

DAS ERDBEBEN IN CHILI (THE EARTHQUAKE IN CHILE)

Heinrich von Kleist

Analysis by Marina Foschi

Novella

Heinrich von Kleist's *Das Erdbeben in Chili* (1807) is a tragic novella set in Santiago during the 1647 earthquake. The disaster interrupts the execution of two lovers, Jeronimo and Josephe, briefly granting them freedom before society's violent moral order is restored. Combining realism and symbolism, Kleist explores how natural catastrophe can result in social disruption while exposing human vulnerability.

Year of Publication	1807
Publication Place	Stuttgart
Editor	Cotta
Entity	The 1647 Santiago earthquake "El terremoto de Mayo"
Magazine	Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände, 10-15 September

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake The 1647 Santiago earthquake "El terremoto de Mayo"

REAL EVENT

Time	13th May, 1647, 22:30 local time
Location	Chile
Coordinates	-33.447616, -70.666804
Impacted Areas	Santiago de Chile
Seismic Fault	Nazca fault line
Magnitude	X–XI (MM, modified Mercalli scale)
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

"On 13 May 1647, a large earthquake, known as the earthquake of May (el terremoto de Mayo), practically destroyed the whole city and killed one-fifth of its inhabitants." (Udías et al. 1640). "The origin time of the earthquake is given by all sources as 22:30 local time [...] The duration of shaking in Santiago is given as being between one-half of one-quarter of an hour [...] to one-quarter of an hour [...], which seems exaggerated." (Udías et al. 1641); "Earthquake intensity at Santiago may be estimated at X–XI (MM, modified Mercalli scale)" (Udías et al. 1643)

Anthropization Level

Houses

"Damage in Santiago was very extensive, with all houses, convents, and churches destroyed [...]. Destruction is said to have extended to the whole town [...], and no building was left standing [...]. Even the foundations of the buildings were affected so that one could not build upon them [...]. The destruction is said to have been widespread, affecting all buildings of the city." (Udías et al. 1642)

Public Buildings

"Damage in Santiago was very extensive, with all houses, convents, and churches destroyed [...]. Explicit mention is made of the damage to the [...] city hall; court house; royal houses; house of the cabildo; and prison [...]." (Udías et al. 1642)

Churches

"Damage in Santiago was very extensive, with all houses, convents, and churches destroyed [...]. Explicit mention is made of the damage to the cathedral; Jesuit college; convents of Santo Domingo, San Francisco, San Agustín, la Concepción, Santa Clara, and la Merced; hospital and church of San Juan de Dios; parish churches of Santa Ana, San Lázaro, and San Saturnino [...]. The damage suffered by the cathedral is described in great detail. Its structure is said to have been excellent so that, from the point of view of its architecture, nothing in America could be compared with it [...]. It was built between 1566 and 1600. The structure was formed by three naves of cut stone. The columns and arches of the central nave, made of cut stone, withstood the earthquake [...], except for one which was damaged [...], and the wooden roof on the central nave also withstood the shaking. But this was not true of the two lateral naves, which came down [...] because, owing to a lack of funds, they had been finished with adobe [...]. The left lateral nave suffered more damage than the right nave [...]. The exterior walls were so severely damaged that they needed to be rebuilt [...]. All of the ornate decorations inside the church, such as the altars and images, were destroyed [...]. The whole building was damaged except for the columns and arches of the central nave. [...] The Jesuit college and church were built near the cathedral [...]. The church was of solid construction with walls of cut stone, a wooden roof [...], and a dome on the transept. The dome and the arches of the transept withstood the motion [...]. The college, however, collapsed completely [...]. The convent of the Dominican friars [...], situated one block south of the Plaza Mayor, had a church with brick arches, 15 chapels, and a newly built cloister. The church and the cloister came down [...]. The convent of Agustinians was still under construction, and only the central of the church naves was finished. The church collapsed completely [...]. The convent of Franciscans was of very solid construction [...] with a tall tower, two cloisters, and many rooms and offices. Everything was destroyed [...]. The destruction of the church of the convent of Mercedarians, except for its major chapel, is specified as well as that of the convents of Santa Clara and La Concepción and the hospital of San Juan de Dios; the infirmary of the hospital was not destroyed, and thus bedridden sick people were spared." (Udías et al. 1642)

Farming Areas

"The destruction also extended to ranches and farms (estancias y chacras) outside the town of which at least 50 or 60 were destroyed" (Udías et al. 1642-3)

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

"The ground broke in the hill of Santa Lucia, to the southeast of Santiago, with some landslides. Two large boulders came down from a nearby hill and reached the houses [...]. Mentions are made of the ground breaking and water welling out [...], which may refer to cases of liquefaction." (Udías et al. 1642)

Social Impacts

Deaths

"The first estimates reported 670 people buried in the first days after the earthquake [...]. This number soon rose to about 1000 [...], which is the number repeated in later documents [...]. This number applies only to Spanish citizens and does not count the Indians, negro servants, and victims outside the town [...]. Since the population of Santiago was about 5000, this means that one-fifth of the entire population of the town died during the earthquake." (Udías et al. 1642)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"The Casas Reales, i.e. the building that housed the governor's residence, the meeting room of the Real Audiencia, the arsenal, containing weapons and ammunition, and the prison, collapsed almost

completely, killing the guards. Nevertheless, the prisoners who escaped the catastrophe did not flee or rebel. They were gathered in the Plaza de Armas, where those sentenced to death were put in chains without offering any resistance." (Borri 131)

