

German Literature

Study Guide

Instructions for the Study Guide: Please use the questions to develop a deeper understanding of the text and to review the concepts. As you read, consider the questions. Keeping careful notes or a journal will help you prepare to write the essays at the end of each section as well as the final essay. Your required and supplemental readings can be found in the "Readings" file.

Instructions for Essays: Please write a 1,250 – 1,500 word essay that responds to the essay questions. Then, send your essay to your professor. You may send an outline and drafts to your instructor for feedback and guidance before you send your finished essay.

Instructions for Final Essay: Please write a 5,000 word essay that responds to the essay questions. Then, send your essay to your professor. You may send an outline and drafts to your instructor for feedback and guidance before you send your finished essay.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- O1. To create in your mind a cohesive map of German literature, from start to finish.
- O2. To see how the stages of German literature grow in and out of one another.
- O3. To familiarize yourself with the various strands—Christian, pagan, Latin and Greek—which go into making the fabric of German literature.
- O4. To identify the major genres of German literature, and to appreciate their importance, relative to one another, in keeping the German literary tradition alive.
- O5. To form some opinion of the historical and cultural setting of German literature.
- O6. To relate German literature to your own national literature/culture. How do they compare?

UNIT	WEEKS	Early German Literature
I	1-3	
	Topic: The Foundations	<i>Nibelungenlied</i> . The origins of German literature lie in Norse and Icelandic saga, and embody rich traits: powerful mythological forces in conflict, ruling the world; subtle as well as bellicose personal relations embodied inside that mythic dynamic. This material is neither Christian nor drawn from Classical Antiquity and therefore opens us to perspectives on humanity and nature which have not been incorporated in the mainstream of Western culture. Do you find yourself drawn to the world of the Nibelungens? Can you see any reason why this world did not become the ruling narrative for Western culture?
	Topic: The Early Song and Lyric Traditions of Germany	Minnesingers The 12 th and 13 th centuries witnessed the development of a refined poetry, Minnesong or Love Song, promoted by the scattered feudal courts of the Germanic lords. (Of nationhood we cannot yet speak.) You will at once see the distance of this refined lyric tradition, much of it romantic and inspired by the Troubadour tradition of Southern France, from the potent epic mind of the Nibelungens. Walther von der Vogelweide is a good model of this sophisticated work. If you read the translation of his poetry carefully, and compare it with the original, you will begin to see how close German is to English. Do you see the

magic of this particular verse? Try out this quasi/translation practice throughout the course. You will find that many of the texts you read here will be both in English translation and in the German original. Look closely at the relations of these two types of language.

Topic: The Emergence of the People's Poetry

The Mastersingers

The Mastersingers were a guild of poets who developed organically from local and church choirs in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their most famous representative was Hans Sachs, 1494-1576, a cobbler from the city of Nuerenberg. While these guilds of singer/poets developed from the working person's level, they managed to create sophisticated if down to earth poetry, which you will find strikingly different from that of the Minnesingers. Can you imagine this kind of poetry-from-the-groundroots-of-society in our time? Do we have 'popular poetry' of this sort? You should notice that a powerful German composer and poet, Richard Wagner (1813-1883), will later use both the *Nibelungenlied* and The Mastersinger tradition as the foundations of his nation-shaping musical drama.

Topic: Christian poetry

Parzifal

Wolfram von Eschenbach, the author of *Parzifal*, composed this work in the first quarter of the twelfth century. (This work belongs to the era of the Minnesingers.) It is the first major work of German literature to tap directly into the Christian tradition, and stems from a close reading of the work of the *Perceval* of the contemporary French poet, Chretien de Troyes. The elaborate story, of a Knight on a spiritual adventure quest, ultimately involves a transformative encounter with the Holy Grail, the chalice alleged to have been used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. Read *Parzifal*, please, with an eye for the thriller story in which ultimate Christian mystery is embedded. Do you find this text of contemporary (to us) interest? What is most living in it? To note: the same Richard Wagner, mentioned above, also made *Parzifal* into an opera. You will find Wagner a powerful reinterpreter of the early German literature you are now reading.

