

Can women have it all? The (in)compatibility of work and family in Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen* and Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*

Können Frauen alles haben? Die (Un)Vereinbarkeit von Arbeit und Familie in Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen* und Maren Ades *Toni Erdmann*

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Mannheim, den 2. Juli 2018

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of women in contemporary German literature and film against the backdrop of German public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s. The works selected for this undertaking are Kristine Bilkau's 2015 debut novel *Die Glücklichen* and Maren Ade's 2016 film *Toni Erdmann*, both of which center (at least in part) on 30-year-old German women and the challenges they face in their personal and professional lives. By means of the analysis and the resulting observations, I argue that the female images constructed in these two works reflect those of recent public discourse and that both works highlight the compatibility of work and family – or lack thereof – as the thorniest issue for German women today.

Utilizing a discourse analytical framework influenced primarily by the work of Rainer Keller while also drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, I first present an overview of German public discourse on women between 2010 and 2014. By focusing on the debates that dominated the public sphere during this time, most notably the establishment of a female quota on management boards, the gender pay gap, sexism in the workplace, as well as discourse on daycare facilities, I distill the female images projected by public discourse on these topics, e.g. the stereotypical masculinity of women managers (Lang and Rybnikova). In the subsequent analysis of the two selected works, I examine the portrayal of their respective female protagonists and dissect the interconnections between their work, family, and relationships, as well as their individual perceptions of what it means to be a woman. Finally, I compare the two sets of female images to assess to what extent public discourse has influenced the portrayal of the protagonists of these works.

By means of this comparative analysis, I arrive at the conclusion that German public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s directly influenced the female images constructed in both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. The protagonists of both works exhibit a number of traits attributed to women in recent public discourse, such as stress and time constraints, with the most correlations found between the portrayal of women managers in the quota debate and *Toni Erdmann*'s protagonist Ines, a business consultant. In addition, both the novel and the film are shown to attribute the challenges faced by their protagonists to the conflicting responsibilities stemming from work on the one hand and family on the other – a sentiment which echoes the portrayal of women in public discourse, where the duality of work and family was largely presented as being at natural opposition. These findings ultimately support the interplay between contemporary public and literary discourse and can be used as a springboard for further research in the fields of both German and gender studies.

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Για τους γονείς μου, Ελένη και Μίμη,
που με στηρίζουν σε κάθε βήμα,

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public discourse on women's rights and their societal position has rarely been livelier. From the 2016 U.S. presidential election inciting pro-women marches around the world, to the hashtag #metoo drawing attention to sexual harassment and abuse, to "feminism" being declared Merriam Webster's word of the year in 2017, interest in gender-focused debates has been steadily on the rise. In Germany, the so-called "demography debate" in the mid-2000s sparked an ongoing discussion about women's right to self-determination on issues like work and motherhood, while the 2010s saw thousands of Germans participate in the Women's March and continue to raise issues of gender equality. The gender pay gap, for instance, held a particularly prominent spot in the 2017 German federal election, with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) making it a focal point of its agenda – which did little, however, to attract voters, as the party suffered its worst results since World War II. This increasing prominence of gender-focused discourse is reflected in the works created by and about women, with authors such as Julia Franck gaining widespread recognition and directors like Maren Ade and Maria Schrader being celebrated at home and abroad. Acknowledging that novels and films are, as products of artistic expression, influenced by the societal context in which they are created, it is important to examine such works in order to determine how public discourse has shaped the societal image they project; in this case, the portrayal of women. To paraphrase Hester Baer, I believe that there is a space of cultural production in contemporary literature and film that responds in reflective ways to public discourse surrounding women ("Introduction" 13). It is this space of cultural production I wish to situate within the larger debates about women in Germany today.

The following thesis deals with the portrayal of women in contemporary German literature and film using two examples: Kristine Bilkau's 2015 novel *Die Glücklichen* and Maren

Ade's 2016 film *Toni Erdmann*. The aim of this project is to determine how these two works interact with German public discourse concerning the societal position of women and the challenges they face. To do this, I focus the examination on the female protagonists of these two works and dissect the interconnections between their work, family, and relationships, as well as their perception of what it means to be a woman.

In order to tackle the complex and highly topical issue of the portrayal of women in literature and film, the research question I set focuses on the discourse surrounding women in Germany as portrayed in the two works. Accordingly, I aim to answer the following question: Does the portrayal of the female protagonists in *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* reflect or reject the female images constructed by recent public discourse on women in Germany? My hypothesis is twofold: firstly, that the female figures in these works indeed reflect the recent debates on the role of women in German society by showcasing the adversity women face and their struggle to overcome it. And secondly, that both works highlight the compatibility of work and family – or lack thereof – as the thorniest issue for German women today by having their female protagonists vacillate between the two.

While *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* are by no means the only contemporary German works that center on female figures, they share a number of similarities that allow for a productive side-by-side analysis and comparison; the most relevant for this project being that they both appeared around the same point in time. With *Die Glücklichen* published in 2015 and *Toni Erdmann* released in cinemas a little more than a year later, both were created under similar societal conditions, and participated in the public discourses of the time. Furthermore, both works were created by women: *Die Glücklichen* was author Kristine Bilkau's debut novel, whereas *Toni Erdmann* was written, directed, and co-produced by established director Maren

Ade. On a narrative level, both works center on female figures in their 30s facing one or more challenges in their personal and professional lives. A final deciding factor was the works' perceived relevance on the basis of their critical performance, with *Die Glücklichen* having won multiple literature awards and *Toni Erdmann* having been nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film at the 89th Academy Awards, among other accolades.

Another choice that should be addressed at this point is that of the medium. While comparing and contrasting a novel with a film does raise methodological concerns, I believe that the benefits of this method far outweigh the risks. Combining the long respected medium of literature with the widely consumed and extremely influential medium of film will, in my opinion, yield more accurate results in an examination of the portrayal of women in contemporary works of fiction. The critical and commercial success of *Toni Erdmann* further highlights the importance of examining films alongside novels as instances of artistic production that can provide significant insights into the societal images they are both influenced by and project.

In order to provide an answer to my research question, I perform an analysis of the female protagonists in *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*: Isabell and Ines respectively. Specifically, I focus on the interplay between their personal and professional lives, dissecting how the two figures are portrayed with respect to issues regarding their work, family, and intimate relationships. Furthermore, I examine instances in the two works which allude to the protagonists' perception of themselves as women as well as their view of other women. By means of this analysis and the resulting observations, I aim to contribute to a greater understanding of the public discourse surrounding women in contemporary German society, produced in part by its representations in literature and film. As mentioned above, I ultimately

argue that both works highlight the compatibility of work and family as the main area of struggle for German women today and, in so doing, pose a much-debated question: Can women have it all?

The main body of this thesis will begin with an outline of my theoretical framework and methodological approach. Following this, I will present an overview of the public discourse surrounding women in contemporary German society in the years leading up to the appearance of *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. Particular emphasis will be placed on issues that spawned lively debates in the public sphere, such as sexism or the establishment of a female quota in the workplace, while considering the socio-political context in which the discourse on these topics takes place as well as the female images constructed in the process. In the analysis, which will be the focus of the fourth chapter, I will first provide an overview of the selected works' release and reception history, including information on their creators. Subsequently, I will consider the portrayal of women in these works on the basis of their female protagonists and their approach to issues regarding their work, family, intimate relationships, and perception of women. Finally, I will conclude my thesis by discussing the implications of my findings and referring back to the research question I have set in order to provide a fitting answer.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

In the interest of establishing the methods used in the main body of my thesis, this chapter focuses on presenting my methodological approach in its theoretical context. I will start by briefly revisiting the research question informing my analysis, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework guiding my methodology. Finally, I will present the methods used in my analysis and touch upon their strengths and limitations.

As discussed in the introductory remarks, the aim of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of women in Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen* and Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* against the backdrop of German public discourse on women in the years leading up to the release of the two works. As such, my analysis will be guided by the following research question: Does the portrayal of the main female figures *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* reflect or reject the female images constructed by recent public discourse on women in Germany? Accordingly, I will first define the concrete female images constructed by German public discourse, before moving on to the analysis of *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* to distill the respective images projected in these works. With these tools at my disposal, I will ultimately compare the two sets of images to discern their points of intersection.

In order to first distill the female images constructed by German public discourse on the topic of women, I will be following a discourse analytical approach. Throughout this thesis, I will be using the term “public discourse” to refer to discussions carried out in the media on a particular topic, in most cases being that of women in contemporary German society. For the purposes of this analysis, I consider public discourse to be a subcategorization of the broader term “discourse” and adopt Reiner Keller's definition of the term. Rooted in the tradition of social constructionism, Keller sees discourse as a set of statements that are studied with regard to

institutionally stabilized structural patterns, practices, rules, and resources of generating meaning (234). In other words, discourse is a communicative nexus of texts capable of constructing reality; in our case, it is the sum of statements carried out in all facets of life, including but not limited to politics, the media, literature, and academia, on the topic of women in contemporary German society. These statements, capable as they are of constructing and constantly reshaping the image of women in Germany, will be presented with regard to the female images they project and will later serve as a point of reference for the analysis of the selected works.

Accordingly, I distinguish between “public discourse” and “literary discourse,” both of which fall under the umbrella term “discourse” as defined above. While “literary discourse” can be used to encapsulate all written statements in a variety of settings, including academia as well as fiction and non-fiction prose, the term will be used henceforth to refer to statements produced in a fictional setting, including but not limited to fictional novels, poems, films, and television shows. Simply put, what separates public from literary discourse is, for the purposes of this thesis, the aspect of fictionality, aptly defined by Johansen as “a hypothetical state of affairs or mind that is ontologically different from the experiential universe within which we live” (97-98). Owing to its discursive nature, literary discourse is also capable of constructing reality. Within the context of this project, this means that both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* construct and project a particular image of German women. It is this image I wish to compare with the one constructed by public discourse to discern their points of intersection.

Seeing as my thesis focuses on gender in discourse, it is important to note that my analysis is further informed by the concept of gender performativity as theorized by Judith Butler. Rooted in her understanding of performativity as the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies That Matter* 2), which is

reminiscent of Keller, Butler sees gender as a performative act. According to Butler, gender “[constitutes] the identity it is purported to be” (*Gender Trouble* 34). As such, there is no stable, coherent, or innate gender identity; gender is rather constructed by reiterative acts imitating the dominant conventions of what gender is supposed to entail. Accordingly, my analysis will consider “male” or “female” identity traits projected by the discourse not as innate characteristics intrinsically tied to their respective sex, but rather as social constructs.

By utilizing a theoretical framework informed by the above principles, I will first perform a discourse analysis concentrating on the debates that unfolded in German politics and media with regard to women in the years leading up to the appearance of *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. In order to do so, I will be both reiterating existing research on the topic and performing my own analysis based on selected articles and reports, whose relevance will be judged on the basis of their perceived influence on the discourse, e.g. by how frequently they appear or are cited. With regard to the selection of media, I will be adopting Imke Schmincke’s pragmatic approach by focusing on traditional mass media as being capable of constructing reality, such as newspaper and magazine articles, rather than relatively new media such as online blogs (145). In line with Helga Sadowski, who also adopted this approach in a 2016 article on digital feminisms, I consider traditional mass media to influence public opinion more than natively digital media which do not cross over into the mainstream sphere (66n4). Accordingly, while my analysis will focus primarily on newspaper and magazine articles, it will also include new media that made the transition to public discourse in the form of mass mediated news, e.g. the Twitter campaign #aufschrei.

I will then move on to the analysis of *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* with the goal of discerning the female images constructed in each work. To do this, I will be first performing a

close textual reading of *Die Glücklichen*, focusing primarily on the activities and utterances of the main female character, Isabell, as well as her interaction with other figures in the novel. Particular emphasis will be placed on those acts and utterances that explicitly or implicitly refer to Isabell's gender, as well as on passages illustrating her self-perception as a woman and her view of other women. For *Toni Erdmann*, I will be performing a film analysis geared principally towards the narrative level of the film, while incorporating those elements of mise-en-scène that point to characters' underlying thoughts or feelings, such as facial expressions and costume design. Once again, I will be focusing on the film's female protagonist, Ines, and on those utterances and elements that highlight her gender, her perception of herself as a woman, as well as her perception of other women. For both works, the analysis will be broken down into three distinct categories, namely family, work, and intimate relationships, while highlighting their points of intersection if applicable. Lastly, I will compare and contrast the results from both analyses with the goal of providing an answer to my research question, i.e. whether the female images constructed in *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* reflect or reject those found in recent public discourse on women in Germany.

Overall, my methodology will allow for a text-based, character-focused analysis that highlights the works' portrayal of women on the basis of their respective female protagonists. At the same time, it will allow for a productive side-by-side comparison between the female images constructed by the public discourse and those found in the novels. Thus, this project can reach conclusions about the points of intersection between contemporary public and literary discourse with regard to the portrayal of women, while taking into account the societal context in which these images are projected. However, some limitations to this approach must be acknowledged; namely, the nature of insights it is equipped to deliver. Since my methodology is geared towards

an analysis of literary works, the resulting observations concern primarily the portrayal of women in contemporary literary discourse in Germany as shown in *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. Accordingly, this project does not claim to produce insight into the broader public discourse surrounding women. Rather, it is limited to an analysis of the female images projected by these two works, influenced as they are by the public discourse on the topic.

Chapter 3: Overview of Public Discourse

In order to situate the selected works and the issues they address with regard to women in contemporary Germany within a larger sociopolitical context, this chapter will provide an overview of German public discourse on women in the years leading up to the release of my two primary texts. I will first name the main debates regarding women that occupied the public sphere and then offer a brief overview of how these unfolded in the media. Particular focus will be placed on the female images constructed through the discourse, which will later serve as a point of reference for the analysis of the selected works.

This chapter will focus on debates that took place between 2010 and 2014, while providing explanatory background from the years leading up to this period. The selection of the time frame is based on Kristine Bilkau's and Maren Ade's accounts of when they each wrote *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* respectively, with Bilkau reporting she worked on her debut novel over a period of four years leading up to its release (Hasse), while Ade worked on the film's screenplay for two years prior to filming, which began in 2014 (Heidsiek). Due to the proximity of the works' release dates, the time frame selected for the analysis was narrowed down to the years between 2010 and 2014. Although I do not argue that Bilkau's and Ade's writing was only influenced by the public discourse of these few years, I see the debates that unfolded during the works' inception and creation as the most influential and therefore most relevant to the analysis. Additionally, an examination of a longer time frame would go beyond the scope of this analysis, whose aim is not to delve into the female image as constructed by the public discourse, but rather to use that as a springboard for the analysis of the selected works.

Before I move on to the debates that dominated the public sphere in the first half of the 2010s, it is important to establish the context in which these debates took place. As mentioned in

the introduction, German public discourse on women since the turn of the millennium has been shaped to a large extent by the so-called “demography debate,” whose beginnings can be traced back to 2006, when a study published by Germany’s Federal Statistical Office called attention to the country’s falling birthrate (Eisenmenger et al.). Combined with an increase in citizens over the age of 65 due to higher life expectancy, the concern was raised that “die Deutschen sterben aus” (Radisch 15). This is not to say that other European countries were not experiencing a similar or even higher decline in birth rates. However, as Alexandra Merley Hill notes, the statistics were quickly inflated by the German media to create a national crisis, employing a “highly classed, racialized, and gendered discourse” that put the blame for the waning normative family on white, middle-class German women and their negatively connotated “career aspirations” (211-212). The debate quickly expanded to explore the reasons behind women’s perceived choice of career over family, with feminism named as one of the main culprits. *Der Spiegel* even featured a dramatic cover story on the topic, posing the question of whether feminism had encouraged women to become more selfish in pursuing a career (Wolf) – a sentiment that echoes the term “Rabenmütter,” used mostly in previous decades to describe mothers in paid jobs: heartless mother ravens, leaving their chicks to be cared for by others (Ferree 207). This led to a renewed public interest in feminism and women’s rights in Germany that would go on to inform public discourse for years to come, with multiple publications trying to reclaim feminism for a new generation of German women (Haaf et al.; Stöcker), as we will later discuss, and a constant focus on the compatibility of work and family.

This new discursive focus was also reflected in Germany’s family policy in the years following the outbreak of the debate. While previous cabinets had introduced a few years of pension credits for child rearing and up to three years of paid child-rearing leave, which

encouraged new mothers to stay out of the labour market, the conservative parties changed course under Merkel's chancellorship (Ferree 207). 2007 saw the introduction of Elterngeld, an income replacement scheme which lowered maternity leave allowances and shortened the length of the paid leave period, while providing an incentive for fathers to take a leave as well (Botsch 19). A paradigm shift in German family policy, Elterngeld effectively acknowledged mothers' rights to compete in the labour market, and, by encouraging fathers to contribute to child rearing, moved one step further from the male breadwinner bias of the previous decades – despite its continued prevalence (Kerber-Clasen 14). Introduced by then-Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth Ursula von der Leyen, Elterngeld was hailed as a win by many who saw it as promoting the compatibility of work and family (Schmincke 151). While it is indeed a step in that direction, non-conservatives have pointed out that the measure mainly benefitted parents of a good financial standing, while largely disregarding lower-income families and single mothers (Stöckle and Davison). The nuclear family seems to still be the focal point of gender and family policy in Germany, which is not surprising considering the country's larger sociopolitical influences; as Myra Marx Ferree notes, German politics has traditionally drawn on “both conservative views of patriarchal authority and social democratic ideals of justice to forge a social welfare state that prioritizes family support and the social reproduction of the nation” (5).

