

The “Little Gentleman” and the Scale of Normalcy: Bodily Difference, Aesthetic Self-Governance, and the Gaze in Thomas Mann’s *Der kleine Herr Friedemann*

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ABSTRACT: *Thomas Mann’s early novella Der kleine Herr Friedemann (1897) has often been read through decadence, the conflict between civilisation and instinct, or the destructive agency of a femme fatale. This article shifts attention from causal explanations of Friedemann’s death to the novella’s calibration of bodily scale, bourgeois status, and visibility. I argue that the title’s polite designation, ‘little gentleman,’ condenses a poetics of diminution: ‘Herr’ grants Friedemann adult bourgeois standing, while ‘kleine’ qualifies his ability to inhabit that standing as an embodied masculine subject. Drawing on disability studies, theories of the gaze, and Foucault’s technologies of the self, the article traces this diminution across domestic space, aesthetic practice, theatrical spectatorship, and bodily posture. Friedemann’s cultivated life of music, reading, and theatre is treated not simply as repression but as a viable form of aesthetic self-governance dependent on controlled distance. Gerda von Rinnlingen’s return gaze disrupts that arrangement by turning spectator into spectacle and concentrating his demand for recognition in a single other. The ending’s unresolved motives and downward bodily sequence expose the fragility of bourgeois subjecthood when bodily normalcy, social recognition, and self-command cease to reinforce one another.*

KEYWORDS - aesthetic self-governance, bourgeois masculinity, disability studies, gaze, normalcy, Thomas Mann

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Mann’s *Der kleine Herr Friedemann* begins with an unusually definite assignment of responsibility. ‘Die Amme hatte die Schuld’: the nurse is said to be to blame for the fall that injures the infant Johannes Friedemann, an explanation Friedemann himself later gives for his bodily impairment. The novella ends, by contrast, with interpretive uncertainty. After Gerda von Rinnlingen tears her hands from his, throws him to the ground, and disappears, the narrator asks what is actually taking place within him and tentatively invokes more than one possible motive for what follows. Between a causally emphatic beginning and an epistemically unstable ending, the text stages a life that critics have repeatedly sought to explain through one dominant logic: bodily impairment, the return of repressed sexuality, decadence, failed civilisation, or the destructive force of an alluring woman. Each of these approaches identifies an important pressure within the novella. Yet each risks turning the narrative into the illustration of a prior cause and overlooking the formal means by which Friedemann is made socially legible before his death becomes a problem of explanation [1, chs. I, XV].

This article begins instead with the title. *Der kleine Herr Friedemann* does not name its protagonist as a cripple, a hunchback, an invalid, or even an outsider. It gives him the conventional bourgeois honorific Herr and then places before it the diminutive adjective kleine. The combination is at once courteous and qualifying. ‘Herr’ recognizes Johannes Friedemann as an adult man with a name, property, occupation, education, and access to respectable social life; ‘kleine’ repeatedly returns that status to the scale of his body. The title therefore does more than describe physical stature. It establishes a relation between bodily measurement and social standing. My argument is that this relation organizes the novella as a whole. Mann develops what may be called

a poetics of diminution in which naming, architecture, spectatorship, posture, and affect continually admit Friedemann to bourgeois subjecthood while reducing the terms on which he can occupy it. He is not simply excluded from bourgeois society. More precisely, he belongs to it in a diminished form.

Such a reading builds on, but also reorients, a substantial critical tradition. Gerhard Kluge demonstrated the structural density of the novella through its recurrent motifs; Hans Rudolf Vaget situated its affective economy within a Fontanean intertext; and Børge Kristiansen influentially described Friedemann's collapse as the defeat of civilisation by a repressed instinctual world [2]–[4]. More recent work has shifted attention towards gender, disability, and visibility. Astrid Lange-Kirchheim reads Friedemann and Gerda through stigma, masquerade, and gender performativity, showing how both disturb a heterosexual gender order; Tobias Kurwinkel describes the aesthetic distance of Mann's early outsiders in terms of 'Apollonian' detachment; Ernest Schonfield places gesture and the gaze at the centre of the novella's melodramatic structure; and Michael Boehringer explicitly links Friedemann's disability to masculinity and desire [5]–[8]. These studies make it impossible to treat Friedemann's body as a merely symbolic vessel for a more fundamental psychological conflict. What remains to be developed, however, is an account of how the text itself calibrates bodily difference against bourgeois rank and how that calibration shifts across spaces and regimes of looking.

