Gerhart Hauptmann, *Before Daybreak*, First Performed to a Scandalized Audience (October 20, 1889)

Abstract

The German writer and dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946) was one of the chief representatives of the Naturalist movement. In 1912, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. His first drama, *Before Daybreak* [*Vor Sonnenaufgang*], debuted on October 20, 1889, and created an immediate scandal. The audience was not used to Hauptmann's language, which combined local dialect with hard-hitting dialogue. The sensitive subject matter added to the *éclat*, bringing together such themes as environmental protectionism, alcoholism, suicide, and the impact of heredity. (In the play, Alfred Loth, a young socialist, falls in love with Helene Krause, the sister-in-law of a former college friend who had since become a ruthless coal-mining engineer after coal was discovered on his land. Eventually Alfred leaves Helene, who then kills herself.) Because of the commotion that engulfed the theater, the actors could barely finish the performance. This excerpt cannot convey the full impact of the play, but it does offer a taste of the language Hauptmann used and his sensitivity to the plight of the lower classes.

Source

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KRAUSE, landowner
MRS. KRAUSE, his second wife
HELEN, Krause's daughter by his first marriage
MARTHA, Krause's daughter by his first marriage
HOFFMANN, engineer, married to Martha
WILLIAM KAHL, Mrs. Krause's nephew
MRS. SPILLER, companion to Mrs. Krause
ALFRED LOTH
DR. SCHIMMELPFENNIG
BEIBST, hired hand on Krause's farm
GUSTE, maidservant on Krause's farm
LIESE, maidservant on Krause's farm
MARIE, maidservant on Krause's farm
BAER, known as "Hoppy Baer"
EDWARD, Hoffmann's servant
MIELE, Mrs. Krause's housemaid
THE COACHMAN'S WIFE
GOLISCH, cowherd
A PARCEL DELIVERY MAN

Act I

[…]

MRS. KRAUSE appears, dreadfully overdressed. Lost of shiny silk and expensive jewelry. Both bearing and garb betray callous arrogance, absurd vanity, and the pride born of stupidity.

HOFFMANN. Ah, there you are, Mother! Permit me to introduce my friend, Dr. Loth.

MRS. KRAUSE. *(Improvises a grotesque curtsey.)* Pleased-t'meetcha. *(After a short pause.)* Now first, Doctor, I gotta ask ya not to have no hard feelin's toward me, 'n I'm properly sorry, so 'scuse me, will ya? — 'Scuse me on account o' the way I acted afore. *(The longer she speaks, the faster she speaks.)* Y'know, y'unnerstan', we got a whoppin' big bunch o' bums comes bummin' their way in 'n outa these parts . . . Ya wouldn' believe the kind o' trouble we got with them moochers. Bunch o' magpies'll swipe anythin' ain't nailed down. An' it ain't 'zackly 's if we was tight, ya know. A penny one way or t'other don't mean nothin' to us . . . or a Mark neither. Not on yer life! Now, you take Ludwig Krause's ol' lady, she's 's cheap 's they come; wouldn' give ya th' time o' day. Her ol' man dropped dead in a fit o' rage 'cause he lost a lousy two thousan' playin' cards. Well, we ain't that sort, ya know. See that buffet over there? Set me back two hunnert—'n that don't even include the shippin' costs. Baron Klinkow himself ain't got nothin' better.

MRS. SPILLER has also entered, shortly after Mrs. Krause. She is small, somewhat deformed, and decked out in Mrs. Krause's hand-me-downs. While Mrs. Krause speaks, she looks up at her with a kind of admiration. She is about fifty-five. Her breath is accompanied by a quiet little moan when she exhales; it is regularly audible, even when she speaks, as a soft "nnngg."

MRS. SPILLER. *(In an obsequious, affectedly melancholic, minor-key tone. Very softly.)* His Lordship the Baron has the exact same buffet—nnngg.

HELEN. *(To Mrs. Krause.)* Mother, don't you think we should sit down before we . . .

MRS. KRAUSE. *(With a lightning fast turn to Helen, and a scathing look; brusquely and imperiously.)* Izzat fittin' 'n proper? *(She is just about to sit down when she remembers that grace has not been said. Mechanically she folds her hands without, however, managing to suppress her meanness.)*

MRS. SPILLER. *(Intoning.)*
Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest.
May thy bounty to us be blessed.
A-men.

