Margaret Fuller, at the beginning of her feminist tract *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), modifies Hamlet's exclamation "Frailty, thy name is WOMAN" to read "Frailty, thy name is MAN" (7), adding that man's frailty is often mixed with princely visions of his future glory. In order to illustrate this double nature of male existence, she turns to the biblical parable of the prodigal son:

> If, oftentimes, we see the prodigal son feeding on the husks in the fair field no more his own, anon, we raise the eyelids, heavy from bitter tears, to behold in him the radiant apparition of genius and love, demanding not less than the all of goodness, power and beauty. (7)

This allusion (not very well informed, by the way, since the prodigal son never formerly possessed the field in which he was finally craved for – not ate – the husks meant for the swine) tries to capitalize on Christ's well-known parable in order to make a point that has virtually nothing to do with the point of the original tale in Luke 15. She just wants to show that there is potential glory as well as potential misery not only in women but in men also. There are hundreds of examples of similar twists and revisions of the parable.

Some writers have concentrated on the wrongdoing of the younger son and on the dire consequences it has for him, others on the welcome scene, and a few have focused on the resentful behavior of the elder brother. In view of all these interpretations one needs to keep in mind the point that Christ wanted to make – that God offers unconditional love to anybody who returns to him, even if that someone is rejected by others. As Helmut Thielicke put it: "The ultimate theme of this story is not: About the Lost Son, but: About the Father who finds us. The ultimate theme is not: About the faithlessness of human beings, but: About the faithfulness of God" (Thielicke 27).

In American literature, the parable of the prodigal has been put to many uses which sometimes were quite different from the purpose with which Christ told the story to the Pharisees
and the teachers of religious law. From the beginning of English settlement in the New England colonies, preachers, and later poets, used the parable to teach children obedience toward their parents. During the Revolution, it was used on both sides of the conflict to depict America as a prodigal child – or England as a father who fell short of being as loving as the biblical father. The Westward Movement gave rise to a host of literary works in which the prodigal son appeared as a tramp roaming the far country of the West. And around the time of the Civil War, the North accused the South of being the prodigal who was leaving the house of the Union, while the South called itself the prodigal, who, by explicitly acknowledging Almighty God in the Confederate Constitution, had returned to the house of the Father – both instrumentalizing the biblical story.

Writers and poets in America have hardly ever produced straightforward adaptations or simple retellings of the story, but have usually given the plot a slant which was in tune with the lesson they wanted to teach. To achieve this, the simplest narrative technique for them was to fix the point of view on only one of the characters (while Jesus gives us three different perspectives: the younger son's, the father's and the elder brother's), or to focus on one phase of the prodigal's career and simply eclipsing the rest of the story. But because Jesus, even though he intended to make one specific point – the unconditional love of the divine Father – did not lapse into painting in black-and-white, he developed a highly complex plot, Not only did he introduce the perspectives of three different persons, but within the perspective of the younger son, he made another division – this time between the homecoming of the son as he envisions it and the actual homecoming to the Father.

These two versions of the prodigal son's homecoming form a narrative opposition. After the young man has squandered all his money, he is subsiding as a swineherd and has visions of his homecoming as a contrite son who has experienced the worst and will be happy if his father does not chase him away but employs him as a servant. The second, totally different version is the real homecoming: the father does not hold the son's misdoing against him but reinstalls him as someone who holds all the rights of sonhood.

As real as the younger son's exile is, as fictive is his imagination of his return. The striking difference between the two versions of the return, the large descrepancy between anticipations and reality, drives the point of Jesus' story home: nobody can really imagine the unlimited love of the heavenly father who accepts sinners even if they do not in the least deserve such acceptance. In this point-of-view technique, Jesus, the master-storyteller, is both very
realistic and strikingly modern. His prodigal son is given the chance to dwell on his own bleak view of life, to wallow in his despair and lostness, and to ponder on parental authority; and we, the listeners or readers, are invited to join his point of view. We are lured into sharing the son's well-deserved fears and his hesitant last-ditch hopes, before we are surprised by the reality of God's 'otherness.'

A number of adaptations at the beginning of the twentieth century drew their inspiration from this passage of the parable – the prodigal envisioning his return to his father's house while he is still sitting among the pigs. The concentration on this passage and the contrast it provides to the final "real" return offered Modernists the chance of re-vision, of throwing different lights on the story. In fact it enabled them to focus not so much on the real return itself but on the imagined return – on all the doubts and the anxious anticipations of the father's just retribution for parental authority spurned and a fortune squandered. I hope to show that this is not just the usual imaginative space for filling the gaps in the narrative but that in this process the adaptations reflect some of Modernism's very own claims and features.