While it is important to establish Germany's mix of conservatism and social democracy regarding its gender policy, that is not to say that recent public discourse has focused solely on family matters, as the major debates in the years following Elterngeld demonstrate. On the contrary, issues relating to women in the workplace have been particularly dominant in terms of both policy-making and media coverage, with the issue of the female quota in management positions being the most prominent in the first half of the 2010s – and especially between 2011

and 2013 (Lang and Rybnikova). The issue of the gender pay gap, propelled into the spotlight in 2008 with the initiative Equal Pay Day, has also featured heavily in the discourse on women since the 2010s, while 2013 saw a nationwide debate on sexism unfold in the media, instigated by a sexist comment made by then-FDP chairman Rainer Brüderle towards a female journalist covering the federal election (“Sexismus-Debatte”; Stokowski). Meanwhile, family matters remained in the public eye, with the passing of a 2013 law which guaranteed children aged 1 to 3 a slot in a public daycare facility (“Rechtsanspruch”).

The main debates that informed public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s can thus be summed up in three categories: discrimination of women in the workplace (including the female quota and gender pay gap), sexism, and the compatibility of work and family (including the statutory right to a slot in a daycare facility as well as echoes of previous debates on Elterngeld and lower birth rates). To be sure, these categories – and the respective debates – are not mutually exclusive; discussions on the female quota, for example, are often interwoven with the issue of lower birth rates, with women’s career aspirations being cited as the reason for Germany’s ageing population, as mentioned above. However, it is important to look at each of them separately to discern the images they construct with regard to women, especially considering that most of these issues are addressed in one way or another in *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*, as the analysis will show.

Although the issue of a female quota on management boards had been a topic of political discussion since the 1990s, it didn’t gain momentum until 2011 when then-Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Ursula von der Leyen proposed a 30% quota for women in all management boards of public companies. The proposal was preceded by studies indicating that the voluntary self-commitment of a number of private companies who had either introduced a quota previously

or declared their willingness to do so had failed to increase the number of women in top management positions (Sinus Sociovision GmbH). Von der Leyen's proposal was initially met with reluctance but, following lengthy political debates, all parties agreed to call for a minimum quota of 30% for supervisory boards. Public discourse on the topic continued in 2012 and 2013, with both politicians and representatives of the business world weighing in on the detailed aspects of a quota (Lang and Rybnikova). The proposal to introduce a 30% quota on supervisory boards of large German companies was finally made in 2014, with the respective law passing in March 2015.

With regard to the portrayal of women, public discourse on the topic of the female quota centered mainly on women managers but, as a 2016 study found, failed to challenge gendered stereotypes regarding this group (Lang and Rybnikova). An analysis of articles from two right-wing newspapers, *Welt* and *Bild*, on the topic of the quota between 2011 and 2013 – although limited in its scope – found that the discussion around establishing a gender quota in supervisory boards was dominated by “dualistic categories and reductionist identity ascriptions” (Lang and Rybnikova 359), often describing women as either “over-feminine” or “over-masculine,” “exclusive” or “outsiders.” Despite the discourse's heterogeneity as well as the variety of images and argumentations presented over the course of the quota debate, both the opponents and supporters of a gender quota were found to reproduce stereotypical gendered images of women managers with an emphasis on such dualistic pairs as “family versus work.” Women were often referred to as being trapped between their work and family requirements – two distinct spheres framed as being mutually exclusive and naturally opposed to each other. Examples of women who were able to achieve a balance between the two conflicting worlds were presented as exceptions that prove the rule, and their success was not attributed to a generalizable potential of

women to combine career and family, but rather to individual competency and organizational excellence. Phrases such as “perfectly organized full-time career woman with child” by *Welt* (qtd. in Lang and Rybnikova 368) further show that the family takes a secondary role in this scenario, with the woman in question primarily defined by her career.

Although not explicitly addressed in *Die Glücklichen* or *Toni Erdmann*, the gender pay gap has, along with the female quota, been a central issue in the recent discourse on women in the workplace, and therefore merits a brief review. Germany has consistently had one of the highest gender pay gaps in the European Union with women earning on average 22% less than men – a figure that has remained stable since 2010 (Deutscher Bundestag). The issue first came into prominence with the initiative “Rote-Taschen-Kampagne” in 2007, spearheaded by the organization Business and Professional Women Germany, to raise awareness for the discrepancy in compensation between men and women. This initiative led to the establishment of an annual Equal Pay Day in Germany, which first took place in 2008. The issue has remained in the spotlight ever since, being revisited on an almost annual basis with each release of the official numbers for the gender pay gap by the German government. The figures for 2013 caused particular stir, as they coincided with the height of the quota debate, and prompted politicians pushing for a quota to take a stance in the media. Manuela Schwesig, then-Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, called for an elimination of the gender pay gap through a “better compatibility of family and work,” while then-Minister of Labour Andrea Nahles drew attention to the “part-time trap” affecting many new mothers (BMFSFJ). Once again, the balance of work and family is identified as a critical factor for women’s career advancement and it is made clear that there is still room for improvement.

The third debate that shaped German public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s concerned the topic of sexism and was incited by the Twitter campaign #aufschrei in early 2013. The campaign was created as a response to the scandal caused when a journalist covering the 2013 federal election accused then-FDP chairman Rainer Brüderle of sexual harassment (“Sexismus-Debatte”). Following the news, thousands of women took to Twitter using the hashtag #aufschrei to draw attention to the structural inequality of women by reporting instances of sexism and discrimination they had experienced – the first two weeks alone saw over 58,000 tweets using the hashtag (Sadowski). The campaign eventually spread to conventional media, including print journalism and television talk shows, with well-known public figures addressing the ubiquity of sexism in German society (Baer, “Redoing Feminism”). Despite the debate not centering on the construction of a distinct female image, questions of agency were raised with regard to responding to sexual harassment, with *Die Zeit* urging women to clearly state that they will not tolerate such behavior, thus bringing them “out of the passive victim role” (Groll). The image of the woman as a passive victim of sexist behaviour was central to this debate, while the workplace was often identified as the primary social environment in which such incidents take place. Attention was also drawn to the fact that women might tolerate such behaviour out of fear a reaction against it would impede their professional advancement – “schließlich geht es um die Karriere” (Groll).

Finally, questions of women’s societal role were raised in the discourse surrounding daycare facilities in Germany, particularly with regard to a law passed in 2013 guaranteeing every child between 1 and 3 years old a slot at a daycare facility (“Betreuungsplätze”). This law was part of a larger reform of the German daycare system, which has been taking place since the mid-2000s as part of Germany’s reoriented family politics in the face of the demography debate.

Recent policies have focused on the expansion of daycare facilities as well as on the implementation of educational programs aimed at improving the quality of teaching (Kerber-Clasen 13). These policies have been accompanied by a change in discourse regarding daycare facilities, which has seen them gain higher political, social, and financial value as institutions integral to the modernization of the German social state. The 2013 law is insofar noteworthy as it was geared towards enabling parents – particularly mothers – to reenter the workforce by being able to place children over 12 months in a daycare facility, which had up until that point been particularly problematic due to a lack of both slots and facilities. The law was also passed in the hopes that it would encourage families to have more children, with empirical evidence suggesting a correlation between the availability of daycare slots and higher birth rates (Heine).

While the discourse surrounding the 2013 daycare law was not inherently woman-centered, it did display many of the tendencies present in previous debates, particularly the one on *Elterngeld*, with regard to the portrayal of women. Like *Elterngeld*, the new daycare law aimed at promoting the compatibility of work and family by making it easier for parents to reenter the workforce after the birth of a child and seek full-time employment. Due to the aforementioned persistence of the male breadwinner bias in German society causing child-rearing to continue to be perceived as a female responsibility, the 2013 law was geared mainly towards reestablishing the relationship between motherhood – rather than fatherhood or parenthood – and employment (Kerber-Clasen 14). However, discussions in the media painted a less than optimistic picture, with many pointing out that Germany's high taxes and social security contributions take a heavy toll on women's wages ("A 200-Billion-Euro Waste"). As a result, women are still discouraged from seeking full-time employment, even though the majority of them consider it a priority (Allmendinger et al.). Women were thus, once again, portrayed as

being caught in a vicious circle of wanting to combine career and family but being largely prevented from doing so due to structural hurdles.

While the four debates presented were undoubtedly influential in their construction of a female image, they were certainly not alone in dealing with the topic of women in contemporary German society. Instances such as International Women's Day or isolated woman-related incidents and opinion pieces often led to lively discussions in the media, especially in the years between 2011 and 2013 against the backdrop of the quota debate. 2011 saw a particular surge of media coverage on International Women's Day, as the year marked its 100th anniversary. While public discourse on this occasion centered on the quota as the focal point of German women's struggle for equal rights rather than the portrayal of a distinct female image, a recurrent feature was the aforementioned dualistic pattern of women as either having "overly feminine" or "overly masculine" traits present in the quota debate. Former Family Minister von der Leyen was for instance quoted as saying that women are "nicht so risikofreudig wie Männer" and that they place bigger value on "soziale, emotionale Kompetenz" ("Weltfrauentag"), thereby identifying risk-taking as an inherently male trait, in whose place women have the (presumably inherently feminine) trait of emotional competence.

This dichotomist structure is further observed with regard to the portrayal of female politicians in Germany, a subject which has received considerable attention since the election of Angela Merkel as chancellor. The model of the emotional female politician is often contrasted with that of the rational statesman, with the former being attributed values such as weakness, naivety, and reluctance, while the latter being associated with power, strength, and a competitive spirit (Lünenborg and Maier). Interestingly, Merkel herself is attributed with a position of masculinity in the German media, but this recognition remains rooted in a gendered,

heteronormative system in which male and female are distinctive, mutually exclusive categories that occasionally allow for a woman to act as a man. Accordingly, a 2012 *Die Zeit* article saw in Merkel an embodiment of the “cowboy principle”: “unter einer harten Schale [verbirgt sich] oft ein weicher Kern” (Niejahr and Ulrich). The article goes on to describe women who reverse the cowboy principle as “weiblicher” and “emotionaler,” thereby reaffirming the gendered stereotype of the weak, emotional woman versus that of the hard, pragmatic man. Furthermore, as Lünenborg and Maier demonstrate, the attribution of “female” traits such as reluctance to male politicians is usually employed to symbolize defeat (193). This hierarchical and gendered dichotomist structure makes clear that the German media sees the political arena as a dominantly male terrain, where the woman must adopt traditional “male” qualities to be recognized as an equal.

A further dichotomy present in the portrayal of women in German public discourse is that between young and old. In the above-mentioned 2012 *Die Zeit* article, the examples given for the female politicians described as “weiblicher” and “emotionaler” include Julia Klöckner, Ilse Aigner, and Andrea Nahles, all of whom are younger in age than their “cowboy” counterparts who, besides Angela Merkel, include Christine Lieberknecht and Hannelore Kraft. The latter group is collectively referred to as “Generation Merkel,” which effectively frames a generational gap between young, emotional, and more female politicians on the one hand, and older, austere, and more pragmatic politicians on the other. This dichotomy expands beyond the realm of politics, as a 2013 article entitled “Das Modell Junge Frau” showcases (Schmidt). In it, the author puts forward the model of the “young woman” as a societal ideal, which he juxtaposes with that of the older, powerful woman, embodied – once again – by Angela Merkel. The young woman is intelligent, communicative, and trendy, and represents autonomy, freedom, and moral

integrity. Despite her high potential, however, her advancement is often hindered by the men hierarchically above her. The author of the article goes on to contrast the model of the young woman with three more archetypes often present in the media, namely the perfect mother, the working woman combining career and family, and the heroic single mother. According to the article, these types of women can't represent a societal ideal because, unlike the young woman, they lack "das Trendige, das Utopische, auch das Schicke" (Schmidt). What is noteworthy about this categorization, however, is the fact that all three types of the non-ideal woman have one element in common, namely that of motherhood. It could be theorized, therefore, that despite Germany's deep-seated paternalistic values and strong emphasis on motherhood, recent years have brought about a change in the collective mind. While motherhood remains a focal point of German family politics, it seems to be lacking an element of "trendiness" for young women and might be seen as keeping them from realizing their full potential – a mindset which may have contributed to the lower birth rate in recent years.

On the other side of the spectrum, the apparent austere pragmatism of the older generation may come at a price. A 2015 survey of women aged between 40 and 59 found that the vast majority are overwhelmed by their responsibilities, which only increase with age (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach). Dubbed the "sandwich generation," older women tend to be under constant time pressure, caught between having to care for their children on the one hand, and for their parents and in-laws on the other. And while men do contribute to household tasks, care and emotional support remain female responsibilities, ultimately leading to "Einsatz ohne jede Pause" (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 4). This seemingly endless pool of responsibilities is often cause for stress among women of this generation. Employed women are particularly prone to stress, worrying that they may be doing neither their work nor their family justice due to their

extremely tight time schedules. However, the majority of women report that they gladly take care of their loved ones, as they see it as both a moral responsibility and as a chance to give something back to the community. It is therefore not the care per se, but rather the challenging compatibility of work and family that leads to stress and time constraints. As a result, an increasing number of women are cutting back on their working hours or stop working altogether: of the women surveyed, about 78% were employed, of which only 30% full time. These numbers confirm Germany's status as one of the countries with the highest part-time employment ratio among women, with 46,6% of German women working part-time in 2015 (Eurostat).

Finally, the question of feminism has occupied much of public discourse on women since the outbreak of the demography debate in the mid-2000s. Germany's relationship with feminism is a particularly complex one, as evidenced by a general reluctance to even utter the word, which has been often described as an "Unwort" (Gebhardt, "Frauenbewegung"). Instead, discussions on feminism and its significance in modern German society are often labelled as "Geschlechterdebatten" in an attempt to avoid the stigma of radicalism that the term still carries in the collective mind. This negative image stems largely from a reluctance to identify with Germany's mainstream feminist figures, notably Alice Schwarzer. Dubbed the "brand name" of German feminism, Schwarzer has come to be synonymous with feminism and the women's movement in Germany (Gebhardt, *Alice im Niemandsland* 298). And while neither her influence nor her contributions to the advancement of women's rights can be denied, her controversial comments and absolutist stance in recent years have been often cited as one of the main reasons for German women's reluctance to identify as feminists. Schwarzer's image of women boils down to two distinct categories:

die starken Frauen, die feministisch Vorbildlichen, Politikerinnen, Karrierefrauen, Spitzensportlerinnen, Islamkritikerinnen – und die schwachen Frauen, die vom falschen Bewusstsein Infizierten, die Opfer des Patriarchats: Prostituierte, Pornodarstellerinnen, verwöhnte Macchiato-Mütter, Essgestörte, Verschleierte, Vergewaltigungsopfer.

(Gebhardt, *Alice im Niemandsland* 301)

Reminiscent of the dichotomies found in many of the above-discussed debates, this dualistic pattern of strong feminists versus weak victims of the patriarchy leaves little room for German women to identify with Alice Schwarzer and, by extension, with the feminism she represents.

However, Schwarzer is not alone in drawing women away from feminism. Anti-feminist discourse in mainstream German media has continually portrayed feminism – and feminists – as outdated and unfashionable, employing strategies that discredit the social arguments of equality feminism by displacing such claims into the sphere of the erotic, intimate, or personal, and thus labelling them as insignificant (Becker-Cantarino 10). Citing only selected statements by a few outspoken yet controversial feminists such as Alice Schwarzer, feminist gender negotiations are collectively portrayed in the media as ridiculous, hysteric, or even dangerous for the prosperity of German society, whose paternalistic values and recent demographic concerns still place women within the family and whose policies largely disregard socially or financially disadvantaged women.

This controversial portrayal of feminism in the media has, in recent years, led to various efforts to “reclaim” feminism for German women, particularly by those women who see themselves as proponents of women’s rights but do not identify with the dominant feminist image projected by the media. Between 2006 and 2011, a number of books were published by a new generation of self-proclaimed feminists with titles such as *Wir Alphamädchen* and *Das F-*

Wort, which aimed at reclaiming the concept of feminism according to the realities of being a woman in contemporary German society (Haaf et al.; Stöcker). These books gained widespread attention in the media, launching prominent – and often controversial – debates, which often centered around the question: “Brauchen wir einen neuen Feminismus?” (Gerhard 121). While the question remains largely unanswered, these books and the debates they spawned are a testament to feminism’s renewed relevance in German society as well as women’s waning reluctance to identify as feminists.