Topic: Christian Mysticism

Meister Eckhardt (1260-1328)

The Christian theme foregrounded in *Parzifal* is concurrently working its way into mystical currents. Meister Eckhardt takes the experience of God directly onto himself, and although he is a monk, and belongs to the Church, he adopts an independent, directly mystical relation to God, which puts him at a distance from the institution of the Church. Please read Eckhardt's texts/aphorisms with attention to their universal qualities. Can you apply them to life in your own time and place? Does Eckhardt seem far from us, or very close? While reviewing Eckhardt, keep in mind that from his kind of independent thinking, and direct relation to God, it is not far to Martin Luther, whose break from within the Catholic Church, and foundation of Protestantism, will in the sixteenth century appear to transform the landscape of Christianity.

Topic: A Review

A literary historical survey is always artificial. The historian is obliged to put apples and oranges together in order to create a unified whole. This artifice is clear in the case of any history of 'early' German literature. Works of totally different kinds have to be joined: vast pre-Christian epics, delicate nature poems, mystical aphorisms. Furthermore, these totally different genres stem from diverse historical moments. One useful way to 'use' this material is to think of it in terms of its future. Each of the texts you have been reading will play a significant role in later German literature. We will continue to draw the parallels that result. By the end of the course you should have a sense of the intricate past-present-future weave of themes in German literature.

Essay Questions for Unit !

1. German literature grew from several roots: Norse mythology; mediaeval Latin court poetry; Christian mysticism or narrative (as in *Parzifal*.) What evidence of that triple heritage have you seen in this Unit? (You may want to support your perceptions with some reading in a History of German Literature.)

2. Literature can either be 'high class' in production, emerging from a sophisticated and even aristocratic creative milieu, or it can be produced from the level of the Volk ('the people.'). Which creative source seems to you to dominate the early German literary material we have read so far?

Unit II	Weeks	The Age of Luther
	4-6	
	Topic: The Protestant Reformation	<p>Martin Luther (1483-1546)</p> <p>Martin Luther was of peasant stock, a person of the people, who became a priest, then a professor of theology, a brilliant translator of the Bible, a creator of a unified standard for the whole German language, a superb composer of hymns, and ultimately the 'founder' of a culture-changing Reformation in religious practice. The heart of that new religious practice was faith, not good works. Luther disputed the Catholic conviction that good works, and their channeling through the Sacraments, could lead to salvation; for Luther salvation depended entirely on a free gift from God. Many niceties of theology are involved in the study of Luther, but we are concerned with him as a force in German literature. Read him as an innovator in language, a brilliant translator, and a hymn writer; you will be readying yourself to see the place he is going to assume in later German letters. Do you know other examples of 'great religious leaders' who also served as masters of literary accomplishment?</p>
	Topic: The Mystical Tradition	<p>Jakob Boehme (1515-1624)</p> <p>We have already met Meister Eckhardt, and we will soon meet another mystic, Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), who was born in the year Boehme died. You will want to reflect on the importance of this mystical tradition to early German literature. (Why was so much of the early tradition involved with this kind of intense personal encounter with God? What echoes of this kind of mystical thinking will appear later in the Germanic tradition?) Among the notions assuming thematic form in Boehme's extensive writings, are the ideas that the Fall (and the Devil) are necessary parts of the Creation, the idea that man can become 'as god' by divesting himself of humanity and seeing the world as God sees it. Boehme's often 'daring' thought put him at odds with the newly established Lutheran church, and yet his thinking remains inscribed inside the theology of Luther. Are you prepared to view this kind of ecstatic testimony as 'literature'? Is the work of the mystic also work of the 'imagination'?</p>
	Topic: The Thirty Years War	<p>Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (1621-1676)</p> <p>To this point we have encountered nothing in German literature like 'prose fiction.' We have been reading poetry of diverse kinds, mystical aphorisms, and 'theology' from the work of Martin Luther. With <i>Simplizissimus</i> (1668) we come on full blooded imaginative prose, a novel. (The novel is just beginning to make its voice heard in Europe: the reading public for popular literature is growing, and the book industry is starting to take off). Grimmelshausen's theme is the Thirty Years War, a dreadful conflict into which life threw him. (You may want to read a little about that messy and brutal war, which bankrupted and exhausted much of Europe from 1618-1648). <i>Simplizissimus</i> is a fictionalized autobiography of its author, who grew up among scenes of destruction and havoc, and who captures them in a fascinating fictional canvas. Do you know any similar war accounts? What makes war such a rich, if disastrous, material for the literary imagination? What is Grimmelshausen's personal attitude toward the conflict driving the war?</p>
	Topic: Mysticism	<p>Angelus Silesius (1624-1677)</p> <p>"I am like God and God like me. I am as large as God. He is as small as I. He</p>