**Modernism**

Modernism, the phase of cultural history on both sides of the Atlantic that was felt across the various disciplines of the arts and literature and that spans, roughly, the first three decades of the twentieth century but has its forerunners in the late nineteenth century, has many faces. Above all, it is marked by the desire to part with the past and former authorities, "to make it new," to leave behind certain, if not all the conventions and traditions of bygone centuries and to found – in Harold Rosenburg's paradoxical phrase, the "tradition of the new" (qtd. in Childs 1). Being what Ezra Pound called "the race's antennae," Modernists had lost belief in the coherence and the meaning of external reality, or at least in the individual's ability to discover any such meaning there. The results were a fragmentation of view, subjectivity, sometimes to the point of solipsism, and moral relativism, which were felt on both sides of the Atlantic and across the arts and literary genres. Formally, Modernist literature placed a new emphasis on impressionism, that is, on how we see rather than what we see (which can be felt in the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique). Novels moved away from the apparent objectivity provided by such features as omniscient narrators and fixed narrative points of view. From the many facets of Modernism I want to select three that I consider to be symptomatic of the international
intellectual *malaise* at the beginning of the twentieth century and representative of the literary means of diagnosis and therapy used by writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

**Loss of Authority**

One of the key developments of Modernism was what the German Sociologist Alexander Mitscherlich called "Entleerung der Autorität" / "emptying of authority" (183). When the fragmentation of the production process and the division between working and living space made fathers more or less invisible, their *auctoritas* was emptied within and outside of the family. While this was first felt in the family, also other kinds of "publicly recognized authority lost legitimacy" and "the arts took on more and more of the job of defining the human horizon. The challenge they posed to church and state was less direct, but rather more effective in the long run than that of anarchists and social revolutionaries" (Anderson 695). Many modernists were not so much openly rebelling against paternal authority, but rather slowly eroding this authority through ironic portrayals or eclipsing the father altogether. In doing that, poets took on key concepts, creeds, and scriptural passages of Christianity to spell out their different views. One such passage was the parable of the Prodigal Son.

German poet **Rainer Maria Rilke** repeatedly made use of the parable as an intertext. One poem is "Auszug des Verlorenen Sohnes" (Rilke 2:491-92) in which he rejects the past and the role of his father, because he longs for a fuller life in the future.

> Now to depart from all this incoherence that's ours, but which we can't appropriate, and, like old well-springs, mirrors our appearance in trembling outlines that disintegrate; . . . .

This incoherence is attributed to the negative qualities of childhood: He wants to dive into the well of the past in order to come to terms with the fact that his childhood was full to the brim of impersonal suffering, but he feels he has to make up his mind to "depart, hand out of hand, / as though you tore a wound that had been healing, / and to depart: whither?" The lyrical I's leaving of the past thus is the beginning of a trip into the uncertain:

> To take on all this, and, in vain persistence, let fall, perhaps what you have held, to die alone and destitute, not knowing why –

> Is this the way into some new existence?
He never answers this question, but at the end of the poem the reader is left with the impression that even if the way into some new existence may ultimately lead to a lonely death, there is no other way for the prodigal than to depart from his father's house. We do not get any satisfying answer to the question why he has to leave, and in this poem Rilke does not directly identify the parable's father as God.

The most tangible answer to the problem of why the son leaves can be found in a novel-like text entitled *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge / The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1911), in which the narrator says: "Man wird mich schwer davon überzeugen, daß die Geschichte des Verlorenen Sohnes nicht die Legende dessen ist, der nicht geliebt werden wollte" (Rilke 6:938). Regardless of how well or how badly the father has done his job of raising his sons, his role is rejected.

If one looks at American literature of the period, the fathers in the Modernists' adaptations of the parable are either ridiculed or implicitly criticized. Eugene O'Neill's short play *The Rope* of 1919 presents the father as a senile old man, who is at the mercy of his materialistic daughter and son-in-law, and is constantly muttering and shouting proclamations from the prophet Jeremiah. His prodigal son Luke, who stole one hundred dollars from him when he left home five years ago, suddenly returns. Instead of being repentant, the son only returns in order to collect the rest of the inheritance. That he fails results from the father's scheme of hiding the gold in order save it for his son. He attaches the gift to the condition that the son hang himself – which will not work since the rope has been tied to the bag of gold. Since the son does not take the hint that repentance is necessary, his niece skips goldpieces on the water of the ocean and thus turns out to be another innocent prodigal. Luke's father may have meant well, but he has attached the reward to a condition – which is quite the opposite of what the biblical father does, and thus the drama ultimately teaches not more than the obvious lessons that avarice is bad and love should be unambiguous.

