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Fiction and Politics: Karl May and the American West in Nineteenth Century German Sociopolitical Consciousness

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Fiction and Politics: Karl May and the American West in Nineteenth Century German
Sociopolitical Consciousness

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to answer the following question: Why did the nineteenth century novels and short stories of Karl May, which take place in the American West, find such great commercial success in Germany? Through the examination of the novels themselves, in addition to various primary and secondary sources related to the life of May and the historical context in which this phenomenon took place, this question is answered. Though the novels take place in an American landscape, they are full of references to various cultural and political phenomena which took place throughout the course of May's life in Germany. Influenced by late nineteenth century theories of German superiority and scientific racism, as well as by efforts for German unification and the imperial domination of Asia and Africa, May produced novels that were so uniquely nineteenth century, and so uniquely German, that Germans could not help but to fall in love with them. By painting a portrait of the American West through the lens of a nineteenth century German sociopolitical consciousness, May gave birth to a German fascination with cowboys and Indians that would last for decades to come.

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Germans and the American West: A Curious Fascination

In the summer of 2011, I spent several weeks living with a host family in a small town just outside of Düsseldorf, Germany. Throughout my stay I was able to experience everyday German life and culture firsthand; I ate bratwurst, sampled local beer, tried on a dirndl, and did many other stereotypical German things. While most of these activities were expected and therefore did not surprise me, there was one day in particular that stood out from the rest. My host family enjoyed movie nights, and after I requested that we watch a German-made film we watched what was perhaps one of the strangest films I had ever seen: *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001). Directed by Michael Helbig, this comedic Western was one of the most successful German language films of all time and was obviously a beloved favorite of the children in my host family. What surprised me most about this film was that it takes place not in Germany, but in the American “Wild West,” with the main characters being a cowboy named Ranger and an Apache chief named Abahachi. Full of anachronistic and “punny” humor, this film was clearly poking fun at something all the Germans in the room were very familiar with; I however, did not understand the humor in this tale of two unlikely companions speaking German in an American landscape. This experience, along with the sight of several references to Native American culture in various advertisements during my trips to Germany, piqued my interest seven years ago as to why modern Germans are fascinated with Native Americans and with stories of the American West. It was not until recently, as I dug deeper into the research of this phenomenon, that my answer was found.

Contrary to my original assumption, *Der Schuh des Manitu* was not poking fun at American Westerns, such as the stories of Lone Ranger and Tonto, but at the hugely

successful German Western films of the mid-twentieth century based on the novels of Germany's most successful author: Karl May. "Ranger" was a parody of May's most famous hero Old Shatterhand (often called Old Surehand in the films), and his companion Abahachi a parody of the Apache hero of May's best-selling novels: *Winnetou*. *Der Schuh des Manitu*, along with Helbig's many other parodies, found success with the current generation of Germans because May's novels and the films based on them have been an integral part of German culture since their publication in the late nineteenth century. The story of the invincible German immigrant Old Shatterhand and his virtuous blood brother Winnetou influenced the way Germans saw themselves, the new frontier in the American West, and perhaps most significantly the culture of the Native American tribes which inhabited much of the Great Plains during the nineteenth century. Even today, German tourists are among the most common guests at Native American reservation museums and cultural centers in the American West, and many come with an extensive prior knowledge of the Apache and Comanche tribes that would rival the knowledge of most Americans who have inhabited the region their entire lives.¹ Although he is not considered a great author, the influence of Karl May on German perceptions of the United States cannot be underestimated.

The Karl May phenomenon brings forth a plethora of questions worth researching, with the two most important being 1) why did stories which take place in the American West find such great commercial success in Germany, and 2) despite their monumental success in Germany and other European countries, as well as their

¹ Michael Kimmelman, "Karl May and the Origins of a German Obsession," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/12/travel/12iht-12karl.7479952.html?pagewanted=all>.

connection to American characters and landscapes, why did May's novels never gain even remote popularity in the United States? While the answers to both of these questions are multifaceted and complex, there are a few factors which explain these phenomena most thoroughly and accurately that must be brought to the front of scholarly discussion on this topic. Through an examination of nineteenth century German history and culture, the life of Karl May, May festivals and movies, and most importantly the original novels and their more recent English translations, this thesis seeks to reveal the most comprehensive answer to these questions as is possible with the limited scholarship available on this subject in the United States.

The most essential question here is this: why did May find greater success in Germany than any other native author, despite that his novels took place in the United States and lacked in overall quality? While later sections of this thesis will answer this question in depth, the clearest, most simple answer is this: these novels were so thoroughly German, and so thoroughly a product of the social and political atmosphere of Germany in the late nineteenth century, that it would have been nearly impossible for a German reader not to connect with them in some way. Though they took place against a foreign backdrop, the lessons taught in May's novels directly reflect late nineteenth century German culture, values, and patriotism; reading *Winnetou* would make one proud to be German. May's Westerns provided Germans with the means to escape their everyday reality while still remaining faithful to the *Heimat*, and it is for this reason he both found great success in Germany and found no success in the United States. Though many scholars have argued that May was successful because of his incorporation of themes relevant to German culture, none have gone so far as to suggest that it was all of

these themes combined which led to his positive reception. It is in this gap that this thesis will assert itself.

The bulk of the evidence to support the claim that the unique “German-ness” of May’s works can be found in the novels themselves, and thus a large portion of this study will be dedicated to their analysis. The novels, however, cannot be properly appreciated without first establishing an understanding of how German history, contemporary German culture, and the life of May influenced their characters and content. An examination of the life of May, followed by a brief chronology the events and ideas which surrounded his life, will seek to establish this understanding and to provide a frame of reference through which the novels may be understood as pieces of a much greater historical phenomenon.

Historiography

In the century since May’s death in 1912, countless scholars have published works concerning his life, diaries, travel journals, and novels, with the vast majority of these works being published in German. The most common scholarly work done on May, particularly in the twentieth century, was biography, some of the most influential of which will be discussed in the biography section of this paper. In recent decades, however, German scholars have produced journal articles debating the cause of German obsession with May and the American West, with the most common argument being that May’s depiction of the Apache Indians as peaceful, “natural,” and moral, which was exactly the way many late nineteenth century Germans viewed their own Germanic ancestors.² May’s depiction of the Natives as heroes, as well as victims of brutality from

² Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 108.

other nations and the forces of industrialization, is said by many German scholars to have been a product of German nationalism, and this argument has been furthered by those who point out that May's novels were used to educate Hitler's SS soldiers.³

While the common connection made between May's popularity and the rise of German nationalism is no doubt convincing, there are several other arguments concerning the roots of May's success present in the German intellectual discourse of him. One of these theories is that the fascination with May is a direct result of a "yearning for class harmony and Christian anti-militarism" that was present in many late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germans.⁴ Scholars who support this theory use May's rampant use of Christian symbolism, as well as his main character Old Shatterhand's abstinence from deadly violence, as evidence that May wrote these novels not to support German nationalism and the bloodshed it so often produced, but to critique it. Just as May criticized the American characters in his novel for their cruelty towards the Apache and other marginalized groups, many German scholars believe that the majority of May's early fan base desired to see an end to the nationalistic, and later fascist, violence pervading their beloved country.

Yet another common argument among German scholars is that May's novels' condemnation of "race hatred" is what contributed most to their great success.⁵ While a later discussion of popular European theories regarding race during May's lifetime will make this argument difficult to support for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, German scholars who support this theory seem to believe that modern May enthusiasts

³ Christopher B. Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 20.

⁴ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 108.

⁵ *ibid.*

are so enamored with his stories because they lack the blatant racism found in many other works published at the time. Although riddled with language and stereotypes twenty-first century readers would find problematic, May's treatment of non-white characters could be seen as "better" than that of many contemporaries, particularly in the case of his hero Winnetou. Far from the "savage" many Europeans and Americans would have deemed a young Indian chief to be at the time, Winnetou is the epitome of strength, intelligence, and morality; it is precisely this approach, according to some German scholars, that has contributed to May's continuing influence on German culture in recent decades.

The fourth and final common argument found among German scholars is this: May's novels became a cultural phenomenon because he, like many others in the Western world at the turn of the twentieth century, "identified with ecology, Christian fellowship, and agrarian populism."⁶ While the world churned ever onward towards increasing industrialization, many Germans argue that May's novels and their fans represented a growing desire to return to the simpler days of an agrarian lifestyle and a deep connection to nature. Similar to those who argue that May represents a call for German nationalism, those who support this theory see the fascination with May and his American West as a product of a German desire to reconnect with their "natural" Germanic roots and ties to the land. Industrialization continued to reshape the landscape of Germany, as well as nearly every other nation on Earth, and it is for this reason those who support this theory argue that May's stories remained a source of fascination for decades beyond their original publication.

⁶ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 108.

Despite years of continued scholarly debate about May in the German language, very few works have been published on the subject in English, and of these none extend beyond the length of a typical journal article. Despite the fact that May's novels take place in the United States, and that the popularity of his novels has greatly influenced beliefs about American culture and history throughout Europe, American scholars have neglected to study the phenomenon of their popularity in Germany, and perhaps even more importantly their lack of success in entertaining American audiences. It was not until 1967 that Richard Cracroft, a graduate of and later professor of English at Brigham Young University,⁷ became the first American to publish a thorough examination of May's life and works in English. Based on his earlier Master's thesis, his article "The American West of Karl May" used original German publications of May's novels to argue that "we must be slow to claim that May took his West directly from Cooper; rather it was from the German image of the American West, which had, to a great degree, been formulated through Cooper's widespread influence."⁸ Though rather indirectly, Cracroft seems to argue that May did not enjoy success in the United States because 1) as of 1967 none of his novels had been translated into English, 2) because May's American West was a "uniquely German" one which actual Americans would have trouble connecting with, and 3) because the majority of American characters in the novels are portrayed as violent villains, while those of German or Indian heritage are continually presented as moral heroes. Though very brief and 50 years old, Cracroft's article is perhaps the most

⁷ "Richard H. Cracroft," BYU Speeches, Brigham Young University, last modified 2018, <https://speeches.byu.edu/speakers/richard-h-cracroft/>.

⁸ Richard H. Cracroft, "The American West of Karl May," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 256, doi: 10.2307/2710789, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.umsl.edu/stable/2710789>.

accurate interpretation of May available in the English language. What it lacks, however, is an analysis of the May phenomenon which reaches beyond the novels themselves.

Christopher Frayling's chapter "Karl May and the Noble Savage," located in his 2006 publication *Spaghetti Westerns*, provides another, more modern interpretation of the May phenomenon in English. Though the majority of his work focuses on Westerns produced in Italy, cultural historian Frayling spends considerable time examining the unique nature of German-made Western films based on the novels of Karl May. Unlike Cracroft, Frayling does not delve into the issue of the novels' lack of acceptance in American pop culture, but rather focuses on adding an English-language argument to the vast collection of arguments proposed by German scholars as to why Germans became more fascinated with Western characters than the people of any other European country. He argues that the glorification of Winnetou in both films and novels does not demonstrate a call to nationalism or a desire to return to the "good old days" of agriculture and nature, but rather represents a lesson that May was attempting to portray: that accepting the forces of change and time, despite their evils, was the key to success. "It is precisely because Winnetou can appreciate European culture, as defined by Shatterhand, that he can become an *Edelmensch*"⁹; in other words, Frayling supports the theory that Winnetou was a hero not because he rejected modernity, but because he modified his lifestyle in order to accommodate inevitable change. Frayling's argument, however convincing and well-developed, has done little to penetrate the exclusively German discourse on the reasons for May's immense popularity; thus, it is vital that American scholars continue to discuss this phenomenon.

⁹ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 112.

Though Cracroft and Frayling have both contributed minor works to the American intellectual discourse on Karl May, they remain some of the only scholars to have published works in English on the subject. To make matters more troublesome, Cracroft's works are extremely difficult to access, and are thus unlikely to be read by anyone who has not already heard about May and his popularity. There has, however, been work done by students in recent years to produce theses and dissertations related to various aspects of May's novels, as well as the festivals, films, and other cultural phenomena produced in their wake.

One such dissertation is Petra Watzke's "'Howgh, ich habe gesprochen!' – German Literary Representations of Native American Ritual and Religion," defended in 2009 at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Watzke's primary argument is that through his writing and subsequent popularity, Karl May is to blame for the incorrect perceptions of Native Americans held by many Germans, and that it was the duty of German scholars in the twentieth century to combat the stereotypes May-mania created. While it is true that May did include many fabricated or exaggerated elements of Native American culture in his novels, and also true that his novels influenced how many Germans saw the Indians of the American West, Watzke's argument is risky in that it urges the reader to place their own twenty-first century understanding of morality and racial equality onto their understanding of a nineteenth century author and phenomenon. When researching May, it is best to keep in mind that he was a product of the views of his time period (which will be discussed at length in the next section), and that he did not set out to portray Native Americans in a negative or "incorrect light." It is also important to note that many May fans, including leading members of May festival societies and

publishing houses, have dedicated themselves to ensuring that fans of the novels understand that the depictions of Native American culture are often incorrect.¹⁰ Watzke's work is, therefore, useful in that it points out one of the major issues with May's novels, but lacking in that it tries too hard to impose modern morality on a historical phenomenon.

