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Author: Nina Augustynowicz

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Nina Augustynowicz

University of Silesia

The Good, the Healthy, and the Natural: Charlotte Brontë and the 19th-Century Health Reformers

The body in Charlotte Brontë's novels is an arena where ideologies meet and engage in conflict. Various, often contradictory forces operating within the spheres of religion, gender, and class make the body a site of struggle. Thanks to Michel Foucault, the body has been understood as a cultural phenomenon, a *corporeality* in which the borders between psyche and soma, as well as between the inside and the outside are porous, allowing for these realms to overlap. Consequently, any external disturbances may become internalised, for example as illnesses. In the context of such materializations, the issue of health, both on the personal and national level, must gain primary importance. The moment the physical well-being of individuals is located at the intersection of numerous modes of thinking about the aforementioned matters, it starts to signify outside the strictly physiological domain. In other words, bodily symptoms indicate not only diseases of the flesh, but also ideas about morality, beauty, and the nature-culture opposition.

A similar blending of these superficially distant concepts happened in the works of the mid-19th-century health reformers, who strived to remedy the social ills by means of, most importantly, a carefully administered diet. The emerging natural sciences combined with strict Protestant ethics lay at the basis of a new discourse they created, a mixture of scientific influence with religious sources, which saw both the Bible and medical textbooks as the justification for its recommendations. Moreover, the fact that it is considerably difficult to establish whether this phenomenon occurred first in Britain or the States points to it being a manifestation of the *zeitgeist*. With precise ideas about the proper food, clothing, and other aspects of life, the reformers managed to verbalize, or rather radicalise the spirit of the era, which in its less explicit shape also permeated Brontë's works.

What shall follow now is a brief description of the dietary reform movement on both sides of the Atlantic which will provide background information on its representatives and define, firstly, their ideas about nutrition, secondly, other aspects they meant to control, and finally, their definition of nature. Next, an analysis of the ways these concepts are manifested in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) will be offered, with special attention paid to the educational institutions depicted in them. This will be done with an attempt at delineating the general attitude towards the vegetarian option found in the works under examination.

The history of the movement, closely connected in its principles to vegetarianism or even what would be called today veganism, goes back at least to the year 1815,¹ which saw the publication of Dr. William Lambe's *Water and Vegetable Diet in Consumption, Scrofula, Cancer, Asthma, and Other Chronic Diseases*; a book containing the famous quote about vegetable products being the only type of nutrition suitable for human beings due to the specialisation of the gastrointestinal tract.² Already at this point the author signalled that the appropriateness of the advocated ingredients of diet derives from the fact that they are "the direct produce of the earth"³; this argument will be reinspected later in the article. The figure of William Lambe, a fellow of Royal College of Physicians in London is crucial here for two reasons: firstly, he was cited as an inspiration by other members or supporters of the movement,⁴ and secondly, his medical authority definitely added largely to the spreading of the ideas among the public, and, by the same token, contributed to viewing them as scientifically validated. His concepts were later expanded by several others in Britain; for instance, William Horsell appended them with theories about the healing power of fresh water and regular exercise outdoors,⁵

¹ The 1815 book is a better known continuation and extended version of an earlier work, *Reports on the Effects of a Peculiar Regimen on Scirrhus Tumours and Cancerous Ulcers*, published in London in 1809.

² William Lambe, *Water and Vegetable Diet in Consumption, Scrofula, Cancer, Asthma, and Other Chronic Diseases*, 2nd edn. (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1850), p. 89.

³ Lambe, *Water and Vegetable Diet*, p. 89.

⁴ For example, in his *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating* (1883), Howard Williams called him "the founder of scientific dietetics in this country" (p. 198); he and his family were also quoted by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813) as an instance of the beneficial consequences of following a vegetarian diet (p. 19).

