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Günter Grass’s linguistic masterpiece *Die Blechtrommel* is a complex labyrinth of intertwining motifs. An individual analysis of the various themes present in the work should therefore precede any holistic conclusions drawn. This seemingly overwhelming task can be facilitated through an in-depth examination of the usage of certain lexemes which support the primary textual themes. As Noel L. Thomas remarks about the novel’s protagonist, “Oskar speaks the language of doubt; the metaphorical language, despite Oskar and as it were unbeknown to Oskar, sometimes reveals more than the narrator himself” (59-60). Ralph Freedman asserts similarly that “Grass’s linguistic universe, which relies so much on descriptive words, pointing to things or impressions, conforms precisely to a narrative world in which the surface of external events—their chronology, their history—conceals an inner dimension” (56). It is clear that the utilization of language in *Die Blechtrommel* must be scrupulously considered in any productive analysis of the work. This investigation will focus specifically on the lexeme *unten*, in its function as a preposition as well as a prefixoid, as it is employed in association with the themes of fear and insecurity in the novel.

Günter Grass utilizes terms of spatial reference in *Die Blechtrommel* to indicate not only concrete physical dimensions in the narration, but also to express Oskar Matzerath’s longing for security. The spatial preposition *unten* is an essential starting point for an analysis of the extent to which Grass’s language enhances the theme of insecurity and fear in *Die Blechtrommel*. Physically being under something implies, at least partially, that one is protected from danger and less vulnerable. Hence, the frequency of characters in the...
novel finding themselves underneath an object reinforces the theme of the individuals’ need for safety and stresses their desire to be shielded from harm. As described in Duden’s Bedeutungswörterbuch, the spatial preposition unter simply denotes “die tiefere Lage im Verhältnis zu einem anderen Genannten.” But when viewed in a figurative sense, unter is extended to imply a certain dependence and even subordination, as in the phrase “unter jemandem arbeiten.” This figurative denotation is observed as Oskar reports a loss of control over his senses while ill, having seen and heard “allerlei unterm Fieber” (507). Thus, it would seem that weighing the polysemy of unter, the habitual dwelling underneath other objects, could be regarded as a symbolic representation of a lack of self-determination. The characters have little, if any, control over their fates, a fact that is accentuated by the physical dimensions conveyed through the preposition unter.

The local preposition unter is projective, as it is employed in the context of viewing an object in relation to something else from a certain point of observation. Through the repeated utilization of unter, Grass projects the standpoint of the essentially powerless, insecure individual into his text. The narration begins with the tale of Anna Koljaiczek’s skirts, a metaphor which resurfaces frequently throughout the novel. Oskar’s grandfather hides under Anna’s mysterious layered skirts, one “Oberrock” and three “Unterröcke” (10), thereby successfully avoiding capture by the German police (14). This initial episode involving the skirts is associated with the fear of persecution, as Joseph Koljaiczek is described as the one “mit der Angst unterm Rock” (14). The theme of fear and the search for a secure hiding place is introduced via the Koljaiczeks and becomes a thread woven throughout Die Blechtrommel, providing a common bond among the novel’s many characters.

It should be pointed out, however, that the significance of “unterm Rock” extends further than a mere symbol for the refuge sought by persecuted or frightened individuals. The location is also a site for sexual activity, as marked by Oskar’s depiction of the erotic pleasure of his grandmother. The “Unterröcke” themselves carry sexual connotations, as they can be translated not only as the skirts underneath the external one, but also as slips, items of lingerie. Oskar later informs the reader that his mother, Agnes Koljaiczek, was indeed conceived underneath the skirts of her mother at the time of her intercourse, as opposed to the traditional placement of the woman underneath the man. This indicates the male’s dependence on, and submission to, the feminine figure—the possessor of the womb.

Oskar’s mother Agnes resembles her father in that, as a child, she finds “im Versteck ähnliche Sicherheit ... als Joseph unter den Röcken der Anna fand” (24). Rather than her mother’s skirts, however, Agnes seeks comfort elsewhere: “wenn sie nicht unter das Bett kroch, dann steckte sie im Kleiderschrank, und wenn Besuch da war, saß sie unter dem Tisch und mit ihr ihre Kodderpuppen” (23-24). It is significant that Agnes is in no apparent danger when she feels the need to hide. This is indicative of a generalized lack of individuals’ security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril.
As a three-year old, Oskar “blieb unter dem Tisch” while his parents and Jan Bronski played skat (74). Oskar amuses himself by observing the risqué under-the-table behavior of his mother and Jan Bronski, but more importantly, he associates existence under the table with a sense of well-being: “Ich fühlte mich wohl unter der Tischplatte, im Windschatten des herabhängenden Tischruches” (75). As in the case of Agnes, there is no evident reason for Oskar to remain under the table. He does so not out of immediate necessity, but rather, due to a natural impulse. Oskar’s resistance to exposure becomes even more apparent as he explains his inclination to spend time in the attic of the apartment building in which the Matzerath family live: “Während der Hof für Oskar voller Gefahren war, bot ihm der Dachboden Sicherheit” (109). Once again, the need for security does not arise out of a life-or-death situation; the “Gefahren” to which he refers are nothing more than some taunting children. It is not the relatively harmless children, however, that cause Oskar to stay in the attic. Oskar is fleeing from a much more menacing force, that of human plight.