A similar case of rather unrepentant prodigal occurs in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Prodigal Son" (1932). Here the prodigal is not the stunned recipient of his father's unconditional love either but a self-confident family member who accuses his elder brother of self-love and an uncharitable spirit. In his view, his elder brother is envious and resentful, but, at the same time, he implicitly criticizes his father for being too parsimonious and puritanical:

> You are not merry, brother. Why not laugh,  
> As I do, and acclaim the fatted calf?
For, unless ways are changing here at home,
You might not have it, if I had not come. (1209)

The younger brother, "Full of good wine, good viands, and good will," has learned more about life than the elder brother will ever do, and this gain in experience ("fate's way of educating us") is the only thing that counts. He is not at all sorry for his riotous living, but anticipates the elder's regret after he – the younger son – has died: "And I, the ghost of one you could not save, / May find you planting lentils on my grave." Thus the criticism of paternal authority is conveyed through a single intelligence, and neither the father nor the brother have a chance to defend their own views of the matter.

**Fragmentation of Perception**

The loss of a unified world picture that resulted from the newly developing sciences such as Darwin's biology and Freud's psychoanalysis made poets and writers look for new ways of making sense of the world. The refusal to accept an objective reality that could be presented by an omniscient narrator was spawned by Freudian psychology and created individual worlds of experience instead (Ernst 453). As Denis Donoghue has put it: "Modernism is concerned with the validity of one's feelings and the practice of converting apparently external images and events into inwardness, personal energy" (qtd. in Quinn). Since Christ's parable gives three different views of the events – the younger son's, the father's, and the elder son's, it anticipates this modernist strategy by two thousand years. And if one looks closely, the younger son's perception is further split into an imagined course of events and the real return – which makes it as complex an intertext as any modernist might have wished for.

**Franz Kafka's** short text "Heimkehr" / "Homecoming" offers a radical introspection – a concentration on the son's perspective which leaves out the perspectives of father and brother altogether. The son has returned to his father's old farm, which triggers a host of memories.

I have returned, I have passed under the arch and am looking around. It's my father's old yard. The puddle in the middle. Old, useless tools, jumbled together, block the way to the attic stairs. The cat lurks on the banister. A torn piece of cloth, once wound around a stick in a game, flutters in the breeze. I have arrived.

Though Kafka called himself a "faithless Western Jew," he was interested in religion, and according to the majority of critics he may have consciously used the biblical parable as an intertext. But if we adopt that view, we will have to answer the question: to what purpose? The differences between Kafka's tale and the biblical parable are obvious: While there is an
omniscient narrator in Luke 15 – freely moving from the home to the far country, and to the field the elder brother is working in, Kafka works with an (inner) monolog by the son that restricts the reader's view on the events. While Christ's narration covers a longer time span – probably several months or even years – and uses past tense, Kafka's I-narrator focuses on the one single moment of the return, telling it in present tense.

The U-shaped course of the action in Luke (Northrop Frye) – the movement from a comfortable economic state to an existence below subsistence level and upward again – contrasts with the downward slope on which Kafka's action moves. The I-narrator arrives with feelings of self-assurance and hopeful expectation, and almost imperceptibly the details of his observations introduce negative terms: the puddle, the useless tools obstructing the son's way, the lurking cat, the torn cloth and the coldness of the arrangement: they all produce an unfriendly atmosphere and lead to questions and doubts. This is expressed through the change from active verbs of movement to more static verbs at the end. The impression of being excluded from the mysteries of the house's innermost life, nibbles away at the son's initial confidence and gives him the feeling of being a stranger – even though he is the old farmer's son and this is his father's farm. The secrecy of the family who seems to hide behind the closed kitchen door is contagious in that ultimately the son does not want to share his own mysteries with anybody either.

The longer one hesitates before the door, the more estranged one becomes. What would happen if someone were to open the door now and ask me a question? Would not I myself then behave like one who wants to keep his secret? (445-46)

Thus he is thrown back on his own perceptions which lead him nowhere. Sure, he does not meet with open hostility, he is not scolded or sent away, but the freeze in which the tale ends is more paralyzing, more deadly than a real conflict.