Much like Watzke, Nicole Perry argued in her 2007 dissertation "Karl May's Winnetou: The Image of the German Indian" that May's novels were an example of Edward Said's famous theory of "orientalism," in which Europeans tend to exert Western cultural and religious norms over non-European peoples. This argument cannot be denied; May repeatedly assigns Christ-like qualities and Christian values to Winnetou, and as Perry pointed out he made Winnetou a hero because he was an "apple Indian": red on the outside, but white on the inside. What this argument lacks again, however, is some much needed historical perspective. May was indeed guilty of all that Perry accused him of, but those who research May must remember that his misunderstandings about Native American culture were likely because 1) he had never been to America at the time his Winnetou novels were published, and 2) his only known exposure to Native Americans would have been through the major writings of scientific racism and the traveling spectacle fairs, in which Indians and other peoples were placed on display like animals at a zoo, that came through Germany throughout much of his life. Keeping this in mind, it is important for those writing future works on May to provide the sufficient historical background as to why May portrayed Winnetou and other Native American heroes in such an orientalist way.

¹⁰ Rivka Galchen, "Wild West Germany: Why do Cowboys and Indians so Captivate the Country?," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/09/wild-west-germany>.

One final recent publication on May was Alina Weber's 2010 dissertation "Indians' on German Stages," in which she focuses primarily on the Karl May festivals which take place in Germany every year. Unlike Watzke and Perry, Weber largely refrains from condemning May's portrayal of Native American culture, and argues instead that the Native American ceremonies which take place at May festivals are beneficial in that they represent "a central aspiration of German-speaking cultures: the bridging of cultural differences."¹¹ She points out, as was mentioned before, that the leaders of May societies have worked continuously to correct racially insensitive aspects of the novel at the festival, while still preserving the integrity of the stories. Modern Germans have a desire to celebrate cultural differences in an inoffensive way, and the modifications to the ceremonies conducted at May festivals have helped them to do just that. Weber argues that "ultimately...the festivals' reconciliatory answer to a deeper-rooted German cultural concern about relating to Others accounts for their ongoing success."¹² Though not historical in its focus, Weber's dissertation provides perhaps the most balanced analysis of May among all English-language dissertations.

Cracroft, Frayling, Watzke, Perry, and Weber represent a majority of the very few authors who have published significant English-language works on Karl May and the German cultural phenomenon associated with them. Though these works would provide the English-speaking reader with substantial knowledge about the content of the novels, the various adaptations of them in recent decades, and the many problems with the novels' portrayal of Native Americans and ethnic minorities, they all lack sufficient focus

¹¹ Alina Weber, "Indians on German Stages: The History and Meaning of Karl May Festivals" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2010), abstract.

¹² *ibid.*

on the historical background of these phenomenon. Only one English publication (that of Frayling) was written by a historian, and even this is lacking in that it is just a short chapter in a much larger volume concerning Italian-made films in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, there is a major gap in the scholarship available on May from an English-speaking, and particularly an American, perspective; this thesis seeks to fill this gap. Through the provision of a historical background and focus concerning May's novels and their impact on German culture, as well as a new perspective on why May's novels were never successful in the United States, the primary goal of this thesis is to provide a much-needed analysis of "May-mania" from the desk of an American scholar.

Karl May: Success and Tragedy

Though May enjoyed great fame and wealth in his later years, as well as a fame which lasted well beyond his death, little is known about this popular German author's life, especially about the forty or so years of his life which occurred before he reached mild success as an author. What little can be known "for sure" about his life has been gleaned by German scholars, most notably scientist-turned-biographer Christian Heermann (1936-2017),¹³ from church birth, death, and marriage records, as well as from official records from May's time in school and prison as a young adult. Conjectures can be made based on these records about what May's childhood and early adulthood may have been like, but they only provide a loose frame in which to place the complicated tale of this rather strange man. The rest of what is known of May's life comes primarily from his 1910 autobiography *Mein Leben und Streben* (My Life and Struggles) and from the various travel journals he produced during his tours of North America and the Middle

¹³ "Christian Heermann," Wikipedia, last modified December 1, 2017, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Heermann.

East.¹⁴ What is known of May's personality comes directly from the two characters in his novels, Old Shatterhand and Kara Ben Nemsî, which he based on his own view of himself. While it is likely that some of the information May provided about himself was indeed accurate, there are several issues to keep in mind when approaching the biography of Karl May.

One such issue is that of May's reputation. Many of his contemporaries argued that he was a pathological liar, an argument easily supported by the fact that May asserted that he was fluent in over thirty languages and had traveled the world in his early twenties despite having no evidence to back up either of these claims.¹⁵ Some records even suggest that May was diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder (multiple personalities),¹⁶ which could be supported by the fact that May regularly identified himself as his two most popular heroes, Old Shatterhand and Kara Ben Nemsî, as well as the fact that he seemed to completely change personalities and writing styles at various points throughout his life.¹⁷ Due to allegations of insanity, pathological lying, and various criminal activities throughout his life, the primary sources of information regarding May's biography cannot be trusted. Still, they are useful in that they provide vital information on how May saw himself, his background, and his role in the greater history of late nineteenth century Germany, all of which are essential to the understanding of his great success.

¹⁴ Christian Heermann, *Der Mann, der Old Shatterhand war: Eine Karl-May-Biographie* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1988), 35.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ "Karl Friedrich May: The Years 1842-1874," Dr. William E. Thomas, trans., Karl May Stiftung, <http://www.karl-may-stiftung.de/engl/biograph.html>.

¹⁷ "A Short Biography of Karl May," Karl May Gesellschaft, <http://www.karl-may-gesellschaft.de/index.php?seite=a-short-biography&sprache=fremdsprachen>.

Karl May was born on February 25, 1842 at 10pm in Enstthal, Saxony.¹⁸ He was the fifth child of thirty-two-year-old Heinrich August May and his twenty-five-year-old wife Christiane Wilhelmine, but was only the second child to survive infancy. Throughout his life May would witness the arrival of nine more siblings, making a total of fourteen children for his parents, but only four (older sister Auguste, younger sisters Christiane and Karoline, and Karl himself) would survive past early adulthood, with most of the May siblings passing away before their first birthday.¹⁹ May's childhood was filled with sorrows such as these primarily due to the fact that he grew up in a very poor family during a time of political turmoil in Germany. May claimed that, due to malnutrition, he experienced issues with his vision beginning at age two, and that these problems progressed to complete blindness by the time he was three years old.²⁰ Though his vision returned in later childhood, the vision problems that were a vestige of the lack of food in his early years would haunt May throughout his life, returning on various occasions. It was perhaps the terrible conditions of his childhood which prompted May to write novels filled with fantasy and the achievement of lofty aspirations.

Despite his surroundings, May proved to be a very intelligent young man from an early age. He recalled among his earliest memories hearing discussions between the adults in his community about the German revolutions of 1848-9 which began when May was only five years old. Though he admittedly did not understand the complete ramifications of these events, he claimed that he understood that the political turmoil of the era was what prompted many of his friends' families to leave the German "Heimat"

¹⁸ Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

¹⁹ Heermann, *Der Mann*, 34.

²⁰ Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

(homeland) for North America.²¹ Though May would later become a major fan of the Wild West, his negative view of those who immigrated to America in the mid nineteenth century suggests that May was a loyal, proud German at heart throughout his life who would never dream of leaving the land of his ancestors completely behind. He and his family were among those who longed for the “better times” of ancient Germans during the time of the Roman empire, who were hopeful that Germany could once again return to its former glory.²²

In addition to remaining highly observant of the world around him, the young May was known as a bookworm by all who met him. Though some of the books he read, primarily scientific and geographical books, were required reading given to him by his father in order to supplement the subpar education May could obtain as a poor citizen of Ernstthal, May read many books of his own accord.²³ His primary interests were in the languages and cultures of other nations, and he spent countless hours listening to his godfather’s travel stories and to the lessons of the private language tutor his father worked hard to provide for him. May showed great promise in his ability to learn foreign language and to extend his knowledge into areas beyond the schoolhouse.²⁴ Unfortunately, his family was still far too poor to provide him with any sort of access to higher education, and thus as a young teen May resorted to a life of crime in order to help support his family as well as his dream to further his education.

In *Mein Leben und Streben*, May claimed to have ran away from home at age thirteen in order to seek financial opportunity in Spain. Though his father caught him

²¹ Heermann, *Der Mann*, 49.

²² *ibid*, 58.

²³ Karl May Stiftung, “Karl Friedrich May.”

²⁴ *ibid*.

within the first 24 hours of his attempt, this spirit of doing “whatever it takes” to make money and survive as a poor boy remained with May for years to come.²⁵ Although he was indeed a troublemaker, May kept his focus on his goal to further his education, a goal which was nearly achieved in 1860 when he was accepted to the Teachers’ Institute at the age of eighteen. He showed promise, as he always had before, but his dreams were shattered when he was caught in possession of a watch that another student had reported missing. May denied having stolen the watch, but his reputation as a thief and liar made it impossible for him to escape the consequences of having been found with this item.²⁶ In addition, May was also caught smuggling candles from the school around the holidays, which he claimed he had only taken in order to provide his poor sister with candles at Christmas time.²⁷ These two offenses got May expelled from the institute and permanently removed his teacher’s license, and he spent six weeks in prison to atone for his crimes. He was left with no way to work as a teacher, which was the only job he was properly trained to do, a bad reputation that would follow him for the rest of his life, and no way to make money. Despite his aspirations and efforts, the legacy of poverty he earned in his childhood prevented May from living a “normal,” respectable German life.

The loss of his opportunity to become a teacher led to a very dark and often strange period in May’s life. There are very little records of what May was up to during his early twenties, and thus he claimed later that he spent 1862-3 traveling throughout America and visiting Yellowstone Park in order to learn more about Native American culture.²⁸ Given that Yellowstone was not established until ten years after this alleged

²⁵ Karl May Gesellschaft, “A Short Biography.”

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Karl May Stiftung, “Karl Friedrich May.”

²⁸ Heermann, *Der Mann*, 74.

visit, that he had no financial means by which to make this journey, and that many of the Native American practices described by May in his novels are far from accurate, nearly all May scholars deny that this trip ever took place. What is commonly agreed upon, however, is that the 1860s were dark years for May in which he suffered mentally and emotionally from a loss of purpose. In order to support himself he once again turned to a life of crime, “masquerading, among other stunts, as a medical doctor, as a lieutenant of the detective police and as a notary's assistant” and serving several sentences in prison as a result.²⁹ This period of delinquency culminated in 1870 when he was sentenced to four years in prison after being arrested for trespassing in a barn while impersonating a fictional landowner named “Albin Wadenbach” from the West Indies.³⁰

After his arrest in January 1870, May stood trial in Mittweida (a town about 100 miles from his home in the vicinity of Dresden, the capital of Saxony) in April at the age of twenty eight. Though the offense for which he was arrested was rather minor the judge brought up many other offenses of which May had been accused throughout the previous decade, arguing that a four year prison sentence was "by him deserved, because of simple and cunning thefts, frauds, and frauds under aggravating circumstances, also for repeated unlawful theft and falsification, in due consideration of him being a habitual offender..."³¹ Edgar Bayer, a psychiatrist and neurologist from a clinic in Guenzburg, diagnosed May with Dissociative Identity Disorder after the trial and thus it was later deemed that the four year sentence imposed on May was unfair because he was not in control of his own actions.³² Still the fines imposed on May, which totaled nearly one

²⁹ Karl May Gesellschaft, “A Short Biography.”

³⁰ Karl May Stiftung, “Karl Friedrich May.”

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

thousand marks, were too high for the impoverished man to pay, and thus he entered the prison at Waldheim (near Mittweida) in May of 1870. He would remain there for the next four years.³³

During his time in prison, May spent as much time working in the prison library as he could; in effect, he used these four years as a chance to obtain the closest thing to a formal education that he, a poor man with an extensive criminal record and a mental illness diagnosis, could get his hands on.³⁴ It was during this time that May claimed to have read many classics and learned over thirty foreign languages; most likely, this is when he was exposed to the works of Cooper and other authors of tales concerning the American West. In 1874, at the age of thirty two, May emerged from prison a new man. Although he was ordered to spend the next two years under police supervision, May set out to pursue a new goal of becoming a writer, all the while pursuing a relationship with the famously beautiful Emma Pollmer. May's thirties were not quite as turbulent as his twenties and he managed to avoid a criminal lifestyle more successfully than he ever had before. Still, May had to work hard to overcome both personal obstacles and his terrible reputation throughout the late 1870s.

May began to work as an editor shortly after his release from prison, and on the side he began working on his first novel: *Die Rose von Ernstthal*. Despite some minor issues with accusations of impersonation (which would follow May all of his life and may prove that he did indeed suffer from Dissociative Identity Disorder to some degree) he managed to avoid arrest during this period and eventually moved to Dresden in order to further his career. It was there that he met Emma Pollmer, a woman that he would live

³³ Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

³⁴ Galchen, "Wild West Germany."

with starting in 1875 and would officially marry in 1880. Their marriage was a rocky one from the start, as May and others believed Pollmer was unfaithful to him even before their marriage and continued to live in infidelity for many years.³⁵ It is for this reason that many May scholars, myself included, believe that May developed an estranged relationship with the idea of romance, and with women as a whole, that would show up again and again throughout his later novels. His marriage with Pollmer was an unhappy one indeed, but May was able to find happiness and success in what would become the most important realm of his life: his career as an author.