A conscious awareness of Oskar’s own belief that existence underneath something provides protection and security is demonstrated through his treatment of the sacred tin drum. He tells about his concealment of the drum during the confrontation with the gang known as “die Stauber”: “Als ich aufstand, nahm ich das Blech, um es vor weiteren Schäden besser bewahren zu können, an mich, unter den Kittel” (449). The importance that Oskar places on the drum, his link between past and present, is highlighted by his protective treatment of it in this scene. Handling the drum as if it were a living creature, Oskar is determined to provide it with the protection from the world which he cannot seem to find for himself.

Oskar meets the midget Bebra, for whom he holds great respect for a time, at a circus with his parents (131). Bebra’s words of wisdom to Oskar upon their meeting also require analysis in light of projective prepositions and the theme of fear and insecurity: “Kleine Leute wie wir finden selbst auf überfülltesten Tribünen noch ein Plätzchen. Und wenn nicht auf der Tribüne, dann unter der Tribüne” (133). The “Tribünen” to which he refers are those found at the Nazi propaganda-rallies. In the same chapter “Die Tribünen,” Oskar secretly follows Alfred Matzerath to one of these rallies, where he hides “unter dem Rednerpult” (139). The substantially enclosed area underneath the grandstands provides a realm where Oskar can observe what is taking place. In his place underneath the crowd, however, he is not completely exposed and susceptible to the Nazi propaganda that is being presented in front of them. After the death of the dwarf Roswitha, Bebra also associates the space underneath the grandstands with security: “Wir Zwerge und Narren sollten nicht auf einem Beton tanzen, der für Riesen gestampft und hart wurde! Wären wir nur unter den Tribünen geblieben, wo uns niemand vermutete” (424).

An important distinction to be made between Oskar and Agnes is that Oskar, unlike his mother, never abandons his inclination for hiding in confined spaces. As an adult—inasmuch as he can be considered as such—he no longer sits under tables. But in the chapter entitled “Im Kleiderschrank,” Oskar encloses himself in the closet of Schwester Dorothea (600-12). Furthermore, he constantly longs for the sanctuary underneath his grandmother Anna’s skirts.

Later in life, as Oskar finds himself “unter dem Eiffelturm,” he imagines sitting simultaneously under Anna’s four skirts (406). The skirts of his grandmother are also his “Fluchtziel” in the final chapter of the novel (717). His yearning to return to the warmth and safety of Anna’s skirts, or to conceal himself within the closet of a nurse, suggests a psychological desire to return to the ultimate site of protection, the womb. This instinct manifests itself often in Oskar’s pursuit of enclosure; even when he sits under the table, he is at least partially enclosed because of the “herabhängenden Tischruches” (75). Oskar expresses his own uncertainty as he writes in the present tense, as a thirty-year old:

“Wer nimmt mich heut’ unter die Röcke? Wer stellt mir das Tageslicht und das Lampenlicht ab? Wer gibt mir den Geruch jener gelblich zerfließenden, leicht ranzigen Butter, die meine Großmutter mir zur Kost unter den Rücken stapelte, beherbergte, ablagerte und mir einzuteilen, damit sie mir anschlug, damit ich Geschmack fand (201).”

Oskar’s longing to return to the “womb” underneath his grandmother’s skirts is expressed through the verb untertauchen: “Oskar wollte, sobald er sie sah, seinem Großvater Koljaiczek nachzufolgen, bei ihr
Considered figuratively, the recurrent usage of the term Unterschlupf appears to be a deliberate attempt to place emphasis on the characters' search for security. The definition of the term contains two elements that shed light on this motif as well. Duden's Bedeutungswörterbuch defines Unterschlupf as the “Ort, an dem man Schutz findet oder an dem man sich vorübergehend verbirgt.” According to this definition, one allegedly finds protection, exactly what Grass's characters are seeking, in an Unterschlupf. The other significant component of the definition is the term “voriibergehend.” Residence in an Unterschlupf is a temporary condition, thus whatever protection it may offer is also only temporary. This illuminates the conclusion that Oskar eventually seems to reach, that the quest for lasting security is a futile one.

The recurrent usage of unter as a literal term of spatiality as well as in its figurative semantic role undoubtedly marks a hierarchy of sorts. A case in point is seen on Klepp Miünzer's wall, on which hangs a picture of Queen Elizabeth of England and a set of bagpipes: “Unter dem Bild hing an einem Mauerhaken ein Dudelsack” (623-24).
Focus on Literatur

As a symbol of Scotland, the bagpipes exemplify the fusion of the spatial-dimensional and the metaphorical ramifications derived from the morpheme *unter*. In the case of the Matzeraths and the other characters of the novel, they are all subordinates, and the power which forces them to remain oppressed is simply their insecurity and their fear of the human condition.

An analysis of Grass's utilization of *unter* in *Die Blechtrommel* reveals the significance bestowed upon the motifs of fear and insecurity. The application of this approach can be extended to other linguistic-thematic relationships within the text. As J. Harris Frederick remarks, the linguistic reality in Grass's texts is "more powerful, certainly more durable than the historical reality" (257). On this basis, an in-depth examination of key lexical elements marks the initial step in gaining insight into the distorted yet surprisingly believable reality of *unter* portrayed in *Die Blechtrommel*.

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Focus on Literatur Vol. 4, No. 1 (1997)