They take their seats noisily. With all the passing and taking of the many dishes, which occupies no mean amount of time, they manage to get over the awkwardness of the previous interchange.

HOFFMANN. *(To Loth.)* Help yourself, Alfred. How about some oysters?

LOTH. I'll give them a try. First time for me.

MRS. KRAUSE. *(Who has just slurped one down noisily and speaks with freshly restuffed mouth.)* Ya mean this season?

LOTH. I mean ever.

Mrs. Krause and Mrs. Spiller exchange glances.

HOFFMANN. *(To Kahl, who is squeezing the juice from a lemon with his teeth.)* Haven't seen you for two days, Mr. Kahl. Been busy shooting up the fieldmice?

KAHL. Aw, g-g-go on.

HOFFMANN. *(To Loth.)* You see, Mr. Kahl is passionately devoted to hunting.

KAHL. F-f-fieldmice is inf-f-famous amph-ph-phibians!

HELEN. *(Bursts out laughing.)* That's just too absurd. Wild or domestic, tame or game, he can't see anything that moves without shooting it!

KAHL. L-las' night, I g-g-gunned down our ol' s-s-sow.

LOTH. Seems that shooting is your primary occupation.

MRS. KRAUSE. Mr. Kahl does it strickly fer 'is personal pleasure.

MRS. SPILLER. "Woods, wildlife, and women,"—as his Excellency, Minister von Schadendorf, used to say.

KAHL. 'N d-day after t-t-t'morrow, we're g-gonna have a pigeon shoot.

LOTH. What in the world is that supposed to be: a pigeon shoot?

HELEN. I simply can't bear that sort of thing. It's just sadistic and childish. A boy who pitches a stone through a window is doing something more constructive.

HOFFMANN. Isn't that a bit much, Helen?

HELEN. I'm not sure. From my point of view, it makes a lot more sense to smash windows than to tie pigeons to a post and then try to shoot them.

HOFFMANN. But, Helen, you really must consider . . .

LOTH. *(While cutting up something or other on his plate.)* It is a disgraceful barbarity.

KAHL. A c-couple o' lousy p-pigeons?

MRS. SPILLER. Nnngg — You know, Mr. Kahl keeps—nnngg—two hundred of them in his loft.

LOTH. All hunting is a form of the barbaric.

HOFFMANN. But one you can't exterminate. Right now, for instance, they're trying to track down five hundred live foxes, and foresters all over Germany are devoting their entire attention to looking into holes in the ground.

LOTH. Who needs all those foxes?

HOFFMANN. The English—who bestow upon them the honor of being released from their cages only to be chased to death by members of the aristocracy.

LOTH. Moslem or Christian—all the same. Once a beast, always a beast.

HOFFMANN. May I pass you some lobster, Mother?

MRS. KRAUSE. Sure. They're mighty tasty this year.

MRS. SPILLER. Madame has such refined taste—nnngg.

MRS. KRAUSE. *(To Loth.)* Guess ya never et no lobster neither, hunh Doctor?

LOTH. Yes, once in a while—by the sea up in Warnemünde[1], where I was born.

MRS. KRAUSE. *(To Kahl.)* 'Times, honest-ta-God, a body don't know *what* to eat no more, hunh William?

KAHL. D-d-damn right, c-cousin!

EDWARD. *(About to pour champagne into Loth's glass.)* Champagne, sir?

LOTH. *(Quickly covers his glass with his hand.) No*! . . . No, thank you.

HOFFMANN. Don't be silly.

HELEN. What? You don't drink?

LOTH. No, Miss Krause.

HOFFMANN. Now, look here, Alfred . . . This is getting to be a bit of a bore, isn't it?

LOTH. Were I to drink, I'd only become a bigger bore.

HELEN. That's very interesting, Doctor.

LOTH. *(Tactlessly.)* What? That drinking wine makes me even more boring?

HELEN. *(Somewhat taken aback.)* No! Oh my, no—not that. Only that you don't drink . . . I mean, not at all.

LOTH. Why should that be particularly interesting?

HELEN. *(Blushing.)* It's . . . it's just so unusual. *(She grows even more flushed and embarrassed.)*

LOTH. *(Heavy handed.)* Absolutely correct—unfortunately.

MRS. KRAUSE. *(To Loth.)* This stuff sets us back fifteen Marks a bottle. Ya don't gotta be scared t' drink it. Comes straight from Rheims. We ain't puttin' no cheap swill in front o' ya; wouldn' touch it ourselves.