Disability studies provides a vocabulary for this problem because it treats normality not as a neutral description of bodily fact but as a historically produced norm. Lennard Davis has shown how the modern idea of the 'normal' becomes meaningful through statistical comparison and the pressure of an imagined average, while Rosemarie Garland-Thomson emphasizes that disability emerges through relations among bodies, environments, and cultural expectations rather than residing wholly within an individual body [9], [10]. Her later concept of 'misfitting' is particularly useful here: a body may fit or misfit depending on the material and social environment in which it must act [11]. Friedemann's impairment is therefore the narrative's starting condition, not a complete explanation of his marginality. The more precise question is how the novella turns bodily difference into social difference by placing his body within expectations of uprightness, proportionality, mobility, heterosexual marriage, public agency, and masculine composure.

I use 'normalcy' in this relational sense and connect it to two further concepts. First, Foucault's account of 'technologies of the self' helps clarify Friedemann's cultivated practices of reading, music, walking, and theatrical spectatorship. These practices do not simply repress a true self; they constitute a mode of self-governance by which he regulates affect, selects objects of attention, and converts potentially destabilizing experiences into forms he can inhabit [12]. Second, theories of staring and the gaze illuminate the point at which this self-governance encounters another subject whose look cannot be controlled. Garland-Thomson's work on staring shows how bodily difference becomes public information under intensified visual attention, while Schonfield's Sartrean reading of Gerda's gaze demonstrates how Friedemann is displaced from the position from which he had previously interpreted himself [13], [7]. The article traces this movement in four steps: from the diminutive title and domestic space, through aesthetic self-governance and theatrical distance, to the reversal of the gaze and finally to the downward bodily grammar of the ending.

II. THE DIMINUTIVE GENTLEMAN

The title's force becomes visible in the opening descriptions of Friedemann's body. After the infant's fall, the doctor examines 'die Glieder des gekrümmten und zuckenden kleinen Wesens,' the limbs of the curled and twitching little creature [1, ch. I]. In childhood, the narrator emphasises not simply pathology but proportion, describing him 'mit seiner spitzen und hohen Brust, seinem weit ausladenden Rücken und seinen viel zu langen, mageren Armen'; the same passage remarks that 'sein Gesicht so jämmerlich zwischen den Schultern sass' [1, ch. II]. The recurring vocabulary of smallness and disproportion places these features within a comparative field. Adult social designation and diminished bodily scale, bourgeois dress and physical disproportion, are repeatedly made visible together. The body is not presented as a self-sufficient medical object; it becomes meaningful because it is measured against an implicit model of the upright, proportionate, mature male body.

The honorific Herr intensifies that comparison. Friedemann is not deprived of the markers that define respectable male adulthood in his milieu. He participates in business, dresses correctly, attends concerts and social gatherings, shares ownership of the family house, and possesses the cultural literacy associated with Bildung [1, chs. III–V]. Yet the noun Herr never entirely absorbs its modifier. The title continually asks how much social authority an honorific can confer when the body to which it attaches is read as too small, misshapen, comic, or pitiable. The phrase kleine Herr is thus not a contradiction that can be resolved in favour of either term. It is a social syntax: formal recognition is granted and simultaneously scaled down.

The narrator's phrase 'putzige Wichtigkeit' is exemplary in this respect [1, ch. IV]. Friedemann's carefully arranged clothes and serious demeanour make a claim to adult bourgeois respectability, but the claim is framed as quaint or comical importance. What is diminished is therefore not only the body but also the public

meaning of the gestures through which adult masculinity is ordinarily displayed. The same action can signify dignity when performed by one body and ridiculous overcompensation when performed by another. The novella thereby reveals that bourgeois masculinity is not secured by legal adulthood, property, or etiquette alone. It depends on an embodied credibility that normally remains unspoken precisely because the normative body can take it for granted.