May's journey to fame began in the mid-1870s when he began to produce short-story Westerns for local newspapers and journals. It was in these short stories that May would introduce who would become some of his most famous characters: Old Shatterhand, Sam Hawkens, and the ever-important Winnetou. Stories such as "Inn-nu-who, der Indianerhäuptling," which appeared in Dresden's *Deutschen Familienblatt* in 1875, introduced everyday Germans to the magic and mystery of the American West, and soon his stories spread beyond Dresden to all of Saxony, and beyond Saxony to all of the newly-unified Germany. By the time he was in his forties, May saw his works being published in several major cities, one of the first of which was "Die Both Shatters, ein Abenteuer aus dem wilden Westen" published in Stuttgart's *Für alle Welt!* In 1882.³⁶ Publishing moral tales of German cowboys and their Indian companions under his real name, and raunchier tales under various pseudonyms including "D. Jam,"³⁷ May became

³⁵ Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

³⁶ Karl May, "Die Both Shatters, ein Abenteuer aus dem wilden Westen," in *Die Both Shatters und andere Wildwestererzählungen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 2.

³⁷ Karl May, *Unter der Windhose und andere Erzählungen aus dem Wilden Westen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 2.

an accomplished author and overcame some of the terrible reputation he had earned in the first half of his life. By the time he was fifty years old, May had gained enough experience and notoriety as an author to produce what would become the most successful trilogy in German history: *Winnetou I-III*, or *Winnetou der Rote Gentleman* (the red gentleman).

Winnetou, one of May's most prominent characters and the epitome of the 19th century "noble savage," had appeared regularly in May's works since 1875 and thus became a beloved figure among all of his fans. Using the financial security he obtained from the publication and sale of his various *Reiseerzählungen* (travel tales) in 1891, May set out to publish three lengthy volumes concerning the origin of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand's relationship, as well as their most important adventures up until Winnetou's dramatic death in volume three.³⁸ These novels, each about three hundred pages in length (much longer than the vast majority of his previous works on the American West), proved to be monumental successes. In fact, a poll of East German high school students in the mid-1980s revealed that *Winnetou I* remained the most beloved book among young Germans nearly a century after its original publication.³⁹ By 1900, after the publication of all three volumes of *Winnetou*, Karl May was recognized as one of Europe's "most popular and most widely read authors," and he had collected a fortune in royalties which allowed him to purchase a nice home and to provide himself and his wife with a lavish lifestyle the poor, young Karl May could never have imagined.⁴⁰

³⁸ Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

³⁹ David Koblick, "Introduction," in *Winnetou*, trans. David Koblick (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989), xi.

⁴⁰ Karl May Gesellschaft, "A Short Biography."

Despite great commercial success in the late nineteenth century, May's reputation and troubled personal life both caused impediments to his success as he and the rest of the world transitioned into the twentieth. In 1901, it was revealed that May was the author of several morally scandalous novels which he had published in previous decades under a pseudonym. The emergence of these erotic texts, combined with press spread throughout Germany arguing that May had never traveled to America and pointing out that he was a former criminal who had spent several sentences in prison, once again threw May's reputation into turmoil.⁴¹ May was devastated and feared for the loss of the success he had so recently found from *Winnetou*, and thus to save himself he began to turn to philosophical and moral writing in the twentieth century. Rather than writing adventures in the American West, May wrote about good and evil, and the moral questions that many early twentieth century Germans were wrestling with in novels such as *Im Reiche des silbernen Löwen* (1903). As if the struggles in his professional life were not enough, the first years of the twentieth century also brought great strife in May's personal life, especially in his already troubled relationship with his wife Emma.

Emma was rumored to have been unfaithful to May throughout their entire marriage, and records from a psychiatric institution in Radebeul (home to Karl May in the last twenty years of his life) reveal that she suffered from fits of rage which may well have resulted in the verbal and physical abuse of her husband. In 1902, following the tragic death of May's dear friend Richard Plöhn, the couple filed divorce, and in March of 1903, only three short weeks after Emma and Karl's divorced was legally finalized, May married Plöhn's widow Klara with whom he had traveled extensively in previous

⁴¹ Karl May Gesellschaft, "A Short Biography."

years.⁴² Though his divorce and ensuing marriage, like many other aspects of his life, were quite scandalous by the standards of the time, May's union with Klara led to a period of peace. Though he still dealt with occasional accusations from the press and the ever-haunting reputation from his troubled past, May was able to redeem himself and his novels in the years that followed his second marriage. Unfortunately, May would not live to enjoy some of his greatest success.

In 1908, May finally made a confirmed, documented trip to the United States, during which he spent most of his time in the Eastern states and visited Niagara Falls.⁴³ Four short years later, on March 30, 1912, May died of what is presumed to have been lung disease in his home, which he lovingly referred to as "Villa Shatterhand."⁴⁴ Though May had passed at the age of seventy, his legacy lived on for decades after his death and continues to impact German literature and culture to this day.

As was mentioned before, much of what is known about May's life is based either upon conjecture gleaned from records, or from his autobiography. Given that neither of these sources is completely trustworthy, the deepest truths of May's life will never be known. However, perhaps the best way to peer into May's mind is through his novels, and in particular through the eyes of Old Shatterhand, whom he modeled directly after himself. An examination of Old Shatterhand's actions and reactions in May's works, which will occur later in this paper, reveals many more mysteries and possibilities about the life of May which have yet to be sufficiently explored. In order to understand and appreciate the value of the novels themselves, however, one must obtain some

⁴² Karl May Stiftung, "Karl Friedrich May."

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

background knowledge about the various political and intellectual movements which occurred in Germany throughout May's life and thus undoubtedly influenced his writing. With both the biography of May and the story of late nineteenth century Germany in mind, the stories written between the lines in May's Western novels can be illuminated, and thus the reason for May's great success in Germany can be more easily understood.

May in Historical Context

Though Germany had only been a unified nation-state for three years when Karl May's first *Winnetou* story was published, the idea of a unified Germanic people existed long before that. Throughout May's life in the mid- and late nineteenth century, as well as for centuries before, many nationalist calls were made for a return to the "pure" state of Germanic peoples experienced during the Roman Empire. These "natural" Germans were seen as the pinnacle of moral civilization, and a return to their lifestyle was romanticized by many, including (many German scholars would presume) Karl May. Although there is no concrete evidence that May had any ties to German nationalism, and that there is some evidence to the contrary, perhaps the most commonly made argument as to why May's novels were so embraced by early twentieth century Germans is that the portrayal of moral, "natural" Native American characters such as *Winnetou* reminded them of the tales they heard of ancient Germans. The fascination with Germany's roots culminated with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in the years leading up to World War II, but it began nearly two thousand years before.

Born in 1842, Karl May grew up during the most turbulent times in all of German political history. The desire to return to the age of their Germanic ancestors led many Germans from the various, loosely connected German states to seek unification,

beginning most significantly with a failed revolution in 1848.⁴⁵ By 1867 several other brief wars and political situations led to the unification of much of what is now modern Germany under Prussian rule in the North German Confederation, of which May's home state Saxony was a member. In 1868, the suggestion that German Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen should replace the overthrown Queen Isabella of Spain, thus creating an alliance between Spain and the ever-expanding Prussia, angered the French, who forced King Wilhelm I of Prussia to abandon his mission to set Leopold on the Spanish throne.⁴⁶ Further French political aggression led to further conflict between France and Prussia, which culminated when French emperor Napoleon III declared war on Prussia in July of 1870. The Prussian army, which before unification with many other German states may not have been able to achieve this feat, invaded France and defeated them with the signing of the Treaty of Frankfurt in March of 1871. This treaty, signed after twenty-three years of political turmoil in Germany when May was only twenty-nine years old, made the entire unification of Germany possible. With King Wilhelm I of Prussia at its head, a unified Germany set out to find its place in the world as a new nation.

Though the newly unified German states shared commonalities in language and culture, each state had unique qualities that would not simply disappear in 1871. Late nineteenth century Germans such as May still strongly identified with their region more so than with their new role as Germans; May undoubtedly spent the first half of his life feeling much more like a Saxon than a German. In order to ensure that all the German states could exist in harmony, it was necessary for a national identity, based on common

⁴⁵ Birdsall S. Viault, *Modern European History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1990), 299.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 302-3.

ancestry, to be established. It was this desire which led to the resurfacing of a book, referred to by classicist Christopher Krebs as “a most dangerous book,” from the dusty shelves of monks from centuries before in order to inspire a new generation of Germans with the story of their “ancestors.”

Germania, or “About the Origin and Mores of the Germanic Peoples,” is a thirty-page book published in 98 CE that has impacted how Germans see themselves since its original publication.⁴⁷ The book has been lost and rediscovered several times throughout history, and with each rediscovery has come a new belief about the history and destiny of German people. Although the Germanic tribes discussed by Tacitus were far from closely related to the Germans of May’s day, “the majority [of German scholars] from the fifteenth through the twentieth century studied *Germania* through an ideological lens and valued it as a gateway to the German past.”⁴⁸ The first of these scholars was Rudolf of Fulda, a monk who argued in the ninth century that the ancient Saxons were moral and honest despite their lack of Christianity,⁴⁹ leading Germanic people throughout the Middle Ages to regard their ancestors as a people morally superior to their contemporaries, a rare breed of “noble pagans” in a sea of disaster. It was this view that would persist until *Germania* was revisited by early Modern scholars.

Upon being “rediscovered” in a new intellectual era, *Germania* came to inspire movements for a unified German nation as early as the sixteenth century.⁵⁰ These movements, founded on the belief that “indigenous and pure, [German] ancestors had lived a hard but free, simple but moral life as tall, fair, and flaxen-haired men and women

⁴⁷ Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, 17.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 19.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 63.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 106.

of war...what they lacked in cultural refinement they more than made up for by moral rectitude,”⁵¹ continued to grow as the idea of a German *Volksgeist*, or “national spirit,” sprung up in the mid eighteenth century.⁵² Early Modern Germans saw themselves as the heirs to a legacy of greatness that began with the Saxons discussed by Tacitus, and thus they fought diligently to see their dream of a unified Germany become a reality throughout the nineteenth century. After Germany’s successful establishment as a unified nation in 1871, scholars turned once again to *Germania* in order to foster a homogenous German culture inspired by the lifestyle of ancient Germans.

During May’s lifetime, German intellectuals were concerned that newly unified “Germans” were unaware of their “glorious past,” and thus they pushed for a total rewrite of, and new focus on, German history.⁵³ Nineteenth century Germans were taught that what ancient Germans lacked in sophistication they made up for in courage and morality, and thus they could be seen as superior to ancient Greeks and Romans in this regard. It is the prevalence of this teaching during May’s life that led many German scholars to believe that the morality of Winnetou was directly inspired by May’s beliefs about ancient Germans. Much like those described in *Germania*, Winnetou was less educated and led a simpler life than his German and American counterparts, and yet he was far more courageous and morally sound than they could ever hope to be. All of the Native American characters in May’s novels outshine the American characters in physical strength, “Christ-like” behavior, and loyalty; one could say that they are the Saxons, while the Americans are the Romans. While it is likely that the well-read May was aware

⁵¹ Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, 105.

⁵² *ibid*, 157.

⁵³ *ibid*, 189.

of *Germania* and the commonly held beliefs about the superiority of ancient Germans held during his lifetime, the argument that this alone inspired the morality of Winnetou ignores another, perhaps even more influential, theory of May's time: scientific racism.

Outside of their character, another major point of appeal of Tacitus' Saxons was their physical similarity to one another. Tacitus noted that Germans all looked and acted the same; they were tall, pale, and strong with blond hair and shared the common roots of "freedom and loyalty."⁵⁴ This observation, combined with the most common theories of scientific racism available in the late nineteenth century, led to theories that Germans were "purer" than Romans because they had not mixed with other people. To be German came to be conflated with being "pure," and this led to the surfacing of many problematic beliefs not only about other European peoples, but especially about people of African, Asian, and American origins.⁵⁵ The scientists who lived and worked alongside May fell prey to the belief that "race" as defined by physical characteristics determined one's moral and intellectual capacity, and it is undeniable that May encountered these theories during his lifetime as an avid reader and member of German society.

Though scientific racism came to encompass global scientific thought in the nineteenth century, it was a German scientist who is often regarded as the "father" of these theories. In his 1795 dissertation *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa*, or "On the Natural Varieties of Mankind," Blumenbach argued that the human species could be divided into five distinct races: Caucasian (white), Mongolian (yellow), Malayan (brown), Ethiopian (black), and American (red). In his introduction to the five "races," Blumenbach provided a brief description of the typical physical characteristics of each

⁵⁴ Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, 209-10.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 196.

race, beginning with the Caucasian race to which he assigned “first place.” This place was assigned to Caucasians not necessarily because he saw this race as the “best” or most “capable,” but more likely because Blumenbach was convinced that the first humans were Caucasian and that all other races were a result of degeneration from this original race caused by differences in culture and climate. He described the skin of the typical Caucasian with the term *albus*, a straightforward color term meaning a flat, plain shade of white, while also pointing out that the Caucasian race was the only one in which he had observed the ability to blush.⁵⁶ He then went on to describe the “typical” physical characteristics of each of the other four races, and concluded by restating his theory that all races were descendants of an original, white couple: Adam and Eve.