Social Disruption

"Although there were fears in Santiago of a revolt by black and indigenous slaves, only one African was put to death, presumably for intimidation purposes, but with the official charge, which justified the severity of the punishment, of having gone so far as to threaten his master with a spear, claiming to be the son of the king of Guinea." (Borri 131); "Despite the calamity that had destroyed Santiago, Governor Mujica was forced to remain at the front and convene a new Parliament in 1647 to prevent enemies [the indios mapuche] from taking advantage of the situation by advancing to Santiago, and to keep them at bay with promises and flattery. The survivors of the capital, therefore, were well aware that the precariousness of their existence was also linked to the ever-present indigenous threat, which on that occasion was more likely to materialize, so much so that some proposed moving the capital to another location." (Borri 132)

Conflict

"The Church therefore refused to attribute the terrible cataclysm that had struck Santiago to divine punishment, but instead devoted itself to channeling collective fear towards religious practices and preaching in public squares. It is not surprising that the most active in providing accounts of the event were members of the Augustinians and Jesuits, missionary orders that had been sent to Chile at the end of the 16th century, whose activity had intensified after the Counter-Reformation. Compared to them, the original orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, hardly appear in the sources except as rectors of their respective churches, among which was that of St. Francis, which, as we have seen, was the only one to remain intact." (Borri 131)

Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1647
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Social Impacts	Injuries Destruction Of Public Buildings Social Disruption Relocation Conflict Deaths

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Jeronimo Rugera
Gender	Male
Native Place	Spain
Nationality	Spanish
Reactions	Escape Fight For Survival Solidarity Astonishment Sadness Paralysis

Name	Donna Josephe Asteron
Gender	Female
Native Place	Chile
Nationality	Chile

Reactions

Solidarity

Prayer

Survival Instinct

Anxiety

Escape

Empathy

Astonishment

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name

Working class people

Reactions

Prayer

Terror

Name

Religious people

Reactions

Rage

Order

Prayer

Name

Nobles

Reactions

Escape

Cooperation

Solidarity

Prayer

Heroism

Discomfort

Name

The crowd

Reactions

Prayer

Fatalism

Madness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

Erdbeben (Earthquake)

Erderschütterung (Earth Tremor)

Erdstöße (Earth Shocks)

Fall (Accidiment, Case, Fall)

Zufall (Accident, Chance)

Vorfall (Incident, Event)

Weltgericht (Judgment Day)

Verderben (Ruin)

Unglück (Misfortune)

Similes

"der größte Teil der Stadt, mit einem Gekrache, als ob das Firmament einstürzte, versank" 'Most of the city sank with a crash as if the sky were falling' (Kleist 146; my trans.)

"und gleich, als ob der eine entsetzliche Eindruck, der sich seinem Gemüt eingeprägt hatte, alle früheren daraus verdrängt hätte, weinte er vor Lust, daß er sich des lieblichen Lebens, voll bunter Erscheinungen, noch erfreue." (Kleist 147)

'It was as if, since the terrible blow that had shaken them, all minds had been reconciled.' ((Kleist 147; my trans.)

"als ob das allgemeine Unglück alles, was ihm entronnen war, zu einer Familie gemacht hätte." 'as if the general misfortune had turned everything that had escaped it into a family.' (Kleist 151; my trans.)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Death

Locus Horridus

Locus Amoenus

Apocalypse

Ideal Community

Panicked Mob

Superstition

Syntax

Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases

Punctuation	Multiple Exl, Hypens
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm

Kleist's story was first published in 1807 under the title *Jeronimo und Josephe. Eine Scene aus dem Erdbeben zu Chili, vom Jahr 1647*. As the word *Scene* ('scene') in the original title suggests, the story has a dramatic structure. In the first edition of the book (1810), the text was divided into 31 paragraphs and three main sections (Kreutzer 96), reflecting a dramatic arc and the unity of action, place, and time. The drama evolves between the onset of the earthquake and the day after, taking place respectively in Santiago (site of the 1647 earthquake), the outskirts of the town where the population has sought refuge, and back in Santiago. The story depicts all three phases of the earthquake: a) pre-disaster (causes/context); b) disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics); c) post-disaster (consequences), albeit not from a geological perspective. Rather, the story emphasises the social reality and dynamics that cause the individual tragedies of Jeronimo and Josephe, which are not caused by the natural disaster itself, but rather take place before and after the earthquake in a different three-phase evolution.

The first part of the story (paragraphs 1–13) recounts the events that took place before the earthquake. Jeronimo Rugera, a Spaniard and tutor to the Asteron family, is in love with Josephe, the daughter of Henricho Asteron. The young woman is sent to a convent, where Jeronimo manages to visit her. During a religious procession, she gives birth to a baby boy, Philippe. The town is scandalised. Josephe is sentenced to death. Just as the social conflict reaches its tragic conclusion, an earthquake strikes: the procession is taking Josephe to the place of execution and Jeronimo, in prison, is about to hang himself in despair. In the ensuing chaos and confusion, the earthquake has fatal consequences for most people, but the two lovers are spared. After escaping the city and finding refuge in the fields, fate reunites the two lovers and their child.

In the open fields where Jeronimo and Josephe find refuge, other people have also fled. It seems as if misfortune has made a family of everyone who has escaped the earthquake. The second act (paragraphs 14–21) depicts the earthquake's impact on the protagonists' fate, as they are welcomed into the circle of the noble Don Fernando Ormez and his family. Jeronimo and Josephe decide not to leave the country, instead going back to the city with their protectors to attend a solemn mass in the Dominican church — the only building spared by the earthquake — led by the monastery's prelate, who implores heaven to prevent further misfortune.

