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Selective Memory: Contrasting Male and Female Perspectives
in Schnitzler's *Fraulein Else* and *Leutnant Gustl*

“Wenn ich mich nur erinnern könnt...” is a common sentiment uttered by the main character in Schnitzler's short story *Leutnant Gustl*. Although Gustl spends most of the stream-of-consciousness work uncertain about his memory of events, he is nonetheless so certain of some facts that he makes the decision to end his life. Similarly, the eponymous character in Schnitzler's novella *Fräulein Else* also experiences a personal crisis. Considering a proposition which has been made to her, Else sees no way out and ends up committing suicide. Both characters make their decisions based largely on memory of past events and their impressions of a potential future. Because each story is told in first person using *innere Monolog*, the reader experiences the reality of each character's life only through the selective memory of the main character—a memory directly influenced by the role he or she plays in society. This paper will address how the specific differences in the memories Else and Gustl have of the events affecting their decisions are distorted by the expectations their social standing places upon them

Leutnant Gustl and *Fräulein Else* provide the reader a unique window into the culture of turn-of-the century Austria. While both characters are part of bourgeois Viennese society, their perspectives and their life choices are greatly influenced by their gender. For example, both characters consider themselves to be victims of circumstance. As a man, Gustl has the advantage of being able to use women without thought of their feelings, but he has the added burden of his military code of honor which forces a decision he really does not want to make. Else, on the other hand, while appearing to live a life of leisure, is also cursed by her inability to work, because it leaves only her body and her honor as her tools of trade. The gender-based differences in the personalities of Gustl and Else are also illustrated by the accuracy of their memory. Each character constantly questions his or her memory of past conversations and events, yet each is only truly accurate in those details which are directly vital to his or her place in society. *Leutnant Gustl* does not remember even the names of his past lovers, for example, while *Fräulein Else* remembers with clear detail every emotion relating to her sexuality.

By sharing the innermost thoughts of each character, the reader is able to look back in time twice: first to the short term memories of Else and Gustl and their personal experiences, and secondly to the broader and more general past of turn-of-the century Viennese culture. In writing about Viennese Modernism, Andreas Huyssen notes that this time period may be particularly popular as modern readers seek to “hold on to an afterimage of these prototypically modernist cities and to fix that image in memory before the owl of Minerva completes its flight.” The selective memories illustrated in

Fräulein Else and *Leutnant Gustl* provide the reader with complementary male and female views of *Jahrhundertwende* Austrian culture.