

Heinrich boll's context and lost honour essay



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Long Essay- The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum Authors often use characters within their novels to show the consequences of challenging cultural boundaries and, in turn, display their own personal concerns. It is not uncommon for characters to reflect an author's ideology regarding social groups in their contemporary time periods. It is clear that this is certainly the case with the 1975 novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, (also referred to as *How Violence Develops and Where it Can Lead*), written by the German Author, Heinrich Boll.

The Lost Honour is, on the surface, an attack on yellow journalism and the damage it causes to the lives of the people reported on. However, with a more in depth analysis of the novel we are able to see that Boll is in fact using his characters to reflect his own personal views on the stereotypical social groups in contemporary Germany. Boll himself has described *The Lost Honour* as " a pamphlet disguised as a novel". Through the use of the seemingly ' objective' third person limited narrator, we are shown the consequences of challenging and conforming to the expected gender requirements.

On one hand we are presented with Katharina Blum, a woman who rejects the majority of expected stereotypically feminine traits that are place upon women and the resulting slander upon her name in doing so. In contrast however, Boll also demonstrates the consequences of abusing power, which is stemmed from being a male, through the character of Totges, an example of a yellow journalist. It is Totges' own assumptions of Blum and his vulgarly masculine ways which ultimately leads to his murder. It is important to

remember that these narrative developments reflect Bolls own personal views formed from his own context.

There are many significant occurrences in Bolls life, such as his time in Hitler's army, which would suggest that he despises the inequality of power among all German citizens as is reflected by the contrast between Blum and Totges. Bolls sympathy and admiration for economically lower class citizens, most likely due to the economic hardship faced by his father, is presented through the hardworking nature of Blum. However, he also shows the suspicion cast upon Blum because of her comfortable living standards as a result of her independent ways.

This suggests that he is concerned with people's inability to except rises in class without assuming something sinister or unlawful has occurred in the process. Through the use of his characters in *The Lost Honour* and Bolls personal life experiences we are able to see his concerns regarding the cultural boundaries within Germany. Boll has demonstrated a sympathetic leaning towards females through the lack of power and rights given to his title character Katharina Blum in correlation with his own political views. It is clear that within *The Lost Honour* it is Blum who we are supposed to sympathise with.

This is clear through the satirical tone used by the less than 'objective' limited third person narrator. One of the things implied about women, specifically Blum, repeatedly throughout the novel is the fact that they were created to satisfy men's sexual needs and little else. An example of this is during the questioning of Blum about her relationship with Gotten as

Beizmenne allegedly asked Blum " Well, did he fuck you? " Blum replies with " No, I wouldn't call it that". Boll has challenged the idea of sex being about women satisfying men by having Blum suggest that a sexual act did occur, but it was rather for the enjoyment of both parties.

This is an example of Boll using Blum to challenge the power shift between women and men. However, due to Blum's suggestion of equality of men and women sexually, for the rest of the novel she is punished by being referred to as promiscuous and derogatory names such as " moll" and " bitch" which defame her existence. It is further implied that Blum is inferior to men with the following News headline; " Murderers moll won't talk. " Although Gotten is being referred to as a murderer, an obviously negative suggestion, it still implies that Blum, the " moll", is under a males control, almost as if she is merely his tool.

Not only does it imply that Blum is a criminal but also that she is not smart enough to organize the crime itself. Ultimately Blum defies this suggestion by committing the crime of murder without any help from a male companion. In the process Blum is being punished for going past cultural boundaries by her incarceration for the murder of Totges. When looking at Boll's political views it is clear that he has a deep concern for inequality of power. His time spent in Germany during the Nazi reign has led him to distrust dictatorship, the ultimate form of unequal power.

In relation with the treatment of Blum in *The Lost Honour* his inability to except the unequal power in society has led him to oppose the patriarchal society in which contemporary Germany was in at that point in time. The

treatment of Blum after her struggle to break free from her expected social role demonstrates Bolls understanding of the problems faced by women and his deep concerns relating to them. Personal experiences in relation to the male characters in *The Lost Honour* demonstrate Bolls inability to accept the social power held by strong male figures and their abusing of this power.

It is clear that it is the males that hold all the power within *The Lost Honour* through the delegation of occupations. Beizmenne is the chief crime commissioner, Totges is a renowned News journalist and Gotten is a criminal mastermind. In fact, it is suggested to be unusual to have an unimportant job as a male when Beizemenne is listing the last people Gotten came into contact with before disappearing; "A sales clerk (male) in a tobacco store" For the word 'male' to be in brackets suggests that it is unheard of for a male to have a job as irrelevant as a sales clerk, therefore it must be stipulated.

If it were a female sales clerk it would be unlikely that the word female would be in brackets. It is unique how Boll has addressed his concerns over the unfair distribution of power among males. He has not punished them for crossing a cultural boundary; rather he has punished them for abusing the power they receive by staying within their cultural boundary. He demonstrates this through the character of Totges. Totges is one of the chief journalists for the News and is the perfect example of yellow journalism, a dramatised account of questionable occurrences.

It is interesting to note that the other journalist who abused their power and was ultimately shot to death shared the same first name as the dictator Boll

despised, Adolf Hitler. This suggests that Boll believes that the way Totges and Schonner are abusing their power is to a similar standard to which Hitler abused his. While Hitler robbed people of their lives in a literal sense, while Totges robbed people of their lives in a figurative manner, if not their lives, than indeed their dignity. Even the title suggests this occurrence. Totges has taken away the 'honour of Katharina Blum' therefore it is 'lost'.

An example of him abusing his power to discredit Katharina is the way he had altered her description of being "intelligent, cool and level-headed" into "ice-cold and calculating." Not caring about the consequences of his actions, Totges abuses his power in order to receive more. However, it is ironic that it is Totges sense of power that leads to his murder at the hands of Blum. After pestering her for more information Totges suggests to Blum that they should "have a bang for a start", a vulgar expression meaning sexual intercourse.

Blum complies with a loud 'bang' emitting from her gun as she shoots Totges dead, robbing him of his power as he did to her. Boll has punished Totges for abusing the power he received by being a male in an influential occupation, ironically at the hands of the person who was the victim of his ways. Boll's context suggests he has a close relation with people abusing their power, not only from the Nazi reign, but also from the media. Boll himself had experienced harassment from the media which resulted in the police searching his house due to the fact that he announced that suspected terrorist Ulrike Meinhof should be given a fair trial.

With this contextual information in relation to the character of Totges we are clearly able to see that Boll had deep concerns regarding the distribution of power among genders and people in general. Bolls family history as well as Blum's struggle to rise in economic classes reflects Bolls concern for the lack of understanding towards working class citizens. For the majority of people in the world the class you are born in is likely to be the class in which you will die. There are very few ways to rise in class, unless you marry someone of a higher class. To work your way from lower to middle economic classes is almost unheard of.