MRS. SPILLER. Oh, believe me, Doctor—nnngg—if his Excellency, Minister von Schadendorf, had—nnngg—been able to set such a table . . .

KAHL. I couldn't live without my wine.

HELEN. *(To Loth.)* Could you tell us why you don't drink?

LOTH. With pleasure. I . . .

HOFFMANN. Oh, what is all this, Alfred? (*He takes the bottle from the servant so that he may now try to inflict it upon Loth.)* Think about the good old days, how we used to spend many a happy hour . . .

LOTH. No, please. Don't bother to . . .

HOFFMANN. Drink today—just this once.

LOTH. You're wasting your time.

HOFFMANN. For me!

Hoffmann tries to pour; Loth resists; a slight scuffling of hands.

LOTH. No . . . No . . . I mean it . . . No! . . . No, thank you.

HOFFMANN. Don't be offended now, but aren't you being downright difficult?

KAHL. *(To Mrs. Spiller.)* A man who don't want nothin' 's already got what he has comin'. *(Mrs. Spiller nods in resignation.)*

HOFFMANN. Thy will be done . . . but all I can tell you is this: without a glass of wine at dinner . . .

LOTH. And a glass of beer right after breakfast . . .

HOFFMANN. Well, why not? A glass of beer's a very healthy thing.

LOTH. And a little nip of cognac now and then . . .

HOFFMANN. You're not going to deny me *that* little bit of pleasure, are you? You'll never have much chance of turning me into an ascetic. What are you trying to do? Deprive life of everything that's stimulating?

LOTH. Not quite. I'm thoroughly satisfied with the normal stimuli that touch my nervous system.

HOFFMANN. Well, as far as I'm concerned, a group of people who sit down together and keep their throats dry enough to spit feathers is, and always will be, a hopelessly dreary and tedious lot, and one which, as a rule, I can do very well without.

MRS. KRAUSE. Even all them blue bloods drink like fish.

MRS. SPILLER. *(Solemnly confirming the remark with a stately bow.)* Drinking large quantities of wine—nnngg—is second nature to a real gentleman.

LOTH. *(To Hoffmann.)* My response is the diametrical opposite. I generally find myself bored to tears at tables devoted to heavy drinking.

HOFFMANN. Well, of course, these things must be done in moderation.

LOTH. What would you call moderation?

HOFFMANN. Oh . . . as long as you manage to retain control of your senses . . .

LOTH. Aha! Then you're willing to admit that the consumption of alcohol does indeed impair the senses. And that, you see, is why I find drinking parties such a bore.

HOFFMANN. Are you afraid of losing control of your senses all that easily?

KAHL. Th-th-th'other day I drank a b-bottle o' R-Rrrr-Rü-Rüdesheimer, 'n th-then one o' champagne. And on top o' that an-n-nother one o' B-B-Bordeaux, b-but I was n-n-nowheres n-near drunk.

LOTH. *(To Hoffmann.)* Of course I'm not afraid. You know very well that it was I who used to take you boys home after you'd had too much. And I've still got that same old iron constitution. No, that's not what scares me.

HOFFMANN. What then?

HELEN. Yes, what *is* your real reason for not drinking? Please tell us.

LOTH. *(To Hoffmann.)* All right, so that you'll be satisfied: I no longer drink, if for no other reason than that I have pledged by my word of honor to avoid all beverages containing alcoholic spirits.

HOFFMANN. In other words, you have cheerfully reduced yourself to the level of a temperance fanatic.

LOTH. I am a teetotaler.

HOFFMANN. And for how long, if one may ask, are you taking the pledge?

LOTH. For life.

HOFFMANN. *(Throws down his knife and fork and half rises from his chair.)* Jeee-sus! *(Plops down again.)* To be perfectly frank . . . I mean, I never thought you'd be so—if you'll pardon the expression—childish.

LOTH. You're welcome to call it that.

HOFFMANN. How in the world did you ever arrive at this sorry state?

HELEN. You must have rather substantial reasons. — At least, that's what I think.