cannot above me nor I beneath him be." This is the kind of witty and daring mysticism Silesius undertakes, playing off of the identity of God and man. (Silesius was off and on accused by the Church of panentheism, of believing that the world exists as God, but that God is more (the animating force) than the world.) You will see that Boehme is in the background of this thought. These two geniuses of the mystical perspective differ in many ways: one point of agreement between them is that both believe that man is in a sense responsible for God. This thought, which trembles between witticism and a profound statement of faith, is the preeminent evidence of literary perspective in these two mystics. Are you comfortable with considering mysticism a kind of literature? Do you accept the premise of this course, that literature makes its presence felt in many forms of writing—from fiction to adoration and meditation?

Topic: A Review

A history of literature performs a fine balancing act: between purely formal considerations and sociological attention to the setting of works and lives. We have been walking that fine line here, inviting you to consider texts now as art, now as historical documents. I think you can see that both sides of this debate have their merits. You will want to be building some personal view of this debate. Meanwhile you have another assignment before you. Try to capture the materials we have been reading under the heading of 'German literature.' What common traits begin to emerge? Susceptibility to religious sentiment? Directness? Or do all such labels seem to you too facile? Is each text a separate case of its own?

Essay Questions for Unit II

1. What is the literary value of the religious imagination in early German literature? Is religious experience a fertile field for creativity in language? Why? How?
2. The period of German literature we are studying, in this unit, features a few fine works written during the 17th century. You will note the absence of plays and poetry, two sophisticated art forms which were being brought to stages of perfection at this time, in France and England. Is there something about the German national culture, during this period, which impeded its fulness of literary development? You may want to check out this issue in a political/social history of Germany itself.

Unit III

Weeks

The 18th Century Enlightenment

7-9

Topic: Entering the Enlightenment

Gottfried von Lessing (1729-1781)

Gottfried Lessing is a good introduction to the period of German (and European) culture customarily termed The Enlightenment. As you enter Lessing's thought world you will immediately sense that you are in a cultural environment 'closer to us' than was anything we have read so far. (Please start trying to define that 'closer to us.' Or perhaps you will disagree about the 'closer.')

Classical (as well as German) literature forms the basis of Lessing's sensibility, and can be seen in his many plays—from *Minna von Barnhelm* to *Nathan der Weise*. But as Lessing developed, in playwriting, he broke increasingly from the stylized classicism of the (great) French dramatists of the 17th century, and brought his own dramaturgy constantly closer to 'real life settings and language.' His *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* is a collection of lively notes on the practice and theory of the theater, direct result of Lessing's role as a theater critic in Hamburg during the years 1767-69. His *Laokoon* (1766) deals with the burning point between still beauty and intense beauty. You may want to ask yourself, as you encounter this sophisticate of the 'modern theater,' this wit and littérateur, whether you have totally left the world of such as Angelus Silesius. Are you

beginning to get the sense of the sharp contrasts among the works that make up German literature?