Following the 1795 publication of *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa*, racial “scientists” began to use Blumenbach’s 5-race system to justify the mistreatment of non-white peoples around the globe. The atrocities which arose out of the “scientific racism” movement have led many historians to blame Blumenbach for creating a system by which countless people have been killed and oppressed. Others, however, argue that racism was never Blumenbach’s intent, and that he meant only to help explain differences in human skin color, stature, and other physical features. Though Blumenbach was undoubtedly responsible for the creation of a 5-race system of human classification that is used even to this day, a close examination of his work on race reveals that the rise of scientific racism was more the fault of his translators and the scientists who built upon his theories than it was the fault of Blumenbach himself. Still, it is quite likely that May encountered Blumenbach’s theories, and the countless racist theories which stemmed

⁵⁶ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1795), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/degenerishumaniv00blum>, 120.

from it throughout the nineteenth century, during his lifetime, and was thus under the impression that the Native American and African-American characters featured in his novels were in some way less “fit” than the white characters. As was previously mentioned, Winnetou is only noble because he assumed a “white” personality and adopted European cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Winnetou was to May, therefore, likely quite different from Tacitus’ ancient Germans who were “white” and inherently good. He was “red,” and therefore inherently savage, and was brought to a new status only through his efforts to be more like a white, German man; this status was that of a “noble savage.”

Since Europeans’ first contact with Native Americans in the fifteenth century, European scholars portrayed the “Indians” not as a people group belonging to their modern era, but as a reflection of the European past.⁵⁷ Much like Blumenbach, scholars who ascribed to the myth of the “noble savage” thought that Native Americans represented a more primitive/degenerate time in human evolution, and they admired them for their “noble” qualities while simultaneously gawking at the more shocking aspects of their culture.⁵⁸ Europeans were in constant contact with the four “lesser” races during May’s lifetime as a result of widespread imperialism. Though Indians were more often excused for their “savagery” than were Africans and other peoples European colonizers came into contact with,⁵⁹ they remained a lesser race and were treated as childlike figures capable of great moral and physical strength but lacking in the greater sophistication of

⁵⁷ Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 26.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 171.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 215.

the mind. Thus, Native American “noble savages” such as Winnetou became a favorite object of spectacle in May’s nineteenth century Europe.

Though the 1884 “Scramble for Africa” did not take place until May was forty-two years old and had already published many short stories and done the preliminary work on his most successful novels, the air of imperialism had permeated much of Europe throughout May’s life and thus influenced the way in which he portrayed Native Americans and other non-white peoples in his novels. The Americas had already been colonized in the centuries before, mostly by colonizers from Spain, Portugal, England, and France, and May made it very clear in his novels that Germans were aware of the fact that this colonization led to the murder and mistreatment of indigenous people. Still, popular theories of scientific racism led nineteenth century Europeans, including Germans, to believe that the non-white peoples of Africa and Asia would be “better off” under European rule, and greed fueled by the industrial revolution led to an insatiable desire for the valuable raw materials available in faraway lands. Though the unified Germany would not join the imperialist mission of the rest of Europe until the latter half of May’s life, the ideas which inspired Germans to take part in the colonization of Africa had a direct influence on how May and his contemporaries thought about race, and thus how May presented Native Americans and African-Americans in his stories.

The prevalence of beliefs of European, and above all German, superiority fueled by nationalism, imperialism, and scientific racism led to Native Americans becoming objects of fascination in both professional fields of study and in new forms of popular entertainment. As Barnum’s widely successful exhibition of circus freaks grew in popularity in America, traveling fairs in which Native Americans and other non-

European people were put on display became extremely popular during May's lifetime.⁶⁰ By the 1890s, when May's most successful novels were published, "easier transport made travelling pseudo-ethnographic shows, often put on at zoos, much more common."⁶¹ And, much like zoo animals, the Native Americans put on display at these shows were stared at by thousands of peering white eyes, standing in awe of their "savage" clothing and customs.

In addition to likely exposure to fairs of this sort, May would also have had the opportunity to attend a fair inspired by Europeans' love for the Western tales of American author James Fenimore Cooper. The popularity of his "Leatherstocking" tales spread from America to Europe in the mid nineteenth century,⁶² and by the time May was writing American Western legends were traveling on tours of Europe. "When Buffalo Bill Cody went to Munich in 1890 with his Wild West show—which featured two hundred cowboys and Indians, Sioux Ghost Dance performances, and reënactments of the battle of Little Bighorn with 'the people who were there!'—hopeful attendees camped out overnight to get tickets."⁶³ Though the German obsession with Native Americans and the American West was at this point nowhere near as prominent as it was in the aftermath of May's publication of *Winnetou*, the popularity of the "exotic" West undoubtedly influenced May in his formative years, and he likely read Cooper's novels during his time as a prison librarian. It was these shows, in which both the Native American and the Cowboy were objects of complete fascination, which supplied May with the knowledge

⁶⁰ Ellingson, *Noble Savage*, 244.

⁶¹ Galchen, "Wild West Germany."

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

he needed of the American West to construct rather convincing cowboy tales despite never having stepped foot on American soil.

At the very same time that May was writing, countless American writers were the producing Western “dime novels” which inspired a fascination with the cowboy throughout the United States. Inspired by the early nineteenth century “tall tales” of wild men like Daniel Boone, American authors came to see that stories of cowboys and Indians sold better than perhaps any other genre.⁶⁴ The most successful of these authors was the aforementioned James Fenimore Cooper, whose 1826 *The Last of the Mohicans* and other works introduced international readers to Leatherstocking, as well as to ““the negative doctrine that civilization is wicked and the positive doctrine that untouched nature is a source of strength, truth, and virtue,” both of which “occur sporadically in writing about the Wild West far into the nineteenth century.”⁶⁵ Cooper’s legacy, including the Western character tropes he helped to create, inspired late nineteenth century authors who would establish the basic formula for an American Western.

The dime novels of the 1890s often featured a struggle between bandits and a detective, a Western hero whose persona embodied that of “a benevolent hunter without a fixed place of abode, advanced in age, celibate, and of unequalled prowess in trailing, marksmanship, and Indian fighting.”⁶⁶ This description nearly perfectly fits May’s hero Old Shatterhand, and thus it could reasonably be argued that May was inspired by Cooper’s Leatherstocking and other American heroes when he wrote his novels. One marked difference between the typical American Western and May’s novels, however,

⁶⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 54.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 71.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 92.

was the role of Native Americans. While Indian tribes were indeed a constant presence in most dime novels, their presence was threatening and individual Native Americans were never given a starring role like Winnetou enjoyed through May. In fact, a comparable Indian sidekick to Winnetou did not enter the American imagination until the rise of The Lone Ranger and Tonto in the 1930s.⁶⁷ In dime novels, the primary role of Native Americans was to capture the hero's romantic interest and hold her as a "damsel in distress" until he came to the rescue.⁶⁸ May's novels, which feature a central Native American character and have no damsels in distress, thus diverted greatly from the accepted formula for Westerns in the United States, which could in part explain that while Cooper and Buffalo Bill found success in Europe, May found no such thing in America.

Though he became by far the most recognized, May was far from being the only European author to produce Western novels in nineteenth century Europe. Some scholars, such as ethnohistorian Christian Feest, would even go as far as to argue that May was not unique at all in his writing about the American West and was simply one small piece in a much larger European phenomenon. May's French and British contemporaries were also publishing works which displayed Native Americans in a far more positive light than did American dime novels, and Feest argued that this was because of a broader European admiration for indigenous peoples which existed at the time. Feest does acknowledge, however, that the extent to which Germans became obsessed with Native American culture far outshined anything else in Europe, but argued that this could be explained by

⁶⁷ Helen O'Hara, "A History of the Lone Ranger," *Empire*, October 28, 2012, last modified October 19, 2015, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/lone-ranger-history/>.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 95.

the fact that, like Indians, nineteenth century Germans identified more closely with regional affiliations (“tribes”) than they did with the German state.⁶⁹ To take the influence of May out of the picture, however, would be problematic in that it would completely ignore the fact that Germans’ beliefs about Native Americans are nearly entirely influenced by the depictions offered in May’s novels, and that the German-Indian fascination remains closely tied with the novels to this day.

May’s Westerns were undoubtedly unique in both content and influence, but they did not exist in a vacuum. Influenced by waves of German nationalism, the “purity” of German ancestors, prevalent theories of scientific racism, and the growing popularity of Western-themed novels and shows in Europe, it is no wonder that a late nineteenth century German author decided to publish a series of books which took place in the American West despite the fact that he himself had never been there. Through continued themes of German cultural and moral superiority, the lack of morality among Americans, and the nobility of Native Americans (among others), May created a web of Western tales which supported German beliefs about their nation’s history, as well as its glorious destiny.

Fictional Characters and Historical Phenomena

As has been mentioned before, May enjoyed great financial success following the publication of the *Winnetou* novels and other Western tales in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Though this success was in part due to the fact that Europeans were generally fascinated with indigenous peoples and cultures at the time (no doubt a result of

⁶⁹ Christian Feest, “Germany’s Indians in a European Perspective,” *ResearchGate* (January 2002): 27, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christian_Feest2/publication/258994375_Germany's_Indians_in_a_European_Perspective/links/00b495298f1aa93671000000.pdf.

imperialism), perhaps the greatest reason for May's success was that he upheld German cultural and political beliefs throughout each of his stories. Though none of the books take place in Germany they always featured German characters who reinforced the commonly-held belief that Germans were nobler, more intelligent, and better looking than their American counterparts. In addition, the novels also painted Americans as the "bad guys" in the tale of the American West while depicting the majority of Native American characters as blameless victims and "noble savages." These tropes, in combination with several other smaller themes which helped to further the novels' connection with nineteenth century German culture, solidified May as a superstar in Germany and ensured that the novels would be loved by German readers for decades to come.

Though Winnetou and his role as a noble savage has been by far the most discussed by scholars in recent years, the nobility of the novels' German characters is far more prevalent and thus worthy of further discussion. Produced during a time when Germans looked to the past with a longing to return to their former glory, the novels portrayed Germans as morally and physically superior humans who often mirror the image of the ancient Germans described by Tacitus. Even in May's earliest short stories, Germans appear regularly in the American landscape and continually reinforce this trope. In "Die Both Shatters" (1882), the narrator Old Shatterhand is referred to by his American companions as a "Mann aus Germany."⁷⁰ This phrase does two things: it establishes early on in the story that the hero is German, and it reinforces the idea that the Americans, who otherwise speak in perfect German, are too stupid to refer to Germany as

⁷⁰ May, "Die Both Shatters," 11.

“Deutschland.” Old Shatterhand and the Native American characters in the story consistently refer to the *Heimat* as Deutschland, but the Americans seem to be incapable of doing so. There are many instances in May’s stories and novels where the German characters, despite speaking English as their second language and having little knowledge of the land and its customs, outsmart Americans who have been working as “West men” for years.

In “Unter der Windhose” (1886), there is a scene in which Old Shatterhand encounters a woman. Shatterhand, who normally ignores women, approaches the woman and tells her that he is German; she responds that she is German, too, and the two proceed to hold a conversation in their mother tongue in front of Shatterhand’s Native American and American comrades.⁷¹ Despite the fact that Shatterhand, the woman, and various other German characters in May’s stories are capable of speaking fluent English and Apache, May is careful to point out that neither the Americans nor the Apaches can understand the German conversation being held, and that only the young Apache man standing near them was even capable of understanding the names being used in the conversation.⁷² This is yet another instance in which May suggests through his writing that Germans are intellectually superior to others, even to fellow whites, and that the German language is some sort of exclusive privilege hidden from the rest of the world.

Winnetou I, which recounts the arrival of Old Shatterhand to America and his first meeting with Winnetou, opens with a scene in which Shatterhand, then known as Charlie (after Karl May himself) arrives in St. Louis and finds himself lucky that he has taken up

⁷¹Karl May, “Unter der Windhose,” in *Unter der Windhose und andere Erzählungen aus dem Wilden Westen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 16.

⁷² *ibid.*

residence with the German family of Mr. Henry.⁷³ Mr. Henry and his family are hospitable, talented, and kind, and they provide Charlie with opportunities to learn to shoot, ride a horse, and survey land, all of which will help him on his journey to become a *Westmann*. Though the upstanding nature of Mr. Henry does enough to establish that German immigrants are the best type of Americans, it is Charlie himself who really brings this point home when he shoots the bullseye on his first attempt with Mr. Henry's gun and tames a mustang that was unable to be ridden by even the most experienced of American West men. In addition, Charlie makes it known that he is well read, fluent in multiple languages, and possesses in-depth knowledge of the surveying of the American West, all within the first chapter. Charlie, like Karl his namesake, epitomizes the ideal of the noble German, one who constantly reminds readers of the glorious German past that they must all strive to return to.

Besides Mr. Henry and Charlie (Old Shatterhand), the other important German character in *Winnetou I* is Sam Hawkens, a man of German descent who has spent so much time traveling through the American West that he has assumed an American identity and American customs. Despite the fact that he speaks and acts very similarly to the American characters in the novel, Hawkens remains free from the vices given to American characters because of his German ancestry. Though he never speaks of any time in Germany, Sam remains a loyal and moral friend of Old Shatterhand throughout the *Winnetou* novels and other short stories. Sam is a prime example of the belief that Germans are inherently "better" than other people had permeated the minds of Germans such as May in the late nineteenth century. Though he had plenty of opportunities to be

⁷³ Karl May, *Winnetou I* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH), 3.

tainted by the dangers of the American West, the German Sam Hawkens remained protected by the armor of German superiority.