LOTH. I do indeed have them. You probably have no notion, Miss Krause—nor do you, Hoffmann—of the horrible part that alcohol plays in modern life . . . Read Bunge, if you want to begin to understand it. — I happen to remember what a man named Everett wrote concerning the significance of alcohol in the life of the United States. — *Nota bene*, his evidence covers a period of ten years. In that time, according to Everett, alcohol has directly devoured a sum of three billion dollars, and another six-hundred million indirectly. It has killed three-hundred thousand people; it has sent one-hundred thousand children into the streets to beg; it has driven countless other thousands of souls into the prisons and poorhouses; it has caused at least two thousand suicides; it is responsible for the loss of at least ten million dollars as a result of fire, violence, and vandalism; it has widowed no fewer than twenty thousand women, and it has made orphans of at least one million children. Worst of all, the effects of alcohol extend to the third and fourth generation. — Had I sworn never to marry, I might freely drink, but as things stand . . . After all, my ancestors were all healthy, vigorous and, as I happen to know, thoroughly temperate people. Every movement that I make, every hardship I surmount, every clear breath I draw makes me realize how much I owe them. And this, you see, is precisely the point: this heritage which is mine is one I am absolutely determined to transmit, both unsullied and undiminished, to any progeny I might sire.

MRS. KRAUSE. Hey—you know—them miners o' ours actually do drink too much. That's th' God's honest truth.

KAHL. Lap it up like a b-bunch o' p-p-pigs.

HELEN. Oh, my. You mean that such things are hereditary?

LOTH. Alcoholism runs in families. Some are destroyed by it.

[…]

Act II

[…]

LOTH. *(Who has gradually become more and more absorbed in his contemplation of the dewy orchard and has now given himself over to it completely.)* It's magnificent here. Look at that sun coming up over the mountain. — And all these apples in your garden—what a harvest.

HELEN. Three-quarters of them will be stolen again this year, as always. The poverty around here is simply too enormous.

LOTH. You can't imagine how deeply I love the country. Unfortunately, for the most part, my own crops

must be harvested in the city. But for once I intend to enjoy a brief pastoral respite thoroughly. A man like myself needs a bit of fresh air and sunshine more than most people.

HELEN. *(Sighing.)* More so than others? . . . Why?

LOTH. Because I am in the midst of a gruelling struggle, the end of which I shall not live to see.

HELEN. Aren't the rest of us engaged in the same sort of struggle?

LOTH. No.[2]

HELEN. But we're all involved in some sort of struggle, aren't we?

LOTH. Of course, but in one that has a chance of ending.

HELEN. Has a chance—there you're right. But why is there no such chance for *your* struggle, Mr. Loth?

LOTH. Because *your* struggle can, after all, only be one for your personal well-being. And an individual can attain this, insofar as is humanly possible. But *my* struggle is a pitched battle for the happiness of all mankind. For me to be happy, the entire rest of humanity must first be happy; I would have to be able to look around me everywhere and see neither disease nor poverty, neither servitude nor meanness. I could not, in a manner of speaking, take my seat at the feast of life except as the last of its guests.

HELEN. *(With deep conviction.)* Then you are a really, truly good man.

LOTH. *(A bit embarrassed.)* There's no particular virtue in my stance; it's no great moral choice; it's just my nature. Furthermore, I must admit that my struggle in the interest of human progress gives me great personal satisfaction. And this is a kind of happiness that I value much more than the sort that gratifies your run-of-the-mill egoist.

HELEN. I imagine that there are only a very few people who share your nature. It must be a joy to be born with it.

LOTH. Actually, one isn't really born with it. I think we are driven to it by the essential wrongness of the conditions that life imposes. But one must have deep feeling for that which is wrong—that's the crucial point. And when a man has that feeling and consciously suffers the wrongness of the human condition, it necessarily follows that he will become the sort of man that I am.

HELEN. Oh, if I only knew more . . . What, for instance, would you call "wrong conditions"?

LOTH. All right! A few examples: It is wrong when the man who works in the sweat of his brow goes hungry while the indolent live in luxury. It is wrong to condemn murder in peacetime while we reward it in war. It is wrong to despise the executioner while we glorify the soldier brandishing his instruments of slaughter, strutting around with his rapier or his sabre at his side. Were that executioner to parade the same way with his axe, he would probably be stoned by an irate populace. And, finally, it is wrong to set up a state religion that calls itself the faith of Christ—a faith which teaches suffering, forgiveness and love—and then to train the people of entire nations to go out and butcher their fellow human beings in the name of that faith. And remember, these are only a few of the millions of examples of such madness. It takes no mean amount of effort to come to grips with all of these horrid conditions. One must begin early in life.

HELEN. How did you ever manage to become aware of all this? It seems so simple, yet most people never give it a second thought.