The third act (paragraphs 22–31) is set in and around the church and depicts the final social catastrophe as an indirect consequence of the earthquake. The priest and the congregation identify the two unhappy lovers as the cause of the natural disaster. The story concludes with the brutal execution of Jeronimo and Josephe, as well as Don Fernando's baby, who is mistakenly believed to be the child born of the sin that led to the earthquake.

The natural disaster

In Kleist's story, the earthquake is both symbolic and functional to the drama of the action. Its occurrence in the middle of the day does not coincide with the historical moment of the real earthquake in Santiago, which took place at night. It is depicted as a natural force that causes chaos and destruction. As Jeronimo flees, he sees dead bodies, people groaning under the rubble and screaming from burning roofs, and people and animals struggling in the waves. Josephe herself sees the abbess and almost all the nuns of the convent crushed to death and the archbishop lying dead. The city becomes a 'locus horridus', a place of horror, where death, injury and destruction take place, with houses crashing down, the river overflowing its banks and buildings ablaze. Human dwellings and all institutional buildings are destroyed, including the cathedral, the Vice-King's palace, the courthouse and the prison where Jeronimo is held, as well as the guillotine stage set up for Josephe. This aligns with historical documents which state that the entire city was destroyed, including the buildings mentioned in Kleist's story: the Vice-King's Palace, the courthouse, the prison, the convent and the cathedral. The narrative's main focus concerning the event is the destruction of the social order. In Kleist's story, the destruction of public buildings symbolises the destruction of the social order

guaranteed by secular and religious authorities. Man's law no longer applies: prison walls collapse, and so do the gallows. Even Heinricho Asteron's house is flooded in the aftermath of the earthquake: another symbol of patriarchal power is destroyed. The Asteron family — Josephe's father and brother — represent the patriarchal social order, which also collapses in the earthquake. Afterwards, neither of these characters has a role to play. Kleist does not describe collective or individual reactions to the earthquake; his focus is on the actions and reactions of the protagonists. It is only in the second part of the story that there are references to reports from the city, providing a realistic portrayal of how the post-disaster institutional void gave rise to both rape and looting, as well as spontaneous acts of altruism (Holm 49).

The reactions of the two main characters demonstrate the differing attitudes of men and women towards danger. The shock of the trembling earth causes them both to enter a temporary state of irrationality. This gives Jeronimo the strength to overcome the danger, leading to profound joy at having saved his life, despite his intention to kill himself. Driven by her maternal instinct, Josephine is able to face the situation rationally. When faced with the catastrophe, Jeronimo exhibits horror and astonishment, but above all a survival instinct that compels him to flee. He runs from death, zigzagging almost unconsciously between falling buildings. When he realises that he has escaped, he falls to the ground, thankful to God, and cries out in joy. Only when he has recovered in the fields does he think of Josephe:

- Er mochte wohl eine Viertelstunde in der tiefsten Bewußtlosigkeit gelegen haben, als er endlich wieder erwachte, und sich, mit nach der Stadt gekehrtem Rücken, halb auf dem Erdboden erhob. Er befühlte sich Stirn und Brust, unwissend, was er aus seinem Zustande machen sollte, und ein unsägliches Wonnengefühl ergriff ihn, als ein Westwind, vom Meere her, sein wiederkehrendes Leben anwehte, und sein Auge sich nach allen Richtungen über die blühende Gegend von St. Jago hinwandte. Nur die verstörten Menschenhaufen, die sich überall blicken ließen, beklemmten sein Herz; er begriff nicht, was ihn und sie hiehergeführt haben konnte, und erst, da er sich umkehrte, und die Stadt hinter sich versunken sah, erinnerte er sich des schrecklichen Augenblicks, den er erlebt hatte. Er senkte sich so tief, daß seine Stirn den Boden berührte, Gott für seine wunderbare Errettung zu danken; und gleich, als ob der eine entsetzliche Eindruck, der sich seinem Gemüt eingeprägt hatte, alle früheren daraus verdrängt hätte, weinte er vor Lust, daß er sich des lieblichen Lebens, voll bunter Erscheinungen, noch erfreue. / Darauf, als er eines Ringes an seiner Hand gewahrte, erinnerte er sich plötzlich auch Josephens. (Kleist 146-147)
- He must have lain in a deep unconsciousness for a quarter of an hour before he finally awoke and, with his back turned toward the city, half rose from the ground. He felt his forehead and chest, not knowing what to make of his condition, and an indescribable feeling of bliss came over him as a west wind from the sea blew his returning life back to him and his eyes turned in all directions over the blossoming countryside of St. Jago. Only the distraught crowds of people who were everywhere weighed heavily on his heart; he did not understand what could have brought him and them here, and only when he turned around and saw the city sinking behind him did he remember the terrible moment he had experienced. He bowed so low that his forehead touched the ground, thanking God for his miraculous salvation; and immediately, as if the one terrible impression that had imprinted itself on his mind had supplanted all previous ones, he wept with joy that he could still enjoy the lovely life, full of colorful phenomena. / Then, when he noticed a ring on his hand, he suddenly remembered Josephe, too. (my trans.)