Whether this moment frozen in time is the return of a soldier from World War I (it was written in 1920) or the homecoming of a younger generation who has left the agricultural sphere for the city (after all, the son has forgotten or never known how certain tools are used) does not really matter. The younger son might rather be seen as an embodiment of Kafka's own attitude toward his father, whom he wrote a long letter in 1919 – though he never sent it. In that letter he accused his father Hermann Kafka of never understanding his son, of trying to fit him into the mould of successful merchant and of thwarting his various attempts to become married. The resulting inferiority complexes and feelings of guilt may well be reflected in the I-narrator's hesitation to knock at the door. Yet in the context of the Modernist movement, the narration can
also be read as an illustration of the loss of paternal authority and of man's lostness in a universe that has become strange and seems to hide its larger meaning from the limited view of the questioning individual.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the same study of the moment of return can be found in the work of Thomas Wolfe. If any single word characterizes the work of Thomas Wolfe, it is the word "lost." Though he has again and again been counted among the "Lost Generation," he himself rejected this relationship both in his novels and his letters (cf. Boyer 32-38). But lostness figures in the titles of such stories as "The Lost Boy" or "O Lost."

"The Return of the Prodigal" is a two-part story that first appeared in the posthumously published collection *The Hills Beyond* (1941). The first part, "The Thing Imagined," introduces the writer Eugene Gant, who seven years before wrote a book about his hometown Altamont, with very unflattering portraits of some of its citizens. Afraid to return home, he imagines what a return would be like, and his fears reveal a very bleak picture indeed, since he expects his own mother not to recognize him. The second part, "The Real Thing," shows how unfounded these fears have been, since he is welcomed by the entire town enthusiastically, with his mother becoming his public-relations manager, channelling the many callers who want to bask in the light of the town's famous son.

The scenario of the first part could not be further from the joyous welcome that the younger son receives in Christ's parable. Eugene's perspective is shaped by his highly personal experience of the past. His imagination – just like the biblical prodigal's – produces a highly idiosyncratic image of his return: "He thought of this so often with the intensity of nostalgic longing that in the end his feelings built up in his mind and image which seemed to him more true than anything that he had ever actually experienced. After that it became an image that never varied. It came back to him a thousand times – this image of what it would be like if he did go home again" (542).

Gant's perspective is one of the central issues in the two parts: from the beginning, his "intuition" (543) matters more than reality. On a larger scale, Wolfe suggests that Gant's limited look at the world is symptomatic of all Americans: "Each man of us has his own America, his own stretch, from which, here outward, the patterns are familiar as his mother's face and the prospect is all his" (549).

In "The Real Thing," the son's real motive for going home is not repentance, no intention to make up for one's wrongdoing – but the mere fact that enough time has passed to patch things
up: "But time passes, and puts halters on debate" (549). When he meets a "chorus of voices, laughing and calling out greetings" (556), he knows that the citizens have forgiven him and are even proud of having been exposed in his novel. "They called him every name they could think of, and now they're crawling over one another just to shake his hand" (558). His mother breathlessly rattles down a list of people who have called to see him: childhood companions and town gossips, the would-be writers and classmates, the rich and the poor, and she warns him: "You watch out, son – don't let any of these silly women rope you in" (561).

With all this shallow enthusiasm, Gene's return is a mixed blessing to him, who felt much more comfortable in his pessimistic reveries, but his surprise shows two things at least: The narrative focus is radically on his own assessment of the situation. And the citizens' motive – and apparently also his mother's – for welcoming him is not really a love for him as a person but for him as a celebrity with whom to adorn themselves. The return may be a happy occasion, but it does not really concern himself.

**Moral Relativism**

One of the consequences of epistemological and ethical relativism is the question of whether there is any such thing as moral responsibility: Who is guilty? Is there any authority that might pass judgment on evildoers? This problem, unresolved if one tries to leave out the possibility of God as a last ethical instance, became ever more urgent in the face of the totalitarian regimes who led millions into war and ultimately into death. For some modernists, the answer was a nihilistic refusal to deal with any such questions, others – like T.S. Eliot in his *Waste Land* – found refuge in mythical images or, like Thomas Wolfe, tried to twist their plots into positive solutions; and still others searched for explanations in psychological and political terms. Two texts from the 1930s and 40s show how German authors exiled in America tried to cope with the enormous question of who was to blame for the development of National Socialism and for the atrocities committed in the Third Reich. As active opponents to National Socialism, both were above criticism or reproach as to their own moral stance. But their dealing with the question of guilt was far from being a facile denouncing of the entire German people.

