of unreconstructible past events:

There was no Levi or Krzewin, but I did find an Itzhak Stern, also a bookkeeper, though in a factory in Kraków. He was not a relative of mine, because my Sterns were in Odessa, and those who hadn't emigrated much earlier were making revolution in the underground, yet one war later there were no rescue missions for them in Odessa and no more lists. Should I put this Stern onto my list anyway, because the others can't be tracked down? Or would that be attempted theft? There are, as is well known, games without winners.⁸

Another example is when she wonders about her identity:

Never have I felt as perfectly lost as here in Warsaw; I thought in Russian, looked for my Jewish relatives, and wrote in German. I was lucky to be able to move in that space between languages, swapping words and switching roles and viewpoints. Who conquered whom, who was one of mine, who was one of the others, which shore is mine?⁹

⁷ Petrowskaja, Maybe Esther, 40.

⁸ Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 22–23.

⁹ Petrowskaja, Maybe Esther, 91.

When Petrowskaja becomes insecure regarding her identity and loyalties it creates emotions which appear as irony in the texts.

Another way these emotions appear in the texts is by formulating universally human or collective memories, as in the scene when the I-narrator travels to Babij Jar, Ukraine. This is the place where Nazi soldiers massacred more than 30,000 Ukrainian Jews in 1941; the author visited it around 2010. Upon her arrival in Babij Jar she could not comprehend how the people there were able to peacefully walk in the place where these horrible things had happened. This is something that is supposed to affect everybody, all the people on Earth, not only Jewish people: "Babi Yar is a part of my history, and I have no other, but I am not here on that account, or not exclusively. There is something that brings me here because I believe that there are no strangers among victims. Here, everybody has someone." The authors of the third literary generation want to achieve the *universally human* level, contributing to the "Dialogisches Erinnern" – Dialogic memory in Europe defined by Assmann.

Sasha Marianna Salzmann was born in Volgograd in 1985 and emigrated to Germany with her family in 1995. She is a member of a literary group called Contingent Refugees: people who emigrated without religious awareness. Lena Gorelik and Wladimir Kaminer are also members of this group. Salzmann is a theatre director and writer who lives in Berlin. Her novel Außer sich (Beside Myself) is a frame story about Ali, who from being a woman becomes a man as a result of hormone therapy. Family stories from the past are inserted into the frame story, which is Salzmann's autobiography from her childhood to the present day. There are three story lines: the story of Ali in Istanbul in the present, the childhood of Ali and her alleged brother, Anton, in Russia and Germany in the recent past, and the history of Ali's ancestors in Eastern-Europe and the Soviet Union a long time ago. The tone and style of irony is different in this book by the youngest of the four authors, but it is still true that it is caused by insecurity. The chicken as the symbol of bad feelings returns in certain events in the stories. Every time Ali arrives somewhere in the book, she has the taste of chicken in her mouth and it makes her gag. It happens in the present when she arrives in Istanbul, when she arrives in Germany and in Russia as well: "Ali was sure she could taste chicken in her throat again. She rummaged for her passport." Another instance is from when they lived in the shelter for migrants in Germany: "Tanya screamed first; she was the first to see the children. Then Valya screamed, and soon the entire kitchen was shrieking as if a siren had gone off. The home was transformed into a coop of startled chickens."¹³ Irony is a tool which

¹⁰ Petrowskaja, Maybe Esther, 146.

¹¹ Assmann, "Auf dem Weg."

¹² Salzmann, Beside Myself, 14.

¹³ Salzmann, Beside Myself, 100-1.

has an effect on the reader, from provocation to amazement. Irony is used in the case of alienation, in emotionally uncontrollable situations. However, the ways in which these authors apply irony in their literary work are not the same.