Just as the Saxons in Tacitus' *Germania* exuded strength and bravery, Old Shatterhand continually displays the characteristics of an upstanding German man. When Mr. White, the man in charge of the railroad surveying project in New Mexico, comes to visit the site on which Shatterhand is working, he notices that it is the young, German gentleman who is doing all the work on the site while the Yankees are lying around drunk most of the day.⁷⁴ Constant praise from his superiors earns Shatterhand a bad reputation among his American colleagues, and the fact that he later kills a bison, captures a wild mule, and kills a bear does not do anything to ease the tension. Shatterhand is a perfect German specimen, more capable of surviving in the American wilderness than any native to the land. Just like many nineteenth century Germans believed their ancient ancestors to be, this faultless German character (who experiences no character development throughout the novels and is as perfect on the first page as he is on the last) is braver, stronger, and more intelligent than any other man in the American West.

In addition to proving German superiority through the actions of German characters, May also included various physical descriptions which painted Germans as the most attractive of all the characters in his novels. Undoubtedly influenced by the ideas of Blumenbach and other contributors to popular theories of scientific racism at the time, May made sure to include descriptors that would mark German characters as pure amongst a sea of muddy Americans. In "Unter der Windhose," May describes a German man as having thick, blonde hair, and magnificent, German blue eyes.⁷⁵ He later again

⁷⁴ May, *Winnetou I*, 12.

⁷⁵ May, "Unter der Windhose," 9.

refers to a young character as a pretty blonde, blue-eyed boy; it is later discovered that this boy is the son of the German woman Old Shatterhand has the aforementioned German conversation with.⁷⁶ Though physical descriptions such as these are more common in May's short stories than in his longer works, the fact that he takes time to mention that German characters are beautiful, blonde, and blue eyed reveals that he, like many of his contemporaries, was influenced both by Tacitus, who observed that ancient Saxons were statuesque blondes, and by Blumenbach, who observed that blonde hair and blue eyes were traits unique to the "Caucasian race" and thus signified racial purity among those who had these traits. Were physical appearance unimportant to May, he would likely have neglected to spend as much time discussing it in his works. His references to beautiful Germans, as well as to the physical characteristics of other character types yet to be discussed, are thus best considered as evidence that May was heavily influenced by culture and history while producing his novels. More importantly, the fact that all physical descriptions of Germans are positive reveals a major reason why May's novels found such great success among a German readership.

Though they often play a smaller role, the American characters in May's novels reveal the German belief that Americans, due to their racial impurity and lack of an ancient legacy of moral fortitude, were unfit to settle and manage the American West. In *Winnetou I*, Old Shatterhand finds himself employed by Mr. Bancroft, an American man who spends at least half of his day totally drunk and encouraged his employees to do the same.⁷⁷ When accused by Mr. White of neglecting his duties Bancroft tries to push the blame on Shatterhand but is unsuccessful; he, like so many other Americans in May's

⁷⁶ May, "Unter der Windhose," 14.

⁷⁷ May, *Winnetou I*, 10.

novels, was morally and physically unfit to do his job. This theme of unfitness runs throughout the first Winnetou novel, with American characters such as Rattler finding themselves running away from angry bears, being captured by violent Indians, and even being executed for their crimes and neglectfulness. While Sam Hawkens (who was, as mentioned before, of German ancestry) and a few other American characters display noble qualities, the vast majority are cowards who have to rely on Old Shatterhand and other Germans to do the work of running the West properly.

Physical descriptions of Americans, particularly in May's short stories, reveal that he also believed them lacking in attractiveness, undoubtedly due to the fact that these "Yankees" were of mixed ancestry and lacked the pure blonde-haired, blue-eyed genes of the Saxons found in so many Germans. One of the most obvious examples of this is found in "Der erste Elk" (1893), in which Old Shatterhand describes his encounter with Fred Cutter. This old "Texas cowboy" was described as old, wrinkly, weathered, and clean-shaven, with "nigger lips," a sharp nose, and grey eyes that could pierce the soul despite remaining half shut all the time.⁷⁸ Cutter, like so many of the American characters featured by May, was far from physically attractive and even held traits that would suggest that his ancestors had mixed with other races. Though it was likely not his main point in writing the novels, the prevalence of negative descriptions of Americans throughout May's novels explains both why the novels found such great success among Germans (many of whom, as May expressed in his autobiography, resented the Germans who abandoned their homeland for America throughout the nineteenth century), as well as why the novels never found a readership in the United States.

⁷⁸ Karl May, "Der erste Elk," in *Unter der Windhose und andere Erzählungen aus dem Wilden Westen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 63-4.

Though characters like Cutter and Mr. Bancroft were largely harmless in the grand scheme of May's stories, other Americans with more specifically problematic backgrounds served as villains throughout both his short stories and longer novels. One such character type was the Mormon missionary, a phenomenon discussed at length by the aforementioned Richard Cracroft of, naturally, Brigham Young University. Although most Americans disapproved of the Latter Day Saints' beliefs and lifestyle in the nineteenth century, May took this disdain to a new level in his stories. In "Die Rache des Mormonen," or "The Revenge of the Mormons" (1889), a pair of Mormon missionaries named Brother Jeremias and Brother Gideon arrive to stir up trouble for Old Shatterhand and his Native American companions. When the characters are first introduced, they argue over whether or not Brigham Young would approve of Gideon taking Intah-tikila, an Indian woman, as his bride. They come to the conclusion that he would approve, given that he sent them on a mission to Christianize the Apache. In order to capture her and avoid the disapproval of her Apache-warrior father, Gideon plans to kiss her, as he has been told by Jeremias that Indian women are required to marry any man they kiss openly.⁷⁹ The morally superior Old Shatterhand, who has been listening to this conversation from afar, obviously disapproves of this and sets out to prevent Gideon from kissing Intah-tikila; chaos ensues, but in the end the Mormons are sent packing.

This, among countless other accounts of Mormons found in May's work, reveals that May, like many other Germans, held Mormons in disregard. Although as a German he likely had no firsthand experience with the religion, stories of the Mormons and their practice of taking multiple wives had obviously reached Germany by the late nineteenth

⁷⁹ Karl May, "Die Rache des Mormonen," in *Unter der Windhose und andere Erzählungen aus dem Wilden Westen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 52-3.

century. May and his contemporaries, who held conservative Christian values, would have seen this as abhorrent, and this view is made clear by May who placed Mormons among his primary villains in several works. The Mormons make a perfect counterpart to the morally upstanding Old Shatterhand, who never takes a wife or even expresses much interest in women, and thus they help to illuminate the fact that Germans like Shatterhand were far superior to the Americans who had fallen for Joseph Smith's scheme.

One character type regularly mentioned, and sometimes featured, by May is that of the African-American. Though never portrayed as villains, black characters are portrayed as simple, unintelligent, and inferior to both white and Native American characters, thus supporting the argument that May had been influenced by scientific racism and simultaneously refuting the common scholarly argument that May's works served as an "early denunciation of racism."⁸⁰ Though there are only a few black characters with significant roles in May's stories, May uses what he believes are common physical characteristics and personality traits of black men in particular in order to describe other characters rather often; his characters, especially American characters, do this as well.

Sam Thick, a fur-trapping character in "Die Both Shatters," describes his partner Sam Thin as being as thick-headed (stubborn) as a "Coloured Gentleman," which May points out in parentheses as a "Neger."⁸¹ In "Inn-nu-woh, der Indianerhäuptling" (commonly regarded as May's first Winnetou story), an American refers to a Native American character as a "Nigger," thus severely angering the Indian.⁸² Both of these

⁸⁰ Koblick, "Introduction," x.

⁸¹ May, "Die Both Shatters," 13.

⁸² Karl May, "Inn-nu-who, der Indianerhäuptling," in *Die Both Shatters und andere Wildwestererzählungen* (Hildesheim: Benu Verlag, 2018), 34.

instances reveal that May, despite likely never having contact with an African-American person, was so influenced by theories of scientific racism and imperialism that he, like the majority of his contemporaries, believed people of African descent to be inferior to all other “races,” including Native Americans. African-American characteristics and looks are always considered negative by May and his characters; Old Shatterhand may have fought regularly against the KKK, but he surely was no early champion against racism when it came to the plight of the black Americans in his stories.

One of the most discussed black characters of May’s is Negro Bob, “a recurring figure in his Westerns” who is depicted as “stereotypical...eye-boggling, simple, illiterate, but good-hearted.”⁸³ Named in *Winnetou III* and often nameless in May’s shorter stories, Bob has been cited by many scholars as further evidence that May was some sort of advocate against racism. While this view could be supported by the fact that Shatterhand and Winnetou speak out against slavery at several points throughout *Winnetou*, May’s portrayal of Bob should be viewed more as an argument against slavery, which was not uncommon among Europeans during May’s time, than an argument against racism. Shatterhand, who is extremely patronizing towards Bob and depicts him as a rather stupid character, does not show in any way that he believes Bob to be his equal. While he doesn’t see him as deserving of the horrors of chattel slavery or being chased by the KKK, Bob is still in need of much improvement before he could ever reach some sense of “equality” to Shatterhand, or even to an Apache Indian, in Shatterhand’s eyes. In “Inn-nu-who, der Indianerhäuptling,” the Bob trope appears as a nameless “gray-headed nigger” who speaks in broken German/English and consistently

⁸³ Richard H. Cracroft, “Foreward,” in *Winnetou*, trans. David Koblick (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989), xvi.

refers to Shatterhand as Master, despite the story presumably taking place after the American abolition of slavery.⁸⁴ Unlike Winnetou, who is depicted as highly intelligent and capable of working with Shatterhand on a fairly equal level, Bob's inferiority (due here to his ethnicity) is made very clear by May. When analyzing whether May was a racist, and whether his works were influenced by racist philosophies, it is of utmost importance to keep his depiction of Negro Bob in mind.

One character type which has been overlooked by nearly every scholar of May is that of the female character. Though women never play large roles in May's stories and often remain nameless, they are a constant presence in his American West and thus his portrayal of them is worthy of discussion. In his early short stories May included several female characters, both white and Native American, all of whom served a similar role as either the housekeeper for the men in Old Shatterhand's company or the love interest of some character (typically not Shatterhand himself). One such character is the aforementioned German woman from "Unter der Windhose," who besides speaking to Shatterhand in German does little else but cook and clean. When the men set out on a mission in the second half of the story, May points out that the German woman remains behind to tend to the fire and to fix meat for when the men would return.⁸⁵ Though this is far from an atypical representation of a woman's role in the late nineteenth century, the fact that this woman is mentioned several times throughout the story and even provides dialogue but lacks a name other than "Die Frau" (the woman) demonstrates that May, despite having many sisters, a wife, and female friends, regarded women as completely unimportant when it comes to creating a cohesive narrative. This may have come as a

⁸⁴ May, "Inn-nu-woh," 33.

⁸⁵ May, "Unter der Windhose," 23.

result of negative experiences in his life with women, which will be discussed at length later, but was also likely a result of common Western beliefs concerning women during May's lifetime.

Unlike white women, who are often nameless and rarely serve as the object of another character's affection, the Native American women in May's novels are typically given names, vague personality traits, and roles as the love interest of one of Shatterhand's companions or enemies. Intah-tikila, the woman the aforementioned Brother Gideon attempted to take as his bride, has very little agency nor much to say in "Die Rache des Mormonen," and yet she is given a name and a rather lengthy physical description by May. Like many other Indian women in his stories, Intah-tikila (also known as "Shwarzauge" or "black eyes") is described as a stunning beauty who is capable of captivating both Indian and white men. It is her beauty which gives her purpose in the story, and not much else. Although she is given a bit more attention than the German woman, Intah-tikila remains rejected by May.

Perhaps the most interesting, and assuredly the most developed, female character in all of May's Westerns is Nsho-chi, Winnetou's beloved sister who helps Old Shatterhand and his companions recover from the wounds they gained in a battle with the Kiowa and Apache. Nsho-chi is given regular dialogue throughout much of *Winnetou I*, and she becomes quite remarkable in that she is the only female character that Old Shatterhand ever considers pursuing a romantic relationship with; in fact, he even agrees to marry her after Winnetou advises him to. Much like her brother and the other Indian women in May's tales, Nsho-chi is beautiful, intelligent, gentle, and kind. She cares for Shatterhand even before he is adopted by the Apache or becomes Winnetou's blood

brother, and she quietly makes sure he and the other men of the story are healthy and well-fed. Nsho-chi shares many characteristics with the other stereotypical females in May's Westerns, that is for sure, but she is granted lengthy dialogue that all other women are denied. In one instance, her dialogue reveals a lot about how May, and likely many other Germans, felt about American women in the late nineteenth century.