To sum up, German public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s is characterized by two recurring features with regard to the construction of a female image, namely a tendency towards dualistic identity ascriptions and an emphasis on the compatibility of work and family. Dualistic pairs are particularly frequent when portraying women in positions of power, such as managers or politicians, who tend to be described as either “over-feminine” or “over-masculine,” with the traditionally “feminine” traits often used synonymously with weakness or defeat. This is proof of the continued prevalence of a hierarchical, gendered system which not even inherently pro-woman discourses like the one surrounding the female quota were able to reverse. Additional dichotomies, for instance between young and trendy versus old and overwhelmed women, or between feminists versus victims of the patriarchy, further support this binary scheme and reaffirm the opposing criteria of weakness and strength as deciding factors for which of the two given categories one falls into. Finally, the compatibility of work and family – or lack thereof – is an overarching theme present in the majority of public discourse. Women are for the most part presented as unable to effectively achieve a balance between work and family due to structural hurdles, and the ones who succeed are seen as the exception that proves the rule. Overall, whether “strong” or “weak,” women are portrayed as being caught in a vicious circle of

wanting to combine career aspirations with family responsibilities, but constantly finding themselves in a position of disadvantage.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1: *Die Glücklichen*

Published in 2015, *Die Glücklichen* is the debut novel of German author and journalist Kristine Bilkau. Born 1974 in Hamburg, Bilkau had earned a number of accolades prior to the publication of her first novel, including a 2009 grant by the Literary Colloquium Berlin and a 2010 grant by the Künstlerdorf Schöppingen Foundation in support of new authors. In 2013, she took part in the Bayerische Akademie des Schreibens, an author-gearred seminar offered by the Literaturhaus München, where her draft of *Die Glücklichen* caught the attention of editor Susanne Krones of the Luchterhand publishing house (Hassel). Upon its publication, the novel earned largely positive reviews and went on to win multiple awards, including the Klaus-Michael-Kühne-Preis, the Hamburger Förderpreis für Literatur, as well as the prestigious Franz-Tumler-Preis, a biennial award to celebrate the best debut novel written in the German language.

Die Glücklichen tells the story of Isabell and Georg, a couple in their 30s who find themselves struggling financially after losing their jobs while at the same time battling a crisis in their relationship. The novel utilizes a third-person narrator, alternating between the points of view of Isabell and Georg, albeit with a focus on Isabell: of the 41 total chapters, 25 are told through her perspective, including the first and last chapter of the novel. The individual chapters are also grouped into two larger sections, one entitled “Bald ist Winter” and comprising chapters 1 through 19, and the second entitled “Wir haben Frühling.” The narrator is subjective rather than omniscient, with each chapter allowing insight into only one of the characters’ thoughts. Furthermore, the narrative time is present, with occasional flashbacks from Isabell and Georg’s childhood and early adulthood told in past tense.

The following pages will focus on the figure of Isabell and examine her portrayal as a woman throughout the novel. Particular emphasis will be placed on the areas of work, family, and relationships in her life, while exploring their points of intersection – or lack thereof. I will also consider passages alluding to her self-perception as a woman as well as her view of other women in order to further explore the female image (or images) constructed in the novel. Accordingly, the analysis will be largely based on passages from those chapters in *Die Glücklichen* written from Isabell's point of view, as they provide insight into her thoughts and thus allow for a more thorough analysis of her character. Furthermore, in order to examine the development of Isabell's character as the plot progresses, the analysis will consider passages from the entirety of the novel rather than the first or second subsection alone.

Isabell is introduced at the beginning of the novel's first chapter, which, as mentioned previously, is narrated through her perspective. She is a German woman in her mid-30s who works as a cellist for a local musical and lives in an unnamed German city together with her husband Georg and their 1-year-old son Matti. As with most figures in the novel, little information is given as to Isabell's physical appearance; the only feature revealed to the reader is her long, red hair (22). After growing up in a small town, Isabell moved to the city with her mother while still in school and has been living in the same apartment since, with the exception of a few years spent in London as a soloist. It is unclear how long she has been a couple with Georg, who is about 10 years older than her, or when they got married. At the outset of the novel, she is shown getting ready for her third evening at work after her maternity leave, which, considering Matti's age, is presumed to have lasted at least a year.

One of the first things we learn about Isabell, and the driving force behind many significant plot points in *Die Glücklichen*, is the fact that her right hand, with which she holds the

cello's bow, has begun to shake during performances. This issue is addressed in the novel's first scene, with Isabell writing the words "Meine Hände werden nicht zittern" (10) on two pieces of paper, which she later puts in her jeans' pockets before leaving for work. She then declines her husband's offer to have a cup of coffee, assuring him that she is concentrated enough without it, but then immediately thinks to herself that she meant to say "angespannt" instead of "konzentriert" (11). She instead opts for a warm glass of milk with honey, the reasoning behind her choice being that "warme Milch beruhigt die Nerven" (11). Despite the reason behind the shaking not having been explicitly named yet, this behaviour paints the picture of an individual under stress and suggests that the symptoms she is experiencing may be ascribed to fluctuations in her mental state, possibly anxiety. This suspicion is reinforced the following day, with Isabell reflecting on the shaking in her hand:

Das Zittern steckt in den Gedanken.

Von dort wandert es in die Hände. (25)

Isabell's condition is thus presented as psychosomatic, a fact she seems aware of from the outset. However, her hand seems to only be affected during her performance at the musical, as she later contemplates: "ihre Hände sind gesund, wenn sie für sich allein spielt. ... Doch im Theater kehrt die Angst zurück, jeder Abend ist wie eine sich selbst erfüllende Prophezeiung, kein unkontrolliertes Zittern, nein, es kommt auf den Punkt genau, wenn sie verwundbar ist" (79). By identifying her position as one of vulnerability, Isabell alludes to an underlying cause for the symptoms she is experiencing, which only seem to manifest themselves during the most demanding moments of her performance. This in turn points to a potentially problematic dynamic between her personal and professional life, which may be affecting her mental state and, by extension, her musical ability.

In order to discern the interconnections between the various aspects of Isabell's life, a closer look at each aspect is necessary, starting with her work. As mentioned previously, Isabell works as a cellist for a musical and performs six nights a week. Of her coworkers, only four are named throughout the novel: Sean, the orchestra's maestro and boss, Alexander, the first violin, Sebastian, the second violin, and Maggie, who plays the viola. Isabell's relationship with her coworkers is for the most part neutral; the only times they seem to be at odds is when the rest of the ensemble notices the slips in Isabell's performance and they subsequently comment on what they presume to be stage fright.

Aside from her hand shaking, Isabell seems largely content with her job, but it is eventually revealed that a spot at a musical is not what she was aspiring to. During flashback scenes, she describes herself at earlier stages in her career as "fleißig und immer gut vorbereitet" (233), "eine vielversprechende Kandidatin" (212), and "wohlsituert" (54). A diligent and promising student, Isabell expected her career to follow a steady, linear path that would ultimately lead to big opportunities. Towards the end of the novel, when she and Georg are discussing their unemployment and looking back at their original career aspirations, she reveals that she was expecting her career to culminate in her performing in Milan or Paris, or in recording a CD as a star soloist (296). Despite her high expectations, she doesn't seem resentful about her current position, the reason being that "es war gut bezahlt" (195). Isabell thus acknowledges that she has had to compromise and set aside her dreams of grandeur in order to gain financial security, an aspect of her work which she clearly prioritizes at this stage in her life.

While Isabell acknowledges that she has settled for a job she didn't originally aspire to, she doesn't doubt her ability as a cellist because of it. Her ability and, by extension, her success as a musician, is called into question only once her hand starts shaking during performances:

Einsatz Fagott, sie bringt sich in Position, achtet auf die Haltung, doch ihr fehlt die Kraft, sich gegen das Zittern zu widersetzen, sich zu verkrampfen, für ein bisschen Kontrolle. Ihr Einsatz klingt fragil und zaghaft. Sie lässt es geschehen, lässt alles geschehen ... doch dann gelingt plötzlich etwas, ihr Klang wird sogar einen Moment so voll und klar, wie es ganz selten geschieht, wie sie es nicht erzwingen kann, wie es nur möglich ist, wenn sie das Risiko annimmt, das ganze Risiko, wenn sie Fehler und Schönheit eng miteinander verwoben sein lässt. (104)

As this passage demonstrates, Isabell finds herself in a position of weakness leading up to and during the most demanding moments of her performance. She is described as fragile, hesitant, and unable to resist the shaking, which robs her of the control she once had. By “letting it all happen,” she finally caves in and adopts a passive role, overcome by a crushing fear of failure. However, once she momentarily lets go of that fear, she is able to play without hesitation and her sound is “full” and “clear.” By acknowledging failure and beauty as not necessarily incompatible, she is finally able to regain agency in her performance, even just for a brief moment.

Isabell’s pronounced fear of failure does, however, ultimately lead to failure in her professional life, as her contract is eventually not renewed, leading her to perceive herself as a failed cellist. Upon reading of a woman whose damaged amygdala prevented her from experiencing fear, Isabell concludes that “Mit einem beschädigten Mandelkern, wie ihn Leah H. hat, würde ich wahrscheinlich brillante Soli spielen, vielleicht wäre ich mit diesem Defekt eine erfolgreiche Cellistin geworden” (139). By branding herself a failure in her career, Isabell makes it clear that she has lost faith in her abilities and considers herself unable to perform well in her

current state. Her subsequent auditions seem to prove this point, and the novel ends with her still unemployed.

On top of losing faith in her abilities, Isabell's passion for playing the cello is also waning as the plot progresses. Although it is established that she used to practice the cello at home for her own enjoyment (66), she progressively loses interest in playing and only does so when she considers it necessary, e.g. to practice her solo before a performance or to prepare for an audition. Her lack of passion is explicitly addressed twice in the second half of the novel, the first time being when she meets her friend Miriam. During their meeting, Miriam asks Isabell where she would be interested in working as a cellist, to which Isabell thinks "als wäre das ein Kriterium ... Sie hat vergessen, was sie interessieren würde" (232-233). Furthermore, in one of the novel's final scenes, an acquaintance gives Isabell a compliment on her profession, commenting on how fortunate she must be for turning her passion into a job, yet she chooses not to reply and instead blends in with the crowd to escape the conversation (281). On the one hand, these two scenes reaffirm Isabell's loss of passion for her work, which is first evidenced by her increasing disinterest in playing the cello at home, and on the other hand reinforce her tendency to want to flee difficult situations, as demonstrated later in the analysis.

In spite of her waning passion for playing the cello, Isabell's desire to be employed stays intact, especially after her contract isn't renewed at the musical. She often reflects on her dissatisfaction with being unemployed, goes to auditions, and continues to see herself as a career woman, especially when that status is threatened. When Georg suggests that they move to a small town in the country where he could work as a local journalist, Isabell immediately rejects the idea saying that they wouldn't be able to stand the bleak routine of a small-town life, and adds "wo komme ich in deinen Überlegungen eigentlich vor? Hast du dich mal gefragt, was da

aus mir werden soll?“ (196). With this reaction, Isabell positions herself as an equal partner in her marriage with regard to her right to work, refusing to let her career be glossed over. In doing so, she effectively opposes the male breadwinner bias still largely present in German society (Kerber-Clasen 14). Isabell refuses to let herself land in a situation where only her husband’s career prospects are secured, even though she is aware of her consistently flawed performance and, as already discussed, considers herself a failed cellist. However, she still actively seeks out new opportunities and refuses to become a stay-at-home mother – a role which she explicitly rejects, as further analysis will show. Overall, Isabell demonstrates a strong desire to combine work and family, yet it quickly becomes clear that achieving a balance between the two is rather problematic in her case. Isabell’s case thus strongly resembles the female image projected in the context of the debate on German daycare facilities, according to which women are caught in a vicious circle of wanting to combine career and family but failing due to the apparent incompatibility of the two (Allmendinger et al.).

Following the analysis of Isabell’s professional life, a closer look at her personal life is needed to distill the points of intersection between the two and to discuss potential causes of conflict resulting from them, starting with Isabell’s family. In the interest of clarity, “family” will be used here to refer mainly to Isabell’s status as a mother and her role within the nuclear family she and Georg have founded – excluding, however, her intimate relationship with her husband, which will be the subject of the following section. Isabell’s relationship with her mother-in-law Erika will also be excluded from this section, as Isabell shares no close relationship with her for the majority of the plot and only visits her for Georg’s sake. However, given the significant role Erika eventually plays for Isabell’s character growth, the relationship between the two women will be covered extensively in the section on Isabell’s perception of other women.

Isabell's difficulty in balancing her work with her family is already addressed during the novel's first scene, in which she reflects on how her life has changed since giving birth to Matti: "Seit es Matti gibt, fallen ihr Abends die Augen zu, nun muss sie um diese Zeit wieder hellwach sein" (11). This passage clearly establishes a negative effect motherhood has had on Isabell's career, namely that she gets tired in the evenings, which is problematic due to the nature of her work. Considering the shaking in her hand, which only manifested itself after Isabell came back to work from her maternity leave, it could be argued that Isabell is suffering from post-partum depression. Reviewers of *Die Glücklichen* have often called attention to Isabell's "depressive" nature (Hasse) – there is, however, little evidence to attribute her symptoms to this condition alone. Whatever the underlying cause may be, it is clear that motherhood has taken its toll on Isabell's performance in the workplace. This is further evidenced by a passage from one of the novel's early chapters, in which Isabell struggles to put Matti to sleep: "die Erkenntnis, keinen Einfluss auf den Lärm und die Launen ihres Kindes zu haben, macht sie noch ungeduldiger; die Zeit zum Üben hängt am seidenen Faden" (32). Not only is she physically tired as a result of her sleeplessness after Matti's birth, but her time to practice the cello is at risk due to her motherly duties. Isabell hence finds herself under constant time pressure, much like the majority of young German women who wish to combine career and family (Allmendinger et al.).

Despite the initially rather negative portrayal of motherhood, later chapters in the novel often feature passages drawing attention to Isabell's love for Matti and her desire to protect and care for her son. In one such passage, Isabell is putting Matti to bed and reflecting on the beauty of moments like these, when she can fulfill her son's needs, and happily falls asleep next to him (133-134). This scene is repeated in one of the novel's final scenes, with Isabell once again contemplating the beauty of her sleeping child and the love she feels for him (252-253). Being

able to take care of Matti is clearly very important to Isabell, whose happiness later derives almost exclusively from seeing her son content, as she finds herself unemployed and deeply stressed. Furthermore, Isabell admits to being frustrated whenever Matti appears to be unhappy, in pain, or otherwise unsatisfied, as demonstrated previously. This frustration stems from her fear of not having control over her son's mood which, much like her lack of control over her bow hand, would brand her a failure in her role as a mother.

This mixed portrayal of motherhood, which is reinforced a number of times throughout the novel, is reminiscent of the image of the young, childless woman as a societal ideal present in recent public discourse. As mentioned previously, the model of the "young woman" was put forth as representative of women's highest potential (Schmidt); the young woman is intelligent, capable, and autonomous, with the latter largely attributed to her choice of career over family. In contrast, mothers lack an element of "trendiness," with motherhood essentially portrayed as an impediment to women's careers. In the case of Isabell, it is not motherhood per se that is depicted as a hindrance to her advancement, but rather the challenging compatibility of her professional and familial duties. Interestingly, though, the latter mostly involve her duties as a mother – she does, after all, blame her lack of time to practice the cello on the time she spends with Matti. In doing so, the responsibilities stemming from motherhood are ultimately portrayed as being incompatible with Isabell's desire to advance in her field. This view is thus in line with the recent paradigm shift in the German collective mind, according to which motherhood is gradually being de-idealized and instead seen as keeping women from reaching their full potential (Schmidt).

Following her work and family, the third aspect of Isabell's life to be examined in this section is her relationship with her husband, Georg. As mentioned previously, it is unclear how

long the two have been together or when they got married, while their status as a married couple is not revealed until the final third of the novel (223). Overall, Isabell and Georg's marriage is chiefly thematized in the context of their professional and financial struggles which, as the analysis will show, put a strain on their relationship. The only references of their love for each other are made during flashbacks from earlier stages of their relationship, such as when Isabell is looking at a photo of her that Georg took during their first trip together, which she describes as a "Liebeserklärung" (25). Interestingly, this profession of love only applies to Georg's feelings for Isabell, as he was the one taking the picture. The first mention of Isabell's love for Georg doesn't come until about halfway through the novel, when she reminisces about a business trip to Amsterdam she took with Georg and how they used to sit at a café, "glücklich erschöpft vom Verliebtsein" (130). This is indeed the only mention of Isabell's love for Georg as a partner throughout the novel, and, given its placement in a flashback, indicates a present emotional detachment from her husband. This is in part attributed to the birth of their son, as Isabell is often seen contemplating how their everyday life has changed since becoming parents: "Geschenkter Schlaf, in diesem Moment lustvoller als alle Vormittage, die sie und Georg im Bett verbracht haben, bevor sie Eltern wurden" (57). The excitement of physical intimacy with her husband is thus surpassed by the satisfaction of a nap while her child is sleeping, marking a shift in what Isabell considers exciting or "sensual."

Towards the beginning of the novel, Isabell's relationship with Georg is mainly characterized by a prevailing sense of comfort, as is to be expected of couples in long-term relationships. However, the two gradually lose both physical and emotional intimacy as they are forced to tackle issues threatening their financial standing. This process begins early on in the novel, during a scene in which Isabell is seen getting ready for work and pondering whether she

should leave her nails painted red. When Georg expresses his fondness for her nail colour, Isabell immediately responds with “Es geht aber nicht darum, was du findest” (66). To be sure, Isabell’s main concern is to not draw attention to her shaking-prone hands, yet the way she frames her response suggests a general disinterest in what her husband considers appealing. The element of romance is thus portrayed as lacking in their relationship, at least from Isabell’s side, who makes no effort to rekindle it. By dismissing the idea of Georg visiting her at the musical (66), Isabell also shows the first signs of trying to separate her work and family, which she sees as two distinct entities, as further passages will demonstrate. This distinction is primarily a means of control for Isabell, who often laments the toll motherhood has taken on her career, e.g. having less time to practice the cello. Keeping her professional and personal life apart is therefore a way for Isabell to regain control over a life which, as mentioned previously, she thinks is spinning out of her control.