Driven by her maternal instinct, Josephine recovers much faster from the shock caused by the earthquake. She goes to the convent to save her child and responds courageously and rationally to the danger and horror she encounters:

- Sie wollte der Äbtissin, welche die Hände über ihr Haupt zusammenschlug, eben in die Arme sinken, als diese, mit fast allen ihren Klosterfrauen, von einem herabfallenden Giebel des Hauses, auf eine schmähliche Art erschlagen ward. Josephe bebte bei diesem entsetzlichen Anblicke zurück; sie drückte der Äbtissin flüchtig die Augen zu, und floh, ganz von Schrecken erfüllt, den teuern Knaben, den ihr der Himmel wieder geschenkt hatte, dem Verderben zu entreißen. / Sie hatte noch wenig Schritte getan, als ihr auch schon die Leiche des Erzbischofs begegnete, die man soeben zerschmettert aus dem Schutt der Kathedrale hervorgezogen hatte. Der Palast des Vizekönigs war versunken, der Gerichtshof, in welchem ihr das Urteil

gesprochen worden war, stand in Flammen, und an die Stelle, wo sich ihr väterliches Haus befunden hatte, war ein See getreten, und kochte rötliche Dämpfe aus. (Kleist 149)

- She was about to sink into the arms of the abbess, who was wringing her hands above her head, when the latter, along with almost all of her nuns, was killed in a gruesome manner by a falling gable of the house. Josephe recoiled at this horrific sight; she quickly closed the abbess's eyes and fled, filled with terror, to rescue the dear boy whom heaven had given her back from destruction. She had taken only a few steps when she came upon the archbishop's body, which had just been pulled from the rubble of the cathedral, shattered. The viceroy's palace had sunk, the court where her sentence had been pronounced was in flames, and where her father's house had once stood, there was now a lake, boiling with reddish vapors. (my trans.)

Josephe prays not for herself but for Jeronimo's soul, believing him to be dead. Alongside the description of Jeronimo's reaction, the impression is given of the crowd's reaction, depicted through their efforts to save their own lives and their fear and terror of death:

- Besinnungslos, wie er sich aus diesem allgemeinen Verderben retten würde, eilte er, über Schutt und Gebälk hinweg, indessen der Tod von allen Seiten Angriffe auf ihn machte, nach einem der nächsten Tore der Stadt. Hier stürzte noch ein Haus zusammen, und jagte ihn, die Trümmer weit umherschleudernd, in eine Nebenstraße; hier leckte die Flamme schon, in Dampfwolken blitzend, aus allen Giebeln, und trieb ihn schreckenvoll in eine andere; hier wälzte sich, aus seinem Gestade gehoben, der Mapochofluß auf ihn heran, und riß ihn brüllend in eine dritte. Hier lag ein Haufen Erschlagener, hier ächzte noch eine Stimme unter dem Schutte, hier schrieen Leute von brennenden Dächern herab, hier kämpften Menschen und Tiere mit den Wellen, hier war ein mutiger Retter bemüht, zu helfen; hier stand ein anderer, bleich wie der Tod, und streckte sprachlos zitternde Hände zum Himmel. Als Jeronimo das Tor erreicht, und einen Hügel jenseits desselben bestiegen hatte, sank er ohnmächtig auf demselben nieder. (Kleist 146)
- Unable to comprehend how he would escape this general destruction, he hurried over rubble and beams, while death attacked him from all sides, toward one of the nearest city gates. Here another house collapsed, hurling debris far and wide and chasing him into a side street; here flames were already licking out of every gable, flashing in clouds of steam, and drove him in terror into another; here the Mapacho River, lifted from its banks, rolled toward him and tore him roaring into a third. Here lay a pile of dead bodies, here a voice still groaned under the rubble, here people screamed from burning roofs, here people and animals struggled with the waves, here a brave rescuer tried to help; here stood another, pale as death, stretching his trembling hands toward the sky, speechless. When Jeronimo reached the gate and climbed a hill beyond it, he sank down unconscious on top of it. (my trans.)

After the natural disaster: dramatic turn and catastrophe

Away from the city, nature shows its arcadian face. The open field are in every sense “free”, and described as a locus amoenus:

- so schlichen Jeronimo und Josephe in ein dichteres Gebüsch, um durch das heimliche Gejauchz ihrer Seelen niemand zu betrüben. Sie fanden einen prachtvollen Granatapfelbaum, der seine Zweige, voll duftender Früchte, weit ausbreitete; und die Nachtigall flötete im Wipfel ihr wollüstiges Lied. Hier ließ sich Jeronimo am Stamme nieder, und Josephe in seinem, Philipp in Josephens Schoß, saßen sie, von seinem Mantel bedeckt, und ruhten. Der Baumschatten zog, mit seinen verstreuten Lichtern, über sie hinweg, und der Mond erblaßte schon wieder vor der Morgenröte, ehe sie einschliefen. (Kleist 150)
- So Jeronimo and Josephe crept into a thicket so as not to disturb anyone with the secret rejoicing of their souls. They found a magnificent pomegranate tree, its branches laden with fragrant fruit; and the nightingale sang its voluptuous song in the treetops. Here Jeronimo settled down at the trunk, and Josephe in his, Philipp in Josephens lap, they sat, covered by his cloak, and rested. The tree's shadow, with its scattered lights, passed over them, and the moon was already fading before dawn before they fell asleep. (my trans.)