As a German native speaker, Johanna Adorján differs from the other authors. She was born in Stockholm in 1971. Her mother is German and her father, who escaped from Hungary to Copenhagen with his sister and parents in 1956, is a Hungarian Jew. Adorján is a journalist and writer living in Berlin. Her first book, *Eine exklusive Liebe* (*An Exclusive Love*), was published in 2009. In it she tells the story of the suicide of her Hungarian Jewish grandparents. Adorján, the granddaughter, starts to investigate the story of her grandparents. She travels to Budapest in order to meet and interview her grandmother's friend Erzsi. She travels to Auschwitz and Mauthausen as well to see the camps where her grandfather was imprisoned and which he miraculously survived. Her grandmother never told her where and how she had survived; she was supposedly hidden somewhere. The grandparents never talked about those years or about their Jewish identity to their granddaughter; they assimilated totally into Denmark. Adorján defines the gap caused by her grandparents' silence in the following way:

If I want to be totally honest it not only makes me sad but also a bit angry. Because a part of my own identity has been stolen, the understanding of myself lacks self-evidence, deficiency has been inherited which is like a secret. I miss a part. I miss something and I don't exactly know what this something is. What a pity if something goes missing.¹⁴

Adorján's style highlights the problem of the grandchildren. The individual's understanding of their own identity without the whole knowledge of the past and the dilemmas regarding the present identities seems impossible. For individuals the emotions caused by the lack of comprehension of the solution and of a constructive future can be the "universally human" and "collective memories":

Typical Jewish feature? This constant arguing, am I also prone to it, to the sadness of others, who I only disagree with in order to see how far I can go? Is there such a thing as a typical Jewish feature at all?¹⁵

[&]quot;Wenn ich ganz ehrlich bin, macht mich das nicht nur traurig, es macht mich sogar ein bisschen wütend. Denn auch mir hat er dadurch einen Teil meiner Identität gestohlen, meinem Selbstverständnis das Selbstverständliche genommen, mir eine Lücke vererbt, die mir wie ein Geheimnis erscheint. Mir fehlt ein Stück von mir. Ich vermisse etwas und weiß nicht einmal genau, was. So schade, dass etwas verschwindet." Adorján, Eine exklusive Liebe, 78.

[&]quot;Ist das typisch jüdisch? Dieses ewige Diskutieren, zu dem ich auch neige, zum Leidwesen vieler, denen ich widerspreche, einfach so, um zu gucken, wie weit ich komme. Gibt es das überhaupt: typisch jüdisch?" Adorján, *Eine exklusive Liebe*, 88.

A typical Jewish person is not fond of nature but rather a city dweller, as the friends of Adorján say. So, they conclude that she is typically Jewish.

There is a phenomenon which brings reassurance and peace in our world and it appears in all the examined literary texts. It is something which means permanence for the ancestors in the past and for the children/grandchildren in the present and thus it represents the future as well: nature. For Adriana Altaras it is the green grass which she sees with her aunt, looking out of the window of the train travelling to Germany for the first time; for Katja Petrowskaja it is the garden of her Ukrainian prisoner-of-war grandfather's garden, where the plants enchanted her as a child; in the case of Sasha Marianna Salzmann the great-grandmother could only forget her problems when she was looking after her rose bushes and when she finished, she asked the neighbors to care for their roses as well; and finally there is Johanna Adorján, whose grandmother had a beautiful rose garden which she cared for even on her last day. Nature as an entity above all human identities is the pledge of past, present and future.

The "fiction meter"

In the examined texts, in the self-narratives of the third generation, irony, fiction, and reality, although in different styles, have a similar function. When the processing of a trauma is more immediate, direct involvement is stronger, and it is the story of one's own memory, irony is used. When there is missing information, no personal experiences, and no memories about past events, then emotions shift in the direction of universally human and collective memories. Figure 1, called the "fiction meter" summarizes this concept.

