

## Literature as a handmaid of social activism in Heinrich Böll

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### **Abstract:**

For Heinrich Böll literature was not just piece of art, an aesthetic expression in language, but a practical instrument of social transformation. Metaphorically he uses the phrases “Rose and Dynamite” to describe literature. He chose literature, both as creative and practical forms of speeches and journalistic writing to point out the follies of the ruling politicians, authorities of the church, the business class, journalists and the general public. He was conscious of the functions of literature. Criticism in both communicative and creative forms of literature he used as a tool of social service, making men in responsible positions by coming to the help of the poor by reducing their poverty by freeing them exploitation and repressive tactics. He believed in reasoning and tried by means of literature to improve the condition of his country and of the world at large.

**Keywords:** Literature - instrument of social transformation - Social criticism in literary works – Satire - Real spiritualism - social justice.

As a student of German language and literature I discovered some salient features in Böll’s thoughts and ideas. I would like to present my impressions of Böll in this paper with the intention of making non-German readers from other nations get a little acquainted with Böll. A major aspect of his personality is his radicalness, his way of thinking not in a conventional, convenient, cozy frame of mind but being agitated about many unsavory aspects of the war torn and post war Germany.

Heinrich Böll, the sixth child of Viktor and Maria Böll was born in Köln in the Federal Republic of Germany on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1917. When he was growing up, Germany was undergoing a terrible phase of inflation. Heinrich, born in a Catholic family, started going to a Catholic school in 1924. After four years of attending a Church School, he went to the Kaiser William Grammar school. The parents had to sell their house in 1930 and move to a rented house in another part of the city.

When Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933 there was fear of war. In the family circle there was quite a good deal of anti-authoritarian talk. Maria Böll spoke bitterly

against Hitler's regime. Among friends and visitors there were socialists, communists, strong critics of the Hitler regime. Böll absorbed socialist ideas from their conversation.

Heinrich Böll was against joining any Nazi youth group like Hitlerjugend. He preferred the penalty of going to school on Saturdays and cleaning the library.

In his 17<sup>th</sup> year Böll began to write stories, novels and poems. He had decided to become a writer. His writings were not inspired voices but the expressions of his experience of the stark realities of life around him. He wrote about what he knew about poverty, about fear, about helplessness.

In 1937 Heinrich Böll began as an apprentice in a bookshop which he gave up in a year. Staying at home, Böll gave tuitions, read a lot and wrote a great deal. After a "passive resistance" of five years Heinrich Böll was finally, in 1938, dragged into the Hitler regime. After the compulsory experience of the labour camp Böll joined the University of Köln, but in 1939, when he was 21, he was summoned to the army. During his service in Poland he witnessed the repressions of the Nazi rule. As an infantry man in France Böll practiced an inner isolation by remaining at the rear end of the line of marchers.

In 1942 Böll married Annemarie. While still serving in France he pretended to have contracted an illness which forced his shift to Paris, where he was comparatively free. Böll was wounded during the movement of the troupe to Russia in 1943. In the hospital he met a fellow patient, a former communist who explained to him the tenets of communism. In 1944 he was in a camp in Hungary. In August that year Böll managed to get a false transfer certificate and got himself moved to France, from where with a genuine sanction of leave he came home. He extended his leave by artificially inducing fever in himself. In 1944 Böll's mother died. Böll deserted the army. The theme of his short story, "Entfernung von der Truppe," was based on his personal war experience. But it was too risky to stay at home. In 1945 he returned to the army office with a forged transfer order. On 9<sup>th</sup> April he fell into the hands of the Americans. A month later with the surrender of Germany the war ended. In September he was brought back to Germany. In November Böll and his family returned to Köln, which was now a devastated city.

Böll was not happy about the political developments in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945. He became a vehement critic of the Adenauer government for the politics of restoration and rearmament. He regretted that after 1945 a great chance of achieving a just distribution of wealth in the society had been missed. The currency reform unduly favoured those who owned land.

Böll became gradually a cultural ambassador of Germany. He began to be respected in Western countries and in the socialistic countries. He visualized a new political course with democratic movement in Czechoslovakia. He was sorely disappointed with the march of the armed Soviet tanks on the city of Prague. In 1968 he spoke in favour of the radical students of Czechoslovakia.

In the early seventies when Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik came under criticism from Right wing politicians, Böll also became the subject of attack. He was criticized as a supporter of terrorists, when he pleaded for justice and fair play for the accused. Böll maintained that even criminals should be handled according to the law of justice.

Böll became increasingly critical of the role of the Roman Catholic Church and though a Christian in principle he refused to pay the church money, the tax collected by the state for the church.

Böll became the President of the International PEN club in 1971. In 1972 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Though there was a general rejoicing there were critics who said that he was given the Prize on political considerations. Böll, as the President of the International PEN Club, and even later intervened on behalf of several persecuted writers like Amalrik, Soleschenizyn, Kopelew and Sacharow.

In 1974 Böll sued Mathias Walden for an article in the press in which he considered Böll as one of the propagators of terrorism and violence.

In the early 1980's Böll took part in the peace movement which was launched against the stationing of the Pershing II rockets on German soil. On 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1985 Böll died after a prolonged illness.

In his public lectures, journalistic writings and literary works Böll is a moralist of high rank. As a real activist he led resistance movements against repressive measures of governments. He spoke against the hazards of capitalistic exploitation. He led a systematic campaign against capitalism. His argument against the persecution of radicals and extremists was dubbed as support to terrorism.

