Fall 2018

"Aurelie Werner": Intersections Between Hysteria and the Jewish Woman's Assessment of Jewishness in the late 19th Century

Claire H. Woodward
Gettysburg College

“Aurelie Werner”: Intersections Between Hysteria and the Jewish Woman’s Assessment of Jewishness in the late 19th Century

Abstract
"Aurelie Werner" is a story written by Sara Hirsch Guggenheim, a prominent neo-Orthodox writer in late 19th century Germany. This article analyzes the portrayal of Jewish women during this period, and the ways in which women responded to and coped with exclusion and prejudice. Specifically, "Aurelie Werner" portrays a young woman's experience of anxiety and uncontrolled emotion as she discerns her place in society as a Jew and as a woman. In the early 20th century, these symptoms would be designated as 'hysteric' in nature, and would often be used to describe the demeanor of Jewish women as they grappled with Jewish identity in a largely antisemitic society. Aurelie's hysteria is representative of the Jewish woman's lack of control, which is grounded in not having the power or status to control one's own identity.

Keywords
Aurelie Werner, Sara Hirsch Guggenheim, Hysteria, Jewish women

Disciplines
German Literature | Jewish Studies

Comments
Written for German 351: The German-Jewish Experience

“Aurelie Werner”: Intersections Between Hysteria and the Jewish Woman’s Assessment of Jewishness in the late 19th Century

Claire H. Woodward

In the late 19th century, a movement in the German Jewish community promoted embracing Jewish culture and traditions within German society. This movement, known as Orthodox Judaism, was partially in response to a trend toward conversion of Jews to Christianity, especially for the benefit of marriage and upward class movement. In Sara Hirsch Guggenheim’s “Aurelie Werner,” a young Jewish woman converts to Christianity for marriage and demonstrates experiences of hysteria in response to her inner turmoil about her identity. As a story meant to convince readers to embrace Orthodox Judaism and Jewish traditions, the instances of hysteria paradoxically highlight the emotional struggles of Jewish women in late-19th century German society.

Orthodox Judaism is evident in 19th century German Jewish literature, and Sara Hirsch Guggenheim is a prominent author in this period. In literature, modern Orthodoxy is characterized as having a Jewish protagonist with a lack of dedication to Jewish traditions who, after denying their faith, eventually returns to “law-abiding Judaism and [lives] happily ever after” (Lezzi 209). Aurelie Werner is a female Jewish character who eventually converts to Christianity to marry a Christian Count against the wishes of her father. In doing so, she leaves behind a religion that she finds to be “a copy of the Christian one” (Hirsch Guggenheim 421). This is Aurelie’s demonstration of a lack of personal investment in Jewish traditions and practices as a result of never having been taught their meaning.

For Aurelie, the stress of going against her father and the identity crisis rooted in her Jewishness lead to several instances of what would later be termed hysteria: “A psychosis of a peculiar kind…severe disturbances of vision, paralyses…a severe psychical trauma” (Strachey 22). In the late 19th century, hysteria was considered a physical ailment resulting from emotional or psychological trauma, and notably “hysteria has always been considered a woman’s ailment” (Redmann 205). It is therefore fascinating that “Aurelie Werner” depicts a young Jewish woman experiencing some form of this hysteria.

The first notable example of hysteric behavior in “Aurelie Werner” occurs when the Count arrives at the Werner residence in the city and tries to marry Aurelie. Aurelie is at first conflicted, but hears the organ music from the nearby church and is suddenly “exalted and happy” (Hirsch Guggenheim 427). However, when Mr. Werner arrives and abruptly rips Aurelie out of the Count’s arms “with a gargantuan force,” Aurelie falls unconscious unto her mother’s arms (Hirsch Guggenheim 427). This is indicative of Aurelie’s internal conflict: she is full of joy at the thought of conversion but is aggressively ripped away from that joy. The gargantuan force here can be interpreted as the force preventing Aurelie from leaving behind Judaism; in other words, the force that ties her to Judaism is a force that weighs heavily enough on her to make her lose consciousness.