Pity participates in this scaling process. As a schoolboy Friedemann encounters the 'befangene Zurückhaltung' of his classmates; later he is accustomed to the 'mitleidig freundlichen Art' with which people greet him [1, chs. III, IV]. Neither response amounts to overt persecution. Indeed, both can present themselves as civility. Yet their very specialness marks him as someone for whom ordinary reciprocity must be modified. Garland-Thomson's analysis of staring is relevant precisely because spectacularization need not take the form of aggressive gawking. Bodies can become socially over-readable through attention that is solicitous, restrained, or compassionate. Friedemann's environment repeatedly communicates: you are one of us, but you require a different mode of address. Pity is therefore not the opposite of exclusion; it is one of the mechanisms through which internal marginality is maintained.

This internal marginality is written into architecture. Friedemann occupies ground-floor rooms in the family house so that he need climb the stairs only for meals; his 'Bureau' lies just inside the entrance [1, chs. V, VIII]. The staircase is therefore more than a neutral architectural detail. It functions as an unobtrusive measure of bodily capacity and of access to domestic representation. The point becomes explicit when the Rinnlingens first visit the house. Friedemann has already taken hold of the door handle leading to the upstairs 'Landschaftszimmer,' but he stops, steps back, and returns to the downstairs office: 'Nein. Lieber nicht. –' [1, ch. VIII]. No one blocks him. Yet the spatial threshold has already become a social and bodily threshold that he administers himself.

Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting helps specify what occurs in this scene. Misfitting is not an intrinsic quality of a body but a relation between embodiment and the environment. Friedemann's house is nominally his own, but its vertical organisation differentiates between spaces that can be occupied without exposure and spaces that intensify bodily effort and visibility. His retreat is therefore not adequately described as cowardice. It is a form of anticipatory self-management in an environment whose apparently neutral architecture has acquired normative force. The norm need not prohibit entry when the subject has learned to calculate where the body can appear, how much strain it can display, and under what conditions it can remain socially composed.

The contrast with other bourgeois men clarifies the stakes. On the main commercial street Friedemann walks 'winzig und wichtig' beside the merchant Stephens, who is described as unusually large and broad-built; both wear top hats and discuss politics after Friedemann has come from the Börse, where he has 'ein Wörtchen mitgeredet' [1, ch. VII]. Lieutenant-Colonel von Rinnlingen's social authority, meanwhile, is supported by military rank, marriage, wealth, and the large villa in which the couple establish themselves [1, ch. VI]. Friedemann is likewise a businessman and a Herr, and the text does not exclude him from commercial or social participation. The sharper point is that his formal participation does not erase the bodily asymmetries through which masculinity is read. The 'little gentleman' is diagnostically important because assumptions about uprightness, mobility, public efficacy, marriage, and household continuity become unusually visible when they are only partially or unevenly embodied.

III. AESTHETIC SELF-GOVERNANCE

At sixteen, Friedemann makes an explicit decision after seeing the girl to whom he has become attached kissing another boy. 'Ich will mich niemals wieder um dies alles bekümmern,' he tells himself, and turns immediately to his books and violin [1, ch. III]. Because the novella later culminates in erotic crisis, this moment is easily treated as the origin of repression: desire is pushed down, returns with greater violence, and destroys the defensive structure built against it. The text, however, gives Friedemann's subsequent life more density than such a retrospective diagnosis allows. His renunciation is also an act of redescription. Love and marriage are removed from the centre of the good life; literature, music, walking, scent, seasonal change, and cultivated sensation are elevated in their place.

The crucial term is Genussfähigkeit, the capacity for enjoyment. The narrator links it explicitly to Bildung: cultivation is not presented primarily as a route to public achievement but as the ability to receive and organise experience [1, ch. IV]. Friedemann learns to convert the world into manageable intensities. Soft musical tones, poetic rhythm, the atmosphere of a refined novella, even sadness and unfulfilled longing can be incorporated into an inward order because they are experienced under conditions he can shape. Foucault's 'technologies of the self' illuminate this process better than a simple opposition between authenticity and

repression. Friedemann works upon attention, affect, and interpretation in order to produce a self that can continue to live.