⁵ He argued for this in his *Hydropathy for the People: With Plain Observations on Drugs, Diet, Water, Air, and Exercise* (1845), writing that "all curable diseases are curable by hydropathy" (p. 155) and "inactivity [...] disposes the body to innumerable diseases" (p. 147).

while John Frank Newton, a former patient of Lambe, wrote in favour of animal rights.⁶ The increasing popularity of the reform movement later led to the publication of a number of magazines concerned with these dietary regulations, as well as to the creation of a hydropathic institute in 1846 and the Vegetarian Society the following year. Furthermore, there was a school near London where the principles were to be put into practice, with pupils growing their own vegetables and fruit.⁷

Such institutions mushroomed also on the other side of the Atlantic, together with boarding houses offering meals tailored to the needs of the followers of the American reformers, namely Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg. The latter, today linked with breakfast cereal products, began his career in the 1870s and, thus, exceeds the time frame set for this discussion. Worth mentioning is, however, the fact that he was not only a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but also a legitimate doctor. In keeping with both these traditions, in his publications Kellogg strived to educate, or perhaps rather scare the public by listing tens of possible disastrous consequences of masturbation, which was called the solitary vice,⁸ simultaneously with referring its victims to a cookbook containing vegetable and flour-based recipes capable of curing the condition.⁹ The former, nowadays associated almost solely with graham crackers, was a Presbyterian minister who in the 1830s lectured far and wide on the harmful consequences of consuming not only alcohol and meat, but also almost any substance other than vegetables, bread, and water. What is more, of great interest to him was also the issue of food production; in his view, all cooking should be home-based, with minimally processed ingredients.¹⁰

⁶ Those arguments were made in his *The Return to Nature, or, A Defence of the Vegetarian Regimen* (1811), where he wrote: “it can never be reasonably maintained that it is their [people’s] natural instinct to wound and kill the dumb animal” (p. 154). Moreover, the book was dedicated to Lambe and contains many references to his ideas.

⁷ For more information on the history of the movement, consult James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians. The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007).

⁸ In his *Plain Facts for Old and Young* (1881) the list of harmful consequences ranges from impotence to heart disease and idiocy (pp. 294–315).

⁹ John Harvey Kellogg, *Plain Facts for Old and Young* (Burlington: Segner & Condit., 1881), pp. 333–334.

¹⁰ This opinion held by Graham and advocated most fully in *A Treatise on Bread, and Bread-Making* (1837) encourages to view the movement in terms of economic conditions and anti-industrial trends, especially that he considered professional bakers unacceptable (pp. 103–105). For a discussion of this in more detail, see: Jeffrey Haydu, “Cultural Modeling in Two Eras of U.S. Food Protest: Grahamites (1830s) and Organic Advocates (1960s–1970s),” *Social Problems*, vol. 58, no. 3 (August 2011), pp. 461–487. In addition, Graham allowed only women, excluding domestic servants, to bake the family bread

Although the aforementioned movement is extended both in time and space, it is perfectly possible to summarize its basic principles concerning the proper diet. Essentially, meat, alcohol, tobacco, and opium were strictly forbidden. Some expanded this category of prohibited ingredients to include also cheese, butter, eggs, salt, pepper, mustard, sweets, tea and coffee, and many more.¹¹ In addition, the quantity of food consumed was to be limited, and the mealtimes carefully regulated. The reasons for such restrictions as expressed by the reformers themselves were of a twofold nature: on the one hand, there were theological arguments, which stressed the necessity of adapting diet to the conditions associated with the original state of creation, and, on the other hand, medical explanations, which underlined the issues of anatomical specialization. What is easily noticed here is some classificatory confusion, indicating an overlap between the spheres of religion and science, which has been mentioned already in the beginning of this article. Furthermore, if the theory provided by Graham is taken into consideration, it is obvious that the domains of sexuality and morality also appear in the equation. In *A Lecture to Young Men, on Chastity* (1837) he made explicit what others alluded to and fashioned his own theory of inflammatory substances and their impact on carnal needs. According to Graham, there exists a remarkable reciprocity between the genital organs and the intestines, as they are supplied by the same nerves. Consequently, stimulation of the digestive system through meat, strong drinks, etc. leads to undue excitation of sexual desires, and vice versa, “repeated passions” weaken the functions of the stomach.¹² Even though this is necessarily only a sketch of the concept, the main idea about the “morbid irritability” of physical desire which is caused by frequent use of the prohibited nutritional ingredients and results in various diseases, mental derangement and even premature death must be stressed here, especially as it shows how in this multidimensional discourse dietary regulations may become interwoven with other aspects of life that require supervision.

