

## Heinrich Böll

<http://www.boell.org/welcome.asp>

German writer, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972.

Böll portrayed Germany after World War II

with a deep moral vision

and attacked the materialistic values of the post-war society.

Böll's unorthodox Catholic belief often marked the spiritual content of his stories.

**"Art is always a good hiding-place, not for dynamite, but for intellectual explosives and social time bombs. Why would there otherwise have been the various Indices? And precisely in their despised and often even despicable beauty and lack of transparency lies the best hiding-place for the barb that brings about the sudden jerk or the sudden recognition."** (from *Nobel Lecture*, 1973)

Böll was drafted into the compulsory work program. "... my unconquerable (and still unconquered) aversion to the Nazis was not revolt," Böll later wrote, "*they revolted me*, repelled me on every level of my existence: conscious *and* instinctive, aesthetic *and* political." (from *What's to Become of the Boy?*, 1981)

During World War II Böll served six years as a private and corporal in the army on both the Soviet and Western fronts.

He was wounded four times, and at the end of the war he was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in France.

In his early novels Böll depicted the despair of soldiers' lives...

the oppressive cruelties he witnessed in his youth and in military service.

From the "worm's-eye" view of World War II his scope widened gradually on the reality of modern German society.

*Billiards at Half Past Nine* (1959) took place in a single day (September 6, 1958).

It depicted a prominent family of Cologne architects,  
who have been successively involved with the building of an abbey  
at the beginning of the 20th-century, its destruction during World War II,  
and its rebuilding after 1945.

In the course of the day Böll reveals  
the crucial incidents in the past of the family,  
from the Wilhelminian empire through Weimar and Hitler  
to the prosperous West Germany of 1958.

In 1968 Böll worked as a teacher at the University of Frankfurt and later at other universities (in  
Prag 1969 and in Israel 1970).

Böll was politically active and in 1972 he participated in SPD's election campaign.

*The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1974)

The protagonist, Katharina Blum, is a decent young housekeeper.

question: what is the basic plot?

She falls in love with a young man, who is wanted by the police.  
Katharina helps him to escape, and is interrogated by the police as if she had participated in  
terrorist acts.  
She is persecuted in the sensation-seeking press, and especially an unscrupulous reporter  
named Tötges, who is responsible for ruining her reputation.  
Finally she is driven to the act of murdering him.  
When the reporter says, "How about us having a bang for a start?" she shoots him.

Böll himself had experienced harassment  
by the media and his house was searched by police  
when he announced that terrorist Ulrike Meinhof should be given a fair trial.

Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta adapted the book into screen in 1975.

*Safety Net* (1979) was inspired by the press coverage of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group.

In his essays

Böll saw his role as a writer to act as the social conscience of his age.

He ridiculed contemporary jargon,

defended individual freedom and self-determination,

and warned about the dangers of escalating nuclear armament

and the creeping powers of the state security system.

Often returning to his Catholic faith...

Böll examined the godlessness of the times ...

but viewed critically the church itself.

### **Ulrike Meinhof**

<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/who/terrorists/bmgang/meinhofulrike.html>

### **Heinrich Böll, *Lost Honor of Katharina Blum***

We turn this week to a novel published in the mid-1970s.

Although fiction, its story rings true in that it reveals some of the basic structures of daily life and interaction in a highly industrialized society near the end of the 20th c.

Due to its treatment of the theme of violence following the outbreak of severe violent acts in the west in the 1960s and 1970s, *KB* is often overused as a document of the period, and it is often read for its surface features alone.

Yet Böll had much more in mind than a literal reading of the text as a direct reflection of an actual event.

Böll distinguishes between the 'topical' and the 'real'.

'Real' events, he argued in 1953, were events identified as having had significant impact upon our lives (an example would be WWII).

'Topical' events, by contrast, were more ordinary (in that they were forgotten and therefore seemingly inconsequential).

But Böll's mind, 'topical' events were the keys to reality.

He cited the example of Japanese fishermen exposed to the radiation of American atomic testing in the Pacific.

The 'event' was 'topical'

—the men were not agents of history or of change—  
but even so, the 'reality' of the event was such  
that it introduced into everyone's mind  
a *new consciousness* that air itself can be a form of death.