As the plot progresses, Isabell and Georg’s relationship is characterized by a noticeable loss of physical intimacy, with kisses on the mouth being substituted by blowing kisses to each other from across the room (84) and culminating in Georg sleeping on the sofa instead of the bed he shares with his wife (197). When Georg gets a job offer, the two briefly regain physical intimacy, albeit contained to walking hand in hand and a single kiss on the cheek:

Auf dem Weg zum Restaurant schiebt Georg Matti in der Karre vor sich her, dann nimmt er ihre Hand, wie lange sind sie nicht mehr Hand in Hand irgendwohin spaziert. Sie streckt ihren Kopf und drückt die Lippen auf seine Wange. Sie bleibt stehen, ihr Mund auf seiner Haut, und schließt die Augen, es kommt ihr sogar verwegen vor, ihr Mund auf seiner Haut, so einfach geht das, verblüffend, wie einfach, obwohl die Kluft zwischen ihnen unüberwindbar schien. (164)

While Georg's hiring causes the couple to momentarily engage in physical contact, it is clear that there is a lack of emotional connection between the two, which Isabell goes so far as to call "insurmountable." In doing so, she not only establishes that the problems in their relationship are caused by more than just financial struggles, but also signifies her lack of faith in the relationship altogether; Isabell believes that she and Georg have grown apart to such an extent that their relationship can no longer be salvaged.

Isabell's lack of faith in her relationship being able to recover from this "chasm" between her and Georg is reinforced multiple times throughout the novel (216, 223, 225). In one such instance, she even goes so far as to call the idea that she and Georg would survive a life in the country "absurd" (216). However, given her absolute refusal to consider moving to a small town as well as Georg's established desire to be an "Aussteiger" (180), it is evident that it is *she* who would not be able to cope with life in the country in the long run.

In addition to her dismissal of a life in the country as well as the couple's financial and interpersonal struggles, Isabell provides another reason why she believes her relationship with Georg wouldn't survive, namely that "Sie wollte nichts Kaputtes, wollte nicht zu denen gehören, die aus den Trümmern ihrer Familie kletterten" (226). Interestingly, this train of thought is reminiscent of Isabell's linear view of her career, in that Isabell sees her relationship with Georg and, by extension, their family, as following a linear path that would inevitably lead to happiness instead of "wreckage." Moreover, Isabell once again brands her relationship as a lost cause and, in doing so, acknowledges its failure in keeping to linear, eventually successful path. This duality of success versus failure that seemingly dominates Isabell's view of both her professional and personal life has been often addressed in reviews of *Die Glücklichen*, the most notable – and critical – coming from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s Hans-Peter Kunisch. Kunisch sees in Isabell

and Georg the poster children of an entire generation that has “nicht viel mehr ... als ihre Erfolge,” going on to challenge the very necessity of a pattern such as success versus failure that is so ingrained in Isabell’s worldview. Indeed, this pattern seems to do more harm than good to the figure of Isabell, as the duality’s absolutist nature inevitably leads to Isabell branding herself a failure in all three areas of her life: an unsuccessful cellist, an uncaring wife, and an insecure mother.

So, considering Isabell’s view of her relationship as broken, the absence of any professions of her love for Georg, her mistrust of the institution of marriage (224), as well as the fact that she is already contemplating divorce (226), the question arises: why does she stay together with Georg? What is her reason for choosing to stay in a relationship whose problems she feels cannot be overcome? While the novel provides no explicit answer to this question, several passages from Isabell’s perspective point to her fear of acknowledging their failure as a couple as the driving force behind her choice to remain in the relationship. In one such instance, Isabell and Georg are viewing a house for sale in the country and, even though they have been distant and not spoken a word to each other throughout the viewing, Isabell decides to stand next to him because “wer will schon vor einem anderen Paar als unglücklich dastehen?” (214). This reasoning behind her choice to stand next to her husband is particularly noteworthy, as it is not borne out of a desire to interact with or be near him, but rather out of fear of appearing unhappy in the presence of another couple. In doing so, Isabell clearly distinguishes the real from the perceived image of her relationship, with the latter being undoubtedly more important to her. By standing next to her husband, Isabell is satisfying her need to *seem* like she is in a successful relationship, much like her need to *seem* wealthy when she visits the unemployment office carrying her most expensive bag (167). The image she projects is therefore of greater importance

to her than reflecting the realities of her life; as a result, she chooses to stay together with Georg, because divorcing him would shatter the seemingly picture-perfect image she has constructed of her relationship.

Another reason why Isabell ultimately chooses to stay together with Georg is provided through Erika's passing in the second half of the novel, leading Isabell to take an active role in her relationship by caring for her mourning husband. Her wish to be there for Georg, while not explicitly addressed, is mirrored in her actions following Erika's death, namely her taking care of him when he's sick (255), her initiative to start a pop-up market to sell Erika's belongings (276), and her holding Georg's hand at his mother's funeral (284).

However, these gestures are by themselves not indicative of a revival of emotional or physical intimacy between Isabell and Georg, which is merely hinted at in *Die Glücklichen's* final pages. The last scene of the novel sees Isabell and Georg spending an afternoon at the park, where, as mentioned previously, they discuss what they originally expected their lives to be. The playful exchange leads Isabell to reflect on the present moment with her family: "Dass sie hier zusammen sitzen, reden und dabei ihr Kind betrachten, *das* allein ist bedeutend" (296). While this can be interpreted as the beginning of a shift of focus for Isabell and Georg, with both partners reevaluating what they consider a sign of success in their life, there is no mention of a possible shift in or revival of their feelings for each other. Much like Isabell's work, their relationship seems largely unaffected by the ray of happiness the last scene displays, and will presumably remain strained unless they openly address it. The scene in the park is briefly interrupted by a flashback from a date between Isabell and Georg a few days prior, which further supports their lack of emotional openness towards each other. During the date, they "zeigten ... sich angestrengt von ihren besseren Seiten und umschifften alle schwierigen Themen, und auf

einmal war zwischen ihnen wieder Raum für etwas unwägbare Gutes” (298). This seemingly positive development has led a number of reviewers to interpret the *Die Glücklichen*’s ending as largely positive for the fate of Isabell and Georg’s relationship, with both the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Deutschlandfunk* interpreting the novel’s ending as conciliatory for the protagonists’ marriage (Kunisch; Hillgruber). Despite this being framed as a positive development, I argue that a closer look at the final passages reveals that this “imponderably good” atmosphere between the two is only possible when they don’t address the issues still present in their relationship. This raises the question of whether Isabell and Georg’s relationship recovers by the end of *Die Glücklichen*, for which the novel provides no clear answer, but rather, as we have seen, a mere hint at reconciliation.

Upon examining the areas of work, family, and relationships in Isabell’s life, we shall now turn to those passages in the novel addressing her self-perception as a woman as well as her view of other women. While the following passages do coincide with the aforementioned aspects of Isabell’s life, it is important to examine them separately, as doing so will be most productive for identifying the female image – or images – constructed in *Die Glücklichen*. Isabell’s self-perception as a woman will be examined first, based on passages relating to both her appearance and her character, followed by passages demonstrating her view of other women.

As mentioned previously, the only hint given as to Isabell’s physical appearance throughout the novel is her long, red hair (22). This reference is part of one of Isabell’s early inner monologues, in which she imagines what she would look like thirty years from now:

Manchmal, wenn er aus der Dusche steigt und die Tür offen steht, betrachtet sie ihn und stellt sich vor, wie es in dreißig Jahren sein wird. Sie, Mitte sechzig, mit hängenden Wangen und praktischem Kurzhaarschnitt, nein, mit langen Haaren, schulterlang

wenigstens noch. ... Isabell, die alte Dame mit dem Cello, etwas dünn der Zopf, aber noch rötlich und glänzend, weil sie ihre Friseurtermine einhält. (22)

It is thus established early on in the novel that Isabell's physical appearance is important to her, as she considers it proof of well-being. She rejects the idea of having a short haircut for practical reasons when she's older, instead wishing to keep her hair long and regularly dyed so as to conceal any gray hairs. Seeing as long hair has been traditionally considered a symbol of femininity and wealth, her insistence on keeping her hair long well into her sixties points to her desire to appear both feminine and prosperous as an older woman. In contrast, having a short haircut out of practicality equates to disregarding physical appearance according to her, and so translates into a loss of both perceived femininity and prosperity.

Isabell's view of physical appearance as a symbol of well-being – or lack thereof – is reinforced multiple times throughout the novel, particularly during her interactions with other people. In one such instance, Isabell is eating alone at a restaurant when she runs into her old colleague Maggie, with whom she worked together at the musical. Throughout their exchange, there are multiple references to Maggie's appearance; it is mentioned that she is carrying a bag from the expensive deli Isabell used to shop at, that she is wearing a white blouse with a shimmering brooch, and finally, that she is carrying a "schweres Etui aus schwarzem Lackleder" (176). The detailed description of Maggie's wallet is especially noteworthy, as it comes directly after a mention of Isabell's own wallet, which, in contrast, is not given any physical characteristics. This mirrors the current state of the two women, with Maggie still employed at the musical and seemingly happy with her life, demonstrated by her "energetic" mannerisms (176), and Isabell struggling to come to terms with her unemployment. The detail given to Maggie's appearance and expensive belongings can thus be interpreted as a sign of jealousy on

Isabell's part, who sees in Maggie a reminder of the success and happiness she is currently lacking.

As a final note on the topic of physical appearance, it should be noted that Isabell's views are partly influenced by the industry in which she is employed, a fact she explicitly acknowledges during an audition in the second half of the novel. While in the waiting room, Isabell is sitting among other applicants when she notices one of the men waiting to be auditioned, and immediately thinks: "Der Mann hatte keine Chance, allein die schütterten langen Haare, dieser Zopf, diese Stirnglatze, zu alt, keine Chance, egal, wie er spielen würde. Aussehen zählte, obwohl das keiner zugeben wollte" (205). In doing so, Isabell recognizes the music industry as one where looks play a more important role than talent – after all, she notes that the man wouldn't have a chance at the position, no matter how well he played. This hints at another possible source of pressure for Isabell, namely that of conforming to the beauty standards clearly present in her line of work in order to land a good position, and ultimately be considered successful.

Moving beyond physical appearance, confidence – or its lack – is the aspect most frequently highlighted when referring to Isabell's character, particularly after losing her job. As mentioned above, Isabell quickly begins doubting her abilities as a musician when she finds herself unemployed, which later leads to a loss of confidence altogether. In the second half of the novel, and after having already acknowledged that the shaking in her hands is psychosomatic, she deduces that "Das Zittern ist *ihre* Schwäche, *ihre* Schuld, sie entfacht es durch ihre Gedanken, sie bemüht sich nicht genug, ein zuversichtlicher Mensch zu werden" (211-212). Here, Isabell not only frames the shaking in her hands as a personal weakness, but explicitly attributes it to her lack of an effort to be confident. In doing so, she on the one hand admits to not

seeing herself as a confident person, and on the other implies that, if she were to try harder to gain confidence, the shaking would stop. Confidence is thus framed as not only being synonymous with strength, but also as a personal choice; Isabell believes it is within her power to be confident, but she is currently choosing not to be.

Despite Isabell admitting to her lack of confidence being her “fault,” she doesn’t take full responsibility of this self-proclaimed weakness, as she later attributes it to external factors as well. During a conversation with Georg, Isabell suggests they hire a cleaning lady to help Erika with household duties, to which Georg replies that he has enough time on his hands to be able to drop by and help Erika himself. The emotional tone of his response leads Isabell to think:

Ja, er fand sie herzlos, und vielleicht ist sie das auch. Vielleicht ist sie keine mitfühlende Gefährtin für schlechte Tage, keine Partnerin in Schwierigkeiten, keine Liebende, vielleicht ist sie nicht einmal eine gute Mutter. Sie erinnert sich an diese Hoffnung während der Schwangerschaft, nun ein anderer Mensch zu werden und alles richtig zu machen, eine geduldige, liebevolle, zuversichtliche Frau zu werden. Doch dann zerfiel diese Hoffnung nach und nach, stieß sich stumpf am Alltag. *So ist es, gewöhn dich dran.*
(225)

Here, confidence is listed among patience and affection as a quality Isabell wished to possess as a new mother, thus becoming “another person” than the one she is now, implying that she sees herself as someone who does not exhibit any of these qualities. The reason given here for her lack of confidence is the harsh reality of everyday life, which has prevented her from the change in attitude she believed would make her “do everything right.” The fault for her self-proclaimed weakness is thus shifted from internal to external factors, pointing to an individual who shies away from taking ownership of their shortcomings – also exemplified in her tendency to blame

Georg for their financial and personal issues (146, 238). Furthermore, Isabell's doubt in her role as both a partner and a mother is evident in this passage, as she lists the functions she considers herself to be failing at, namely being a caring companion, a loving partner, and a good mother. Interestingly, her train of thought quickly shifts from doubting her role as a partner to doubting her success as a mother, which is undeniably more important to her, as we have previously seen. However, her perceived lack of patience, affection, and confidence lead her to question her success as a mother altogether.

Isabell's disappointment in her role as a mother is equally, if not more, pronounced when she is referring to other mothers. After a woman at Matti's daycare asks her whether she would like to arrange a playdate between their two sons, Isabell reflects on feeling like an outsider when she finds herself among the rest of the mothers at the daycare centre, "als wären die anderen richtige Mütter, sie selbst aber nicht" (260). In doing so, Isabell compares herself directly with the other mothers, only to conclude that she considers herself a fraud in her role as a mother. What constitutes a "richtige Mutter" in Isabell's eyes is, however, not contained to the three qualities listed above, namely patience, affection, and confidence, but extends to being able to juggle motherly duties with other responsibilities, as an early passage demonstrates: "Im Café jammerten die Mütter ... und Isabell dachte, ihr blöden Mütterkühe, die ihr alles so mühelos schafft" (58). Here, Isabell identifies the ability to accomplish everything "effortlessly" as a sign of a successful mother, reinforcing the ideal of the "Supermutter" often present in public discourse (Stöckle and Davison). However, her observation is quickly invalidated by a fellow mother who draws Isabell's attention to the fact that most of these seemingly perfect women are lying about how easily they cope with motherhood, when in fact they struggle just as much as

Isabell does (58-59). This reversal mirrors the mixed portrayal of motherhood discussed earlier in this chapter, with both positive and negative aspects being addressed.

Another instance of Isabell comparing herself to other women reveals a further feature of a “real” mother according to her, namely the ability to successfully combine work and family. When commenting on how Matti still cries whenever she drops him off at daycare, Isabell concludes that it must be her fault that her child is so attached to her, because she doesn’t leave the daycare “leichterzig . . . , oder eilig, unter Zeitdruck, wie andere Mütter, die in ihre Agentur, Firma oder Praxis hetzen” (168). Interestingly, the time constraints from being a working mother are presented here in a positive light, as they result in a child’s detachment from the mother – something which Isabell admits to failing in. Combined with Isabell’s aforementioned desire to be employed, the model of the working mother is thus elevated into something to aspire to, despite the time pressure it apparently entails. As discussed in the previous chapter, the stress and time pressure stemming from the combination of motherhood and employment are frequently highlighted in recent public discourse, thus making the figure of Isabell reflect the image of working mothers projected in the discourse. Isabell’s apparent admiration of other working mothers further supports this argument, as German women have in recent surveys expressed the wish to combine career and family rather than focus on one or the other (Allmendinger).

As we have seen, a common theme in Isabell’s self-perception is her tendency to compare herself with other women in order to evaluate to what extent she can identify with them. These comparisons provide an insight to what Isabell considers the possible category – or categories – of women one could belong to, as the following passage demonstrates:

Sie befürchtet, die anderen [Mütter] spüren, dass sie eine Täuschung ist. Sie hat das Gefühl dafür verloren, welche Rolle sie erfüllen soll. Ist sie nun eine Vollzeitmutter? – Dann aber keine zufriedene, behütete, versorgt von einem Mann. Ist sie eine Musikerin mit Kind? – Aber keine erfolgreiche. Wird sie in einigen Monaten eine Sozialhilfemutter sein, die es zu verbergen versucht? Dann würden die Mütter es bald merken, ... dass mit ihr etwas nicht stimmt. (260)

Here, Isabell identifies three distinct groups of women to which she could belong, namely the full-time mother, the musician with child, and the mother on welfare. The shared element among all three types is that of motherhood, which is perhaps owed to the fact that Isabell is comparing herself to the mothers she comes across at Matti's daycare, but at the same time reinforces the importance Isabell places on being a mother. Taking into account that the third type, i.e. the mother on welfare, is only framed as a possibility of the future, the two types Isabell is currently vacillating between are the full-time mother and the musician with child.

In the case of the full-time mother, the focus is clearly on the family, particularly on child-bearing and -rearing. In order for this type of woman to be successful in Isabell's eyes, she should be satisfied, protected, and provided for by a man. Emotional and financial stability are thus the deciding factors in determining whether being a full-time mother is something to aspire to in Isabell's eyes, with the latter explicitly referred to as a male responsibility. Accordingly, being a successful full-time mother is only possible in the context of a family with a male and a female partner, effectively excluding other family models. In contrast, the ideal version of the musician with child is only ascribed one characteristic by Isabell, namely success. What is not clarified, however, is whether this success refers merely to her career or rather to the balancing act between career and family. Given Isabell's insistence on being employed as well as her

previously discussed concerns about motherhood coming in the way of her work, it is likely that success refers here to both an accomplished career and a good balance between professional and household responsibilities. The fact that Isabell quickly dismisses this female figure as a representation of herself by branding herself “unsuccessful” points to her admitting to failing not just in her field of work, but also in effectively combining work and family.