The gargantuan force that weighs down on Aurelie is one that many Jews in the mid- to late-1800s experienced – and a force that has weighed on many Jews for hundreds of years. It is a conflict of either remaining Jewish and facing persecution in society, or converting and being relatively accepted in society but leaving behind family traditions and Jewish culture. Until the beginning of the neo-Orthodox movement, many Jewish women were never taught the meaning of Jewish traditions and thus felt disconnected from them, which explains why Jewish women

may have been more frequently characterized as hysteric – they lacked personal dedication to Jewish practices, rendering them likely to question their Jewish identity. For example, Aurelie notes that she prays prayers "whose meaning one can't begin to understand" (Hirsch Guggenheim 421). In the context of the time period, it is sensible for Aurelie to consider conversion, because it is not the religion itself that holds a gargantuan force over her – it is her familial ties and her obligation to her father. Aurelie's connections to the Jewish traditions aren't strong enough to induce affinity for Judaism over Christianity, but her paternal loyalty is still important to her. This explains why she experiences a loss of consciousness: it is a bout of hysteria which embodies her conflicting ties to Judaism and to her family.

The evidence for the connection between hysteria and Jewishness continues in the next pages of the story. Aurelie experiences "severe and long-lasting illness" (Hirsch Guggenheim 428), which the doctors declare is a lovesickness, assuming that it is the loss of the Count that haunts Aurelie. While this is one valid interpretation of her hysteria, Mrs. Werner seems to feel differently when she writes to the Count: "You cannot see your bride in her father's house... my husband is reckless" (Hirsch Guggenheim 428). If Mrs. Werner felt that her daughter were simply lovesick, she would recognize that the presence of the Count is necessary for her daughter's health. On the contrary, Mrs. Werner acknowledges here that the cause of her daughter's apparent sickness is her daughter's conflicted Jewish identity – the Count's presence wouldn't help Aurelie because Mr. Werner would only further impose his opinion on his daughter, making her more confused and upset.

Eventually, the Count gets a court order stating that Aurelie has the right to choose her own faith regardless of her father's wishes. When Aurelie hears of this, "this joyful news made her feel as if she had been born again" (Hirsch Guggenheim 428). This is a direct reference to

Christianity, as baptized Christians are considered 'born again' into the spirit of their faith. Because of Aurelie's almost immediate recovery, it is clear that Aurelie's illness was a psychosis caused by her feeling trapped by her Jewishness. The very moment she is told that she can escape from being Jewish, her hysteric symptoms disappear. Notably, the moment she is told that she can be baptized, she already feels 'born again;' in other words, Aurelie no longer self-identifies as Jewish from this moment onward.

Aurelie continues to live a relatively satisfactory life as a Christian for several years to follow. She marries the Count and has a son, but does not speak to her father after converting. However, life as a countess does not fare well for her, as she is never completely accepted by high society and her relationship with the Count goes awry. Aurelie recognizes the mistake she's made by remembering the words of her father: "There is no power on the earth that can make a Jewess the wife of a Christian man" (Hirsch Guggenheim 433). Thus she comes to the realization that she can't escape her Jewishness after all. She cries out to God: "'Oh, he will not help me, I've offended him far too deeply, far too horribly'" (Hirsch Guggenheim 434-435). The God she speaks to here is clearly the God she knew as a Jew, because she has done nothing to offend her Christian God so horribly. Thus, this is the first time in several years that Aurelie again acknowledges her Jewish identity to herself and to God.

Immediately after acknowledging this, Aurelie again collapses. Her return to hysteria comes with "constantly growing agonies of her conscience" which overpower her (Hirsch Guggenheim 435). Aurelie again experiences hysteric symptoms because she recognizes that she will always be identified as a Jew and has no power over her identity. Moreover, Aurelie has recognized her conversion as a sin in the eyes of God, thus this return to hysteric behavior

reflects a return to Jewishness as well as a fear of being denied by God. In this way, her hysteria is now more severe than it had been before she first converted to Christianity.

