

Carlien Roels

**The biological gender and the composition of Heimat
in Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Heimsuchung***

Big political changes in Germany as well as the rising globalization have turned the concept of Heimat, meaning “home” or “homeland”, into a problematical one. Nevertheless it is very present in German literature of the 20th and 21st century, especially in the period after 1989. In the context of my M.A. project I study the literary representation of Heimat, the loss of Heimat and the search for a Heimat in recently published novels, including Jenny Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung*. A central question of this study concerns the composition of Heimat: is Heimat always linked with geographical spaces or are other compositions possible?

In the first part of the presentation, I'll present the two components a Heimat contains: a psychological and a geographical component. Secondly, I'll explain how my research concerning Erpenbeck's novel has revealed an interesting influence of the biological gender on the composition of the individual Heimat and therefore on the identity of each character. This analysis shows that men tend to put more weight on the material component of Heimat whereas women attribute more importance to the psychological component. Therefore the hypothesis can be advanced that the composition of Heimat in *Heimsuchung* depends on the biological gender of the individual characters. In order to confirm this hypothesis, the third part of the presentation will examine what happens when characters tend to perform a gender other than the biological gender by opposing themselves to gender-related stereotypical expectations. Even when some characters in *Heimsuchung* tend to overcome the biological gender in this way, they fail at doing so. The conclusion will be that the biological gender of the characters in *Heimsuchung* can't be overcome and therefore determines the individual composition of Heimat and the identity of each character.

Carlien Roels studied Linguistics and Literature: French and German at Ghent University (Belgium). She wrote her M.A. thesis about the literary representation of “Heimat” (“homeland”) and of homelessness in the works of Jenny Erpenbeck, a writer born in the GDR, and Andreas Maier, a West-German author. Her research interests focus on German and French literature of the 20th and 21st century, with an emphasis on the literary

representation of identity and identity search, Heimat and homelessness as well as on gender and postcolonial studies.