

# The depiction of nationhood within the lost honor of katharina blum



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Alexander Crummel once said that “ a sense of responsibility which comes with power is the rarest of things” (n. d.). This is a concept which is explored within Heinrich Boll’s 1975 novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* as Boll demonstrates the way power has been abused within the nation of West Germany during the Cold War era. He achieves this through his use of literary devices, such as symbolism, syntax, diction, metaphor, alliteration and dramatic irony, as he reveals the merciless persecution of Katharina Blum at the hands of the police, the press and the patriarchy after she falls in love and spends a single night with the criminal Ludwig Gotten. The author makes apparent the corruption that can accompany power as the young woman’s rights are violated by an unjust police force, her reputation is ruined by a capitalist press and her beauty is sexualised by the patriarchy. It is therefore in order to reveal the corrupt nationhood of West Germany that Boll follows Katharina through her hardships and her absolute powerlessness as she is tormented by the very structures meant to support her and the society that surrounds her.

In his narrative, Boll highlights the corruption of West Germany’s police and contradicts the popular notion of them being just protectors of the public. By exploring the law enforcement’s harsh treatment of Katharina as she is investigated for aiding Gotten’s escape, he is able to condemn the presence of a corrupt legal, judicial and governmental system within West Germany that violates the rights of the weak and marginalised, rather than defending the helpless as they claim to do. This is apparent in Katharina’s damaged perception of her apartment, which she had previously “ been so fond of”, following the police’s forced entrance and search, a view that is evident

when “ she declined to go home, saying the events had spoiled the apartment for her once and for all”, even stating that she “ preferred to wait in a cell”. The invasion of her apartment, a symbol of her hard-work, achievement and independence, represents the destruction of the life she has arduously built for herself at the hands of the police, supported by the power of the law and under the guise of justice. Her preference of an uncomfortable, unpleasant cell over her hard-earned home emphasises the depth of the harm wrought by their intrusion into her residence and their violation of her privacy, allowing Boll to criticise the police’s corrupt use of their authority to infringe on the dignity of the ordinary citizen and suggest their failure to protect the weak.

Such ideas are further supported within the text as the police force a helpless Katharina to undergo a humiliating interrogation, in which she is subject to aggressive and vulgar questioning by the Chief Crime Commissioner, Erwin Biezmenne, who crudely asks, “ Did he fuck you?” The syntax, harsh diction and personal nature of this question creates a jarring, crass effect and reveals the disrespectful nature and insensitivity of the police force as they callously exercise their power. As the investigation continues, it is revealed that these harsh interviews occurred after the police had discovered Gotten’s location as Biezmenne is criticised for leaving him “ unmolested for almost forty-eight hours, although his presence at the Straubleder villa had been known to the police”. The Commissioner’s continuation of Katharina’s interrogation in spite of this knowledge suggests he possesses a vendetta against her and that his motivations went beyond the capture of Gotten and the execution of justice. In revealing this corrupt

abuse of power by the police force of West Germany, Boll directly challenges the idealised image of the law and its enforcement as a symbol of justice, peace and protection for the public and positions audiences to question the illusion of morality and justness surrounding the country itself.

Boll presents the unethical and defamatory actions of the sensationalist press, motivated by their desire for the profit accompanying increased circulation, to criticise the capitalist ideologies which underpin the society of West Germany. By exploring the metaphorical death of Katharina's reputation at the hands of the News, the author is able to reveal the duplicitous nature of " gutter journalism" as it abuses power for monetary gain, proving that " when morality comes up against profit, it is seldom that profit loses" (Crisholm, 1970). This is apparent within their dramatic headlines of " Outlaw's Sweetheart" and " Murderer's Moll". Here, the respective cliché and alliteration, as well as the evocative language chosen by the writer, reveal the News' attempts to portray an innocent Katharina as an accomplice to Gotten's crimes, demonstrating their use of defamatory sensationalism to entice audiences into purchasing their newspaper and thus, furthering their power over public perceptions. Despite being aware of the detrimental impact these false articles would inflict on Katharina's reputation, the press' prioritisation of profit above ethics drives them to continue portraying her as a ' moll', which has damaging connotations of a manipulative and untrustworthy criminal companion. The use of dramatic irony and the text's report-like structure, as the audience knows that she is innocent, allows Boll to criticise the media for the destruction of her name and standing, and thus the capitalism prevalent within West Germany that