Jeronimo and Joseph are not the only ones in the fields. Many people who have been forced to leave the city have improvised shelters in the same area. This does not spoil the idyll, but rather reinforces

it. The open fields are home to a new society, bringing together people of all social classes. The catastrophe seems to have brought out the best in humanity:

- Auf den Feldern, so weit das Auge reichte, sah man Menschen von allen Ständen durcheinander liegen, Fürsten und Bettler, Matronen und Bäuerinnen, Staatsbeamte und Tagelöhner, Klosterherren und Klosterfrauen: einander bemitleiden, sich wechselseitig Hilfe reichen, von dem, was sie zur Erhaltung ihres Lebens gerettet haben mochten, freudig mitteilen, als ob das allgemeine Unglück alles, was ihm entronnen war, zu einer Familie gemacht hätte. (Kleist 152)
- As far as the eye could see, people of all classes lay scattered across the fields: princes and beggars, matrons and peasant women, civil servants and day laborers, monks and nuns, pitying one another, helping one another, joyfully sharing what they had managed to save to sustain their lives, as if the general misfortune had made everything that had escaped it into one family. (my trans.)

The earthquake brings the main characters, Jeronimo and Donna Josephe, back to life, giving them the chance to experience the impossible happiness of being a family. They react with pure joy. For everyone else, the earthquake is a tragedy. Those who managed to do so fled. Those in the fields seek comfort in religion and show solidarity. Faced with horror stories, they are more willing to hear about acts of heroism.

Due to the earthquake, everyone has suffered some kind of loss: a house, a wife, children — everything. Out of compassion, Jeronimo and Josephe hide their joy at being alive and together as a family. Some of the survivors are injured, including Don Fernando's wife, Elvira, and her father, Don Pedro. Some survivors have brought food, but Josephe and Jeronimo have nothing to eat. As for Don Fernando's child, he has had no milk since the earthquake. In the new spirit of solidarity created by the natural disaster, Jeronimo and Josephe reunite with Don Fernando Ormez's family: Josephe offers her breast to Don Fernando's starving child, Juan, and his family — including his sister, Donna Elisabeth, and Donna Elvira's sisters, Donna Isabel and Donna Constanze — welcome the outcasts. Don Fernando's family embodies the ideal community of generous, compassionate and devout noblemen and noblewomen. They demonstrate resilience by calmly accepting the new order established by the forces of love and nature. Despite their unfamiliar physical discomfort, they remain calm, displaying gentleness and nobility. Most of the characters in the story are noble and belong to the colonist social group, as opposed to the people, who include beggars, peasants, and labourers. There is no mention of the different ethnic groups living in Chile at the time. Even historical sources estimate casualties without counting Indians, black servants and victims outside the town. It is stated that the majority of victims came from the middle and upper classes, and the names of 25 of them are provided (Udías et al., 1642). Don Fernando Ormez's aristocratic family represents the only part of society that played an official role in Chile at that time. All of the aristocratic characters, including the bourgeois Jeronimo, are portrayed as pious and resilient people who have strong beliefs in God, sin, prayer and penance.

However, all of the noble characters (except Donna Isabel) are deluded by the vision of post-traumatic solidarity and believe that this state will be permanent. It is not so. By causing the collapse of the old social order, which prescribed a rigid class division, the earthquake gave Jeronimo, the stranger, and Josephine, who was estranged from her family, a new chance in life. However, the decision to return to the city, the realm of repressive social control, proves fatal. There were signs, but they were ignored. News from the city, when not the product of popular imagination and superstition, speaks of unrest and violent repression by the authorities. According to reports, social disorder is partly caused by looters, but mostly by mob justice and law-and-order officials, who react by erecting gallows:

- Man erzählte, wie die Stadt gleich nach der ersten Hauptschüttung von Weibern ganz voll gewesen, die vor den Augen aller Männer niedergekommen seien; wie die Mönche darin, mit dem Kruzifix in der Hand, umhergelaufen wären, und geschrien hätten: das Ende der Welt sei da! wie man einer Wache, die auf Befehl des Vizekönigs verlangte, eine Kirche zu räumen, geantwortet hätte: es gäbe keinen Vizekönig von Chili mehr! wie der Vizekönig in den schrecklichsten Augenblicken hätte müssen Galgen aufrichten lassen, um der Dieberei Einhalt zu tun; und wie ein Unschuldiger, der sich von hinten durch ein brennendes Haus gerettet, von dem Besitzer aus Übereilung ergriffen, und sogleich auch aufgeknöpft worden wäre. (Kleist 151)

- It was said that immediately after the first major tremor, the city was filled with women who gave birth in front of all the men; that the monks ran around with crucifixes in their hands, shouting that the end of the world had come; that when a guard, acting on the orders of the viceroy, demanded that a church be evacuated, he was told that there was no longer a viceroy of Chile! How the viceroy had to have gallows erected in the most terrible moments to put a stop to theft; and how an innocent man, who had saved himself from a burning house by climbing out the back, was seized by the owner in his haste and immediately hanged. (my trans.)

Historical accounts of what happened in Santiago are confirmed by Kleist's story. The Spanish authorities took measures to prevent rebellions, encouraged by the lack of social order. Fearing that the indigenous people and slaves might exploit the chaotic situation politically, a group of soldiers was assembled to guard the royal treasure. However, no violence is reported. Soldiers were also sent to block the irrigation ditches to prevent flooding of the city (Retamal/Retamal, 2020).