This is why the narrator's description of him as an 'Epikuräer' should not be reduced to sensual indulgence. Friedemann relocates happiness from the successful outcome of desire to the experience of sensation itself. Unfulfilled longing can even be more durable than fulfilment because fulfilment ends anticipation. The logic is defensive, but it is also creative. It refuses to allow socially normative success in love, marriage, bodily vigour, and public expansion to monopolise the category of a worthwhile life. The people who greet him with pity do not know, the narration insists, that he loves life tenderly or that it flows on 'erfüllt von einem stillen und zarten Glück, das er sich zu schaffen wusste' [1, ch. IV].

A disability reading should take that happiness seriously. To dismiss it as mere compensation would reproduce the very norm the novella makes visible: the assumption that a life without normative romance, marriage, and bodily ease must be only a defective version of a fuller life. Friedemann's aesthetic practices preserve dignity precisely by shifting value away from domains in which his body is persistently measured against others. They create a sphere in which receptivity, sensitivity, and formal discrimination can count as capacities rather than deficits. In this sense aesthetic self-governance has a resistant dimension. It does not abolish social inequality, but it interrupts the translation of bodily difference into total personal misfortune.

The novella nevertheless marks the cost of this arrangement. Friedemann can 'enjoy' almost everything only so long as experience remains available for aesthetic conversion. Even the grief of his mother's death becomes a powerful inner event to be preserved and used [1, ch. IV]. The stronger the affect, the more insistently it must be transformed into an object of contemplation. His self-governance therefore depends upon distance: desire must become the sensation of desire; pain must become an experience one can observe; other people are easiest to incorporate when they can be encountered as forms, tones, gestures, and atmospheres. The achievement is real, but its conditions are restrictive. Experience must not exceed the frame within which Friedemann remains its interpreter.

The theatre provides the ideal setting for such an arrangement. Friedemann's 'eigentliche Leidenschaft' lies neither in playing the violin nor in reading, but in the theatre. During tragic performances, his 'ganzer kleiner Körper' is set trembling [1, ch. V]. The phrase is significant: the body that is socially diminished becomes aesthetically intense. In the theatre, trembling does not disqualify him from subjecthood; it testifies to a heightened capacity to feel. Love, catastrophe, humiliation, and death can be experienced at maximum emotional pressure because the proscenium and the conventions of spectatorship keep their consequences elsewhere.

His regular seat in the theatre makes this structure spatially concrete. In bourgeois social life his position is insecurely negotiated; in the theatre he occupies a repeatable point of view on the first tier [1, ch. V]. The architecture and conventions of spectatorship direct attention towards the stage and give him a stable position from which to watch. Spectatorship offers a peculiar asymmetry: he can be moved without having to act, can approach catastrophe without becoming responsible for its unfolding, and can translate strong affect into aesthetic experience. Kurwinkel's notion of 'Apollonian outsiderness' is persuasive here because aesthetic form does not eliminate passion; it contains passion within a controlled relation between observer and event [6].

Theatre also reveals the latent paradox of Friedemann's life. He has not extinguished passion but relocated it. He has not transcended catastrophe but learned to consume it under formal conditions. Mann's decision to stage Friedemann's decisive encounter with Gerda in the theatre is therefore structurally exact. Gerda does not invade an otherwise sealed interior from an abstract realm of 'life.' She enters the very apparatus through which Friedemann has learned to turn life into spectacle. The crisis begins when the line separating stage, spectator, and object of vision ceases to hold.

IV. REVERSING THE GAZE

Gerda's first appearance under concentrated collective scrutiny occurs at the theatre. The new lieutenant-colonel's wife attracts attention through her dress and bodily presence; 'alle Augengläser' in the stalls and tiers are directed at box 13, giving the town an opportunity to inspect the couple [1, ch. IX]. The scene renders the theatre as a social optical machine. Gossip has already circulated about Gerda's smoking and riding and about her 'burschikos' manner [1, ch. VI]. In the auditorium, discursive judgement becomes organised visibility. Gerda is made into a spectacle because her body and conduct fail to coincide with the local script of agreeable bourgeois femininity.