In one of the final chapters of *Winnetou I* there is a scene in which Nsho-chi watches the execution of one of the men Old Shatterhand worked on the railroad with. Later in the same scene, she and Winnetou test to see if Shatterhand has become a "true Apache"; in order to prove himself, he must track Nsho-chi down in the woods. He follows her footprints until they disappear, but he (being a perfectly skilled German, of course) is able to find her when he notices that Winnetou's footprints have become deeper, suggesting that he carried Nsho-chi to her final hiding place. When he finds the pair he eavesdrops on their conversation, in which he discovers that Nsho-chi is in love with him but fears that he will never marry her because she is not as accomplished as a white woman. She fears that she, a woman who lives in the wilderness, is not tender-hearted enough to keep Shatterhand happy, but Winnetou assures her that this is not the case. He reminds her, as he originally pointed out after Shatterhand was shocked that Nsho-chi watched the execution, that "civilized" women are not tender-hearted at all but "can hear screams of pain without a shudder – who can see slaves in chains on the auction block, who can stand by with a smile while an innocent black servant girl is whipped to death!"⁸⁶ This statement causes Nsho-chi to realize that the reason she is able to watch violent acts without flinching is not because she is uncivilized, but because

⁸⁶ Karl May, *Winnetou*, trans. David Koblick (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989), 168

exposure to the violence that comes from white civilization has hardened her heart and taught her to accept “blood flow” as a part of everyday life as an Indian woman in America.⁸⁷ When Shatterhand hears this he is not afraid, for as a German he counts himself innocent of the slaughter of Native Americans. Instead, he sees her fire for revenge as a reason to pursue a romantic relationship with her, despite having never expressed interest in a woman at any other point in his stories. Nsho-chi, through her abandonment of stereotypical female beliefs and behaviors, earns the respect of Shatterhand, and therefore the respect of May.

Scenes like this one are what have caused many scholars to go so far as to suggest that May was not a racist, and even to argue that he was an early advocate against racism. While his acknowledgement of the hardships faced by Native Americans at the hands of white settlers was indeed important in that it shed light on the American situation in Europe, scenes like this one with Nsho-chi were far from denouncements of the racist ideas which, as can be seen in the paragraphs above, permeated nearly every aspect of May’s novels. May was a nineteenth century German man with nineteenth century German beliefs, and thus while he did portray Indians and their cause as noble he did not see them as equal to whites. This can be proved by another passage in *Winnetou I*, in which Shatterhand agrees to marry Nsho-chi. Winnetou argues that Nsho-chi will not be worthy of Shatterhand unless she goes to a civilized town and lives with a white family long enough to learn the proper customs and behavior for a white woman. Shatterhand, who earlier admired Nsho-chi for her anger towards whites, still agrees that this is a good idea and brings Nsho-chi, Winnetou, and several others on a journey back to St. Louis

⁸⁷ May, *Winnetou*, Koblick trans, 168.

with him, with the full intention that Nsho-chi must be trained in “whiteness” before she can be a suitable bride. Much like *Winnetou*, who will be discussed at length later, Nsho-chi must adopt white practices in order to become truly admirable. She is noble, a “noble savage,” but she is still far from the perfection that whites, and particularly Germans, possess in May’s eyes. Unfortunately for Nsho-chi, the most interesting female character in all of May’s works, she never lives to achieve her dream of becoming Shatterhand’s bride.

On their journey to St. Louis, Nsho-chi and her father Chief Inshu-chuna are murdered by a villainous West man named Santer and his crew. When they find Nsho-chi she is clinging on to life, and *Winnetou* weeps in devastation; Shatterhand, meanwhile, stands by, unsure of what to say to comfort them. She allows herself to die after she sets eyes on Shatterhand one last time, and at this *Winnetou* vows to seek revenge against all white men in honor of his father and sister. Only a few short pages later, after Nsho-chi is buried, *Winnetou* changes his mind about revenge and forgives the white race because of his relationship with the most perfect white man of all: Shatterhand.⁸⁸ This scene truly captures the issue with the argument that May was “not racist,” for it shows that, through realizing the virtue of a German man, an Apache man who had witnessed years of violence at the hands of white men and who had just experienced the death of his two closest family members was suddenly able to “forgive and forget” all that had happened. *Winnetou* does not become a “noble” character until this moment, the moment when he gives up his quest for revenge against the people who caused much of the hardship in his life. In addition, this passage also supports the claim that May did not value female

⁸⁸ May, *Winnetou*, 207.

characters. Though he gave Nsho-chi more dialogue and action than any other female character, her death was quick and was not allowed to affect the trajectory of the story in any major way. Shatterhand, who would presumably have been devastated at the loss of his fiancée, was able to put the death of Nsho-chi behind him in a moment because her death was the death of an Indian, the kind of death that happened every day in May's American West.

While his descriptions of women, Intah-tikila and Nsho-chi in particular, reveal much about the way May and his European contemporaries viewed Native Americans, it is the titular character Winnetou who encompasses all of the influence *Germania*, scientific racism, imperialism, and ideas of the "noble savage" had on May as a nineteenth century German man. With his long, flowing black hair, glowing copper skin, and statuesque appearance, Shatterhand is mesmerized by Winnetou from the moment he lays eyes on him. In his early twenties Winnetou has already become everything a European would dream a noble savage to be and more; he is strong, brave, and just, and although he lacks the education afforded to Old Shatterhand he makes up for it in moral fortitude, much like the Saxons in Tacitus' *Germania* made up for their supposed inferiority to the Romans. Unlike any other character in May's works, Winnetou experiences some major character development throughout the many novels and short stories he is featured in. It is this development which reveals why the stories of Winnetou were so successful in Germany; in nineteenth century American Westerns, Indians were typically bad guys with few characteristics, but Winnetou developed from an uncivilized, violent "savage" to a "noble savage" capable of living in white society and even of accepting the Christian religion. Winnetou's story arc proved the common European

notion, based on theories of scientific racism, that members of “lesser” races could improve themselves by striving for whiteness, while also affirming the German belief that indigenous peoples, like the Saxons of *Germania*, were inherently brave and admirable due to their connection to nature which had been lost in much of Europe as a result of the industrial revolution.

Winnetou’s first appearances were not in the novels named after him, but in several shorter stories and novels published in the decades prior, with the first being “Innu-woh, der Indianerhäuptling” in 1875. Throughout these stories Winnetou has already become Old Shatterhand’s blood brother and regularly aids him on his adventures, suggesting that May had envisioned many of the events in the *Winnetou* novels nearly twenty years before they were published. Sometimes present in the action, and always present in Old Shatterhand’s mind, Winnetou represented a constant source of loyalty and justice in May’s American West. His journey to nobility, however, is most clearly explored in the *Winnetou* novels themselves, which detail how he and Old Shatterhand met, the nature of their relationship and adventures together, and his tragic death.

Winnetou I, published in 1893, starts with several chapters describing Shatterhand’s first year after immigration to the United States, the majority of which focusing on his time working as a surveyor for Mr. Bancroft while simultaneously proving to Sam Hawkens and his other American companions that he is no Greenhorn but a true “Westmann” worthy of their respect. It is not until Shatterhand has already completed several adventures, including killing the bear and bison, that he first encounters Winnetou. He is fascinated with him from their first encounter, and when he and his companions come into conflict with the Kiowa and Apache near the middle of the

novel *Shatterhand* makes them all promise that no harm will come to Winnetou or his father, and that he will help them to escape Kiowa capture. Once he has proven his loyalty to Winnetou, and therefore to the Apache tribe as a whole, Shatterhand becomes Winnetou's blood brother and finds a permanent home as a member of Winnetou's tribe.

While Winnetou begins his story as a rather violent young man in constant search of revenge both against white settlers and against members of rival tribes, his relationship with the perfect Shatterhand leads him down a path of redemption, and ultimately a path towards "whiteness." By *Winnetou II* he has begun a journey towards conversion to Christianity, all the while speaking in High German to contrast his Apache companions' broken speech, reading poetry, and living a rather blameless life to mirror that of Shatterhand.⁸⁹ Near the end of *Winnetou III*, Old Shatterhand recites May's poem *Ave Maria* to Winnetou as he dies in his arms. Winnetou's last words, which signify the end of his journey towards nobility, are so:

*"Schar-lih, ich glaube an den Heiland. Winnetou is ein Christ. Lebe wohl!"*⁹⁰

Translating roughly to "Charlie, I believe in the savior/salvation. Winnetou is a Christian, farewell!," this short passage is one of the most unique in all of May's works because it depicts something that every other character, including Shatterhand, lacks: character development. In the beginning Winnetou holds tightly to Apache religious traditions and often responds to conflicts with violence; he even rejects Shatterhand's help to free him from the Kiowa and nearly has him executed in *Winnetou I*. Through his acceptance of Shatterhand's more pacifistic approach to life, and later Shatterhand's Christian faith, Winnetou becomes a very different character by the end of *Winnetou III*.

⁸⁹ Cracroft "Foreward," xvii.

⁹⁰ Karl May, *Winnetou III* (Indiebooks, 2017), 260.

He absorbs enough of Shatterhand's German perfection through some sort of relational osmosis, and through the blending of the skills and traits he obtained as an Apache with these German ideals he became someone young Germans could look up to despite racial and cultural differences. It is this saint-like depiction of Winnetou that has led many scholars to argue that May was some sort of advocate against racism. As was mentioned before, caution must be taken with this statement, and those studying May must remember that while Winnetou was indeed a hero he only became one by abandoning his religion and culture for those of a "superior" German man. So much could be said about Winnetou that the analysis of his character alone could fill an entire book. The briefest summary of the importance of his character, however, is this: Winnetou is the perfect example of how many nineteenth century Europeans viewed Native Americans, as well as other peoples deemed lesser by theories of scientific racism. Just as it was Old Shatterhand's "duty" in the novels to convert Winnetou into a pacifistic Christian, many of May's contemporaries came to see it as their duty to Christianize and colonize other peoples by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Winnetou*, therefore, must be read as a tale heavily influenced by nineteenth century notions of race and racial mobility, rather than an early cry out against racism.

While the connections to German culture and history which permeate nearly every page of May's works are of the utmost importance in the study of the May popularity phenomenon, there are other parts of the novels which can only be explained through the lens of May's dubious biography. Each chapter in his Western novels, as well as each of his short stories, starts with a rather lengthy description of some American geographical feature or cultural phenomenon which he uses to set the stage for the action

in the story. May began *Winnetou I* with a section in which the narrator, Old Shatterhand, gives various identifiers which would make someone a “greenhorn” in the American West. One example he gives is this:

Ein Greenhorn spricht entweder gar kein oder ein sehr reines und geziertes Englisch; ihm ist das Yankee-Englisch oder gar das Hinterwälder-Idiom eine Gräuel...Ein Greenhorn hält ein Racoon für ein Opossum und eine leidlich hübsche Mulattin für eine Quadroone.⁹¹

This passage, which asserts that new immigrants to the United States speak little or no English, have trouble understanding Yankee and “backwoods” idioms, confuse raccoons for opossums, and confuse pretty mulatto women for “quadroons,” is just one of the many in which Karl May attempts to prove his “expertise” on the subject of the American West through Old Shatterhand. Accused of never having visited the United States (as was mentioned before, it is highly unlikely that he ever did until the end of his life), May used the knowledge he gleaned from extensive reading in child- and young adulthood concerning geography and foreign languages and customs to pepper his writing with statements that made him sound like an authority on American culture. His characters, especially Americans such as Sam Hawkens, regularly use “backwoods idioms” such as “pshaw!” in order to increase their authenticity, and May also randomly inserts English words and phrases into German sentences to help the reader feel as if this very German tale is truly taking place in the United States. For example, in “Inn-nu-woh, der Indianerhäuptling” the aforementioned Negro Bob trope, here referred to as the “old, gray-headed nigger,” uses “yes” instead of “ja,” “Master” rather than “Meister,” and even

⁹¹ May, *Winnetou I*, 3.

once utters the sentence “Well, well, Sir; aber so sein, actually (wirklich) so sein!,”⁹² nearly half and half English and German and including a translation of the word “actually” from May. May used German filled with English words and phrases often in the dialogue of American characters, both black and white, to establish authority and authenticity in his writing. In this example, however, he differs from American writers who would have ensured that a black character’s speech was filled with stereotypical phrases such as “Massa” rather than “Master” to convey an accent. May, who likely had no real firsthand knowledge of American slavery or the culture or speech of African-Americans in the South, missed this opportunity to increase his “authenticity” even further.

Old Shatterhand, the ever-present narrator of nearly all May’s Westerns, represents May himself in more ways than through his “expert” knowledge of the languages and customs of the American West. Like May himself, Old Shatterhand (along with other “good” characters) constantly proves those who falsely accuse him wrong and seeks to keep his conscience and reputation clear.⁹³ Shatterhand is a kind, pacifistic man who seeks justice in every situation and treats others, even those who many of his companions treat badly, with compassion; although it can’t be known for sure if May had these qualities, the fact that they are so prominent in Shatterhand reveals that May truly believed that he exhibited these qualities. Another aspect of Shatterhand, one which has been explored by several researchers in recent years, is his often homoerotic relationship with Winnetou, which some argue suggests that May himself may have been homo- or bisexual.

⁹² May, “Inn-nu-woh,” 33.

⁹³ Galchen, “Wild West Germany.”