Topic: The Classical within the Enlightenment

Johann Winckelmann
(1717-1768)

Like Lessing, Winckelmann took his deepest impulses from the Classical World. (In fact, when you consider Lessing's *Laokoon*, you may say that for both Winckelmann and Lessing the plastic art of the Greeks and Romans was the text of supreme importance.) Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764) was a testimony to the beauty and ideal sensuality of the ancient Greek figure, and artist. In that art Winckelmann found what he called 'a noble simplicity and a quiet greatness,' and from the model of such art he wished to inspire his contemporaries. Like Lessing, Winckelmann turned to the ancient world for spiritual direction in the 'modern world.' From the time of these two great pioneers of Enlightenment, German culture was to remain preoccupied with Antiquity, especially with the Greek example. Can you see how new was this development in German culture? Can you begin to see some of the reasons for this new classical emphasis? To answer you might need to look into European cultural history of the eighteenth century. There you will see that one important evolutionary factor, in Germany, was a sequence of breathtaking archeological discoveries in both Italy and Greece.

Topic: The move toward 'Humanity'

Johann Gottfried Herder
(1744-1803)

With Herder we are a generation farther into the century than in the two writers considered above. Dates are not always meaningful, but time has its slow unfolding processes, and with Herder we touch a level of imaginative humanity which strikes an unmistakably 'new world note.' Herder is still an intense admirer of ancient Greek culture, but he feels that such culture was a rare and unrepeatable trick of historical development. His own perceptions drew him increasingly toward 'world culture,' the largeness of the human experience, and the anthropological insights which, in a highly aesthetic observer, lead to fresh disclosing of the nature of society. As a literary critic Herder goes beyond even Lessing, in his sensitivity to the living presence of the stage. In his studies of ancient poetries he breaks down artificial barriers between the 'modern' and the 'ancient,' and sees world culture as one. As you read in this unit, please try to ferret out the distinctively modern tone in Herder. Would this flexible 18th century thinker be able to adjust to our contemporary world?

Topic: The Finest Achievement of German Humanism

Johann Wolfgang Goethe
(1749-1832)

Goethe takes us to the center of German Classicism/Humanism/Sturm und Drang. (Check out this last phrase, *Sturm und Drang*, in a History of German Literature.) As you read Goethe, and about him, you will find all these terms put to use, for this author is so great, his achievements so multiple and thoughtful, that he is not easily caught in a brief concept. Perhaps the notion of Aufklaerung, Enlightenment, belongs to Goethe in all his facets, for he brings the light of reason and imagination to his creations and researches. He creates vast dramatic epics like *Faust*, heart-rending short novels like *Werther* or long philosophical novels like *Wilhelm Meister*; he writes art and literary criticism; he rivals Herder in stimulating travel writing—as in his *Journal of a Trip to Italy*; he masters every form of lyric poetry at its highest level; he provides lasting models of dramatic art, and indeed, as though the foregoing were not enough, he conducts fruitful and still Today relevant research into botany, geology, meteorology, and vulcanology. One of the questions you will be asking yourself, as you read this man, is: what goes into constituting a universal genius? You may search your memory for other examples. Leonardo da Vinci? Aristotle? Is this kind of comprehensive knowing and creating possible in our time? While it is true that Goethe draws vigorously on his predecessors, especially Herder and

Winckelmann, he transmutes everything into his own universe.