This apparent parallel between Gerda and Friedemann matters. Both enter collective perception through deviation from gendered bodily norms, and Lange-Kirchheim is right to stress that both unsettle a heterosexual order [5]. Yet their deviations do not carry equal social weight. Gerda is highly mobile, married to an officer, and protected by social position; she rides and, when Friedemann first sees her, drives her own

carriage through the city [1, chs. VI–VII]. Her masculine-coded manner can produce irritation, but it can also be converted into fascination and erotic authority. Friedemann's bodily difference, by contrast, is persistently translated into pity and comic smallness. The novella thus refuses the comforting assumption that marginality automatically creates solidarity. Different deviations are valued differently because they intersect with gender, class, bodily capacity, and social mobility.

Gerda's power within the theatre arises from this asymmetry. She is certainly objectified by the opera glasses directed towards her, but she is also able to return the look. Friedemann initially tries to process her through his established aesthetics of spectatorship. He attends to the pallor of her uncovered arm, the pale-blue veins beneath the skin, and other visual details that can be translated into colour, contour, and atmosphere [1, ch. IX]. As long as Gerda remains an object of perception, she can be incorporated into the same economy that makes tragic performance emotionally intense but formally safe.

The decisive movement is almost wordless. When Friedemann becomes aware that Gerda's eyes are resting on him, he raises his head involuntarily. Their looks meet; she does not look aside but continues to observe him 'ohne eine Spur von Verlegenheit' until he himself, 'bezwungen und gedemütigt,' lowers his eyes [1, ch. IX]. He grows still paler, and a 'süßlich beizender Zorn' rises in him before the music resumes. The reversal is more than an erotic shock. It reorganises subject and object. Friedemann's aesthetic position depends on the ability to determine what an experience means to him. Gerda's look forces him to encounter another determination of his body, one he cannot wholly anticipate or control. He becomes aware not simply that he has a body, but that his body exists as an object in another person's field of vision.

Schonfield's Sartrean account of this moment is crucial: the gaze makes Friedemann 'außer sich,' outside himself, in the double sense of emotional derangement and displacement from a previously stable self-position [7]. The novella's emphasis on silent gesture makes the mechanism especially powerful. Friedemann had trembled before, but theatrical trembling belonged to an experience he could still frame as his own sensitivity. Under Gerda's gaze, trembling becomes visible evidence that can be read by someone else. The body ceases to be solely the medium of sensation and becomes a surface on which social meaning is assigned.

Mann more than once stages Gerda's gaze as passing over or beyond Friedemann. During his visit to the villa, once he finally raises his eyes again, she is no longer looking at him but 'blickte ruhig über seinen Kopf hinweg auf die Thür'; in the final garden scene she sits upright while her eyes look 'über ihn fort, ins Weite' [1, chs. XII, XV]. These gestures turn the scalar relation of the title into an optical relation. Gerda need not insult him. Her line of sight can simultaneously make his body painfully salient and suspend reciprocal interpersonal recognition. Friedemann is caught in a paradox familiar to disability theory. He wants Gerda to see him, yet fears the terms under which he can be seen; he wants recognition as a subject of desire, yet the encounter threatens to return him to the status of bodily spectacle.

At this point the function of art changes. Earlier the stage contained passion by directing it away from the spectator. Now the decisive drama takes place within the box through glances, lowered eyes, pallor, the wiping of Friedemann's brow, his restless movement to the corridor door and back, the contraction of his whole body after the episode with Gerda's fan, and his eventual departure before the performance ends [1, ch. IX]. Schonfield notes the increasing importance of mute gesture in the novella, and that muteness also blocks interpretive mastery [7]. The text does not give a stable account of why Gerda looks at him, whether she feels affinity, curiosity, cruelty, desire, or some shifting mixture of these. Friedemann must endure another subject without possessing the key to her intentions. His aesthetic crisis therefore does not prove that art is weak before 'real life.' It reveals a more specific limit: aesthetic self-governance cannot cancel the freedom and opacity of another person.