Despite Isabell herself refusing to identify with either of the two archetypes of women she presents, these are embodied by two other significant women in Isabell’s life, namely her mother and Georg’s mother Erika. The lives of both women are frequently referenced throughout the novel, with Isabell’s mother being an example of a successful working mother in Isabell’s eyes, and Erika presented as the epitome of the full-time mother. The following pages will provide an overview of the portrayal of both women while demonstrating their assignment to the aforementioned categories and examine if and to what extent Isabell’s perception of each woman shifts as the plot progresses.

Despite being Georg’s mother, the first mention of Erika in *Die Glücklichen* occurs through Isabell’s eyes in one of the novel’s early scenes, which sees the family visiting Erika at her home: “Hinter diesem Schaufenster wohnt Erika, Isabell empfindet, wie immer, eine Spur Ekel, für den sie sich gleichzeitig schämt” (45). Erika’s introduction thus immediately establishes Isabell’s negative view of her mother-in-law, the reasons for which are quickly revealed: Isabell sees Erika as a brittle old lady who often acts in a way meant to elicit sympathy from others. Her only source of happiness is the occasional visit from her son and his family, which she often tries to elongate by finding excuses for her son to fix things around the house, or by giving old electronic devices to Isabell and Georg, unaware that they are long outdated. This behaviour leads Isabell to repeatedly describe Erika as “bedürftig” (49, 143) and “bedrückend”

(143), and to note that she feels no empathy whatsoever for her mother-in-law. Isabell even goes so far as to call Erika an “alte Schachtel” (51) and to express her disgust at the thought of turning into a burden for Matti when she’s older, much like Erika currently is for her and Georg.

Isabell’s frustration at having to visit and occasionally take care of Erika, which is informed by her overall negative view of her mother-in-law’s “needy” nature, is insofar significant as it opposes the image of women painted by recent public discourse with regard to caring for elders. As discussed in the previous chapter, the majority of German women in a 2015 survey reported that they gladly take care of elder members of their family, seeing it as both a moral responsibility on their part and as a chance to give something back to the community (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 4). This is evidently not the case with Isabell, who frequently expresses her frustration at having to visit her mother-in-law and even goes so far as to portray Erika’s old age and resulting helplessness in a negative light. To be sure, this discrepancy could be attributed to the age difference between Isabell and the surveyed women, with Isabell being in her 30s and the survey’s subjects ranging between 40 and 59. However, it should be noted that Isabell does exhibit other traits ascribed to this age group, which was dubbed the “sandwich generation” due to their endless pool of responsibilities towards both younger and older members of their family. Isabell, too, seems to be caught between having to care for both her son and her mother-in-law, which, combined with her work-related responsibilities, leads to “Einsatz ohne jede Pause” in her case as well (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 4); in this regard, the figure of Isabell therefore mirrors a distinct female image projected in public discourse which does not correspond with her age.

Interestingly, Isabell acknowledges early on that her negative view of Erika is not just informed by her mother-in-law's "needy" nature, but also shaped by Isabell's view of her own mother:

Sie könnte Georgs Mutter rührend finden, wäre sie irgendeine Dame aus der Nachbarschaft, irgendeine seltsame Ladenfrau, mit der sie nichts zu tun hätte, mit der sie über das Wetter plaudern könnte, aber nicht *müsste*. ... Sie ist halt kein Familienmensch und muss an ihre eigene Mutter denken, die zehn Jahre jünger als Erika ist und Silberschmuck mit Türkisen trägt. Sie stellt sich die beiden Frauen nebeneinander vor, bekommt ihre Mutter aber nicht dazu, sich an diesen Kaffeetisch zu setzen. Ihre Mutter ist da kompromissloser als sie selbst. (47)

One of the most revealing passages in the novel in terms of discerning female images, this direct comparison between Erika and Isabell's mother – whose name is interestingly never revealed – contains several clues as to how Isabell sees Erika, her mother, and herself. To begin with, Isabell's lack of empathy for Erika is reaffirmed, whom Isabell now describes as "strange." Isabell notes that she might have found Erika touching were she not forced to spend time with her and, by extension, were she not familiar with Erika's background. However, knowing Erika, Isabell can't help but compare her to her own mother, whom Isabell clearly admires. In noting her mother's love for jewelry and describing her as an "uncompromising" woman, Isabell highlights a few of the qualities she feels Erika is lacking, namely a well put-together exterior – which Isabell places significant value on – and a strong will.

In addition, Isabell's declaration that she is "halt kein Familienmensch" hints at the underlying reason for Isabell's disdain for Erika and her admiration of her mother; namely, Isabell sees the former as the embodiment of the type "full-time mother," a role she apparently

rejects for herself, while the latter as an emancipated working woman. To illustrate the difference between the two women, a look at their respective backgrounds is needed. Erika is revealed to have lived together with her husband and son in the same building as the family's electronic store until she died, her main responsibilities being household duties and occasionally helping out at the store (277). In contrast, Isabell's mother left her husband at an early age, moving to the city together with a young Isabell, and eventually moving again to the south of Germany, where she still lives and works (52).

Isabell's admiration of her mother is frequently reinforced throughout the novel, especially when Isabell mentally compares her with Erika. In one such instance, Isabell notices that Erika is using an excuse to make her and Georg extend their visit and immediately reflects on how happy she is that her own mother is living on her own and not constantly waiting for her child to visit her (52). Later in the novel, Isabell is writing something down in her calendar when she suddenly notices that her handwriting is similar to her mother's, which brings back positive memories from their time living together (207). Finally, it is Isabell's urge to follow in her mother's footsteps by taking Matti and moving away from Georg that best exemplifies her desire to be like her mother (227). In framing her mother's actions as well as aspects of her character – e.g. her “uncompromising” nature – in a positive light, and ultimately by wanting to follow the same life path she once did, it is clear that Isabell sees her mother as someone to emulate. Isabell's mother thus fulfills the function of a role model for Isabell; a strong, independent woman who had the courage to start a new life instead of the weak, needy “old bag” Isabell sees in Erika.

As the plot progresses, however, Isabell's relationship with her mother is revealed to not be as ideal as one would have expected. Despite her aforementioned admiration of her mother

and the frequent references to her, leading the reader to presume that the two share a close relationship, Isabell is only seen interacting with her mother on two occasions, both being phone calls. Interestingly, both conversations are remarkably short – about two pages in length – and mostly consist of short, factual questions and equally short answers. Moreover, both include Isabell lying to her mother about her mental state; during the first conversation, Isabell lies about not knowing whether she's under stress, while in the second she defensively says that she is not upset, even though she clearly is (110, 266). Isabell's choice to not be completely open with her mother about what she is going through may be attributed to her seeing her mother as a strong woman, to whom she doesn't want to admit to weakness. However, regardless of the reasoning behind her choice, the lack of emotional connection between the two women is evident based on their interactions.

Interestingly, as Isabell's relationship with her mother shows signs of emotional distancing, her perception of Erika undergoes a noticeable shift. In one of the novel's final scenes, Isabell is arranging a pop-up flea market to sell her deceased mother-in-law's belongings, when she suddenly decides to breathe in Erika's scent as she opens the door to her closet instead of holding her breath, as she normally does. This leads her to reflect on what Erika's life must have looked like:

Die Frau, die in Rock und Bluse hinter dem Tresen stand, Isabell stellt sie sich vor. Eine Frau, Mitte vierzig, keine junge Mutter, eine späte für damalige Zeit, die ihrem Jungen bei den Hausaufgaben half, die mit ihrem Mann in diesem Bett schlief, die in einem eleganten Kleid an der Spüle stand und beim eiligen Abwaschen in den Hof schaute, die beim Klingeln der Ladenglocke schnell nach vorn ging, eine Frau, die Laden und Familie gut im Griff hatte, die in dieser Gegend eine Bekanntheit war, deren Sohn ein behütetes

Kind war; ... alles, alles spielte sich in diesen Räumen ab. ... Solche Tage sind nicht arm. Was für ein Privileg für sie, an dem Ort alt zu werden, an dem sie jung gewesen ist. Erika muss eine zufriedene, ja, eine glückliche Frau gewesen sein. (277)

This passage marks a significant shift in Isabell's perception of both Erika and herself, as she redefines her idea of what a woman's life can look like in order for her to be happy. As Isabell takes a closer look at Erika's life, she realizes that her mother-in-law was much more than the needy, depressing woman Isabell had thought her to be. Moving away from the dualistic categories of full-time mother versus career woman, Isabell sees in Erika a new type of woman, one who succeeded in all aspects of her life – her work, family, and relationship with her husband. More importantly, however, Isabell sees in Erika a woman who had everything under control; someone who successfully combined work with family – even if her work consisted of simply helping out at the family's electronics store – and did so “elegantly.” Concluding that Erika must have been a happy woman, Isabell finds strength in what she previously considered to be a sign of weakness, namely the freedom to lead a quiet life with one's family that doesn't necessarily include grand concerts in Paris and Milan or the desire to flee once things get difficult. Erika thus becomes a role model for Isabell, who, in highlighting the fact that Erika had “Laden und Familie gut im Griff,” identifies the compatibility of work and family as a key factor in determining a woman's success and, by extension, happiness. While *Die Glücklichen's* ending is rather ambiguous as to Isabell's future, her admission that she feels “happy” (300) in the novel's final scene points to her adopting this new type of female figure she sees in Erika. Instead of trying to fit into fixed categories such as the full-time mother or the working woman and wondering what her role is, Isabell turns her attention to achieving a balance between the various aspects in her life, just as Erika successfully did.

In conclusion, author Kristine Bilkau paints in *Isabell* the portrait of a highly troubled individual struggling to find her role as a woman. Isabell initially believes that she can only belong to one of two categories of women – either the full-time mother or the working woman – thereby presenting women as caught between prioritizing either their work or their family, two distinct spheres apparently incompatible with each other. While she initially identifies more with the model of the working woman, or the “musician with child,” the loss of her job leads her to question what role she fulfills as a woman. She is reluctant to identify with the model of the full-time mother, since she feels that she does not meet the criteria to be one; she is neither content with her current family dynamic nor provided for by her husband. Interestingly, this type of woman is embodied in her mother-in-law Erika, whom Isabell initially dismisses as weak, while the type of the working woman is embodied in Isabell’s own mother, whom Isabell praises as strong and independent. However, Erika’s death leads Isabell to abandon her dualistic scheme, eventually realizing that she doesn’t need to prioritize either her work or her family in order to not feel lost in her role as a woman. Instead, Isabell turns to achieving a balance between the two aspects of her life initially perceived as incompatible. The compatibility of work and family thus becomes the bridge between the two aforementioned female archetypes, ultimately creating a third type: the “glückliche Frau,” a woman who successfully juggles her work and family and, in doing so, is in full control of her life.

4.2: *Toni Erdmann*

Toni Erdmann is a 2016 film written, directed, and co-produced by German filmmaker Maren Ade. At the time of its release, Ade was already known to both German and international film audiences, having written and directed two critically acclaimed feature films: *Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen* (2003) and *Alle Anderen* (2009). Both films received awards at international film festivals and were (at least in part) produced by Komplizen Film, a production company co-founded by Ade in 2000. In 2012, Ade began working on the screenplay for her third feature film, *Toni Erdmann*, which was subsequently filmed over a period of three months in 2014 in Germany and Romania (Heidsiek; “Toni Erdmann”). The film premiered at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, where it was selected to compete for the Palme d’Or, but lost to Ken Loach’s *I, Daniel Blake* (2016). A critical and commercial success, *Toni Erdmann* went on to win multiple accolades at various international festivals, including Best Film at the European Film Awards, and was the first German-language film since Michael Haneke’s *Das weiße Band* (2009) to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film; it lost to *The Salesman* (2016).

Toni Erdmann centers on the relationship between Winfried Conradi, a middle-aged piano teacher living in Aachen, and his daughter Ines, a 30-year-old business consultant based in Bucharest. When Winfried visits Ines unexpectedly after his dog dies, she must learn to cope with her father’s practical jokes, most notably his alter ego “Toni Erdmann” – a persona Winfried adopts by donning a wig and a set of fake teeth and introducing himself as a life coach. With a runtime of 162 minutes, *Toni Erdmann*’s plot takes place over a period of several months and unfolds in chronological order with no jumps in time. The film is highly unstylized, utilizing natural settings and an exclusively diegetic sound while filmed with a handheld camera. Despite

being named after Winfried's alter ego, *Toni Erdmann* follows both Winfried and Ines in their personal and professional lives, with a number of scenes originally focused on only one character often culminating in an interaction between the two.

In order to detect the female images constructed in *Toni Erdmann*, this chapter will focus on the character of Ines and examine her portrayal as a woman throughout the film. Following a brief introduction of her character, the analysis of Ines' portrayal will be broken down into three categories, namely work, family, and relationships, while considering their points of intersection. Similar to *Die Glücklichen*, the analysis will be supplemented by actions and utterances alluding to Ines' self-perception as a woman as well as her view of other women. Accordingly, the analysis will be chiefly based on scenes directly involving Ines and, to a lesser extent, scenes containing mentions of her character, thus allowing for an in-depth examination of her figure. Finally, the observations resulting from the analysis will be summarized in order to present the female image (or images) constructed in the film.

The first mention of Ines in *Toni Erdmann* occurs in one of the film's early scenes, in which Winfried, played by Austrian actor Peter Simonischek, is visiting his elderly mother Annegret. Before leaving his mother's house, Winfried tells her that he might bring Ines along for a visit the following day, as "die ist wohl auf der Durchreise" (00:06:47). The ease with which the line is delivered, as well as the lack of surprise on Annegret's part upon hearing the news, establishes that Ines travels frequently to and from Germany, presumably for professional reasons. Furthermore, the use of the particle "wohl" by Winfried foreshadows the lack of a close relationship to his daughter – a recurring motif throughout the film, as the analysis will demonstrate.

Indeed, the rather distant relationship between Winfried and Ines is addressed heavily in the first scene involving both characters, which takes place at Renate's house (Winfried's ex-wife and Ines' mother). The scene begins with Winfried arriving alone at his ex-wife's house, where he is greeted by her and her husband Gerhard. Upon entering the dining room, Winfried greets three more people: Bärbel, a friend of Renate's, Gerhard's son Oliver, and Oliver's girlfriend Babette. After exchanging pleasantries with the guests, Winfried asks Renate if Ines has arrived, to which she replies "doch doch, telefoniert noch" (00:10:37), pointing to the balcony, where the silhouette of a blonde woman can be seen. Upon recognizing his daughter, Winfried taps lightly on the glass door separating the dining room from the balcony, which prompts Ines, played by German actress Sandra Hüller, to look in his direction and nod slightly (00:10:41). While Ines' reserved reaction upon seeing her father can be attributed to her being distracted by the – presumably important – phone call she is on, this small gesture, along with the presence of a physical obstacle between the two characters, creates a sense of emotional detachment between father and daughter.

The first pieces of information concerning Ines' life and work are revealed to the audience while Ines is still out of frame, during a conversation between Winfried and the rest of the guests. After greeting his daughter through the window, Winfried enters a conversation with Renate and Gerhard about Ines, and quickly learns from Gerhard that Ines just flew in from Shanghai. The news come as a shock to Winfried, who immediately asks "ist sie nicht mehr in Bukarest?" (00:11:07), thus establishing his lacking knowledge of his daughter's whereabouts, who seems to confide more in her mother and stepfather than in Winfried. However, Gerhard replies that Ines is indeed still based in Bucharest, but was on a business trip to Shanghai to meet with potential clients, including the head of Siemens, because her company is considering

opening an office there which Ines intends to lead. Despite the exact nature of Ines' work not having been revealed yet, it is clear that she works in a high-status environment and often deals with the German business elite, as Gerhard's follow-up comment demonstrates: "Das ist schon ein Wahnsinn, mit welchen Schwergewichten sie da im Ring steht" (00:11:31). Here, the use of a boxing metaphor frames Ines' work environment as one of aggressiveness and confrontation, with Ines herself taking on the role of a fighter. The assumption is that Ines has to fight in order to succeed in her work; peaceful means are not enough. This imagery is reminiscent of the journalistic coverage of top German politicians, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, remains within the logic of a gendered system. While the model of the "fighter" is often applied to women in positions of power, such as Angela Merkel, these women are attributed with a position of masculinity rather than femininity (Lünenborg and Maier 192). Given that traditionally "masculine" traits are synonymous with strength and victory, as previously discussed, this reinforces an ideology that subordinates women to men and ultimately maintains the dominant hierarchical gender order instead of challenging it.

Despite Gerhard's comment containing an element of admiration, it should be noted that Ines is not described as a fellow "heavyweight" in this scenario, leaving the outcome of the fight up to the viewer. To be sure, Gerhard omitting his stepdaughter from the "heavyweight" category is not enough by itself to claim that Ines' work is being belittled (much less on the grounds of her gender). However, the conversation takes an interesting turn once Gerhard's son, Oliver, gets involved:

BÄRBEL. Und in Bukarest, was macht sie da?

GERHARD. Öl. Öl-Business.

OLIVER. Na, also die berät da nur [eine] Ölfirma, also sie ist immer noch

Unternehmensberaterin.