Aurelie's return to Judaism results in a relapse of hysteria, but certain changes should be noted. As before, she first falls to the ground unconscious, although this time there is no family there to catch her. She returns to a half-conscious state of numbness that "allowed her to forget herself" (Hirsch Guggenheim 435). This suggests that her state of hysteria is a means of coping with her emotional hardship. The description of Aurelie's state that follows is made up of troublesome observations: "…she had regained consciousness and was contemplating her miserable state… Impetuously, she got up and paced the room, with hurried, staggering steps" (Hirsch Guggenheim 435). These new behaviors may be a result of a different psychological stress – before conversion, her hysteria was grounded in the need to define her identity on her own terms, but now her hysteria is a result of never having had control of her identity in the first place. This new hysteria also aligns with her conversion back to Judaism – a change that comes this time with no benefits of social status or marriage.

Aurelie is eventually welcomed back by her father and by God. She finds a medallion and remembers that her grandmother, a devout Jew, gave it to her before she died. This grandmother told Aurelie about Yom Kippur and "the all-merciful nature of God, who pardons the repentant sinner," (Hirsch Guggenheim 436). Through this memory, Aurelie is able to reconcile her feelings and her regret surrounding her old religion: "[she] lifted her hands up toward heaven" (Hirsch Guggenheim 436). She has begrudgingly acknowledged her Jewish identity in the past, but this is the first time Aurelie truly embraces Judaism and the importance of the religion on a personal level, ultimately emancipating her from her hysteric symptoms. Aurelie then returns to her father and he accepts her repentance in the same way.

It is interesting to note that Aurelie only experiences symptoms resembling hysteria in this story when she struggles with recognizing her Jewishness and feels trapped by it. In moments when she is more confident in her religious identity – whether Christian or Jewish – she does not demonstrate hysteric behaviors, even when she is distraught (Hirsch Guggenheim 423). This is particularly important to note because it intertwines the experience of hysteria with the pressure of being a Jewish woman.

"Aurelie Werner" is a text meant to promote Orthodox Judaism and exemplify the problems with Jewish women converting to Christianity; therefore, it is fascinating that the text demonstrates some negative implications of being a Jewish woman. There are clear examples in "Aurelie Werner" of a young Jewish woman experiencing hysteria due to the pressure of simply being a Jewish woman, which would not have been an isolated incident in late 19th century German Jewish culture. Why would negative experiences of Jewish women – such as hysteric experiences – be included in a story meant to promote Orthodox Judaism? One reason may be that experiences of hysteria were common for Jews – particularly Jewish women – such that leaving it out might be considered a distortion of reality. Accurate portrayal makes the resulting moral believable to Jewish audiences. Hess notes that "Aurelie Werner" "reinforce[es] connections to Judaism and to family… sings the praises of Orthodox Judaism" (Hess 327). This is because the overarching moral of the story reflects the importance of embracing Judaism and its traditions, even if it does sometimes reflect negative experiences of women. Nevertheless, there is no question that "Aurelie Werner" calls Jewish readers to change their practices in order to prevent Jewish women from feeling disconnected from traditions.

Works Cited

Hess, Jonathan M. “Beyond Subversion: German Jewry and the Poetics of Middlebrow Culture.” *The German Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 3, 2009, pp. 316–335.

Hirsch Guggenheim, Sara. “Aurelie Werner.” *Nineteenth-Century Jewish Literature: A Reader*, by Jonathan M. Hess et al., Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 407–439.

Lezzi, Eva. “Secularism and Neo-Orthodoxy: Conflicting Strategies in Modern Orthodox Fiction.” *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, edited by Ari Joskowicz and Ethan B. Katz, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, pp. 208–231.

Redmann, Jennifer. “Else Lasker-Schüler: Writing Hysteria.” *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2002, pp. 202–224.

Strachey, James, translator. “Fräulein Anna O.” *Freud and Breuer: Studies on Hysteria*, by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, Basic Books, Inc., 1957, pp. 21–47.