The reformers did not limit themselves to controlling what people ate; they castigated feather mattresses, fashionable clothing, and other vile habits of luxury. What was recommended instead were cold showers, coarse towels and hard beds, in accordance with the view which considered everything else a dangerous and immoral superfluity, an act of rebellion

(pp. 105–110), which coincides with, or even strengthens, the Victorian ideas of the gendered division of labour.

¹¹ For detailed lists, see Graham on the harmful ingredients of diet (1848, p. 148) and Horsell on the recommended ones (pp. 73–74).

¹² Sylvester Graham, *A Lecture to Young Men, on Chastity. Intended Also for the Serious Consideration of Parents and Guardians* (Boston: Charles S. Pierce, 1848), pp. 42–47.

against the workings of human physiology, as well as divine order. The all-encompassing vision of Lambe, Horsell, Graham and others gathered ice-cream and confectionery in the same category as any comfortable and pleasurable habits of clothing, sleep, and conduct in general, ascribing to them the power to corrupt both the innate moral and intellectual capacities.

As this suggests they clearly nursed an idea of a pure, unspoiled state of humanity, an inquiry into the origins of this concept appears to be essential here. The definition of nature seems to have two central characteristics: firstly, it is a God-given state of affairs which produces pain and disease when violated, secondly, the only means of preventing suffering is to approach natural conditions through adhering strictly to the dietary rules. This view introduces a division, common to all of the reformers, into lawful foods such as vegetables and flour-based products, as opposed to the substances which offend the laws of nature. The basis for establishing this differentiation was the alleged Garden of Eden, which John Frank Newton wanted to reinstate in his *The Return to Nature* (1811). In short, the human race has deviated from the intention of God which was stated thus: “[m]an is created and placed in a garden abounding with fruits and vegetables, with which he is commanded to sustain himself,”¹³ and all ills affecting it nowadays are the punishment for that sin. Moreover, the parallel between the original violation and dietary acts of disobedience is drawn with great strength, accentuating the main position of this issue among the reformers’ postulates.¹⁴ Without a doubt a religion-based concept, the reformers’ idea of nature optimistically postulated a possibility of revisiting paradise which depended only on the decision to change one’s diet habits.

This is why more attention needs to be drawn now to the didactic aspect of the movement. The teachings provided by it were constructed in a form based on the practice of medical evangelism. Education about dietary regulations was perceived as a primary duty, with children and young people being the main target. Shaping and supervising their eating patterns was crucial due to the increased susceptibility to depravity they expressed, which was certain to make its voice heard in later stages of life. For that reason it is the educational institutions depicted in Brontë’s

¹³ John Frank Newton, *The Return to Nature, or A Defence of the Vegetable Regimen* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), p. 4.

¹⁴ It would be interesting to follow this way of thinking into the contemporary gendered health and fitness ideologies, which seem to be making similar identifications. For the discussion of the Victorian restrictions on female appetite and their effects in modern advertising, see Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*.

works which will be the main focus in the analysis presenting the author's ambiguous rendition of the theory.

Lowood, the sinister boarding school for orphaned children where little Jane Eyre is installed, seems to be operating on the very principle listed above. The girls residing there are served mainly porridge, oatcakes and water in small quantities. Yet, their miserable reactions to those meals are far from the laudatory accounts of grateful patients published by the reformers.¹⁵ Instead of embodying the magnificent results of the regime on both physical health and morals, the pupils manifest sickness and increasing aggression. In place of longevity and improved quality of life promised by the reformers, "[s]emi-starvation and neglected colds had predisposed most of the pupils to receive infection: forty-five out of the eighty girls lay ill at one time."¹⁶ In other words, the recommended diet and lack of relative luxuries have effects precisely opposite to those portrayed in Graham's or Lambe's case studies, with the exception of leanness maybe – Jane grows thin during her stay in the school.