LOTH. The way I grew up probably taught me what I had to know. That and conversations with friends, intensive reading, and a lot of independent thinking. I learned about the first of these wrongs when I was only a little boy. I once told a blatant lie, for which my father gave me a memorable hiding. Shortly thereafter, my father and I took a train ride together, and I discovered not only that my father also told lies, but that he considered it a matter of course to lie. I was five years old at that time, and my father told the conductor that I had not yet turned four. Children under four rode free of charge. Then I had a teacher who told us: work hard, be honest, and it shall follow as the night the day that you will prosper in this life. What that man taught us was not true; it didn't take me long to learn that. My father was a kind, honorable, honest, industrious, thoroughly solid citizen, and yet, a scoundrel who wallows in affluence to this day swindled him out of his last few thousand in savings. And my father, driven by need, had to take a menial job in a huge soap factory owned by this very scoundrel.

HELEN. People like myself hardly ever think of such things as major wrongs. At most we might feel that some injustice has been done, but we feel it only privately, and in silence. Come to think of it, I feel it quite often—and then a kind of despair takes hold of me.

LOTH. I remember one great wrong with particular clarity. I had always believed that there was no set of circumstances under which murder was not considered a crime, and punished as such. But after this incident, it became horribly clear to me that only the milder forms of murder are unlawful.

HELEN. How could that possibly . . . ?

LOTH. My father had worked his way up to foreman at the soap factory, and we lived right by the plant. Our windows overlooked the factory yard. I got to see a lot of things. There was a laborer who had been working at the factory for five years. He began to have violent coughing spells, and he kept getting thinner. I still remember when my father told us about him at dinner one night. He said, "Burmeister"—that was the worker's name—"Burmeister has TB, and it's going to kill him if he works in that soap factory much longer. His own doctor says so." The man had eight children. And weak and emaciated as he was, he hadn't any chance of finding work anywhere else. So he *had* to stay in the soap factory, and the boss even felt self-righteous for keeping him on—thought of himself as a philanthropist, exceedingly humane. One August afternoon—the heat was not to be believed—Burmeister was struggling with a wheelbarrow full of lime—trying to get it across the yard. I was just looking out the window. I saw him stop, then stop again, and finally keel over onto the cobblestones. I ran down to him. My father came. So did some other workers. You could hear the death rattle deep in his throat. His mouth was filled with blood. I helped carry him into the house. He was just a bundle of chalky rags that reeked of all kinds of chemicals. Before we'd even gotten him into the house, he was dead.

HELEN. How horrible!

LOTH. Hardly a week later, we pulled his wife out of the river into which the factory dumped its waste lye. And so, my dear Miss Krause, when a man is aware of all the things of which I am now aware, he can find neither rest nor peace, believe me. A simple little piece of soap that no one else in the world could think ill of, or even a pair of clean, well-cared-for hands are enough to depress me beyond endurance.

HELEN. I saw something like that once myself. It was horrible. God, it was horrible.

LOTH. What was it?

HELEN. The son of one of our workers was carried in here half-dead . . . about . . . three years ago.

LOTH. An accident?

HELEN. Yes. Over there in the big shaft.

LOTH. One of the miners, then?

HELEN. Of course. Most of the young men around here end up working in the pits. Another son of the same man also hauled coal down there. He was in a mine accident too.

LOTH. Both dead?

HELEN. Both dead . . .

NOTES

[1] A port on the Baltic Sea, Warnemünde is now in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). [All footnotes are from Gerhard Hauptmann, *Before Daybreak*, introduced and translated by Peter Bauland. Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures; no. 92. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979.]
[2] Felix Dahn's *Ein Kampf um Rom* (1876) was a popular historical novel of heroic deeds. Dahn, Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Breslau at the time of the premiere of *Vor Sonnenaufgang*, extolled the virtues of the Romans and more particularly of the Goths. A pronounced attitude of national superiority permeates the novel. It was reprinted in the early 1930s and gained new popularity with the rise of the Nazis. There is now an inadvertent irony in Loth's high regard for this potboiler which glorified endeavors of conquest and self-denial in the national interest.

Source of English translation: *Gerhardt Hauptmann's "Before Daybreak": A Translation and an Introduction* by Peter Bauland, *Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures*, no. 92. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979. Dramatis Personae, p. 4; Act I, pp. 19–25; Act II, pp. 35–38. Used by permission of the publisher.

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