In the third and final act of the tragedy of Jeronimo and Josephe, the ideal community born in the open fields in the aftermath of the earthquake proves to be an illusion. The earthquake has not changed anything; mostly, it has not changed humanity's vicious nature, its envy of the privileged or its need to seek explanations for the inexplicable, which leads to superstition. Jeronimo and Josephe's religious attitude, which they share with all the other characters and the depicted society, leads them to return to the city to attend mass at the Dominican church, the only place of worship to escape the earthquake. According to official reports following the earthquake, the Spanish authorities, concerned about public order, organised religious events with the help of the ecclesiastical authorities. The Bishop of Santiago arranged for 40–50 priests to be sent to assist those who wished to go to confession. The rest of the clergy were distributed throughout the streets of the city to assist with the relief work. An altar was set up in the Plaza de Armas, where consecrated hosts were given out to comfort the population. A procession was organised (Borri 131). There is a discrepancy between historical documents and Kleist's story concerning the superstitious attitude of the clergy. The bishop of Santiago did not comply with the religious-superstitious view of earthquakes as divine wrath caused by human sin. He refused to attribute the tragedy to the will of God and denied that the terrible cataclysm that had befallen Santiago was divine chastisement (Borri 130). In contrast, Kleist depicts a crowd terrified by recent events who are willing to believe the prelate of the monastery's explanation of natural fury. The prelate prays to heaven to prevent further calamities and affirms that God sent the earthquake to punish the city for showing mercy to sinners. The attempt to overcome the terror by finding a cause-and-effect explanation for the earthquake ends in collective madness and leads to the murder of innocents. This savagery is led by an evil man: the cobbler Pedrillo. Nothing of that sort happened after the real earthquake in Santiago. The final scene represents the fulfilment of the protagonists' individual tragedies. Don Fernando and his wife's adoption of the surviving Philippe (the word *Fall 'chance'* is an important theme in the story) offers a glimmer of hope for a new social order, gently replacing the old one (Kittler 26).

The earthquake in the novella

Kleist's story has been interpreted as a response to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which sparked a debate on theodicy, and attempted to answer the question of how the suffering in the world can be reconciled with the assumption that God is omnipotent, omniscient and good (in the Christian monotheistic tradition). However, Kleist does not attempt to justify God's actions or explain the natural disaster as a result of divine judgement. For Kleist, the question of a just and good God in the face of human suffering following the earthquake leads to an impasse. A metaphysical interpretation of the earthquake is impossible. Humans are both good and evil; their actions are driven by rational and irrational forces (Hamacher 158).

The earthquake is described in realistic terms. The terms used by the narrator do not allow for much creativity. This is evident from the first reference to "die große Erderschütterung vom Jahre 1647, bei welcher viele tausend Menschen ihren Untergang fanden" 'the great earth tremor of 1647, which killed many thousands of people' (Kleist 144; my trans.), accompanied by the indication of its location "In St. Jago, der Hauptstadt des Königreichs Chili" 'in San Jago, the capital of the Kingdom of Chile'. Further references to the event are similarly mere descriptions, such as "eine zweite Bewegung der Erde" 'a second movement of earth' (146; my trans.); "die Erschütterungen" 'the tremors' (149; my trans.); "die Erderschütterungen" 'the tremors of the earth' (150; my trans.); "der ersten Hauptschütterung" 'of the first main tremor' (151; my trans.); "die Erdstöße" 'the earth shocks' (152; my trans.); "das Erdbeben" 'the earthquake' (152; my trans.).

The narrator does not use imagery to describe the earthquake. Rare similes are used to provide a concrete description of the human perception of the physical world. For example, the crash caused by the sinking of the city is described as being as loud as "the firmament collapsing" ("als ob das Firmament einstürzte", Kleist 146). Kleist's style brings the idea of the earthquake as a natural force to life, emphasising its destructive power by personifying it and/or expressing it through phrases that serve as subjects in many sentences:

- "Der Boden wankte unter seinen [Jeronimos] Füßen." 'The ground swayed beneath his [Jeronimo's] feet' (145; my trans.)
- "alle Wände des Gefängnisses rissen" 'All the walls of the prison cracked' (145; my trans.)
- "der ganze Bau neigte sich, nach der Straße zu einzustürzen." 'The entire building was leaning toward the street, as if it were about to collapse.' (145; my trans.)
- "und nur der, seinem langsamem Fall begegnende, Fall des gegenüberstehenden Gebäudes verhinderte, durch eine zufällige Wölbung, die gänzliche Zubodenstreckung desselben." 'And only the slow collapse of the building opposite, which happened to be curved, prevented it from completely collapsing to the ground.' (146; my trans.)
- "der Tod von allen Seiten Angriffe auf ihn machte" 'Death attacked him from all sides' (146; my trans.)
- "Hier stürzte noch ein Haus zusammen, und jagte ihn, die Trümmer weit umherschleudernd, in eine Nebenstraße" 'Another house collapsed here, sending debris flying far and wide and hunting him into a side street.' (146; my trans.)
- "hier leckte die Flamme schon, in Dampfwolken blitzend, aus allen Giebeln, und trieb ihn schreckenvoll in eine andere [Strasse]" 'Here the flame was already licking out, flashing in clouds of steam, driving him in terror into another [street]' (146; my trans.)
- "hier wälzte sich, aus seinem Gestade gehoben, der Mapochofluß auf ihn heran, und riß ihn brüllend in eine dritte [Strasse]" 'Here, lifted from its banks, the Mapocho River rolled toward him and roared as it swept him into a third [street]' (146; my trans.)
- "Ihre [Josephes] ersten entsetzensvollen Schritte trugen sie hierauf dem nächsten Tore zu" 'Her [Josephine's] first terrifying steps carried her to the nearest gate' (148; my trans.)
- "doch die Besinnung kehrte ihr bald wieder, und sie wandte sich, um nach dem Kloster zu eilen, wo ihr kleiner, hülfloser Knabe zurückgeblieben war." 'But she soon regained her senses and turned to hurry back to the monastery, where her little, helpless boy had been left behind.' (148; my trans.)
- "[die Äbtissin], mit fast allen ihren Klosterfrauen, [ward] von einem herabfallenden Giebel des Hauses, auf eine schmähliche Art erschlagen" 'The abbess, along with almost all of her nuns, was killed in a disgraceful manner by a falling gable of the house' (148; my trans.)
- "die Erdstöße nachließen" 'the earth shocks subsided' (153; my trans.)