Topic:
Classicism, Art,
Enlightenment
Humanism

Friedrich Schiller
(1759-1805)

With all the writers we study in this Unit, Friedrich Schiller shared a fascination with the ancient Greeks and their culture. (You might want to look further into this preoccupation with Hellenism among the greatest German writers. Recall that Germany did not precisely have a 'Renaissance,' as did France and England, so German culture was just catching up to a new enrichment which other European nations enjoyed already in the 16th century Renaissance.) Dramatist, cultural critic, poet, philosopher, Schiller oscillated between the poles of Classicism and a passionate revolutionary attitude toward the staid mores of his (growingly bourgeois) time. One of his finest tributes to Hellenism was his *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1793-1795). In that long essay he turns to the theater-centered culture of fifth-century Athens, an example of theater as educational force for an entire people. Like Goethe, Schiller finds the Hellenic example a spur to the development of his own time. In a series of intense dramas, starting with *The Robbers* (1777), Schiller created a series of probing and culture shaping dramas. You might want to direct yourself, in your essay on aspects of 18th century German culture, to the all important issue of the drama, which brought out the strongest cultural concerns of German writers. Why was the drama the natural genre to perform this service?

Topic: Lyric
Hellenism

Friedrich Hoelderlin
(1770-1843)

Friedrich Hoelderlin, a contemporary of the philosophers Hegel and Schelling, turned his obsession with the Hellenic world into vatic poetry—as a young man he translated Sophocles and Pindar, the most awe inspiring and metrically intricate of the ancient Greek poets. Addressing his novel *Hyperion*-- and his powerful lyrics-- to an idealized lover, Diotima. Hoelderlin created a world in which the Gods of Ancient Greece become living forces in his own time. Whereas Schiller and Goethe, in many lyrics, adored the Hellenic as mankind's great age, for Hoelderlin the gods and spirit of Hellenism were *actualities* of his experience. If this sounds odd, you will need to try out the radical perspective on the poetic selections provided for this unit. You may discover that by contrast with Hoelderlin much of the classicism of the 18th century is truly an 'idealization.' Does Hoelderlin's poetry still live?

Topic: A review

For many the group of writers you have just been reading represents the summit of German cultural achievement. You should evaluate that idea, as you survey the whole panorama we are viewing in this class. What do you think might justify the claim, that this 18th century period is the high point of German literature? What is uniquely vigorous and enriching about the writers we have considered here? Is it possible to think that the 18th century is the Renaissance that German culture missed, in the 16th century?

Essay Questions
for Unit III

1. The classical world of Greece and Rome (especially the Greek) exercised huge influence over 18th century German expression. Why? What did the Germans find in the Hellenic, especially, that inspired them and helped them to find their own identity?
2. The theater attracted the highest skills of several of the writers read in this Unit. What unique features does the theater enjoy, as a genre of literature? Can you see why it might have attracted creative minds drawn to the importance of shaping their own culture?

Unit IV Weeks 19 th Century

10-12

Topic: National
Sentiment

Johann Gottlieb Fichte
(1772-1829)

Johann Gottlieb Fichte is best known as a philosophical critic of Immanuel Kant—

whose *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) established a critical benchmark for the speculative thought of the time. In countering Kant—prioritizing the dynamic of the ego, as the creator of a self-sufficient world—Fichte devoted some of his own philosophical attention to the question of national self-awareness. His *Addresses to the German Nation* (1806), concerning national identity, pride, and self-consciousness, is a fragment from Fichte’s whole philosophical system, but in fact an expression of growing German self-awareness. The goods and the tremendous evils of nationalism will have made themselves clear to all Germans by the following century. But it is of value to cite an early stage of that German nationalism, as it appears in benign form in Fichte. You may want to consider the interface between Fichte’s ‘national sentiment’ and that sense of ‘world culture’ which Herder promoted.

Topic: Friedrich Schlegel and Romanticism

Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829)

Friedrich Schlegel takes us over the historical cusp into a sharply Romantic perspective. (You will be suspicious of these period-terms, won’t you, dear student? You see that we use them and re-use them...and abuse them.) That is, he grasps the notion of the creative and dynamic ego, the source of poetry—a working concept that Fichte, one of his teachers, offered him—and he makes it the basis of a subtle view of irony in literary production. Consistent with that insight is Schlegel’s insistence that imaginative thought is always ‘starting in the middle,’ like an epic poem. Man thinks and creates from within a situation. Poetry, the art of building meaning from within the dramatic surface of lived life, is the Romantic genre par excellence. Are you familiar with the English poet Coleridge, whose *Biographia Literaria* draws heavily on the German Romantic notion of imagination?