BÄRBEL. Ach so, [ja]. (00:11:36-00:11:49)

Oliver's intervention, while fulfilling an expository function, is insofar noteworthy as it implicitly attaches value to Ines' work. Oliver is visibly uncomfortable while his father is praising Ines' professional achievements (00:11:40-00:11:43), presumably out of jealousy, and proceeds to clarify the nature of Ines' work. The use of the adverb "nur," along with an audible laugh on Oliver's part while uttering the word "Unternehmensberaterin" (00:11:47), effectively places a lesser value to Ines' position as a consultant compared to being employed in the oil industry, thereby undermining her status. While Oliver's devaluation of his stepsister's work is presumably borne out of jealousy rather than owed to Ines' gender, it is important to note that this is the first instance of Ines' professional life being addressed. This exchange thus sets the tone for the perception of Ines' work, which, as further analysis will demonstrate, is not without its challenges.

Ines is introduced to the audience shortly after this conversation takes place, as she enters the dining room to greet her father after ending her phone call (00:12:11). She is dressed in a dark blue structured suit paired with a light blue shirt, with minimal make-up on and her shoulder-length hair tucked behind her ears. Her formal attire, evocative more of board room meetings than family dinners, stands in stark contrast to her casually dressed family and friends, and suggests she might have travelled to her mother's house directly after a business meeting. Whatever the reasoning behind her choice of clothing is, Ines' physical appearance is clearly centered around her professional identity, thus establishing her as a career woman. In fact, her job as a business consultant is among the few pieces of information revealed to the audience concerning Ines' life and background throughout the film. Along with the fact that most scenes

involving her character take place in her work environment, as further analysis will show, this effectively places Ines' job in the foreground, begging a closer examination of the particularities of both her work and its interplay with other areas in her life.

In order to explore the portrayal of Ines as a female figure and discern the interconnections between her work, family, and relationships, a closer look at each aspect of her life is necessary, starting with her work. As we have seen, Ines is introduced as a career woman from the outset, donning plain, structured suits and being constantly on business calls, even during family dinners. Little to no information is revealed regarding her academic or professional background, except for the fact that she works as a business consultant at Morrison's and has been living in Bucharest for almost a year (00:27:02). Her ongoing task, which is the subject of a number of scenes, is an outsourcing project for the oil business, led by businessman Henneberg. As the plot progresses, a small number of Ines' colleagues is introduced, including Tim, her colleague and frequent sexual partner, her boss Gerald, and finally Anca, Ines' Romanian assistant.

At the outset of the movie, Ines seems to have everything under control in her professional life, which, judging by the prospect of her leading her company's new office in Shanghai, appears to be on an upward trajectory. One of her most highlighted traits is her ability "dem Klient [*sic*] zu erklären, was er eigentlich will" (00:22:24), which, according to her father, Ines possesses both on and off the job. Ines is thus portrayed as a highly capable consultant and a great fit for the ruthless realities of the business she is employed in, leading critics to often describe her character as a "versteinerte Medusa im Olymp der kapitalistischen Helden" (Assheuer). The nature of her work, which frequently involves laying off hundreds of employees at once, has left Ines apparently immune to empathy: when her contractor, Illiescu, fires a worker

during a visit to an oil site, Winfried begs Ines to make him reconsider, to which Ines replies “je mehr er entlässt, desto weniger muss ich dann entlassen” (01:48:43). The casualness with which this line is delivered implies that Ines sees layoffs merely as a means for business optimization, with no regard for the potential human cost they entail. This portrayal is in line with what Lang and Rybnikova call the “stereotypical masculinity of women managers” (369), according to which women managers are often attributed with “persistence” and “hardness” – traits traditionally ascribed to men and thus synonymous with power and success, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Ines’ pragmatism and ruthlessness are not only recognized in her work environment, but function as grounds for respect and admiration by her colleagues and superiors. After giving a presentation on her proposed outsourcing approach for Henneberg, Ines’ boss congratulates her on her work and, before leaving the room, adds “du bist ein Tier, Ines” (01:00:42). Similar to the boxing metaphor from the dinner scene, this likening of Ines to an animal serves to highlight both the intense nature of her work and her ruthless character. By applying a semantic repertoire of aggression and animalism to the character of Ines, which is chiefly used in public discourse to refer to male politicians in top positions, Ines is attributed here with a position of masculinity rather than femininity, similar to the aforementioned treatment of Angela Merkel by the German media (Lünenborg and Maier). Interestingly, the woman who served as inspiration for the character of Ines, German ex-consultant Lotte Brauns, mentioned in an interview with *Die Welt* that she tried to dissuade Maren Ade from using this particular animal metaphor, noting that her own boss would have never used it on her (Hermsmeier). The use of this line was therefore a conscious choice by Ade to highlight Ines’ determined and at the same time cold-hearted nature, which Ines herself seems proud of, as she is briefly seen smiling upon hearing the comment

(01:00:45). Taking Butler's concept of gender performativity into account, it can be therefore argued that Ines' satisfaction at being attributed with a traditionally "masculine" trait is an act that performatively shapes her gender identity, at least in the context of her work environment. By reveling in the acknowledgment of her animalistic attributes, she distances herself from the expected "feminine" traits of empathy and emotionalism and instead adopts a predominantly male identity in her work, which is also exemplified in her gender-neutral (if not masculine) wardrobe, as further analysis will demonstrate.

As the scenes revolving around Ines' work quickly establish, Ines not only works in a male-dominated business, but also one where all top positions are occupied by men, including her boss and her two main contractors, Henneberg and Illiescu. The only woman Ines is shown interacting with in a professional environment is her assistant Anca, who is considerably younger than her colleagues and is seen contributing little to the consulting firm besides clicking through Powerpoint presentations and arranging hotels for guests. Furthermore, Anca is unknowingly the target of Gerald's sexual advances, who, during a conversation with Ines and Tim, refers to her as "diese kleine Anca" (00:55:13). This belittling comment, which seemingly bothers neither Ines nor Tim, combined with Anca's youth and limited responsibilities, serves as a reminder of the male-dominated business Ines is employed in.

However, it is not just the young and inexperienced assistant who becomes a target of sexism in the workplace. In one of the film's early scenes, Ines is attending an event at the American Embassy in Bucharest in the hopes of approaching her contractor, Henneberg, to discuss their mutual project. After introducing herself to him and making polite small talk, Ines immediately proceeds to address the topic of their outsourcing project, but Henneberg instead interrupts her, calling his wife Natalja to join them. Once Natalja arrives, Henneberg points to

Ines and introduces her to his wife as a “specialist” (00:26:49). Henneberg then proceeds to explain that Natalja needs to do some shopping while in Bucharest and asks Ines to help her, seeing as she has lived in Bucharest for a while. Despite Ines’ visible disappointment at this sexist humiliation, she chooses to conceal her dissatisfaction and enter into conversation with Natalja. However, Ines quickly says that she doesn’t do much shopping herself, thereby distancing herself from Natalja and reestablishing her identity as a career woman in the eyes of both the audience and her contractor’s wife. What’s furthermore noteworthy about this exchange is the fact that Ines indeed chooses to help Natalja go shopping, even though she is clearly not excited at the prospect. Given Ines’ determination and the importance of her project with Henneberg, her choice to go shopping with Natalja is a strategic move to ensure a good relationship with her contractor, thereby guaranteeing the success of her project. Referring back to the portrayal of working women in German public discourse, this falls in line with the observation that women are more prone to tolerate sexist behaviour out of fear that a reaction might impede their professional advancement (Groll).

Interestingly, both Ines’ awareness of the sexism she faces in her male-dominated area of work and her choice to overlook it are revisited during a conversation with her boss later in the film:

GERALD. Also das wird jetzt bestimmt die Feministin in dir ärgern, aber O-Ton

Henneberg war: Frau Conradi hat doch genügend Charme, das mit Illiescu alleine hinzukriegen.

INES. Ich bin doch keine Feministin, da würd’ ich es mit Typen wie dir gar nicht aushalten, Gerald. (01:13:52-01:14:05)

Here, Ines is once again subjected to discrimination on the basis of her gender – this time not just by Henneberg, who has already been established as sexist, but also by her boss, who on the one hand acknowledges the innate sexism in Henneberg’s comment, but on the other hand grants it validity by choosing to reiterate it. Ines is told that she has “enough charm” to win over their business partner in this particularly tricky case, the assumption being that women need only employ their appeal to influence men in a professional environment. Interestingly, upon hearing the sexist remark, Ines chooses to not only ignore it, but even goes so far as to distance herself from being labelled a feminist, adding that she wouldn’t be able to tolerate people like Gerald if she were indeed one. In doing so, Ines draws attention to her boss’ sexist behaviour (which we have already seen her ignore once) and, by extension, the inherent sexism in the male-dominated world of business consulting. Moreover, Ines hereby confirms the presumption that she chooses to ignore the sexism she is subjected to in favour of her professional advancement – after all, it is Gerald and “guys like him” who hold the reins in the cutthroat business she is employed in.

A further noteworthy aspect in Ines’ relationship with her boss is that he actively impedes her professional advancement. When Gerald informs Ines that the contractors want her to stay on the outsourcing project until its completion, the camera cuts to a close-up of Ines’ face – a technique used throughout the film to denote emotional distress – who then asks Gerald what became of their deal to have Ines lead the new office in Shanghai (01:14:24). Gerald, however, immediately interrupts Ines saying she would have to stay in Bucharest at least for another year, after which she’d be able to move to a new office. Ines’ response of “Ich hab’ das schon ein paar Mal gehört” (01:14:37) establishes that Gerald has been repeatedly denying her a chance at a promotion, despite valuing Ines as an employee and, as we have seen, praising her performance. This mirrors the portrayal of women managers in the context of the gender quota debate,

particularly in the construction of a duality of male versus female as observed by Lang and Rybnikova, with men constructed as holders of top-management positions who inhibit women in their career, and women portrayed as sufferers (368). The case of Ines therefore confirms this paradigm and, despite her having been established as a strong and determined woman in her professional life rather than a sufferer, she too is subjected to such behaviour by her male superiors.

As *Toni Erdmann*'s plot progresses, another aspect of Ines' work that is frequently highlighted is its high degree of pressure and the resulting toll this takes on Ines' mood and performance. From the outset of the film, Ines is often seen running from place to place, anxious to get to her next appointment (00:23:07). Her high-stakes job clearly causes her a considerable amount of stress, which, combined with the near-constant time pressure she finds herself in, leads her to oversleep on more than occasion: for instance, when she sleeps through the night and misses an appointment with Henneberg (00:46:14), or when she falls asleep on the way to and from the meeting with Illiescu (01:41:53, 01:53:33). To be sure, her father's sudden visit to Bucharest is partly to blame for this behaviour, as Ines finds herself taking Winfried to various appointments and having to deal with his practical jokes. However, during the scene where Ines is asleep on the way to meet with Illiescu, a small line by the driver reveals that it is not just Winfried's presence that causes Ines to oversleep: "You can wake her up now" (01:42:24), the driver urges Winfried. The ease with which this line is delivered by the driver, who has been established as being contracted by the consulting firm and is therefore familiar with Ines, suggests that Ines might have been exhibiting symptoms of exhaustion for a while, a cost of the hectic lifestyle her line of work comes with.

As a final note on the topic of Ines' professional life, *Toni Erdmann* makes clear that its female protagonist regards her work and family as two separate, entirely incompatible with each other spheres in her life. From the outset of the film, Ines is seen actively trying to establish boundaries between her personal and professional life; for instance, when she is standing alone in the balcony of her mother's house with the door closed behind her while on a professional call (00:10:39), or when she ignores her father while talking with her colleagues in her office building (00:19:10). Interestingly, while at her mother's house early in the film, Ines even goes so far as to use her work as an excuse to escape her family: when Winfried goes out to the garden, where Ines was supposedly on a work call, he finds her sitting down and staring at her phone. Her body language (slouched shoulders, arched back, head hanging low) implies that she is hiding from her family and, when she sees Winfried approaching her, she quickly puts the phone to her ear (00:14:41). This behaviour, along with the value Ines places on her work and her identity as a career woman, reveals that not only does she consider work and family as two distinct areas in her life, going out of her way to keep them separate, but also that they are part of a hierarchical system in which work always prevails. Ines clearly places a higher value to her work and career advancement than to her family; however, as the following section on her family demonstrates, her father's intervention in her work eventually threatens this carefully crafted balance.

Moving on to an examination of Ines' family, it should first be noted that the analysis will focus primarily on Ines' relationship with her father, as this is undoubtedly the focal point of Ade's film. Rather than exploring Ines' relationship with her mother or other members of her family, the film centers on the dynamic between Winfried and Ines, leading critics to call *Toni Erdmann* a "sweet and thorny tale of father-daughter bonding" (Scott), a "black comedy about

father-daughter estrangement” (Kermode), or a “strange and marvelous father-daughter cat-and-mouse game” (Zacharek, “Review”). While drawing attention to further aspects of Ines’ and Winfried’s lives, such as their respective work environments, *Toni Erdmann* does indeed place their relationship as father and daughter in the foreground, and thereby rightfully earns the aforementioned descriptors.

As mentioned previously, the film establishes from the outset that Ines does not share a particularly close relationship with her father. While this can be partly attributed to Ines’ choice to live abroad, the interactions between her and her father quickly reveal a lack of emotional intimacy between the two. When Ines greets her father for the first time with a hug during the dinner party scene early on in the film, her body language implies that she is rather uncomfortable with this level of physical intimacy (00:12:16). While Winfried immediately hugs Ines tightly, she remains rather stiff and tries to minimize the amount of physical contact by extending her upper body and refraining from placing her hands on her father’s back, in what a *Die Zeit* review aptly calls a “Business-Umarmung” (Assheuer). A similar interaction occurs a few minutes later, when Ines awkwardly shakes her father’s hand instead of hugging him goodbye, as Winfried apparently expected (00:15:41). Given Ines’ aforementioned devotion to her work, these small gestures can be interpreted as a sign of the influence her work has had on her personal life; rather than giving her father a warm embrace, Ines on both occasions reverts to the level of physical contact she is used to in her work environment, thereby blurring the lines between personal and professional interactions.

As discussed above, Ines considers her work and family to be two entirely separate spheres in her life and makes a conscious effort to have them remain as such. Interestingly, Winfried’s unexpected visit to Bucharest reveals that Ines perceives the fusion of work and

family as unprofessional and therefore a threat to her professional advancement, evidenced chiefly by her reaction upon seeing Winfried in Bucharest for the first time: despite recognizing him at the lobby of her office building, as we later learn, Ines chooses to ignore her father and instead continues talking to her colleagues (00:19:11-00:19:22). When Winfried later asks her if she had recognized him, she answers “ja, hab ich, aber das war der gesamte rumänische Vorstand von Dacoil” (00:23:38). Ines’ reply is insofar significant as it demonstrates a conscious separation of work and family on the one hand, and on the other hand her belief that, should she choose to let her family “infiltrate” her work, she might appear unprofessional or perform poorly. This not only reinforces Ines’ self-identification as a career woman whose work is her absolute priority, but also supports the duality of family versus work as constructed in the gender quota debate, according to which these two spheres are supposed to be at natural opposition for women in managerial positions (Lang and Rybnikova 368).

During Winfried’s prolonged visit to Bucharest, his humorous antics clash with Ines’ pragmatic character and work-centered schedule, resulting in what critics have called a “comedy of role reversal” (Jones). Indeed, the parent-child dynamic between Winfried and Ines shifts significantly during the course of the film, with a number of scenes revolving around Winfried’s childish practical jokes and Ines’ annoyance at him. For instance, when Winfried jokingly handcuffs himself to Ines before an important work meeting, she repeatedly scolds him, calling the stunt a “stupid joke” (01:40:49). Ines’ intolerance for Winfried’s practical jokes, along with perceiving Winfried’s presence as a threat to her work, lead her to assume the responsibilities of a parent instead of a child in her interactions with her father, like instructing him on what he can and cannot say when meeting her colleagues (00:24:21) or chastising him for having no purpose in life other than slipping fart cushions under peoples’ seats (00:48:05). Interestingly, Ines’

frustration at having to take care of her father to such an extent goes against the 2015 survey of German women mentioned in the previous chapter, in which the majority of women reported that they happily take care of elders, seeing it as a moral responsibility (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach). Despite Ines' perception of her parental responsibilities towards her father not being explicitly addressed in the film, her visible discontent with both his presence and his actions suggest that she views taking care of her father less as a moral responsibility and more as a necessity, in an effort to ensure the minimal amount of friction resulting from his visit.