The person responsible for all this is Mr. Brocklehurst, the principal. This stern and gaunt figure, a wealthy clergyman is in charge of the establishment and the girls' lives to such an extent that his later removal is enough to significantly alter their living conditions. He may be seen as a manifestation of the dark side of the movement, a warning against the possible disastrous consequences of acting in line with its rules, especially that he does follow them also in other aspects of life. "How quiet and plain all the girls at Lowood look; with their hair combed behind their ears, and their long pinafores, and those little holland pockets outside their frocks – they are almost like poor people's children!"¹⁷ This exclamation describing the students evinces Mr. Brocklehurst's resolution to dress them in uniform, modest clothes and keep their appearance quite austere. The reader witnesses the most extreme display of his rule when he orders one girl's curly hair to be immediately cut short; as a justification he gives a short speech, in which he explains that his "mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel."¹⁸

¹⁵ For example, a description of one of Lambe's cases uses the following statements to summarize the patient's conditions when on the vegetarian diet: "He never found the smallest real ill consequence of this change" and "He can truly say that since he has acted upon this resolution, no year has passed in which he has not enjoyed better health than in the year which preceded it" (p. 152).

¹⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 3rd edn. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 65.

¹⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 65.

Obviously, the discourse Mr. Brocklehurst employs executes the same intermingling of morality and corporeality as the diet reformers, but with markedly more morose implications. As he himself phrased it, “when you put bread and cheese [...] into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!”¹⁹ This coincides perfectly with how Lambe saw the origins of social ills: “the offspring of tenderness, the luxury and the corruptions introduced by the vices and false refinements of civil society.”²⁰ Whether feeding children bread and cheese is such a vice is another matter.

It would be a simplification to call Mr. Brocklehurst an embodiment of the reformers’ wicked side. Through his figure, Brontë, herself once a student at a similar institution, may criticize the lack of care expressed towards the conditions of living in such schools. The members of the movement, especially Lambe and Horsell pointed to impure air and water as the chief culprits responsible for ill-health.²¹ That aspect is undoubtedly neglected at Lowood: “[t]he unhealthy nature of the site; the quantity and quality of the children’s food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation; the pupils’ wretched clothing and accommodation”²² are the strong arguments against Mr. Brocklehurst’s method. Moreover, another pet abomination mentioned in the vegetarian works was the debatable freshness of meat that is usually available and the harm it does. When the principal finally feeds his pupils with something more than porridge, the dish is “redolent of rancid fat.”²³ With all certainty, this is not what the movement advocated.

The question which needs to be answered here is whether those situations indicate that Brontë’s writings express cautious support of the reformatory ideas, while similarly waging a war against such conditions. On the other hand, it could also be said that her books voice severe admonition of the concepts for the corruption which can occur when unsatisfactory care is exercised. In order to investigate that argument, one more of her novels needs to be examined.

Villette is often said to be a lighter twin of *Jane Eyre*. The tendency to be less stern can be traced in its treatment of food and eating, too. When Lucy Snowe enters Pensionnat Beck, she is served dinner: “meat, nature unknown, [...] in an odd and acid, but pleasant sauce; some chopped potatoes, made savoury with, I know not what: vinegar and sugar, I think:

¹⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 53.

²⁰ Lambe, *Water and Vegetable Diet*, p. 45.

²¹ Horsell wrote, for instance, that “[t]here are few circumstances essential to the preservation of health [...] as the breathing of pure air” (p. 136).

²² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 70.