Topic: High Romanticism

Novalis (1772-1801)

The prioritizing of the poetic imagination, by Schlegel and many of his contemporaries—including counterparts like Wordsworth and Lamartine elsewhere in Europe—became the leitmotif of Novalis’ work. In his *Hymns to the Night*, 1799, Novalis lets his imagination create from the fixed point of the death of his first fiancée, a death which lured him to follow the beloved. As he contemplates this loss, he sees salvation in poetry, whose magic power can transform all that passes into a metaphor of the spirit. Building from this perception Novalis conceives the universe as a fusion of nature and spirit in the aura of which he can be truly one with his beloved. *Friends, you are here in the heart of the Romantic vision, and would do well to evaluate Novalis’ perspective. Is he giving in to wish-fulfillment? Is he discovering the truly spiritual character of what is? Is he rightly evaluating the constitutional powers of the poetic imagination?*

Topic: From Romanticism to Realism

Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872)

Franz Grillparzer, like Schiller, Lessing, and Goethe, turned to the stage for his most serious work. But there is a difference between Grillparzer and the others, who preceded him by at least two generations, and who wrote in fervently different times and from cultural perspectives that by Grillparzer’s time were outdated. You might give some thought to the degree and meaning of that difference between writers separated by only a few generations. Is cultural time so coercive that it sweeps all before it, in its rush for ‘change?’ Or is there a ‘universal component’ in great literature, that transcends such apparent change? Whatever your answer to this question, you may find yourself gripped by a psychological modernity, in Grillparzer’s plays—say in *Sappho* (1818) or *The Waves of Love and of the Ocean* (1831)—that contributes a ‘realistic’ tone to what is in fact a ‘Romantic’ production. Grillparzer’s sense of tragedy is grounded in the individual person’s tragic sense and its tragic consequences. Sappho, longing to ‘live life to the fullest,’ but finding her goal unrealizable, takes her own life. Hero and Leander, the two lovers separated by a stretch of dangerous water, are separated even more fatefully by their inward inability (refusal?) to make one out of their love.

Topic:
Romanticism on
Stage

Heinrich von Kleist
(1777-1811)

The dramatist and novella writer, Heinrich von Kleist, shares a deep psychological insight with his contemporary, Grillparzer, but develops his themes with an eye to their objective correlatives, in particular the workings of the law. *The Broken Jug* (1808) is a comedy with a serious twist. A local judge has been harassing a pretty young girl. As he leaves her bedroom one evening he knocks off and breaks a treasured water jug belonging to the girl's mother. The tale involves the skein of events by which the judge finds himself in the position of trying the case of the 'broken water jug.' 'The comic/humiliating consequences, of this turn of events, turn the law on its head, and 'justify virtue' and the integrity of the young girl's fidelity to her fiancé. The novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1811), written toward the end of Kleist's life, takes a subtle look at the integrity of the law. Michael is a farmer who has been seriously mistreated by a local landowner. He turns to the law for redress, but does not receive it. Michael determines to take revenge into his own hands, and with the growing violence of his anger turns to means increasingly violent. The story is yours to interpret. Who is finally in the wrong? The indifference of the law to Michael's case has inspired him to take action against the law. In the end, but subtly, the law wins the case. Can you see how this kind of narrative, like Grillparzer's drama, speaks to us more immediately—but not more deeply or artistically—than even the great 'universal' dramas of the 18th century? Or don't you see it that way?