So Böll is partly trying to explain the consciousness that governs postwar life  
(why do we think this way and not that?).

To help him achieve this end,

he introduces into his narratives individuals who themselves have made no history,  
but who carry in their own stories the keys to the overarching structures and  
forms of power governing life.

Katharina Blum is one such character.

Social violence dominated the west in the '60s and '70s.

In Germany, student protests broke out in 1968,  
there were running protests over the Vietnam War  
and the deployment of nuclear missiles on German soil,

and at the Munich Olympics in 1972  
terrorists shot and killed Israeli athletes.

Small hostile violent groups, such as the Baader-Meinhof Group or Red Army Faction,  
ravaged German life.

In 1971 two members of that group were killed,  
and in 1972 the US army barracks in Heidelberg were bombed,  
as was the Springer publishing house in Hamburg.

The entire Baader-Meinhof affair was exploited by right wing media  
which used stories on the affair  
as a means to bring down the German government.

Böll intervened on behalf of Ulrike Meinhof in 1972  
because he believed that the press,  
which had been accusatory, had deprived her and her group of a fair trial.

Böll was then himself criticized, subject to police searches,  
accused of creating a climate for violence,  
and cast as a threat to the internal security of the nation.

Böll sued for defamation and eventually won his case in Constitutional Court in 1981.

*The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* appears in the midst of this period, in 1974.

The story is a polemical parody of the structures and mentalities of life.

Böll uses the story to criticize several forms of violence in modern society;  
physical violence is actually the least among them.

The story of *KB* is well known.

Katharina Blum sleeps with a suspected terrorist,  
and is subsequently charged by the police with murder.

Let's look closely at what he is saying  
about the systematic dangers that exist in postwar society.

question: what is the public sphere? how does media participate?

*Consider for discussion:*

1. The newspaper *News* in this story (*Die Zeitung* in the German version) is actually *Bild-Zeitung*, a tabloid published by the Axel Springer (discussed in class). It was and still is the major source

of news for a large portion of the German population. What is the relationship between the *News* and the public sphere?

2. What are the forms of violence that Böll addresses in this work?

3. How does the notion of the public sphere help us to understand what Böll is trying to say about violence?

3. Those who control truth—its construction as well as its certification—in a society are in a position of power. Address the relationship between the *News* and the truth (for instance, compare Katharina's 'facts' to the police's 'facts' to the *News's* 'facts').

useful links:

<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/terminology/terms/springer.html>

<http://www.boell.org/welcome.asp>

<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/who/terrorists/bmgang/meinhofulrike.html>

### **notes from corrado reading on baader-meinhof group**

Burschenschaften wanted to redeem German nation by direct act of will

--reaction against Napoleonic incursion

--romantic, idealist

--distant goals, outside of time and space, sublime spectacle

post war: consolidation of frg democracy and demise of major conditions for tm

1983: 27 members of green party elected to parliament

radicalization of student mvt:

formation of SDS german soct student alliance

1950s on: baby boom, student population booms

tension bw students and faculty (who have control over curriculum, sovereignty). professors act out authoritarian personality.

418/ general structure of univ. system facilitates move to student violence

Frankfurt school theorists (Habermas, Marcuse) assert:

419/ univ system had to be altered so that students could undergo the radicalizing experience that would allow them to contribute to changing w. german society in a nonviolent manner

once violence erupted, habermas spoke out against students: violence would bring about repression that would hinder the unfolding of radical revolution in frg.

rudi dutschke maintained that frg needed to be denazified.

triggers for RAF:            vietnam  
   release of comrades from prison

meinhof's goal: to demonstrate the vulnerability of the police by showing "that armed confrontation is feasible-- that it is possible to carry out actions where we can win." (422)

424/ timeline of 1977

question            what psychological parallels are there between  
   napoleonic victories, failed liberalism of 19. century, shame of NS time?

answer: all attributed to "parental failure"

question:            habermas sees RAF's confusion of symbol and reality as pathological.  
   what does he mean? do you agree? rasch, a forensic psychiatrist,  
   has disagreed.

429/                    RAF only offered 'the oppressed' a distant symbolic identification in  
   return for their revolutionary sacrifices.