The sparse use of metaphors to describe the event is attributed to different characters, such as monks who refer to it as "das Ende der Welt" 'the end of the world' (151; my trans.) or the prelate using the expression "das Weltgericht" 'the day of judgement' (153, 155). In other passages, expressions such as "diesem allgemeinen Verderben" 'to this general ruin' (146; my trans.), or "gräßliches Unglück" 'awful misfortune' (151; my trans.); "gräßliche[n] Augenblicke[n]" 'awful moments' (152; my trans.) reflect the feeling of the characters.

The narrator's personal use of metaphors is evident in the part of the text describing the savage murder of the "sinners". The images help to identify Pedrillo as the leader of an inhuman, devilish group of people by referring to him as "der Fürst der satanischen Rotte" 'the prince of the satanic horde' (158; my trans.), while at the same time using plural, generic expressions to refer to the murder and make the responsibility a collective one: "Der wütende Haufen" 'The furious crowd' (157; my trans.); "die Mordknechte!" 'the murder servants' (157; my trans.); "Sieben Bluthunde lagen tot vor ihm" 'Seven bloodhounds lay dead before him' (158; my trans.). In contrast, the noble Don Fernando is portraited as a hero through traditional epic imagery, such as the epithet "göttliche[r] Held" 'divine hero' (158; my trans.) or the image of the fighting lion, "ein Löwe wehrt sich nicht besser" 'a lion doesn't fight back any better' (158; my trans.).

The list of keywords indicates how these philosophical issues are addressed in the narrative: references to human affairs and social interaction are the most frequent (144 occurrences). After the title of nobility Don/Donna, the most frequent word in the entire text is *mensch*, the generic term for a 'human being', and its adjective *menschlich* (21 occurrences). Other relevant words refer to the basic

experiences of humanity: *Leben* (life, 11) and *Tod/tot* (death/dead, 12); the progression of generations and a reference to patriarchal society: *Kind* (child, 14) and *Vater* (father, 10); and the need and desire to form a community, conveyed by the repetition of the noun *Arm* (arm), the same-sounding adjective *arm* (poor), and the verb *umarmen* (to embrace) (11). References to the natural world are also frequent, expressed by words such as *Himmel* (sky, 10) and *Welt* (world, 9), as well as the word field combining *Erde* (earth) and *Boden* (ground), with compounds such as *Erdboden* (earth ground), *Erdbeben* (earthquake) and *Erderschütterung* (earth tremor). Other references are to the domain of law, with a high frequency of words belonging to the field around the verb *richten* (to direct), such as *Gericht* (court), *hinrichten* (to execute) (15) and *Gefängnis* (prison). In contrast to these references to the natural and human worlds, there are frequent allusions to the metaphysical sphere, conveyed by words such as *Rettung* (salvation) and *Gott* (God), as well as related terms like *göttlich* (divine) and *gottlos* (godless) (12). Finally, there are frequent occurrences of words belonging to the same word family of *Fall* (chance, case, fall), such as *fallen* (to fall), *Zufall* (case), *Vorfall* (incident), *falls* (if, conj.) (17).

The tendency towards realism in the narration is also achieved through the use of syntax that imitates the legal-administrative style, with frequent use of abstract nouns, nominalisations, impersonal constructions and hypotaxis. For example, the following 70-word passage contains 20 nouns, i.e. one every 3.5 words. German nouns are easily identified as they are capitalised:

- Statt der nichtssagenden Unterhaltungen, zu welchen sonst die Welt an den Teetischen den Stoff hergegeben hatte, erzählte man jetzt Beispiele von ungeheuern Taten: Menschen, die man sonst in der Gesellschaft geachtet hatte, hatten Römergröße gezeigt; Beispiele zu Haufen von Unerschrockenheit, von freudiger Verachtung der Gefahr, von Selbstverleugnung und der göttlichen Aufopferung, von ungesäumter Wegwerfung des Lebens, als ob es, dem nichtswürdigsten Gute gleich, auf dem nächsten Schritte schon wiedergefunden würde. (152-153)
- Instead of the meaningless conversations that the world had otherwise provided material for at tea tables, people now recounted examples of tremendous deeds: people who had otherwise been respected in society had shown Roman greatness; examples abounded of fearlessness, of joyful contempt for danger, of self-denial and divine sacrifice, of unhesitating rejection of life, as if it were the most worthless of goods, to be regained at the next step. (my trans.)

However, the narration itself alludes, in its most dramatic passages, to the existence of a world of sensations that intuitively comprehend the incomprehensible.