The analysis of changes between the generations in a family, the patterns of development, the differences and similarities, offer a clue in terms of understanding human nature and the features of universally human elements while simultaneously raising new questions. How can the passing of time be considered an opportunity and not a disadvantage? The interpretation of the past offers an opportunity for contemporary authors. The first step is to get to know, understand and analyze their own past. Questions like "how could it happen?", "what is the truth?" capture the interest of the authors. Their resources are documents from archives, photos and genealogies. These authors try to merge events in their relatives' lives with the information provided by historical data. Thanks to the improvement of digitalization there are more and more opportunities to proceed in this way. It seems as if their literary output is an "objective" reconstruction of the past.

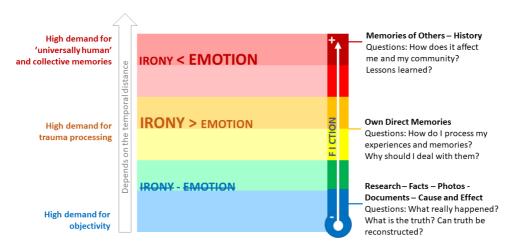


Figure 1 The "fiction meter" is an illustration of my literary analysis concept

The third literary generation¹⁶ represents its members' "own" reality. It deals with the topic of how they experienced their parents' and grandparents' direct or indirect traumas of World War II within the context of their own family, in that given location, in the Eastern Bloc, and how they interpreted the legends of their family and their conscious or subconscious emotions in connection to them.

To sum up, understanding the past is only possible through the interpretation of the present. Moreover, the processes of the present give meaning to past events. Many grandchildren are, for example, unable to comprehend their grandparents' situation as they did not live through the same events. However, the grandchild might sense their grandparents' emotions through their behavior. Therefore, many grandchildren can retrace their grandparents' feelings. Additionally, their schools and surroundings could also affect them. Someone who grew up in the Eastern Bloc and now lives in the united Germany as an adult, experiences the differences which can enable and animate them to understand the past.

Irony and humor have a stronger impact in literary texts when the authors narrate their own direct memories and when they are still processing events. Irony and humor are typical in the case of the second literary generation, who are much closer to their parents' miseries, memories and traumas.

The third literary generation is rarely ironic or humorous in their texts. The time distance makes it possible for them to live through their own emotions and deal with the past as a universal process of improvement. Whereas ironic characteristics are close to reality texts, for female authors who want to express emotions fictional

¹⁶ Remmler, "1980," 796-804.

features play the main role. The imagination and creativity of the author fill in the gaps in family stories and events which naturally appeared due to the passage of time.

Interdisciplinary approaches in the analysis

The need for self-definition is indispensable when it comes to integrating into a different culture. However, literature makes it possible that with the help of the analysis of these texts and other disciplines, different, sometimes totally new contexts can be revealed.

Besides the analysis of macro texts, historical studies also deal with micro texts (diaries, letters, private notes, etc.) as well as family stories and anecdotes. Historians have not clarified how to deal with emotions as something universally human in the case of an event or its consequences during their research.

Ever since the 1960s neurobiological research has been trying to find the so called "memory molecule" in the human brain. No substantial proof of it has yet been found. What has been proven so far is that remembrance is not only tied to the brain, to a single molecule, or to a certain part of the brain but that it affects and directs the whole organism and is a cooperation between many cells, molecules and materials.

Memory researchers have divided memories into groups, for example, implicit and explicit memories. The results of current research can serve as the basis of interpretation and context in the case of literary analysis. The associative memory, namely the memory of learning during childhood, can define and affect a person's adult life. Psychological studies try to establish whether trauma can be "inherited". Moreover, there are a number of studies which claim that trauma could possibly be encoded in our genes.

Proving this goes far beyond the range of literary analysis. However, human development research has the opportunity to analyze these literary works.

Further research directions

Deeper and broader analysis is needed in order to check the applicability, verification or refutation of the "fiction meter". The "fiction meter" concept will be improved during ongoing research in the light of further results. The research will also involve the representation of network correlations in the texts which comes from the basic assumptions of the "fiction meter" if further analysis verifies them.

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