The Austrian **Hermann Broch** (1886-1951) was helped to emigrate to America by James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Albert Einstein in 1938 and later taught at Princeton and Yale. One of his main concerns as a writer was mass psychology (*Massenpsychologie* [postum 1959]), and he tried to explain the emergence of National Socialism in his last novel, *Die Schuldlosen* (The
Guiltless). This novel, published in 1950, was composed of eleven novellas, several of which he had written as early as in 1933. "Verlorener Sohn" was first entitled "Die Heimkehr" and contributes an inverted version of Luke 15:20-24 to the novel.

The novel's entire plot encompasses the complex relationship of the members of a household of the German nobility and several individuals from different strata of society. Broch himself called attention to the central question that he tried to answer: "...wie konnte ein hochgesittetes, tüchtiges Volk in solches Unheil taumeln?" Broch considered the decay of the old social and familial order in the wake of WW I to be responsible for the loss of social ties and the terrible isolation and loneliness of modern man. This forced independence then leads to the most terrible phenomenon of modern life, the guilt of the new type of man which makes him a Cain-like figure:

. . . bis zur Selbstauslöschung gegen sich selber gleichgültig, ist er ohne weiteres auch bereit, den Nebenmenschen auszulöschen. In solch radikaler Verbindungslosigkeit und Gleichgültigkeit bleibt als Verständigungsmittel zwischen Mensch und Mensch nur noch die nackte Gewalt übrig, sie selber schon Perversion und Verbrechen und alles Menschliche, alle menschliche Beziehung (einschließlich der erotischen) aufs ärgste pervertierend. ("Probleme" 313)

It is this isolation and indifference that the novel introduces in the novella "Verlorener Sohn" / "Prodigal Son." The action, set in 1923, is restricted to the arrival in a German small town of a young Dutch trader in jewels, his search for accommodation, his attempt to obtain an apartment in a house in which a widowed baroness, her daughter and her old maid servant are living. While the baroness herself and the old servant Zerline more or less welcome him, the daughter Hildegard is at first adamant in her refusal to tolerate a male boarder in their house – until the money he offers proves too strong an argument. In a time in which the members of the old nobility are hard pressed for an income that is independent of the inflationary devaluation of the German currency, any old guilder will do. Hildegard's objections and the other two women's readiness to accept "A." as some kind of son turn out to be effects of a web of adulterous and warped relationships that only slowly becomes transparent for the new boarder – and is only gradually unfolded in the following novellas.

As Broch himself explained in one of his numerous comments on the novella and the entire novel, it is indeed the characters' lack of attachment that makes them susceptible to being seduced – as the German people were seduced by National Socialism. Broch's lesson is: "In vollkommener Einsamkeit gibt es keine Schuld (zumindest keine gegen den Nebenmenschen)
und auf der Insel seelischer Einsamkeit, auf der sie sich befanden, konnten sie sich keiner Schuld bewußt werden" ("Inhalt" 306). This does not mean that Broch considered the German people to be totally innocent – in Zacharias, one of the characters, he projected the making of a Nazi – but he wanted to show how even those who are guilty may consider themselves "guiltless" in their own eyes. Which, of course, is a lesson that is quite far from the parable of the Prodigal Son.

**Hans Sahl** (1902-1993), who had to flee from Nazi Germany in 1933 and who spent several years in France before he went to the United States, considered himself a man who "represents, compares, and translates from one culture into another. He has an ear for both: for the horrors of war and the flute-playing between the battles. He lives on two continents without identifying with either" (qtd. in Martini 83). His poems were read in prison camps in France and in the meetings of exiles in New York and expressed the suffering and the longing for home of all those who had managed to emigrate from Nazi Germany (Martini 79).

His poem "Der Verlorene Sohn" / "The Prodigal Son" describes the return of a son to the place where he expects his family but where he only finds despair and pessimism, expressed through the voice of his mother. The poem is conspicuous in its poetic diction, particularly in its use of the language of Luther's Bible translation – though he hardly ever quotes the parable itself. Instead, he begins the poem with the words "Und als nun die Zeit gekommen war" (reminiscent of the AV "The time cometh," e.g. John 16:25) or he has the Son say: "Siehe" / "Behold." More than anything else, this elevation of the diction to a biblical level lends a dignified and somber tone to the narration.

The mother's twisting of the great commandment clearly serves the purpose of showing the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion under the Nazi regime:

Fremde Menschen wohnten hier, 
fremd an Sitte und Gebaren, 
und sie lehrten uns, 
deinen Nächsten zu hassen 
dich selber.