motivates them. This is further reinforced as it is revealed that “ the News had transformed [Mr Blorna’s] statement that Katharina was intelligent, cool and level-headed into ‘ ice-cold and calculating’...and that she was ‘ entirely capable of committing a crime’”. This demonstrates how the News has manipulated interviews in order to portray people in harmful manners to serve their own needs. The compliments to her character paid by Mr Blorna have been warped into cunning and deceitful implications in order to present an incriminating depiction of Katharina. By fabricating a guilty image of her through the use of diction, the media is able to sensationalise her story to increase circulation and maximise their own profit. The fact that this is callously achieved at the expense of Katharina’s reputation allows Boll to challenge the belief that journalism is a symbol of truth, justice and integrity and criticise the capitalism which drives the News into these unethical and cruel acts. Thus, in demonstrating the News’ metaphorical murder of Katharina’s reputation, Boll is able to demonstrate the corruption within West German media as a result of its capitalist nature.

Boll deliberately links Katharina’s suffering to the patriarchy of West Germany in order to reveal the destructive consequences caused by the male-dominated structure of the nation. He is able to criticise the male supremacy within West Germany through the sexualised treatment of Katharina as a single, attractive divorcee within a sexist society. This is demonstrated throughout her interactions with powerful men such as Alois Straubleder “ who was not only very well off but downright famous in the political, economic and academic world...almost like a movie star”. In addition to being a conservative politician, a leading industrialist, a

prominent churchman and an academic with powerful contacts in the police, press and judiciary, Straubleder is also Katharina's "gentleman visitor", who forces his unrequited affections on her and consequently contributes to her suffering. While his gifts bring further suspicion upon Katharina, he is completely unaffected by his own actions and is easily able to dismiss the potential investigation into his private life with a single phone call to the police, as evident when he states, "If an affair with a woman gets me into trouble it is private trouble...Even a picture of me with a woman as beautiful as Katharina Blum wouldn't harm me...they are dropping the theory of the male visitor...neither the ring...or the letters...is going to present a problem". This demonstrates how inconsequential sexual affairs are for even married, high-profile men while even just the unconfirmed conjecture of Katharina having sexual relations are publically published and taken as evidence of guilt, with the press painting her as whore and the police regarding her as a criminal.

Despite her refusal of his affections, Katharina is essentially punished by the patriarchal society of West Germany for her rumoured promiscuity, while Straubleder freely admits that he would face no such consequences whatsoever for the very same act, even if there had been photographic evidence of his adultery. Coupled with the fact that he is able to end this theory with just one phone call (whereas Katharina's continuous insistence of its irrelevancy to the case was useless in convincing the police of anything), this reveals sexist nature of West German society and the double standards that exist within it. However, this incident is only one of many examples of Katharina's powerlessness as she is continuously and unduly sexualised and

violated by men, a common occurrence that she is revealed to have experienced countless times since her youth as she states, “ it wasn’t something new for me – a man going for my dress – when you’ve worked in other people’s homes ever since you were fourteen”. This reveals the sense of entitlement felt by many men as a result of the male supremacy within her society, and the corrupt way these men attempt to abuse the power allotted to them by their gender, as a result of the prominent patriarchal control over society, and as her employer to exercise sexual power over her. Their desire to demean and dominate over her is also further prompted by her position as a strong, beautiful and independent woman, as her refusal to fulfil the female stereotype of passivity and obedience undermines their authority and is ever more threatening because “ feminism requires precisely what patriarchy destroys in women: unimpeachable bravery in confronting male power” (Dworkin, 1974). This cruel and inhumane treatment of Katharina as a sexual object for male enjoyment influences audiences to sympathise with her and question the acceptability of the patriarchal structure of West Germany. It is thus through presenting Katharina’s suffering at the hands of powerful men that Boll is able to reveal the corruption brought by the patriarchal nature of the nation of West Germany.

Therefore, Heinrich Boll effectively reveals the corrupt nationhood of West Germany in his 1975 novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*. By exploring Katharina’s powerlessness as her rights are violated, her reputation is destroyed and her beauty is sexualised, he is able to criticise the unjust police, the capitalist press and the unfair patriarchy of West Germany. As

audiences see how these unethical power structures abuse their authority and cause suffering to helpless, ordinary citizens such as Katharina, they are encouraged to question the morality of the country itself, as well as that of their own nation.

### Bibliography

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