On the other hand, Jeronimo and Joseph experience the earthquake and its aftermath as if in a dream. It is precisely their loss of contact with reality that leads to their doom. An important verb that captures the experience of consciousness breaking is *zerschmettern* (to crush), which is also used in contexts related to the fate of human bodies crushed by natural or murderous violence:

- "Jeronimo Rugera war starr vor Entsetzen; und gleich als ob sein ganzes Bewußtsein zerschmettert worden wäre, hielt er sich jetzt an dem Pfeiler, an welchem er hatte sterben wollen, um nicht umzufallen" 'Jeronimo Rugera was frozen with horror; and as if his entire consciousness had been crushed, he now held on to the pillar where he had wanted to die so as not to fall over' (146; my trans.).
- "Als sie [Joseph] sich im Freien sah, schloß sie bald, daß nicht jeder, der ein zertrümmertes Gebäude bewohnt hatte, unter ihm notwendig müsse zerschmettert worden sein." 'When she [Joseph] saw herself outdoors, she soon concluded that not everyone who had lived in a shattered building had necessarily been crushed beneath it' (149; my trans.).
- "Doch Meister Pedrillo ruhte nicht eher, als bis er der Kinder eines bei den Beinen von seiner Brust gerissen, und, hochher im Kreise geschwungen, an eines Kirchpfeilers Ecke zerschmettert hatte." 'But Master Pedrillo did not rest until he had torn one of the children from his chest by the legs and, swinging him high in a circle, crushed him against the corner of a church pillar' (158; my trans.).

Another significant verb is *zittern* (to tremble), which seems to connote feelings of a similar nature: fear of death and the evocation of divine protection:

- "hier stand ein anderer, bleich wie der Tod, und streckte sprachlos zitternde Hände zum Himmel." 'Here stood another, pale as death, stretching his trembling hands toward the sky, speechless' (146; my trans.).
- "Zitternd, mit sträubenden Haaren, und Knieen, die unter ihm brechen wollten, glitt Jeronimo über den schiefgesenkten Fußboden hinweg, der Öffnung zu, die der Zusammenschlag beider Häuser in die vordere Wand des Gefängnisses eingerissen hatte." 'Trembling, his hair standing on end, his knees about to give way beneath him, Jeronimo slid across the sloping floor toward the opening that had been torn into the front wall of the prison when the two houses collided' (146; my trans.).
- "wo nur irgend ein weibliches Gewand im Winde flatterte, da trug ihn sein zitternder Fuß hin" 'Wherever a woman's garment fluttered in the wind, his trembling feet carried him there' (147; my trans.).
- "[Einer der ältesten Chorherren] begann gleich mit Lob, Preis und Dank, seine zitternden, vom Chorhemde weit umflossenen Hände hoch gen Himmel erhebend, daß noch Menschen seien, auf diesem, in Trümmer zerfallenden Teile der Welt, fähig, zu Gott empor zu stammeln." 'He [one of the oldest chorists] began immediately with praise, thanksgiving, and gratitude, raising his trembling hands, covered by his choir robe, high toward heaven, that there were still people in this part of the world, falling into ruin, who were capable of stammering their way up to God' (155; my trans.).

Another way in which the text alludes to the inscrutable forces that guide human destiny is through hyphenation, which allows the narrator to avoid pathetic comments. An example of this can be seen at the end of paragraph 24, when Don Fernando chooses to ignore the gloomy predictions of his wife and sister: "Donna Elisabeth fuhr fort, ihm mit verstörtem Gesicht ins Ohr zu zischeln. Don Fernando stieg eine Röte des Unwillens ins Gesicht; er antwortete: es wäre gut! Donna Elvire möchte sich beruhigen; und führte seine Dame weiter. –" 'Donna Elisabeth continued to whisper in his ear with a distraught expression. Don Fernando's face flushed with anger; he replied that it would be fine! Donna Elvire should calm down, and he led his lady away. –' (155; my trans.).

Kleist's occasionally syncopated syntax serves to highlight the role of chance and fate in human history and individual destinies. Even through his peculiar use of punctuation, in his novella Kleist highlights the inherently fragile nature of the human condition, due to the precarious balance between our fundamental needs and desires, and the overwhelming forces that determine our fate. The earthquake in the novella represents one of these overwhelming forces, serving as a poignant reminder of this delicate balance.

Bibliography

Kleist, Heinrich von. *Das Erdbeben in Chile*, in: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in vier Banden. Dritter Band. München, Wien, Hanser 1982.

Borri, Claudia. "Terremoti in Cile. Storia e immaginazione intorno ad un evento apocalittico." *Saggi/Ensayos/Essays/Essays Apocalipsis*. 2013, pp. 122-143.

Hamacher, Werner. "Das Beben der Darstellung". *Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft. Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists 'Das Erdbeben in Chili'*, ed. by David E. Wellbery, 1987, 2 ed., Beck, pp. 149-173.

Holm, Isak Winkel. "Earthquake in Haiti: Kleist and the Birth of Modern Disaster Discourse". *New German Critique*. 2012, vol. 115, n. 39, I, pp. 49-66.

Kittler, Friedrich A. "Ein Erdbeben in Chili und Preußen". *Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft. Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists 'Das Erdbeben in Chili'*, ed. by David E. Wellbery, 1987, 2 ed., Beck, pp. 24-38.

Kreutzer, Hans Joachim. *Heinrich von Kleist*. Beck, 2011.

Retamal, Felipe / Retamal, Pablo. "El mayo más trágico de Santiago: un terremoto que destruyó la ciudad, el Cristo de Mayo salvado 'de milagro' y la Quintrala". *La Tercera*, 2020. <https://www.latercera.com>. Accessed on 21 July 2025.

Udías, Angel / Madariaga, Raúl / Buforn, Elisa / Muñoz, Daniel M. / Ros, Macarena. "The Large Chilean Historical Earthquakes of 1647, 1657, 1730, and 1751 from Contemporary Documents." *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America*. 2012, vol. 102, n. 4, pp. 1639–1653.