One of Shatterhand's most unique qualities when compared to the leading men of American Westerns is that he is never distracted by his attraction to a female character. He expresses no interest in any woman except for a brief interest in Nsho-chi, and although he refers to her as beautiful on a few occasions he is far from infatuated with her. The one character Shatterhand does allow himself to be completely mesmerized by is Winnetou. From his first physical description of the young Apache, it becomes clear that Shatterhand sees him as human perfection. Even before he gets the chance to know him Shatterhand vows to protect Winnetou with his life, and he is quick to accept the offer to drink Winnetou's blood mixed with river water in order to solidify their relationship as inseparable blood brothers for life.⁹⁴ Shatterhand's borderline-romantic relationship with Winnetou, which culminates with Winnetou dying in his arms, combined with the fact that Shatterhand ignores the advances of all female characters and does not waste his time chasing after damsels in distress, has caused many to question whether the real Old Shatterhand (May) shared some of these characteristics in his own personal life.

May did indeed have an estranged relationship with his first wife Emma, who was unfaithful to him throughout their marriage no doubt because of some sort of dissatisfaction with their relationship. In addition May, who was one of fourteen children, never had any children of his own; whether this was the result of infertility, prevention, or a lack of physical intimacy in his relationships with his wives the world will never know. Though these two things, combined with the nature of Shatterhand and Winnetou's relationship, could suggest that May was a homosexual, scholars must be careful not to jump so quickly to this conclusion. In the 19th century, relationships between two men

⁹⁴ May, *Winnetou*, 176.

were not as constrained by common cultural notions of homosexuality as they are in the present day. Thus, men could more easily express friendly affection towards one another without ridicule at this time. Other historians have suggested that U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, who shared a bed with a man for several years during his time as a young lawyer in Springfield, Illinois and expressed his “love” for said man in a series of letters after,⁹⁵ was homosexual as well, but this is again problematic because the culture of the mid-19th century is not taken into account. May’s personal life, ignorance of women in his novels, and the close relationship between Winnetou and Shatterhand are therefore only three small pieces of a much larger puzzle which can never be solved with certainty without the discovery of clearer evidence.

May’s novels and short stories do much more than tell a fascinating tale of life in the American West; they provide a German perspective on American culture and history which reveals much more about Germany than it ever could about the United States. Through his characters, May revealed how nineteenth century German culture and politics influenced his writing, and how his own life came to serve as the base upon which he created a story which took place in a world he never truly knew. Influenced first by German political upheaval and a season of violence which led to the unification of Germany, May like many others spent much of his life searching for what it meant to be German. He found his answer in *Germania*, which supported the common belief that Germans were members of a superior race with a glorious ancestry which could be restored by looking to the past; in this novels, this played out in the glorification of Old Shatterhand, a German, and Winnetou, an Apache who exhibited the noble qualities of

⁹⁵ Charles E. Morris III, “My Old Kentucky Homo: Lincoln and the Politics of Queer Public Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

Germany's own "indigenous people." May was also influenced by scientific racism and imperialism, both of which influenced the way he portrayed Native and black Americans in all of his short stories and novels. These cultural and political factors, combined with May's rather unique biography, show that these novels, regarded by many as silly children's books of no real literary merit, are worth studying. Their immense popularity, which began in the late nineteenth century and lasts to this day, reveals that their connection to German culture and history proved to be a recipe for unprecedented success.

May in Modern Germany

May's novels were assuredly most relevant during the time in which they were published, and they enjoyed great popularity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The legacy and popularity of these novels, however, did not die with May in 1912. Widely read by some of the most famous Germans in twentieth century history, including Albert Einstein, the books and the cultural influences which inspired them continued to shape German culture in many ways, both positive and negative. One of the most negative, and therefore most "talked about" ways in which May's novels were used was by Adolf Hitler. The fact that Hitler, and later his soldiers, read and loved May's Westerns has led to a common belief that May was therefore associated with the hyper-racist beliefs held by Hitler and many other Germans during the years leading up to the second World War. While there is a bit of truth to this, scholars must be careful to avoid making hasty connections between these two very different historical figures who, although they grew up in a similar geographical area, were raised in vastly different time periods.

May, who was born in 1842, grew up when the aforementioned phenomena of scientific racism and widespread European imperialism were still rather new ideas that had not reached their full potential. When he wrote his first stories and planned the *Winnetou* novels Germany had just become a unified nation, the term “eugenics” had not yet been coined,⁹⁶ and Germany had not yet participated in the “Scramble for Africa” that set off the height of its imperialist ventures. His works were, therefore, influenced by the younger, milder versions of these phenomena, and thus his novels (though still undeniably racist) did not portray any desire to eradicate people groups or to establish German rule over people he deemed inferior. Old Shatterhand, who can be viewed as a fictional personification of May, even claimed at one point that while he did not believe in or necessarily support many Apache religious beliefs and practices he did not believe that it was his job, or the job of any other white man, to interfere with them or try to change them to fit a European mold. May was a man who, despite holding some racist beliefs as a result of nineteenth century German culture, simply did not live long enough to be influenced by the storm of ideas which created the tragedies of the early twentieth century.

Hitler, on the other hand, was born in 1889 and thus spent most of the life he could reasonably be considered to remember in the twentieth century. When Hitler was growing up Germany was acquiring colonies in Africa, the eugenics movement and others associated with the most extreme beliefs of scientific racism had taken hold in many Western nations, and Germany had established itself as a unified and powerfully nationalistic entity. The only thing his upbringing shared with that of Karl May’s was

⁹⁶ “Introduction to Eugenics,” Genetics Generation, <http://knowgenetics.org/history-of-eugenics/>.

this: Germans were still looking back to Tacitus' *Germania* in order to understand their ancestry and destiny in a world increasingly divided by national identities. It is this shared characteristic, and little else, which likely sparked an interest in May among Hitler and his peers that would later lead to the novels, which did indeed suggest that Germans were members of a superior race on track to a glorious destiny, being interpreted by Hitler and his followers as supportive of the Nazi regime and its actions against Jews, the mentally and physically disabled, and countless other "undesirable" people groups in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of Hitler's contemporaries, including the aforementioned Einstein, read and enjoyed May without ever coming to these conclusions about Germany's role in the world. The shared connection to Tacitus and his influence on German culture during Germany's road to unification is, therefore, the only connection between Karl May and Adolf Hitler worth scholarly exploration.

In 1940 German author Klaus Mann, the son of famous German author Thomas Mann who had been stripped of German citizenship under the Nazi regime, published an article in the *Kenyon review* which claimed that May's stories, full of "hypocritical morality and the lurid glorification of cruelty," had poisoned the minds of an entire generation of German young men and were thus directly responsible for the rise of the Third Reich.⁹⁷ This argument, written in the heat of an impending World War and in anger at his expulsion from his home country, influenced many scholars throughout the twentieth century and thus helped to foster the belief that something as simple as a children's book could bring a despicable man to power. Many of May's supporters, most notably those who work to preserve his memory at the museum in Radebeul, fought

⁹⁷ Klaus Mann, "Karl May: Hitler's Literary Mentor," *The Kenyon Review* vol. 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1940): 400, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332192>.

fervently against this accusation.⁹⁸ Those who supported May in the mid-twentieth century pointed out that May, and therefore Old Shatterhand, was a pacifist who purposely avoided killing even in the most dangerous of situations, and that the introduction of Germans to Native American culture through May (however inaccurate) did more to foster positive feelings towards members of other ethnic groups in Germans than it did the opposite.⁹⁹ It was unfair and inaccurate for Mann to assert that May's novels were excessively violent, as they were no more violent than any other Western and often promoted a pacifist approach to violent situations. It was also unfair to assert that these novels alone were the reason Hitler and so many other German men took the belief in German superiority which was mildly present in May's works to the terrible level it reached under the Nazi regime.

Much as May was scorned for years in his own lifetime after the discovery of morally questionable writings and his criminal history, May's novels were regarded by many Germans as "dangerous" as a result of Mann and others' accusations that he had influenced Hitler. Even in East Germany, which was under Communist rule for much of the 20th century, May was banned for being too associated both with Hitler and with Christianity.¹⁰⁰ This fear of "May-mania," however, did not last forever, and May's works found a powerful new fanbase in the second half of the twentieth century. In a 2007 interview, May enthusiast Jurgen Michaelis of Dresden noted that in modern Germany there are Karl May "clubs, magazines, trading cards, school curriculums, stupendously popular German-made Wild West films and outdoor theaters, including one

⁹⁸ Galchen, "Wild West Germany."

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Kimmelman, "Karl May."

high in the sandstone cliffs above the tiny medieval fortress town of Rathen, in Saxony, where cowboys fight Indians on horseback.” There is even “a fake Wild West village, Eldorado, recently shot up on the outskirts of Templin, the city where Angela Merkel, the chancellor, grew up.”¹⁰¹ Though May’s *Winnetou* novels are now well over a century old, modern Germans continue to express their admiration for the character and his Native American culture in various ways. While it is true that many Germans have read the novels themselves (over 150 million copies have been sold),¹⁰² the majority of Germans in the twenty-first century came to love May’s stories through the ever-popular film adaptations of *Winnetou* produced in the 1960s.¹⁰³

May’s reputation fully recovered in West Germany as a result of the films, bringing *Winnetou* and *Old Shatterhand* back to their former glory. The first film, *Der Schatz im Silbersee* (1962) reintroduced Germans, who had not read May so widely as had the generations before the second World War, to *Winnetou*, who once again became “the quintessential German national hero, a paragon of virtue, a nature freak, a romantic, a pacifist at heart, but in a world at war he is the best warrior, alert, strong, sure.”¹⁰⁴ The May films have been played regularly on German television since their original release, and thus many generations have come to admire the story and particularly the French actor Pierre Brice, who played *Winnetou* in twelve films and set the standard for how the character would be played in live adaptations for years to come.¹⁰⁵ The films starring

¹⁰¹ Kimmelman, “Karl May.”

¹⁰² Jay Tavare, “*Winnetou*: The German Apache,” *Huffington Post*, June 15, 2012, last modified December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-tavare/winnetou-the-german-apache_b_1595604.html.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Kimmelman, “Karl May.”

¹⁰⁵ Tavare, “*Winnetou*.”

Brice “saved the West German film industry,”¹⁰⁶ and also ensured that May’s legacy and popularity would be carried well into modern times. In addition, these films helped pave the way for the most famous example of German fascination with the American West: Karl May festivals.

Though Karl May festivals take places in various places throughout Germany, by far the most famous of these occurs in Bad Segeberg. The town has hosted the festival each year since 1952, with attendance in recent years reaching 300,000 and the budget nearing 4 million euros.¹⁰⁷ At these festivals guests can live as if they are a part of May’s “Wild West,” as the grounds are complete with tipis to sleep in, saloons to eat and drink in, and plenty of other Western tropes. In addition to living as characters in the novels, attendees have the opportunity to watch live, open-air reenactments of May’s most famous tales. Much as was the case in the 1960s film adaptations, Winnetou and other Native American characters are typically played by tan German men in long, black wigs, and their American and German counterparts are played by Germans as well. Video footage from the 2017 festival in Bad Segeberg, widely available on the internet, reveals that these performances are no less problematic in their stereotypical portrayal of Native American characters and their depiction of Americans as stupid and evil; in this way, they are very true to May’s legacy.

In the footage from the performance of “Old Surehand” at the 2017 festival countless attendees, the majority of which are dressed in everyday street clothing, are lined up for concession stands modeled after log cabins, on which all the signage is in

¹⁰⁶ Galchen, “Wild West Germany.”

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

English.¹⁰⁸ The signs on the prop buildings on the stage are also in English, but all of the announcements, as well as the play itself, are in German with a few interjections of English phrases. Massive efforts were made to make the show feel as “American as possible,” with a bald eagle being released to fly over the crowd at one point in Act 1 and multiple references made to nineteenth century American presidents and famous figures in the script. One strikingly different element of this production, however, was the costuming of the Native American characters. Unlike in American-made plays and movies, the actors in “Old Surehand” were fully covered in clothing from head to toe. There were no outrageously large headdresses or loin cloths in sight, and even the leading actress wears a dress with long sleeves that reaches down below her knees. The problem with the costuming does not appear until close-up shots reveal that the actor playing Winnetou is clearly white and has had his skin tone altered either through paint or excessive fake tanning; many of the actors are also wearing identical shoulder-length, blue-black wigs. While actors of Native American origin are no doubt in short supply in Europe, perhaps those organizing the festival would do better to hire actors from other ethnic minorities, such as Turks, or to simply refrain from altering the skin color of German actors so as to avoid accusations of cultural appropriation. While May himself, and those who made the film adaptations of his novels in the 1960s, would not have seen a problem with painting a white actor orange, a change in this practice could be a great way to bring May into the twenty-first century.

While the barbeque eating, tipi sleeping attendees of Karl May festivals represent perhaps the most common way that Germans indulge in “May-mania” in the twenty-first

¹⁰⁸ “Karl May Spiele Bad Segeberg 2017 Old Surehand,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YnqSkWTDAQ>.

century, there are countless other outlets through which fans can indulge in the fantasy. One of these is through Karl May fan clubs, the most dedicated of which spend their time identifying and researching the historical inaccuracies in May's works in order to help foster a better understanding of American history and Native American culture among May's dedicated followers.¹⁰⁹ Others can join the efforts of the Karl May Verlag, a press which only publishes new editions and translations of May's books or scholarly works concerning May and his legacy.¹¹⁰ Still others can join the ranks of the curators at the Karl May museum in Dresden. Located at May's former house on a street now named after the author, the Karl May Museum is home to several collections, the first of which is "Indianer Nordamerikas," a collection of Native American artifacts and wax figures of famous Native Americans both historical and fictional. The museum proudly boasts on their website that Lame Deer, a Lakota visitor to the museum in 1983, remarked that "this collection is one of the best that I have seen during my travels around the world."¹¹¹ They also include a quote from Richard West, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, who remarked upon his visit in 2007 that "it is good that Karl May lived, for through him western Europeans know more about the Indians than Americans do."¹¹² While West and Deer were correct in that the museum's collection is unique to Germany and provides better insight to Native American culture than perhaps any other museum in Europe, both of these quotes overestimate the collection's

¹⁰⁹ Galchen, "Wild West Germany."