Topic: The Grand
Finale of the
Century

Richard Wagner
(1813-1883)

Richard Wagner was a great composer, poet (of the librettos of his operas), scenographer, and publicist, and it is no wonder that his creative brilliance made of opera (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the Total Art Work) the consummate statement of 19th century Romanticism. You will be able to trace, in any of his operas, the combination of skills which soars ambitiously. You will also have the occasion, in meeting Wagner, to recapitulate (in his invariably fresh and socially alert manner) many of the early Germanic narrative themes you have traced in this course: *Lohengrin* and *Parzifal* (Wolfram's *Parzifal*); *Tannhauser* (the Meistersingers); The Ring of the *Nibelungen*); *Tristan und Isolde* (Gottfried von Strassburg, 12th century). Wagner's perspective, throughout his reworking of this narrative material, is romantic-tragic in mode, but in world view celebratory of the origins of German literature. Wagner's powerful written lyrics, and sublime (at best) music, which he was to help enshrine in a national festival at Bayreuth (1872), mark one of the high points of German cultural self-awareness. It must be mentioned that Adolf Hitler promoted his own cult of Wagnerian music, which he considered the highest testimony to German national supremacy. But it has been frequently observed, that Wagner was, instead of a nationalist, a creator employing the treasures of German culture to focus an unrelenting critique of German society. You could take it as a study guide prompt, to figure out the special nature and value opera occupies, in the palette of forms by which a society gives an account of itself.

A review

You should by now start to have some sense of the periods of growth and development that mark German literature. In this Unit we began with Fichte, Schlegel, and Novalis, all figures of the beginning of the century, all in their ways tied to the century of Goethe and Schiller. By the end of this Unit you have come on Richard Wagner, a Romantic too, in his way, but the ambitious creator of a 'total' view of German culture. Wagner's movement, to establish a national shrine at Bayreuth, was by the twentieth century to be appropriated by the Nazis, as a symbol of their fake concept of the Germans' sacred mission. While Wagner, himself socially critical and no naive nationalist, bears no responsibility for this dangerous nationalism, he laid foundations which malign followers would use to support structures of unimaginable evil.

Essay Questions

1. Is there anything like progress in the development of literature from one period to another? It is often held that the arts do not 'develop' or 'progress' in the way the sciences do. Restricting yourself to literature, consider whether there is any progress in the 'development' of German literature from the 18th to the 19th centuries.

2. In Schlegel and Novalis you find a strong case for the discovery and creative powers of the imagination. In Hoelderlin you find the creation of an entire poetic universe, which is a unique product of imagination. What is the importance of the concept of imagination, in forming the new world of 19th century Romanticism? What has German culture in common with other contemporary cultures, in its concern with the faculty of imagination?

UNIT V **Weeks**
13-15

20th Century

Topic: Poetry and the 'New World'

Stefan George
(1868-1933)

Stefan George was a visionary poet who gathered together many of the most judicious writers of his moment—like Hugo von Hofmanstahl and Ludwig Klages. Catholic in background, though secular in spirit, George created in his poetry a world of strong transcendental values, and hermeticism (Convinced that woman was the source of evil, he surrounded himself with a stern male community, with whom he shared contempt for the vulgar bourgeois values of his time.) In his unique way he followed the promise of the Romantic theorists of the imagination, like Schlegel and Novalis. You might 'study' George with an eye to 'pure poetry.' Can poetry create 'a world of its own'? Does poetry flourish in an individual cut off into his/her own universe, or is the making of poetry in itself a 'social act'?
Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

Topic: Transcendence through Poetry

Like George, Rilke was a devoted poet, and from the outset an aesthetic observer of life. The two men also shared an historical position—experiencing, in their full maturity, both the First World War and significant preparatory stages of National Socialism—which encouraged their natural tendencies to withdraw from the social arena. Rilke created inside his growing body of books an atmosphere of seeking, of non-religious search for religious value, of trust in art as a free and independent value home. In his greatest books—*Duino Elegies* (begun in 1912), and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*—Rilke comes to ecstatic conviction, from within his 'neo-pagan aestheticism.' The world becomes the longing of the spirits that inhabit it, the inter-involvement of our life at every stage with death, the hope embodied in hopelessness. The poetry in which these profound poems are embedded is unsurpassed in the German lyric. Do you like this poetry? Does it speak to your world?