This case of hating "thy neighbor as thyself" is one of the things that have changed during the time of the son's exile – and one of the things that make a return impossible: "Nichts ist mehr, wie es war, / und nichts mehr wird sein, / wie es gewesen ist."

Though the poem uses religious discourse, its content conspicuously lacks a religious dimension. From among the various ideas critics have isolated one central thought: the rejection of the notion of collective guilt:
Nichts ist geschehen, was nicht
wiedergutgemacht werden könnte,
und es wird eine Zeit kommen,
da man begreifen wird, wie alles geschah
und wer es geschehen ließ

This expresses both a cautious optimism in view of the restoration of the German nation and an
appeal to the reader to differentiate between the silent majority that let Nazism gain momentum,
on the one hand, and the resistance movement within and outside of Germany, on the other. What
the poem does not reveal is when and how such a healing process can be brought under way. And
that God might have anything to do with such a healing is not even suggested.

**Conclusion**

1. In most of our examples the three features of modernism are interwoven. There are
weak, dead, absent or invisible fathers, who are seen almost exclusively from the viewpoint of
the sons, and the guilt is either placed on someone else than the sons, or is obliterated altogether.
In the Modernists' eyes, their experience and the experience of the biblical Prodigal Son
converged in a common rejection of authority and tradition, in the feeling of dissociation and
lostness, and in the question of the nature of guilt. Given the agenda of Modernism, it is not
surprising that the authors we have discussed liked the parable very much. Not because through it
proclaimed God's boundless love, but because Christ – wonderful story-teller that he was –
captured in it exactly the wish of human beings to break away from the past, the feeling of
lostness and the question of moral responsibility. Indeed, these Modernists had to shut their eyes
to the other segments of the parable – the ones that for Christ contained the most important
message: the son's repentance, the waiting father and the joyous celebration. But they still needed
and did use the parable anyway.

2. Authority. Not only did the core of Christ's message disappear completely, but even
any such a notion as a loving, welcoming father on a merely human level was out of the question.
Closed doors instead of open ones, strange voices instead of familiar ones, suspicious looks
instead of open arms are not only representative of a transcendental homelessness but also of a
severing of reliable human bonds. Taking a long-term view, we can note an interesting paradigm
shift. In Puritan and Enlightenment texts the parable of the Prodigal Son was often used to elevate
paternal authority. Children were warned not to imitate the younger son's behavior because it led
to ruin, but to stay at home and obey their parents. Modernist texts utilized the parable in exactly the opposite direction: Through the narratives young people are encouraged to hold their own against the older generation or, at least to maintain their own point of view.

3. Feeling of Lostness. In both cultures, or at least in the post-WW I texts, there is a strong opposition between the outside and the inside world – a distinction which characterizes the state of not "belonging" anywhere, of always being outside of the core group, and a distinction which we witness in many other modernist texts such as Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. Modernism of this kind featured mostly the exclusion from life and hardly had a happy ending. Instead, the outsider's speculation about who is "inside" becomes the key question and is not really answered in Kafka and in Sahl. In his more optimistic outlook – indeed in his depiction of a positive surprise – Thomas Wolfe is the only one of the authors that I have discussed who envisions the possibility of a happy ending to the prodigal son's ordeal, and that is in correspondence with his general attitude.

4. While American authors did not have to grapple with the question of who was to blame for the emergence of the Nazi regime, German and Austrian authors used the parable in order to at least investigate the question of responsibility. In placing their literary sons in a moral context, they at least touched upon the moral differential of the parable, though they ultimately blamed feelings of loneliness and futility for preparing the way for the *maxima culpa* of the twentieth century.

So why read these stories in the first place? Should a Christian who is a critic – or a critic who does his job from a Christian perspective not be angry about the things that writers have done to the parable? My answer is: Even from a theological or Christian position, the Modernist versions of the parable do make sense. They help us to understand the plight of modern man, as Jesus anticipated it in the prodigal's thoughts in the pigsty. And the plight of modern man is no different from the plight of post-modern man, who renounces all grand narratives, including the narrative of God's welcome for the sinner. Sometimes the words of the Bible are too well-known to us to move us anymore. But a radical rewording of such a passage may help us realize afresh what condition humans are in if they do not have any prospect of a loving father receiving them. And that might make us more compassionate and more willing to share the reality of the parable's other parts with them, whether within academic contexts or without.
Works Cited


Quinn, Edward. A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms.