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ "Indianer Nordamerikas," Karl-May-Museum, <http://www.karl-may-museum.de/web/start.php?lang=de&kID=31>.

¹¹² *ibid.*

effectiveness, as it is quite small and outdated. The most unique part of this museum is in its second large collection: “Karl May: Leben und Werk.”

The museum does its best to present the life and work of May as is possible with the limited information available on May’s life. As will be discussed later, much of the information scholars have on May is based on his travel journals and autobiography, both of which are known to be riddled with falsehoods and exaggerations, and thus the curators of the Karl May Museum had to construct a life story using their best judgement. In order to avoid supporting commonly-held false beliefs about May, the museum chose to focus most of their displays on his novels themselves and the circumstances during which they were written rather than on his biography itself. Though like the Native American collection it is small, this collection is more useful to the understanding and preservation of Karl May’s novels and legacy than its counterpart because it is the only collection of its kind in the world. The Native American collection could easily be surpassed in quality by many similar collections in the United States, but the Karl May collection displays the uniquely German character of “May-mania” in a way that has yet to be challenged.

The May museum, clubs, presses, and most prominently festivals all represent the various ways in which modern fans continue to support May’s novels, but they neglect to acknowledge the most unique fan type of all: the independent super fan. The aforementioned Jurgen Michaelis not only lives in Dresden to be close to May’s home and museum, but goes a step further by living in a tipi full time and eating bison burgers for lunch.¹¹³ He goes by his “Native American name” Lonely Man, frequents the museum

¹¹³ Kimmelman, “Karl May.”

and other historic sites related to May, and is one of the thousands of fans who attend annual “powwows” in Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein each year. At these powwows, Michaelis and fans like him live as if they are members of the Comanche and Apache tribes, complete with eating and dressing as if they lived in the nineteenth century American West. In touch with their inner Winnetou, May super fans show the extremes to which the many Germans who have loved the novels in the past century have gone to in order to indulge their desire for the Americas. As was mentioned before, this phenomenon is far from new; in fact, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who ruled Prussia from 1888-1918, was known to dress up in cowboy and Native American costumes at parties, and Albert Einstein noted on several occasions that he deeply admired the books as a boy.¹¹⁴ The novels also gained their fair share of less admirable super fans, one of the most famous being none other than Adolf Hitler.¹¹⁵ May, though far from the most talented author, became the most influential German author of all time through stories about a land he and the majority of his readership were entirely unfamiliar with.

The wide fan base and various expressions of “May-mania” present in modern Germany reveal that while the novels may be old and riddled with the racist attitudes of a bygone era, their impact is still as strong today as it was when the novels were first published. This realization makes the continued study of the May phenomenon, particularly from a historical perspective, vital to the understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century German culture and history as a whole. The historical reasons for the novels’ initial success, the reasons for continued success nearly one hundred years later, and the explanations as to why the novels never took hold in America must all be

¹¹⁴ Kimmelman, “Karl May.”

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

explored in order to reveal why Germany was the place where simple and often inaccurate Westerns became the most popular books in the nation.

Lost in Translation: May in the United States

While May's novels and the various spin-offs from them continue to enchant Germans over 100 years after the author's death, the same cannot be said about American readers. Despite taking place in the American West the novels never found an American fanbase; although there is some scholarly debate on this, the popular consensus seems to be that there were no English translations of the novels readily available to the American public until the end of the twentieth century.¹¹⁶ At first glance, it seems strange that no one thought it important to bring these immensely popular Westerns to America, where Western dime novels were flying off the shelves and people remained fascinated with "cowboys and Indians" well into the twentieth century. However, the analyses above reveal the primary reason for this: the novels were distinctly German in nature and were filled with subliminal references to European politics and culture. Though May's West may have felt very real to a German reader who had never been there, nineteenth century Americans, who had the West in their own backyards, would have found the novels extremely inauthentic and their morally questionable author very untrustworthy. In addition, the negative depiction of Americans in the novels would not have gone over well in the early twentieth century, when the majority of American citizens were filled with nationalistic pride and a mistrust of Germany as a result of two world wars. This, combined with the fact that there were no readily available English translations, explains why the only Americans reading May during the time his novels were most popular

¹¹⁶ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 103.

would have been German immigrants. The rest of America remained blissfully unaware of May, his characters, and the cultural phenomenon he had become in his home country.

Despite all this, May gained a small following of American fans and scholars interested in his work by the second half of the twentieth century, no doubt in part because of Mann's work on the May phenomenon being published in English. In the 1960s there was even an effort to create and distribute English versions of the May films in the United States. *Apache Gold*, the English version of *Winnetou* (1963), was dubbed with the English language and released by Columbia Pictures as a television special in several American cities, as were many of the other May films.¹¹⁷ Still, "May-mania" never caught on in the United States and Americans continued to think of Lone Ranger and Tonto, not Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, when they thought of a cowboy and Indian pairing in the American West. This was in part still because of the stories' unique "German-ness," and also because the films, based on children's books, could not compare with the dramatic intensity of the American-made Westerns which had by the 1960s come to be intended for adult audiences. Thus, after the 1960s there were no major efforts to introduce May to Americans until very recently.

In 2018, a quick search on Amazon would reveal to the American wishing to read an English translation of May that, while there are now several translations readily available, the accuracy and overall quality of these translation is questionable to say the least. English translations of May, most of which are of *Winnetou*, are marketed as companions to fans' most beloved American Westerns. George A. Alexander's 2008 translation, which claims to be unabridged and therefore the most accurate English

¹¹⁷ "Winnetou (1963)," IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057687/>.

translation of *Winnetou* ever produced, has many reviews on Amazon from Americans who love to read Westerns. One reviewer claims that “What you also need to know, is that this is not a John Wayne kind of adventure. The Indians (as they were called back then) are not necessarily the baddies, and the white settlers are not necessarily the good guys. But it's also not just the other way around...But if you can accept that Old Shatterhand is perfect at almost everything, these books are really enjoyable.”¹¹⁸ This reviewer brings up the main reason why Americans may not like the books: they don't fit the accepted American mold for a Western tale and even portray white Americans as “bad guys” at many points. The reviewer also identifies the other major reason the books cannot hope to succeed: Old Shatterhand, a German, is completely without fault or character development. Unlike the “John Wayne” Westerners Americans are used to, Shatterhand has no fatal flaw and is tempted by nothing, which makes him extremely unrelatable in an American reader's eyes.

Alexander's translation, which was only mildly edited to suit American tastes, does not compare to other readily available English translations, in which translators have totally abridged and edited the novels in an attempt to make them more acceptable both to Americans and to people of the twenty-first century as a whole. In the forward of M.A. Thomas' 2014 translation of all three volumes of *Winnetou*, the translator details all of the changes he made to the story in order to make it into one which would not “offend” a modern reader. First, he corrected all the geographical and historical inaccuracies of the book, making sure each river and Native American tribe was called by its proper name

¹¹⁸ “Customer Reviews: *Winnetou* (Unabridged 2008 translation of *Winnetou I*) by Karl May,” Amazon, https://www.amazon.com/Winnetou-Unabridged-2008-translation/dp/0981650406/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1524241392&sr=8-1&keywords=alexander+karl+may.

and that native religions, which Thomas argued had been portrayed as “too Christian” by May, were edited to display a more accurate depiction of what the tribes’ religious practices would have looked like in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁹ While this was undoubtedly a noble and time-consuming feat on the part of Thomas, it removes the uniquely German, uniquely nineteenth century, and ultimately uniquely May aspects of the story which make it such an important lens through which to view German history. Though he helped to make *Winnetou* more appealing to Americans with these edits, he simultaneously stripped the novel of its character and historical significance.

In addition to editing historical inaccuracies, Thomas (like many other English translators of May) went through any “sensitive issues, words and passages that could be perceived as insulting to nations or races” and either completely removed them, as he removed the role of Bob the black servant in *Winnetou III*, or “toned them down” as he did with May’s numerous suggestions of German superiority and generalizations about various Native American tribes.¹²⁰ The removal of some of the most historically telling portions of May’s novels by multiple English translators brings up an issue which has become quite the hot topic in recent years: should we allow people to read books from previous centuries which contain language we would now deem as offensive? Many American school districts are currently wrestling with this question and banning American classics, such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because the language used in them is offensive to the twenty-first century ear. While it may be advisable to censor such works from very young children, these books provide valuable

¹¹⁹ M.A. Thomas, “The Translator’s Foreward,” in *Winnetou: The Chief of the Apache*, trans. M.A. Thomas (Liverpool: CTPDC Publishing Limited, 2014), viii-ix.

¹²⁰ Thomas, “Foreward,” ix.

historical lessons about the times and places in which they were written that reach far beyond the offensive language within and thus should not be censored from anyone interested in using literature as a gateway to understanding history. May's novels are much the same. Although they do include offensive language, racist passages, and plenty of references to German superiority, they reveal valuable information as to how nineteenth century cultural and political phenomena influenced the lives of everyday people such as Karl May, and therefore should not be edited so extensively for content when being translated for an American audience.

In addition to editing for historical accuracy and offensive content, many of May's modern English translators have included explanation of May's history and the May popularity phenomenon in the forwards of their publication. In David Koblick's 1989 translation of *Winnetou I* he includes a forward by the aforementioned Cracroft in which Cracroft identifies the "main points" of the novel for the reader. It becomes clear in the first few pages of his forward that Cracroft is trying to sell May as a moral author who, through Old Shatterhand, modeled the "Christian embrace of the Native American" who, despite a few flaws, depicts members of other races in a positive light.¹²¹ He also seeks to dispel some of the myths about May, including the one of the alleged romantic nature of the relationship between Shatterhand and Winnetou, and presents the novels as stories which can captivate an American audience and teach a lesson on how to treat others.¹²² Cracroft's assertions here are made possible by the fact that English translations of May are heavily edited and thus remove the passages which reveal the truly nineteenth century German nature of the novels, and thus the racism within. In order to provide

¹²¹ Cracroft, "Foreward," xvi.

¹²² *ibid.*

Americans interested in May with a fairer introduction to his works and their historical significance, an accurate, unedited translation of *Winnetou* with an honest forward is desperately needed.

Conclusion

“It has been said of the Karl May festivals that they are expressions of repressed homosexual longings, and it has been said that they are a working through of the trauma of the Nuremberg trials. It has been said that they tap into fascist nationalist sentiment; that they provide a positive blueprint for dealing with the Other; that they don’t provide a positive blueprint for dealing with the Other. It has been said that they are an escape from the troubling ethnic tensions of Germany today. This is all probably true.” – Rivka

Galchen, “Wild West Germany”

The fact that so many modern Germans are fascinated with a set of novels written about the American West in the late nineteenth century does indeed seem very odd. Karl May, an ex-convict who entangled himself in a web of lies throughout his life, produced these novels with the intention that they would sweep readers away to a faraway land, just as his godfather’s travel stories had done for him as a poor young child. While May’s Westerns did indeed capture the imagination of countless young Germans both upon their initial publication and for decades to come, they also did many other, more important things. One such achievement of May’s novels was that they, however inaccurate they were in their depiction of Native Americans, introduced Germans to Native American culture and gave birth to an insatiable interest that has led Germans to treat Indians with much more respect than their American counterparts. In addition, May’s novels also

affirmed some of the deep seated social and political beliefs held by nineteenth century Germans, as well as many other Europeans, at the time they were published.

Notions of German superiority throughout the novels affirmed the belief that Germans were descendants of a superior race destined for greatness which helped create a national identity in the newly unified Germany; unfortunately, this belief eventually gave way to fascism and the rise of the Nazi party in the years preceding World War Two. May's positive depiction of Native Americans, particularly Winnetou, affirmed the idea of the "noble savage"; although he could never hope to be fully equal with whites, Winnetou became an admirable character through his adoption of European religious and cultural practices. Winnetou's transformation also served as a justification for European imperialism; if he could become "better" with the help of a white man, so could the people of Africa and Asia that Germany and so many other nations were desperate to colonize. Though works of fiction often regarded as silly children's books, May's Western novels and short stories are excellent lenses through which to view the various sociopolitical forces which shaped nineteenth century German history, and thus shaped the life of their author Karl May.

The subliminal messages which permeate May's works are relics of a bygone era. His depictions of Native and African American characters are no longer "P.C.," and his connection to Hitler has made the notions of German superiority in his novels seem too dangerous to many modern readers. Still, as evidenced by the thriving festivals and clubs inspired by his works which continue to this day, Germans can't help but love May and his characters. His novels, so uniquely German, will never find a substantial fanbase in the United States, despite the fact that they take place in America. In Germany, however,

they will likely remain popular for years to come as a result of their deep connection to German history and culture.

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