Shame names the affective consequence of this limit. Friedemann's earlier method can assimilate sadness, longing, even imaginary catastrophe because these affects remain available to reflective appropriation. Shame is different. It involves seeing oneself from a position one does not control. Once Gerda's look becomes decisive, Friedemann's body is no longer merely the body he has learned to manage; it is the body he imagines as it appears to her. The problem is therefore not simply that sexual desire returns. Desire becomes inseparable from recognition, and recognition becomes inseparable from the risk that the other will confirm the most painful social interpretation of his bodily difference.

V. ASYMMETRICAL DIFFERENCE

The familiar femme-fatale model tends to organise Gerda and Friedemann into a stark opposition: she embodies health, body, sexuality, and instinct; he embodies weakness, spirit, aesthetic distance, and civilisation. Kristiansen's account of the 'defeat of civilisation' captures the force with which Mann later described one of his recurrent themes, but as a reading of this novella the polarity can obscure Gerda's own deviation from bourgeois femininity [4]. The women of the city disapprove of her demeanour; she smokes and rides, and her

behaviour is described as 'burschikos.' When Friedemann first sees her, she is driving the carriage herself [1, chs. VI–VII]. She is not simply the normative healthy woman whose presence exposes Friedemann's deficiency. She is herself a difficult fit within the gender order of the town.

Recognising Gerda as another nonconforming figure does not make the two characters equivalent. The comparison instead clarifies how social resources mediate difference. Gerda can drive through the city, ride, question Friedemann directly, invite him to the gathering, approach him at the party, and finally end the encounter by leaving him on the ground [1, chs. VII, XII, XIV–XV]. Friedemann's movements repeatedly take the form of stopping, retreating, lowering his head, or leaving. Her gender nonconformity can be aestheticised as cold beauty or mystery; his bodily nonconformity is far less able to escape the languages of pity and grotesque disproportion. What they share is exposure to normative judgement. What they do not share is an equal capacity to redirect that judgement.

Their conversations are structured by approach and withdrawal. During Friedemann's visit to the villa, Gerda asks after his health, looks at him steadily, and says that she herself is often ill, nervous, and subject to 'die merkwürdigsten Zustände' [1, ch. XII]. In the garden she later asks when his impairment began and whether he has been happy during his thirty years [1, ch. XV]. Such exchanges momentarily suggest recognition grounded in shared vulnerability or estrangement. Yet the questions are inseparable from scrutiny. Her gaze can remain fixed on him and then move beyond him; intimacy appears and is suspended. The text gives too little access to Gerda's motives to settle whether this behaviour is compassionate, curious, cruel, self-projective, erotic, or some shifting mixture of these. That indeterminacy is not a defect in characterisation. It prevents the reader from restoring the causal certainty announced at the novella's opening by simply replacing the nurse with Gerda as the person 'to blame.'

The garden scene radicalises this dynamic, but the distribution of speech matters. Gerda does not tell Friedemann that his previous life was a lie. She asks, 'Und Sie waren nicht glücklich, diese dreissig Jahre?' Friedemann answers 'Nein' and then, in his own words, 'das war Lüge und Einbildung.' When she follows with 'Sie haben also geglaubt, glücklich zu sein?', he replies, 'Ich habe es versucht' [1, ch. XV]. The retrospective negation of his earlier happiness is therefore Friedemann's own formulation, produced within a highly charged encounter, not an authoritative verdict supplied by Gerda or by the narrator. It is tempting for criticism to endorse this confession as the novella's final truth and to read everything before Gerda as sterile compensation. Yet such an endorsement would flatten the text's earlier insistence that Friedemann's quiet happiness was real and, crucially, self-created.

The distinction is important. Aesthetic self-governance is limited because it cannot guarantee reciprocal intimacy, but limitation is not the same as falsity. Friedemann's reading, music, walks, theatrical experiences, and disciplined pleasures genuinely organise a liveable existence. In the garden he retrospectively recasts that earlier happiness as 'Lüge und Einbildung' at the very moment when his demand for Gerda's recognition has become acute [1, ch. XV]. His statement is therefore better read as a crisis-bound act of self-redescription than as the narrator's retrospective cancellation of the novella's earlier account. The scene exposes the vulnerability of a self-relation whose value can suddenly become dependent on another person's response.