Despite her aforementioned frustration at Winfried's presence and his meddling in her professional life, the second half of *Toni Erdmann* marks a gradual shift in Ines' attitude towards her father. As the plot progresses, Ines seems to not only come to terms with Winfried's unexpected visit, but also takes active steps to incorporate him into her life and show him the realities of her work and lifestyle. After playing along with his life coach-alter ego "Toni Erdmann," she for instance invites him to a club along with her colleagues, but not before leading him to a parking lot where she, along with her coworker Tim and her friend Tatjana, snorts cocaine in front of him (01:30:58). While Ines initially seems comfortable with sharing this habit with her father, the following scene inside the club sees her sitting on a couch across from Winfried and looking at him intensely until she starts crying (01:33:06). Her emotional reaction can be attributed to a feeling of embarrassment for letting her father in on this aspect of her life, which she is not as proud of as she initially let on, and the scene ends with her leaving the club abruptly. Despite her distressed state, Ines seems pleased with this newfound honesty towards her father about the realities of her life, as she chooses to take him with her to a meeting with Illiescu the following day and present him as a coworker of her contractor Henneberg. During the meeting and their subsequent visit to the oil site, a further noteworthy shift occurs in

Ines' attitude towards her father; namely, she lets him in on the hard realities of her work by explaining the processes involved in an outsourcing project such as the one she is currently leading. While this appears rather insignificant at first glance, for Ines it is the start of a possible reckoning of the spheres of work and family in her life, which, as the analysis has demonstrated, she has deemed entirely incompatible up until this point. By actively letting her father be part of her professional life, Ines shows the first signs of reconsidering the incompatibility of work and family; instead of resisting her father's presence in her work environment, she allows him full immersion in it, thereby shedding her previous fear that such behaviour would impede her career advancement.

This shift in Ines' attitude towards Winfried culminates in the final scenes of *Toni Erdmann*, which see her fighting through her usually cold demeanour to reveal the childish, light-hearted side her father has often accused her of lacking. Whether she's singing Whitney Houston's *Greatest Love of All* at the top of her lungs (02:00:58) or running barefoot across a park to hug her father (02:23:44), it is clear that Ines' relationship with her father has evolved to the point where she is indeed accepting him as a part of her life and making an effort to restore the playful relationship they – presumably – shared when she was younger. Despite this considerable change in Ines' attitude towards her father, however, *Toni Erdmann* ultimately offers no clear answer as to whether its female protagonist has accepted a possible compatibility of work and family by the end, or whether she would react in an equally defensive way should Winfried choose to drop in on her unexpectedly in the future. Interestingly, in one of the film's final scenes, it is revealed that Ines has chosen to take on a new job as a business consultant for an even bigger firm in Singapore, which presumably comes with even more stress and responsibilities than her previous post. While this move could be interpreted as a sign that Ines

has completely ignored her father's advice to "live a little" (00:40:58) instead of overworking herself, the film's final scene reveals that the character growth Ines exhibited in the second half of *Toni Erdmann* has not been for nothing, as she puts on her father's pair of fake teeth and her deceased grandmother's hat (02:35:08) while talking to her father. In doing so, Ines creates her own "Toni Erdmann," thereby proving that she has – at least in part – regained her playful side.

To conclude the section on Ines' family, it should finally be noted that another reason why the analysis is solely based on Ines' role as a daughter is that she has not chosen to have a family of her own, or even exhibited the will to do so. As a daughter, Ines positions herself as someone who occasionally visits their parents but takes no active role in her relationship with them. Unlike the female image projected in public discourse, Ines seems to shun the thought that it is within her responsibilities to take care of her parents as they get older, clearly evidenced by her annoyance when the parent-child dynamic between her and Winfried is reversed. By the end of the film, however, Ines lets her family influence her outlook on life by accepting a certain light-heartedness to her character which her father had been trying to pass on to her since appearing at her office building in Bucharest. Whether she will be applying that side to her work as well, which continues to constitute the most significant sphere in her life, is ultimately up to the viewer to decide.

The third aspect of Ines' life to be examined will revolve around her affair with co-worker Tim, a German consultant in his mid-30s, as he is the only person Ines is shown sharing an intimate relationship with. Tim first appears around the one-hour mark of *Toni Erdmann*, during a scene in which Ines is driving together with him and Gerald to their office building to present their outsourcing ideas to contractor Henneberg (00:53:05). From the moment Tim is introduced to the audience, it becomes clear that his relationship with Ines goes beyond their

professional capacity; as he steps out of the car to let Ines enter, he gently places his hand on her lower back in a gesture of chivalry (00:53:08). However, Ines immediately turns and looks at him sternly until he removes his hand, thereby giving him a clear message about boundaries in their professional environment; similar to her approach towards her family, Ines considers her work and intimate relationships as two distinct spheres and takes active steps to separate them. At the same time, this noticeable reaction on Ines' part serves as an assertion of her equal status towards her male coworker. Instead of accepting the chivalrous gesture, which would position her as a "damsel in distress," Ines reinforces her aforementioned position of masculinity in her work environment by demanding she be treated the same way as if she were a man.

Ines' effort to assert her equal status – if not dominance – towards Tim in their professional environment despite their personal relationship behind the curtains is a recurring motif throughout *Toni Erdmann*. Upon entering the car on her way to the office together with Tim and Gerald, Ines is presenting her proposed approach to their outsourcing project when Tim interrupts her mid-sentence, to which she sternly replies "Kann ich den Gedanken kurz zu Ende führen? Danke" (00:53:48) and then continues talking. Here, Ines once again sets clear boundaries on her relationship with Tim by refusing to allow him to rob her of her agency in a professional setting on the basis of their personal intimacy. Ines is quick to regain her agency in this situation, thereby reinforcing her image as an able and confident consultant who takes her work seriously and will not allow herself to be glossed over by her (male) colleagues.

A further noteworthy interaction between Ines and Tim can be observed during a scene at their office building following Ines' presentation for Henneberg. After Ines briefs Tim on how the presentation went, Tim asks her what her plans for the evening are, which leads to the following dialogue between the two:

TIM. Und, was machst du so heute Abend?

INES. Ich treffe Steph de Boer und Tatjana.

TIM. Frauengruppe.

INES. Ja.

TIM. Was hat man da so für Themen?

INES. So, Frauenquote, sexuelle Belästigung am Arbeitsplatz, solche Sachen.

TIM. Businessnagellack, gut.

INES. Genau.

TIM. Schick. (01:02:20-01:02:39)

Apart from being a flirtatious back-and-forth that hints at the existence of an intimate relationship between Ines and Tim, as evidenced by Ines' smile at the end of the scene (01:02:41), this dialogue is particularly noteworthy as it is the only instance in both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* where the female protagonist – or any character for that matter – shows awareness for German public discourse on women's rights at the time of the works' inception and release. Both topics mentioned by Ines, namely gender quota and sexism in the workplace, were heavily debated in the years leading up to the release of *Toni Erdmann*, as the previous chapter demonstrated. Despite not aligning herself with feminism, as revealed in her interaction with her boss, Ines nevertheless shows awareness of the current debates on women's rights, choosing the two most associated with the workplace – which is to be expected given her work-centered life. While the mention of sexism in the workplace could be interpreted as a mere inside joke pertaining to her sexual relationship with Tim, her reference to the gender quota debate has no relation to her affair with Tim and must therefore be interpreted as a genuine concern on Ines' part. As we have seen, Ines not only works in a male-dominated industry but is

also repeatedly denied the chance at a promotion by her boss. Establishing a quota for women in managerial positions is thus a measure that would enable Ines to achieve her well-deserved promotion. Despite this being the only instance the gender quota is explicitly mentioned, this quick reference ultimately reinforces the image of Ines as a career woman struggling to advance professionally amongst – and often due to – her male colleagues and superiors.

Ines' relationship with Tim is further explored during a scene at an unnamed hotel halfway through the film, which heavily features a power play between the two colleagues. At the start of the scene, Ines is shown walking to the hotel room door, wearing a colourful revealing dress – an eye-catching contrast to her usual dark structured suits, thus signifying that she is there in a personal rather than professional capacity (01:17:36). Upon entering the hotel room, she is greeted by Tim and, after he initiates physical contact with her by stroking her leg and leaning in for a kiss, she kisses him back. Although she is visibly preoccupied by her father's antics a few hours before, the ease with which she returns Tim's kiss establishes their affair as one that has been going on for a while, leading both to be comfortable in each other's presence.

However, this comfort quickly evaporates when Tim reveals to Ines that their boss found out about their affair, adding “[Gerald] hat gesagt, ich soll dich nicht so oft vögeln, damit du deinen Biss nicht verlierst” (01:20:05). Upon hearing this, Ines becomes increasingly reluctant to engage in intercourse with Tim, despite this clearly being the reason for her visit to the hotel room. Instead of undressing like Tim is seen doing, Ines requests that he masturbate in front of her, arguing that she doesn't want to “lose her bite” (01:20:50). Despite his efforts to change her mind, Ines insists and even asks Tim to ejaculate on one of the petit fours brought in by room service, which Tim reluctantly does while Ines watches him smiling in satisfaction. In terms of interpretation, this scene is an excellent example of the power play dominant in the relationship

between Ines and Tim. As the analysis has shown, Ines places a great deal of value on maintaining control both in her personal and professional life. Accordingly, Gerald's sexist comment that Tim might take away her "bite" by having sex with her, which Tim appears to endorse, puts her in a position of lessened agency in her affair with Tim, thereby robbing her of her control in the situation. Gerald's comment also puts Tim in a position of power, as he is the one taking something away from Ines, with Ines in this scenario taking on a passive role. Ines quickly becomes aware of this role reversal and immediately tries to reclaim her agency by refusing to do the very thing that would rob her of it. However, she does not stop there; she even goes so far as make Tim ejaculate on a petit four in order to humiliate him in a symbolic form of emasculation, as the Los Angeles Review of Books notes (Gerke). Indeed, Ines' goal seems to be to punish Tim for even insinuating that she was about to lose her bite and, by extension, her agency. Her determined look and evident satisfaction once Tim complies signify both her emotional detachment from her colleague and the value she places on being in control in their affair. Much like her work and family, Ines wants to be in total control of her intimate relationship – and once that control is threatened, she will do everything in her power to regain it.

Having explored the portrayal of Ines related to her work, family, and relationships, we shall now turn to those elements in *Toni Erdmann* that provide insight into Ines' perception of herself as a woman as well as her view of other women. As with *Die Glücklichen*, it should be noted that the following scenes and utterances do coincide with the aforementioned areas in Ines' life; however, a separate examination of both her self-perception and her perception of other women will allow for a deeper understanding of the female image – or images – constructed in the film. Ines' self-perception as a woman will be examined first, based primarily on her physical

appearance, followed by her view of other female figures. Finally, the chapter will close with a conclusion providing an overview of the portrayal of *Toni Erdmann*'s female protagonist.

Contrary to *Die Glücklichen*'s Isabell, Ines does not explicitly address her perception of herself as a woman throughout the film, thus compelling the examination of her self-perception to be extracted from the way she presents and carries herself. As we have seen, one of the most noticeable aspects of Ines' physical appearance is her choice of clothing, particularly the suits she dons for the majority of her on-screen time. Ines is almost always dressed in dark blue structured suits paired with light-coloured shirts and high heels – a stylistic choice that has attracted the attention of a number of reviewers, with some emphasizing its “boyish” nature (Zacharek, “At Cannes”).

Indeed, Ines' choice of clothing bears a striking resemblance to that of her male colleagues, with structured suits in a neutral colour palette which hide rather than flatter her figure. What's more, Ines seems to resist any feminine elements in her professional attire; when she accidentally gets blood on her shirt, she asks Anca and another young woman who works in her office building to lend her their shirts and, even though she does not seem satisfied with Anca's white shirt, she completely rejects the alternative upon seeing its yellow colour and noticeable design. Ines' choice to go for the more plain-looking shirt reinforces her disapproval of a more feminine appearance in the workplace. Much like the satisfaction she feels when Gerald attributes her with traditionally male characteristics, Ines' choice of clothing effectively places her in a position of masculinity rather than femininity. In terms of gender performativity, it can thus be argued that, through her conscious choice to wear rather masculine clothing while dismissing feminine elements, Ines assumes a masculine identity in her workplace.

The reasons for this conscious choice are related to a further often-cited aspect of Ines' professional attire, namely its function as a defense mechanism (Kniebe; Perneckzy). As we have seen, Ines works in an overwhelmingly male-dominated business, with the vast majority of both her colleagues and superiors being men. Combined with the sexism she faces on a frequent basis, including the reduction of her skills down to her appeal as a woman, this has led Ines to shed as much of her femininity as possible in her professional environment in an effort to be valued based on the same criteria as her male counterparts, namely her performance. Accordingly, she dons "boyish" suits and refrains from calling attention to any aspect related to her gender. Ines has internalized the reality of the business she is employed in: in order to be taken seriously, you have to either be a man or act like one. This logic is reminiscent of the treatment of Angela Merkel by the German media cited earlier in this chapter, which sees Merkel gain recognition as a female politician by means of her ability to "act successfully *as a man* [*sic*]" (Lünenborg and Maier 193), thereby reinforcing a normative value framework of the strong male versus the weak female. It can be therefore argued that – at least in her professional environment – Ines perceives herself less as a "career woman," a term which has been used throughout this project to refer to her figure, and more as a consultant, in an effort to shield herself from any gender-related bias that would affect her work.

Interestingly, one of the final scenes in *Toni Erdmann* sees Ines shed that very "fake skin" (Assheuer) which has shielded her from unwanted bias throughout her life. The morning following her rendition of *Greatest Love of All*, Ines hosts a birthday brunch for her colleagues at her house (02:06:52-02:22:07). When Ines has trouble putting on a tight dress, she impulsively decides to answer the door fully nude and, to the surprise of her colleagues, announces that she is having a "naked party," making everyone undress in order to come inside. Undoubtedly one of

the most memorable scenes of the film, the naked party has received widespread attention by reviewers, with many emphasizing its “liberating” function for the character of Ines (Assheuer; Perneckzy). Indeed, by casting her restrictively tight dress aside, which is reminiscent of the tight suits she wears on a daily basis, Ines frees herself from the constraints of the business world and the expectations of keeping up appearances that have been dominating her life. In an act of defiance, she abandons her defense mechanism and, by appearing naked in front of her boss and colleagues, goes on the offensive. Fueled by her father’s antics, Ines essentially emancipates herself from the harsh restrictions of her work environment and, in so doing, changes her perception of herself as a serious-looking, suit-wearing business consultant and instead becomes her own version of “Toni Erdmann.” However, this change in perception is rather short-lived: as we learn in the film’s final scene, during which she is dressed in her usual dark suit, she has decided to move to Singapore to work for an even bigger firm. While Ines ultimately stays true to her identity as a consultant, the brunch scene is insofar significant as it allows her to realize that, if she is willing, she is able to shed that image momentarily and become her own “Toni Erdmann.”

As far as Ines’ perception of other women is concerned, *Toni Erdmann* is a rather poor resource in comparison to *Die Glücklichen*. Not only does Ines have a limited amount of interaction with other female figures, but her view of them as women is rarely addressed. One notable exception occurs when Ines recounts her shopping trip with Henneberg’s wife Natalja to her friends Steph and Tatjana. After mentioning that she met Henneberg’s wife, Steph asks Ines how “the new wife” (01:04:24) was, to which Ines replies “very Russian, very skinny, very blonde” (01:04:27). Ines’ response, which is delivered in a tone of contempt and with slightly raised eyebrows, frames those attributes in a negative light, thereby establishing that Ines heavily

disapproves of Natalja. What's furthermore noteworthy about Ines' response is that, apart from Natalja's ethnicity, the only other characteristic Ines draws attention to is her physical appearance – Natalja's character or demeanour are not addressed. In doing so, Ines establishes Natalja as a woman whose appearance is her only feature worth mentioning and, by extension, the only trait which grants her identity. Ines sees Natalja only as a trophy wife, a woman who cares exclusively about her looks – after all, the only interactions she has with Natalja revolve around shopping. The figure of Natalja thus functions as the polar opposite of Ines, whose physical appearance and choice of clothing serves functional rather than aesthetic purposes. Ines' visible dissatisfaction at having to spend the day shopping with Natalja, as well as her belittling tone when describing Natalja to her friends, reveal that she has little respect this type of woman.

In conclusion, the female figure projected in *Toni Erdmann* on the basis of its female protagonist is that of a career woman under a significant amount of stress who does everything in her power to keep her work, family, and intimate relationships apart. Ines is a highly capable business consultant; she is a pragmatic and confident woman who at times appears ruthless due to her lack of empathy, which makes her a great fit for the cutthroat world of business consulting. Ines' pragmatism and ruthlessness, traits which in public discourse are predominantly ascribed to men in high positions of power, reinforce the portrayal of women managers as stereotypically masculine, as demonstrated in the context of the gender quota debate. The use of fight and animal imagery to describe her also falls in line with the treatment of top female politicians by the German press, who, in being ascribed traditionally "male" traits such as aggression, are attributed with a position of masculinity rather than femininity in their work, thus promoting the dominant hierarchical gender order rather than challenging it. Ines herself seems to not only be pleased with being ascribed a position of masculinity, but reinforces it through her

choice of clothing by donning dark, structured suits for the majority of her time on and off work. At the same time, her wardrobe functions as a defense mechanism against gender bias in the male-dominated business she is employed in. Ines is often the target of sexism in the workplace, which she chooses to ignore out of fear a reaction against it would impede her professional advancement, thus exhibiting the same behaviour observed in the context of the debate on sexism in the workplace. A further consistency between the portrayal of Ines and that of women managers in German public discourse is the fact that Ines' male boss repeatedly inhibits her professional advancement, thus putting her into a passive victim position. Furthermore, the intense nature of Ines' work and her devotion to it cause her to suffer tremendous levels of stress and time pressure, which in turn lead her to exhibit symptoms such as oversleeping.