²³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 43.

a tartine, or slice of bread and butter, and a baked pear,”²⁴ a meal she consumes with pleasure and some reservations, a dominant combination of emotions accompanying her also later in the book in other relations. Then, she encounters the school’s eponymous principal, an almost exact opposite of Mr. Brocklehurst. In contrast to him, Madame Beck prefers to “make [her] own bed warm and soft; take sedatives and meats, and drinks spiced and sweet, as much as you will.”²⁵ She does not constrain her pupils in this aspect also; the girls in this establishment are well-fed and nicely dressed. What is more, many characters in the novel are linked with sweetness, all of them otherwise portrayed as light-hearted, not to say light-headed, and vain or malicious. This is the case with Madame Beck’s little daughter, Desiree. This tiny mischievous creature “would plunder the preserves, drink the sweet wine, break jars and bottles, and so contrive as to throw the onus of suspicion on the cook and the kitchen-maid,”²⁶ while her mother’s only reaction would be calmly to ascertain the need for discipline, without putting the words in practice.

And training is what Lucy perceives to be lacking in the French, Catholic students and those of her fellow Englishmen who imitate their behaviour. The religious and national conflicts that permeate Brontë’s novel would require much time and space to describe, however, it is necessary to mention eating habits as a differentiating factor in this matter. Madame Beck and her *Labassecourienne* pupils relish in delicious, rich meals; respectively, the girls are depicted as not very intellectually capable and quite passionate, while their main teacher is not able to supervise them in a way other than through spying. All these features seem to be the consequences of the teachings provided by Roman Catholicism which are summarized by the main protagonist in the following way: “robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, [...], joyous, ignorant.”²⁷ The obvious example of this unrepressed attitude would be Ginevra Fanshawe, who in Miss Snowe’s opinion is “a feather-brained school-girl”²⁸ who thrives only in the ballroom, with “sweet wine [being] her element, and sweet cake her daily bread.”²⁹ On the contrary, serious Lucy, initially seems to share her attitude with Mrs. Bretton, who educated her and who quite openly expressed her disapproval of sweets and cakes as signs of over-indulgence.

However, when M. Paul brings her a *petit pâté à la crème* she is delighted by the fact that he is able to recognize her needs so swiftly and

²⁴ Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857), p. 65.

²⁵ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 453.

²⁶ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 91.

²⁷ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 126.

²⁸ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 219.

²⁹ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 141.

admits that she “had feared sweets and wine.”³⁰ The choice of tense in this sentence is crucial here, indicating that Lucy’s framework of ideas is starting to change, while the influence of professor Emanuel is difficult to overestimate in this matter. The act of identifying the opposite sex with a particular food also appears later in the book; when Lucy asks Ginevra about her admirer, the answer is that she likes him just as “sweets, and jams, and comfits, and conservatory flowers.”³¹ Moreover, at one stage in her confusion between the contradictory ideologies, Lucy dreams of manna which “at first melts on the lips with an unspeakable and preternatural sweetness, but which, in the end, our souls full surely loathe; longing deliriously for natural and earth-grown food.”³² In this fragment the corrupted sense of bodily pleasure associated with sugary dishes is underlined, and the supposed true moral value of plant products praised, showing Lucy’s internal confusion between longing for tenderness and the deeply established principles of decency and self-control. Love, intelligence, morality, and food appear to be connected with a network of nerves, just as Graham theorized. Yet, the question is whether this relation is a blessing or rather a curse.

This aspect would suggest that Brontë is using the reformatory discourse, associating particular, prohibited ingredients of diet with moral and intellectual regress. Other evidence for that claim would be the fact that Lucy’s gradual familiarization with Roman Catholic and continental ideas leads her to the suspension of this view. Thanks to this, the deep connection between Protestant ethics and the movement come to the foreground. Furthermore, the main protagonist’s ambivalent feelings towards her new home, a mixture of attraction and repulsion, indicate a complex attitude to the reformers’ ideas – an entanglement in their rhetoric, which becomes a filter through which she perceives people and situations, and a desire to subvert or reject them in favour of a more relaxed, kind perspective.

To conclude, the viewpoint embraced by the dietary reformers is reflected in Brontë’s novels, where it became a means of perception and categorization for both the outside world and inner states. Although it is not possible at this point to establish whether her works articulate approval of Lambe and his like, they do share similar concerns with the members of the movement. This is particularly visible in the representations of educational institutions, since children and training were at the centre of the movement’s interests. Finally, the definition of nature they offered,

³⁰ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 136.

³¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 146.

³² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 241.

a combination of religious and scientific arguments, stressed both the degeneration of the contemporary world and the possibility of returning to the God-given state through strict observance of their restrictions, a theme also found in Brontë's novels.

Nina Augustynowicz

Dobrzy, zdrowi i naturalni

Charlotte Brontë i XIX-wieczni reformatorzy opieki zdrowotnej

Streszczenie

Artykuł bada wskazania żywieniowe obecne w powieściach Charlotte Brontë w kontekście poglądów XIX-wiecznych reformatorów zdrowia. Autorka poddaje analizie dzieła kilku brytyjskich i amerykańskich przedstawicieli ruchu promującego dietę opartą na warzywach, produktach mącznych i wodzie, a następnie interpretuje zawarte w owych poradnikach „idee” jako swoistą werbalizację ducha czasu. Istotne jest tutaj omówienie sposobu, w jaki pojęcia „zdrowy”, „naturalny” i „dobry” bywają w tych pracach zrównane, ze szczególnym podkreśleniem wpływu bezmięsnej diety na zmniejszenie apetytu seksualnego.

Jako że jedzenie raz po raz pojawia się w powieściach Charlotte Brontë jako ważny symbol, można dostrzec pewne istotne paralele między jej twórczością, w szczególności *Villette* i *Jane Eyre*, a poradami żywieniowymi proponowanymi przez jej współczesnych, co prowadzi do pytania o możliwość wpływu. Autorka artykułu analizuje postacie Brontë, zarówno te, które jedzą zgodnie z zasadami reformatorów, jak i te, które rozsmakowywują się w produktach surowo zakazanych (mięso, alkohol, słodczyce), i ostatecznie dochodzi do wniosku, że idee reformatorskie znajdują swoje odbicie w powieściach Brontë, gdzie funkcjonują jako metoda postrzegania i kategoryzacji tak świata zewnętrznego, jak stanów wewnętrznych bohaterów.

Nina Augustynowicz

Gut, gesund und natürlich

Charlotte Brontë und die Krankenpflegere reformer aus dem 19. Jahrhundert

Zusammenfassung

In dem Essay werden die in den Romanen von Charlotte Brontë erörterten Ernährungshinweise im Zusammenhang mit den Ansichten von Krankenpflegere reformern des 19. Jahrhunderts untersucht. Der Untersuchungsgegenstand sind die von einigen britischen und amerikanischen Vertretern der Bewegung, die eine auf Gemüse, Mehlprodukten und Wasser beruhende Diät förderte, geschriebenen Ratgeber. Die Verfasserin interpretiert die in den Ratgebern enthaltenen „Ideen“ als eine Art Verbalisierung des Zeitgeistes. Es ist interessant, auf welche Weise solche Begriffe, wie: „gesund“, „natürlich“ und „gut“ in den Publikationen miteinander gleichgezogen werden und wie der Einfluss von fleischloser Diät auf Abschwächung der sexuellen Lust hervorgehoben wird.

Da das Essen in Charlotte Brontës Romanen immer wieder als ein wichtiges Symbol zum Vorschein kommt, lassen sich gewisse wesentliche Parallelen zwischen ihren Werken, insbesondere *Villette* und *Jane Eyre*, und den von ihren Zeitgenossen erteilten Ernährungsratschlägen wahrnehmen, so dass man nach eventueller Beeinflussung fragen muss. Die Verfasserin analysiert Brontës Figuren: sowohl die, die Prinzipien der Reformern beim Essen befolgen, als auch die an streng verbotenen Produkten (Fleisch, Alkohol, Süßigkeiten) Geschmack findenden und kommt letztendlich zum Schluss, dass reformerische Ideen in Brontës Romanen widergespiegelt werden, und funktionieren dort als eine Methode der Wahrnehmung und Kategorisierung der Außenwelt und des Innenlebens der Helden.