This is the point at which the article's argument about diminution returns in a new register. Friedemann's social world has long diminished his masculinity by attaching pity, comic scale, and bodily qualification to the title Herr. His aesthetic practices respond by constructing alternative criteria of value. In the garden, however, he abandons those plural criteria and allows the possibility of Gerda's recognition to become absolute. Once that recognition is withdrawn, no counterweight remains. The tragedy is not that an artificial aesthetic existence is finally defeated by life; it is that a finite but functional self-relation collapses after all value has been concentrated in an interpersonal encounter whose outcome Friedemann cannot control.

VI. THE DESCENT OF THE BODY

The final scene translates this collapse into posture. Earlier in the novella Friedemann responds to humiliation by straightening himself 'so gut er das vermochte,' as well as he could [1, ch. III]. The qualification matters. Uprightness is neither naturally available nor simply absent; it is an achieved posture, a bodily practice of self-command. His clothing, regular work, measured walks, and formal manners belong to the same economy. They sustain the Herr in kleine Herr by repeatedly producing adult composure under conditions in which that composure is socially fragile.

In the garden the grammar of the body moves in the opposite direction from the earlier act of self-straightening, though not in a perfectly linear sequence. Friedemann and Gerda are seated on the bench when he suddenly convulses upward, then 'sank langsam vor ihr zu Boden.' He kneels before her, pressing his face 'in ihren Schoss'; she tears her hands away, seizes his arm, and throws him fully to the ground. He gets up, takes two steps, falls again, and finally pushes himself forward 'auf dem Bauche' before letting his upper body fall

into the water [1, ch. XV]. After the brief upward convulsion, the scene is dominated by kneeling, prostration, falling, and prone movement. The social diminutive of the title becomes a bodily descent. What had been maintained through disciplined posture is progressively undone.

The dog comparison intensifies the process, but its grammar is relational. The narrator does not simply say that Friedemann lies like a dog; he imagines a possible motive at the point where Friedemann lies on the ground ‘behandelt von ihr wie ein Hund’—treated by her like a dog [1, ch. XV]. The movement from ‘little gentleman’ towards animalising treatment therefore arises within an interaction of humiliation and refusal rather than from disability itself. Friedemann first places extraordinary weight on Gerda’s response; after she throws him down and disappears, the narrative links his prone body to rage and self-disgust. The body materialises a collapse of the social and affective composure through which he had sustained the Herr in kleine Herr.

The death itself resists heroic form. Friedemann does not leap dramatically into the river. ‘Auf dem Bauche’ he pushes himself farther forward, raises his upper body, and lets it fall into the water; he never raises his head again, and even the legs left on the bank cease to move [1, ch. XV]. The incomplete posture refuses the aesthetic of a sublime suicide or a reconciliatory dissolution into nature. It looks awkward, partial, almost stalled. The threshold that has organised so much of his life—inside and outside, upstairs and downstairs, spectator and spectacle, included and diminished—reappears at the boundary between land and water. His body ends in neither element fully.

Narrative causality also becomes partial. The opening sentence had named a responsible agent; the ending explicitly withholds an equivalent certainty. The narrator asks in full, ‘Was ging eigentlich in ihm vor, bei dem, was nun geschah?’ and then tentatively invokes both the ‘wollüstige Hass’ Friedemann had felt when Gerda humiliated him with her look—a hatred now imagined as turning into ‘eine irrsinnige Wut’ that might be enacted even against himself—and ‘ein Ekel vielleicht vor sich selbst,’ a possible disgust with himself that fills him with the urge to annihilate himself [1, ch. XV]. These formulations are conjectural and overlapping rather than a single causal diagnosis. Eroticised hatred, humiliation, rage, self-disgust, and the wish for self-annihilation remain mutually intensifying possibilities rather than one final cause.