Finally, it should be emphasized that Ines sees her work and family as two separate spheres in her life, and as part of a hierarchical system in which work always prevails. Ines clearly places a higher value to her work rather than her family, even going so far as to perceive the presence of a family member in her workplace as unprofessional and threatening to her career advancement. This behaviour reinforces the duality of work and family as two incompatible spheres for women managers as observed in the gender quota debate. It should also be noted that, while "family" is used to refer to a husband and children in public discourse on women, Ines shows no wish to have a family of her own, thus compelling the analysis to be focused on her role as a daughter. As a daughter, Ines considers taking care of her father a necessity, thus opposing the observed consensus of women gladly taking care of their elder family members out of a sense of moral responsibility towards them. However, as the plot progresses, Ines takes active steps to incorporate her father into her professional life, thus signaling the start of a possible reconciliation of work and family. While the film ultimately

offers no clear answer as to whether Ines finally accepts the possibility of incorporating her family more into her work-centered schedule, her character growth in the second half of the film suggests a gradual reconciliation of these two spheres previously thought of as incompatible. Despite much of *Toni Erdmann* revolving around the humorous antics of her middle-aged father, this reconciliation of work and family is central to both the character of Ines and the film altogether; after all, the plot is kickstarted by Ines' family intervening in her work. *Toni Erdmann* thus places the problematic balance of work and family in the foreground and, on the backdrop of fake teeth and fart pillows, ultimately argues that it is not impossible for a highly stressed career woman to (at least in part) incorporate her family into her work-centered life.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through my analysis of the female protagonists in Kristine Bilkau's novel *Die Glücklichen* and Maren Ade's film *Toni Erdmann*, I have sought to answer the following research question: does the portrayal of these figures reflect or reject the female images constructed by recent public discourse on women in Germany? Accordingly, my hypothesis was twofold; first, that the female figures in the selected works indeed reflect the recent debates on women in German society by showcasing the adversity women face and their struggle to overcome it, and second, that both works highlight the compatibility of work and family – or lack thereof – as the thorniest issue for German women today by having their female protagonists vacillate between the two. Before proceeding to my overall conclusions, however, I will first discuss the results from my analyses for each of the selected works. In doing so, I will be able to distill the female images constructed in each of the works, relate these images to those projected in recent public discourse, and ultimately compare and contrast the two works with the aim of providing an answer to my research question.

Kristine Bilkau's novel *Die Glücklichen*, which centers on the figure of Isabell, features a number of analogies to recent public discourse with regard to the portrayal of its female protagonist, most notably an emphasis on the dualism of work versus family. *Die Glücklichen* puts forth two distinct female images which Isabell originally believes she must choose from in order to not feel lost in her role as a woman, namely that of the “full-time mother” versus the “career woman with a child.” Combined with Isabell's pronounced effort to separate the areas of work and family in her life, the novel presents these as two incompatible spheres which must remain separate as a means of control over one's life. This scheme is a prominent feature found across recent public discourse on women in Germany, and particularly in the context of the

gender quota debate, where the dualistic pair of work versus family requirements is named amongst the three main patterns observed in the portrayal of women by the media (Lang and Rybnikova). At the same time, Isabell's evident wish to "effortlessly" combine her work with her family echoes the portrayal of women in recent discourse which was not solely focused on women in the workplace, such as the debate on daycare facilities, according to which the majority of young German women want to combine career and family but ultimately fail to do so due to structural hurdles (Allmendinger et al.; "A 200-Billion-Euro Waste").

Isabell's case also resembles the dualistic scheme of young versus old women present in German public discourse on women, particularly with regard to the portrayal of motherhood in the novel. The partially negative depiction of motherhood observed in *Die Glücklichen* mirrors the recent paradigm shift in German society, with motherhood being gradually de-idealized and considered a hindrance to women's professional aspirations (Schmidt). Accordingly, following the scheme of the young, childless woman versus the older, overwhelmed mother, Isabell's status as a mother places her in the latter category despite her young age. Isabell's view of motherhood as keeping her from fulfilling her professional duties further supports this correlation, as it reflects the portrayal of motherhood as preventing women from realizing their full potential present in the discourse. Finally, the added pressure from having to care for her mother-in-law places Isabell among another group of older rather than younger women found in the discourse, namely that of the "sandwich generation." This consists of women aged 40 to 59 who are caught between having to care for both their children and elder family members, leading to stress and time constraints, as is often the case with Isabell (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach).

Overall, while the figure of Isabell exhibits a number of traits from female images found across public discourse, she interestingly corresponds with the portrayal of both younger and

older generations of German women; on the one hand, she reflects the image of young women wishing to combine career and family, and on the other, she is attributed with traits ascribed to the generation of middle-aged women struggling to care for younger and older members of their family. Throughout Isabell's portrayal, emphasis is placed on such dualistic pairs as success versus failure and family versus work requirements, with the latter being a deciding factor for Isabell's identity as a woman. Finally, despite initially mirroring public discourse in her perception of work and family as incompatible, Isabell ultimately reconciles the two by constructing a third female image, that of "glückliche Frau"; a woman who combines the nurturing nature of the "full-time mother" and the professional drive of the "career woman with a child."

Contrary to *Die Glücklichen*, Maren Ade's film *Toni Erdmann* is dominated by one distinct female image, namely that of the childless career woman. From the outset of the film, its female protagonist Ines is primarily defined by her job as a high-level business consultant. As such, she is quickly established as a confident, pragmatic, and at times ruthless woman; a portrayal reminiscent of the coverage of women managers and top female politicians observed in recent public discourse, particularly in the context of the gender quota debate. By referring to Ines in language that borrows from semantic repertoires of aggression and animalism, the film effectively assigns her a position of masculinity rather than femininity in her work, as such traits are traditionally attributed to male holders of top positions in public discourse (Lünenborg and Maier). What's more, this scheme remains within the logic of a gendered system that subordinates women to men, as traditionally "masculine" traits such as strength and aggression – which Ines is often attributed with – are synonymous with victory, whereas traditionally "feminine" traits such as empathy are synonymous with defeat (Lünenborg and Maier). Ines'

portrayal therefore mirrors the “stereotypical masculinity of women managers” (Lang and Rybnikova 369) observed in the context of the gender quota debate and reinforces the dominant notion that, in order for a woman to be successful in her work, she has to act as a man.

Interestingly, Ines’ perceived masculinity is not just owed to other figures’ accounts of her work ethic or character, but is also reinforced by Ines herself through her choice of clothing. Ines dons dark, structured suits for the majority of her time on and off work, which strongly resemble the suits worn by her male colleagues and superiors, while at the same time actively rejecting any “feminine” elements in her professional attire. In terms of gender performativity, Ines’ choice of clothing is therefore an act that effectively shapes her gender identity; by downplaying her femininity, Ines shields herself from the gender-related bias largely present in the male-dominated business she is employed in and instead assumes a masculine identity in her work environment. This performative act is further exemplified in Ines’ satisfaction at being attributed traditionally “masculine” character traits such as aggression stemming from her animal-like character. By revelling in the acknowledgment of her animalistic attributes, Ines distances herself from the expected “feminine” traits of empathy and emotionalism, which dominate the portrayal of women in public discourse, and instead adopts a power-driven, success-oriented masculine identity.

Further correlations between the figure of Ines and the portrayal of women managers in German public discourse include her subjection to sexist behaviour in the workplace as well as the inhibition of her career by a male superior. Whether by her boss, her contractor, or a family member, Ines becomes on multiple occasions a target of sexist remarks which belittle her job performance. Despite being aware of the sexism to which she is subjected, however, Ines chooses to ignore it to protect her career aspirations. This behaviour corresponds with the female

image painted in recent public discourse on the topic of sexism in the workplace, according to which women often deliberately overlook sexist behaviour out of fear a reaction against it would impede their professional advancement (Groll). Furthermore, despite Ines' boss acknowledging her capabilities and praising her performance, he repeatedly denies her the chance at a promotion, thereby impeding her career advancement. Once more, this mirrors the portrayal of women managers in the context of the gender quota debate with men largely portrayed as holders of top management positions who, in thwarting women's career growth, put them into a passive victim role (Lang and Rybnikova). Ines is thus portrayed both as a strong, capable consultant with a predominantly masculine identity and as a sufferer, thereby calling attention to the adversity women face in the workplace on the basis of their gender – regardless of their performance or strength of character. It is also worth noting that Ines shows awareness of the main debates regarding women in the workplace which unfolded at the time of *Toni Erdmann*'s production and release, namely sexism in and the gender quota, and that she explicitly rejects the feminist label out of fear it, too, would impede her career advancement in a male-dominated – and sexist – environment.

In dealing with the balance between her personal and professional life, it quickly becomes clear that Ines considers her work and family not only as two separate spheres, but also as part of a hierarchical system in which work always prevails. This falls in line with another aspect of the portrayal of women managers in the gender quota debate, namely the dualism of work versus family (Lang and Rybnikova). Similar to the treatment of women managers in recent public discourse, Ines too is depicted as being trapped between conflicting requirements stemming from her work on the one hand and her family on the other. Ines even goes so far as to consider the involvement of her family in her professional environment as posing a threat to her

career, thereby reflecting the dominant notion present in the discourse on women managers that work and family are supposed to be a natural opposition. As the plot progresses, however, Ines gradually accepts her family's involvement in her work-centered life and finally shows signs of reconciliation of the two spheres she initially saw as entirely incompatible.

Moving on to a comparison between the female protagonists in my selected works, a number of similarities can be observed despite the figures' dissimilar backgrounds and interests, the most striking correlation being that both women are under a tremendous amount of stress stemming from the clash between their personal and professional lives. This observation is in line with the portrayal of women across recent public discourse, whether in the case of women managers (Lang and Rybnikova), young women (Schmidt), middle-aged women (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach) or working women altogether (BMFSFJ). In the cases of both Isabell and Ines, this high degree of pressure manifests itself in the form of erratic behaviour and, interestingly, a tendency to oversleep. This is particularly noteworthy considering their contrasting portrayal in terms of confidence and self-assurance, since their eventual collapse under pressure suggests that, no matter how strong or confident, the pressures from combining conflicting spheres in a woman's life will eventually be too much to handle.

Despite much of the portrayal of both female protagonists centering on the problematic balance between their work and families respectively, a further noteworthy correlation between the two is observed in their attitude towards their intimate relationships. While Isabell explicitly states that she mistrusts the institution of marriage and at times entertains the idea of leaving her husband to raise her son alone, as her own mother did, Ines shows no signs of wanting to be in a long-term relationship or start a family, and instead only has casual sex with her coworker – further evidence of her work-centered life. Both female figures thus distance themselves from the

model of the nuclear family traditionally dominating German family policy (Ferree).

Furthermore, both Isabell and Ines place significant value on their career advancement and on the ability to earn a salary that ensures financial independence, thus breaking away from the male breadwinner bias still largely present in German society (Kerber-Clasen).

One noticeable difference between the portrayal of the protagonists in the selected works and the female images projected in public discourse concerns the care of elder family members, which is a focal point of both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. Both Ines and Isabell express discontent at having to spend time with their in-laws and parents respectively, viewing their care as a burden – and, in Ines’ case, even as a career threat. However, recent public discourse has painted a different picture, with women aged 40 to 59 reporting in a 2015 study that they gladly take care of older family members, seeing it as a moral responsibility and as a chance to give something back to the community (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach). The same cannot be said for either Isabell or Ines; it is, however, possible that this is due to the two figures being considerably younger than the subjects of the study.

As the results from the analyses have demonstrated thus far, a driving force behind the plots of both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* is their female protagonists’ struggle to balance the responsibilities stemming from the conflicting pair of work and family. In doing so, the works pose a much-debated question: is it possible for women to achieve a functioning balance between their personal and professional lives despite their apparent incompatibility? In other words, can women have it all? This is perhaps the most central aspect to the portrayal of women in the selected works, as both plots are only kickstarted once the female protagonists’ familial responsibilities clash with her professional duties. Both female figures are presented as unable to achieve a balance between work and family from the outset; Isabell’s work performance wanes

as a result of motherhood-related duties (and possible post-partum depression), while Ines has built her life in a way that excludes her family, leading her to become predictably overwhelmed once a family member intervenes in her work-centered schedule. As discussed in the third chapter, this clash between work-related and family-related responsibilities is also heavily featured across German public discourse on women in the first half of the 2010s, be it the quota debate (Lang and Rybnikova), gender pay gap (BMFSFJ), or discussions surrounding daycare facilities (Allmendinger et al.). Additionally, this incompatibility of work and family, which is highlighted in both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* from the outset, causes their female protagonists significant levels of stress and eventually leads to them crumbling under pressure. This again mirrors the majority of recent public discourse in Germany, with women regularly portrayed as highly stressed individuals caught in a vicious circle of wanting to reconcile career and family but being unable to do so.

Despite this rather grim portrayal of the challenges faced by German women today, both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*'s endings offer a glimpse of a light at the end of the tunnel. Not only do their protagonists *want* to achieve a better balance between their respective work and families, but they gradually take active steps in that direction. Even though both works' endings are rather ambiguous as to whether their protagonists ultimately resolve this issue, both Isabell and Ines' character growth denotes a significant shift in their initial perception of work and family as entirely incompatible. Proof of this shift can be found in the works' final scenes, as discussed in the analyses: in having Isabell come to the realization that a "glückliche Frau" is one who is able to balance work and family, *Die Glücklichen* ultimately argues that a woman doesn't need to prioritize only her work or her family in order to not feel lost in her role as a woman and that a reconciliation of the two spheres is not only feasible, but constitutes the key to a happy

life. *Toni Erdmann*, on the other hand, argues that it is not impossible for a career-driven woman to incorporate her family into her life, while also going so far as to suggest that this is the key to happiness – after all, Ines’ workaholicism and loss of family ties are immediately established in a negative light and cause her father to doubt her happiness. It is safe to say, therefore, that both works highlight the incompatibility of work and family as the thorniest issue plaguing German women today. By subsequently having their protagonists come one step closer to a reconciliation of these two apparently incompatible spheres but not go the full way, both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* finally answer the question of whether women can have it all with a confident “maybe.”

To conclude, this project has determined that the female images constructed in Kristine Bilkau’s 2015 novel *Die Glücklichen* as well as Maren Ade’s 2016 film *Toni Erdmann* on the basis of their respective protagonists indeed reflect the female images projected in German public discourse in the first half of the 2010s. Most correlations between the two sets of female images are observed when comparing the protagonists of the selected works to recent discourse on women in the workplace, such as the debate on establishing a female quota on management boards. Further agreement between the portrayal of women in the selected works and public discourse is observed in (but not limited to) the debate on daycare facilities, the portrayal of top female politicians, and the differentiation between young and old women. A small number of discrepancies were detected as well, most notably regarding the care of elders and the male breadwinner bias. Overall, the two selected works project an image of women as individuals suffering a high degree of stress caused by the conflicting responsibilities of work on the one hand and family on the other, thus thrusting the issue of the compatibility of work and family into the spotlight – a dualistic pair featured heavily in public discourse as a main area of struggle

for German women. Both *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* mirror this stance by having their female protagonists vacillate between family-related and work-related responsibilities from the outset, a clash which is responsible for the main conflicts in both works. This confirms the hypotheses put forth in the introductory remarks of this thesis, namely that the novel and film reflect the female images constructed in recent public discourse and that both works highlight the incompatibility of work and family as the main challenge faced by women. By extension, this confirmation also proves that *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann* were actively influenced by the societal context in which they were created, as they have been shown to echo the societal image projected in public discourse at the time of their inception and appearance. The fact that these two works appeared around the same point in time and constructed comparable female images despite their differing foci finally means that contemporary literature and film constitutes a rich resource from which to draw conclusions about the interplay between contemporary public and literary discourse.

Accordingly, an area for possible further research in the field of German (and gender) studies may lie in the examination of the portrayal of women of other age groups in literature and film, be it younger or older than the 30-year-old protagonists of *Die Glücklichen* and *Toni Erdmann*. For instance, works with female protagonists or figures aged 40 to 59 could be examined in order to assess whether they indeed exhibit the traits ascribed to them by recent public discourse, or if their portrayal rather rejects the image of the “sandwich generation.” Further explorations could also be of diachronic nature, for instance in determining whether the female images projected in literature and film before, during, and after the German demography debate echoed the renewed public interest in feminism and women’s rights observed in public discourse.

Finally, the study of the correlation between the societal image constructed in public discourse on the one hand and literary discourse on the other could be expanded to include the construction of a distinct male image, an area arguably less explored than its female counterpart. However, an examination of the male image alongside the female has the potential to yield more inclusive results concerning the societal structures observed in either discourse, thus leading to a fuller picture of the interconnectedness of male and female images with respect to areas such as work, family, and relationships. This is of particular significance in Germany, a country that may still prioritize motherhood, but whose recent policies have placed an increasing emphasis on fatherhood as well, e.g. by providing incentives for new fathers to take parental leave. Accordingly, an area for further research may lie in the examination of the male image (or images) both synchronically and diachronically; for instance, one could distill the male images projected in German public and literary discourse of the 2010s to assess whether the traits traditionally ascribed to men, such as animalism and aggression, mirror the portrayal of male figures in contemporary German works. From a diachronic perspective, an examination of male figures before, during, and after the demography debate could provide insight into whether the gradual detachment from the male breadwinner bias is reflected in literature and film over the years. Additionally, one could expand on the highly debated issue of the compatibility of work and family by exploring its significance in the portrayal of men in both public and literary discourse, which could be then contrasted with its female counterpart to dissect their points of intersection. That and more will yield a fuller view of the interplay between public and literary discourse in contemporary German society and ultimately allow for a deeper understanding of both the works in question and the societal contexts in which they are produced.

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