Topic: The Fine Art of Alienation

Franz Kafka
(1883-1924)

A German writer born in Prague, the hypersensitive Kafka lived to see a brutal war (World War I) and its aftermath, the formative stages of a uniquely barbaric political movement, National Socialism in Germany. Like many in his time, Kafka grew increasingly aware of the inhumanity of the 'new society' forming around him; a wasteland of bureaucracy, of faceless decisions, of abject middle-class values. Better than any critic, however, Kafka knew how to describe the crisis of his time, in novels catching the human in the midst of bureaucratic labyrinths, and meaningless adventures. *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), two of these novels, skewer the individual against the mysterious and threatening power of society. It is easy to see the spiritual kinship among George, Rilke, and Kafka, as they confront a world which to them seemed dangerously new, but which to us is beginning to seem unremarkably familiar. Or do you not agree with me?

Topic: Confronting the 20th Century Reality in Fiction

Thomas Mann (1875-1955)

During a long career, which eventually brought Mann to a resting point in California, this author took on the full blast of 20th century German turbulence. He chronicled the glory and weakness of middle class life in *Buddenbrooks* (1901), he dealt with problems of political commitment and aesthetic retreat in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), he turned in 1947, with *Doctor Faustus*, 1947, to a study of the tortured insides of the post-War German artistic mind, and in his tetralogy *Joseph and his Brothers* (1933-1943) Mann creates the figure of a mature society-affirming man, familiar with the bloody forces of darkness, who can make significant moves for the world after the political nightmares of National Socialism. Mann, unlike the three writers sampled earlier in this Unit,

Topic: Drama
and some
Experiments with
the New World

lived to see much of the bitterness of this haunted 20th century.
Berthold Brecht (1898-1956)

Berthold Brecht wins his place, at the end of our survey, for the bold way in which he reached out toward and into the second half of the twentieth century. (It is this curriculum maker's opinion that we are not yet able to evaluate German literature of the latter third of the past century: not enough time has passed.) As a lyric poet, but especially as a dramatist—like so many of the writers we have studied here—Brecht was from start to finish socially involved. His work as a dramatist was also work as a member of society, setting up actions within the citizenry; thus Brecht regularly incorporates, in his plays, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, Alienation Effect, designed to make the drama itself seem like a social action, and not a piece of literature. The societal impulse, at work here, took large scale form in Brecht's commitment to Communism. This playwright long allied himself to the East German and East European political perspective instituted during the Cold War. The finest of his plays, like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* or *The Good Woman of Szechuan* throw light on social organizations still unrealized, but part (possibly) of social shapes that will extend out beyond the social period surveyed in this course.

Essay Questions
for Unit V

1. The twentieth century in Europe (and especially in Germany) was torn with political/social upheavals, and national conflicts, which generated distress, suffering, and new political alignments throughout the world. The extent of these self-inflicted wounds only became clear during and just after the Second World War. What were the literary responses of Mann and Brecht, to the wartime events in question? Is it possible to confront cultural barbarism by means of literature, which is normally considered a vehicle of the finer human experiences?
2. To judge from Rilke and George, even in eras of human peril disciplined and depth-searching lyric poetry can provide a meaningful prospect for 'clarifying reality.' Do you find personal relevance and significance in the poetries of Rilke and George? Do these two writers seem to you in a direct line of inheritance from Friedrich Schlegel and Hoelderlin?

VI **Final Essay**
Week 16

Final Essay Question

1. Do you see a unity to German Literature? Are there any themes that pervade the whole of this body of literature? If so, what are they? If not, can this body of literature truly be considered as a whole? In coming to grips with this question, you may want to consider the political/social history of the nation.
2. In which genres does German literature excel? Are certain genres of particular significance at certain times, while other genres are more prominent at other times? Does this discussion spill over into the literary works of your own time? What genre seems to you of particular importance at this moment, and why?