This refusal of a single motive also constrains moral judgement of Gerda. Her rejection and violent casting-off are immediate precipitating events, but they cannot bear the entire explanatory burden. Friedemann has long lived under pitying forms of social perception; his aesthetic practices have created stability without eliminating the desire for intimacy and recognition; the theatre has transformed Gerda’s look into an experience of bodily objectification; the garden converts the hope of recognition into humiliation; and Friedemann himself then redescribes his earlier happiness as ‘Lüge und Einbildung.’ The fatal event emerges from the convergence of these processes. Disability is neither destiny nor metaphorical shorthand for psychological weakness; it becomes socially consequential through a history of embodied comparison, visibility, and self-interpretation [1, chs. III–V, IX, XII, XV].

The novella’s final sound returns the individual death to the social environment. The crickets briefly fall silent and then resume; from the long avenue comes ‘gedämpftes Lachen,’ muted laughter [1, ch. XV]. The source is unspecified. It need not belong to Gerda, and the text offers no grounds for converting it into a final act of personal cruelty. Its anonymity is precisely what gives it force. Throughout the novella Friedemann has lived under forms of social evaluation that are often polite, indirect, and without an identifiable persecutor. At the end, judgement no longer requires a judging subject. It becomes ambient sound.

The laughter can therefore be heard as an acoustic continuation of the gaze. Looking makes bodily difference shareable as spectacle; laughter makes deviation shareable as affective distance. Neither requires explicit hatred. Earlier, in the adolescent scene, the girl responds to the other boy’s kiss ‘kichernd’; at the end, ‘gedämpftes Lachen’ travels through the avenue after Friedemann’s death [1, chs. III, XV]. The repetition links an earlier scene of painful exclusion from normative romance to an anonymous social world that continues without him. No single person is declared guilty, yet the structures by which a Herr can be continually reduced to a kleine Herr remain intact.

VII. CONCLUSION

Der kleine Herr Friedemann is not a parable in which disability naturally unfolds into death. Its formal achievement lies in showing how a bodily difference acquires social meaning through measurement, space, looking, and self-management. The title is the most compressed instance of this process. Herr grants Friedemann the formal position of an adult bourgeois man; kleine qualifies his claim to inhabit that position without remainder. The lower-floor office, staircase, fixed theatre seat, and garden then distribute this qualified belonging spatially. Friedemann is repeatedly inside the institutions of bourgeois life, but the terms of his participation make visible the bodily norms on which those institutions quietly rely.

The same is true of his aesthetic life. Reading, music, cultivation, and theatrical spectatorship are not merely evasions awaiting exposure. They constitute a real practice of self-governance that preserves pleasure and dignity by reorganising the scale on which a successful life is measured. Its vulnerability lies in its dependence on distance. Strong feeling must remain formable; the body must remain governable; other people are easiest to accommodate when they can first be treated as objects of perception. Gerda's return gaze disrupts this arrangement because it introduces an irreducible external point of view. Friedemann becomes not only the person who feels but the body another person sees.

Gerda's own nonconformity makes the result more complex than a conflict between normal health and abnormal disability. Both characters deviate from gendered expectations, but their deviations have unequal social consequences. Gerda can convert difference into mobility, fascination, and visual power; Friedemann's difference is much more firmly attached to pity and comic disproportion. Their encounter therefore demonstrates that marginal positions do not automatically produce reciprocal recognition. Difference is socially graded, and the ability to look back is itself unevenly distributed.

The ending brings these strands together without resolving them into a single cause. The downward sequence of Friedemann's posture materialises the collapse of the self-command through which he had sustained the gentlemanly position; the narrator's alternative motives resist causal closure; and the distant laughter suggests that normalising social perception survives the individual whose life it has helped to shape. Mann's early novella thus exposes the conditions of bourgeois subjecthood at the moment they fail to coincide. To be a Herr is not simply to possess a name, property, education, or occupation. It is also to inhabit a body that can pass as proportionate and self-commanding, to receive recognition from others, and to maintain an affective relation to oneself that does not depend upon a single external verdict. Friedemann's tragedy begins when these conditions cease to support one another. The 'little gentleman' is therefore less an exceptional figure outside normality than a figure through whom the scale on which normality is produced becomes unusually visible.

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