Böll was a builder of public opinion; his writings had an educative purpose. He tried to arouse the conscience of the public. Böll pre-occupied himself with devising newer and newer forms of narrative technique. In Böll there is rather a tone of self-defence in referring to things like buying from black market. He mentions his acts of sacrilege, which under the circumstances could no longer be held as any form of sacrilege. Böll seemed very unorthodox though he too recognized the original value systems like the teachings of Christ as enunciated in the Bible.

Böll was a self-conscious writer and was aware of the necessity of a writer's resorting sometimes to exaggeration. He was primarily a creative writer and he took part in active politics only in a marginal manner and with a great deal of hesitation.

Böll's influences can be classified under three heads – as a writer, as journalist and as intervener in the socio-political life of the Federal Republic. Böll was the most representative of the writers of post war Germany. The literary form of the essay became popular in Germany because of writers like Böll. He improved the German image abroad, an image which had touched an all-time low because of Hitler's atrocities during the war. Böll firmly established a tradition of a literature of humanity. Even in his innumerable speeches Böll appealed to the human sensibility. But at the same time, he constantly tried to awaken his countrymen from a state of harmless self-indulgence.

Political journalism and literature were two channels in which Böll's quest for justice found its powerful expression. Böll's public utterances reveal that writing was his way of mixing with public affairs. He wrote against compulsory military service, against rearmament and warned against nuclear armaments. Böll launched a campaign against the proposals for introducing emergency provisions in the German constitution.

To some extent Böll was a practicing politician too. He was the spokesman for the weak, the persecuted and the oppressed. He never denied help to anybody who needed it. He was greatly helpful to Marcel Reich Ranicki who got his help to organize his life in Germany, which he chose as his home after leaving Poland. He came to the rescue of several others, most of whom were writers and intellectuals.

Böll's intervention on behalf of the persecuted terrorists and extremists alienated him from several Federal German citizens. There were strong attacks on his sympathy for the terrorists. But in the conflict between the state and the individual Böll almost always sided with the oppressed and the persecuted individual.

As a writer Böll is like Dickens setting a deliberate social goal for his works. His imagination does not deviate from social reality. He is aware of the social and individual situation of an author. He formulated in his Frankfurt lectures his aestheticism of humanity – whose themes are: "living, neighbourhood, home, money, love, religion and meals". Literature can take up as theme what the community considers to be a drop out. Böll is of the view that Literature should not merely slide into beautiful but meaningless statements. In spite of his utopian thinking Böll believes that a writer should keep the reality in mind, not simply say what the world should be. In one of his essays, he speaks of literature as rose and dynamite, a sweet-smelling explosive. In another essay Böll refers to the power of words:

words are sometimes more feared than bombs. Literature should however have the purpose of wearing out the unfamiliarity between people and establish mutual knowledge between them. Literature and politics are not really separate in the sense that literature can influence politics.

Literature is a constituent of culture, and should be free. Paradoxically art offers no comfort and on its “comfortlessness” itself there is its ability to offer comfort.

Böll is predominantly a critic of his time and society. He is a rational thinker and his criticism has a certain element of objectivity. He was foremost among West-European thinkers who could fight against the prejudice that only in communistic countries human rights are violated.

Böll criticizes the misplaced values in the society – which tend to glorify cleanliness as purity of conscience and to denounce poor and unkempt workers. The average man pays his attention to purely secondary things, ignoring the main ones. Böll is disappointed because of the discrimination against the poor and the underprivileged. He is distrustful even of the healthiest national spirit.

Böll directs his strongest attack on Hitler’s policy of repression and persecution. He regrets that the chance to bring about a socialist society was lost in post war Germany.

Böll fights against the powers that suppress and persecute thinkers who follow a radical, leftist attitude. The fear of radicalism leads to absurdities like praising Marx and Engels as German thinkers in speeches in foreign countries and not encouraging their views to hold in Germany itself.

In his literary works Böll criticizes the cruelty, and the lack of sympathy among men. How the individual suffers because of poverty and scarcity engages his mind again and again. Böll is an effective commentator upon the situation in post-war Germany. He criticizes social injustice.

Böll’s criticism of the Church was based upon the fact that it did not effectively fight against Hitlerism. During the war the Church was more bothered about sexual morality than with the morality of the war itself. The Church was irrational in the attack of the people of communistic countries as atheists. The church neglected, in the post war years, its duty of caring for the hungry, and suffering people, people who did not have food, people who had no dwellings. Both in the essays and literary works this criticism is present. The Church, by insisting on rituals like the Sunday mass, ruined the happiness of many families. The Church was thoroughly hypocritical in its attitude towards sexuality, advising for example a priest who expressed his desire to marry, to go to a prostitute. Böll was against ‘fiscalizing’ and ‘materializing’ man’s relation to Religion. The reduction of religion to meaningless rituals is

the theme of several stories of Böll like “Not only for Christmas time”, and “Views of a Clown”.

War is the background for most of the stories and novels of Böll. Stories like “the Attack”, “The Will”, “Wanderer”, “Reunion with Drueng” etc. deal with situations in which war degrades mankind. Böll refuses to glorify war. Stories like “The bowl of bread”, “Udessa”, “Postcard”, “Where were you Adam?” deal with the devastating effect of war.

Though the freedom of the press is an essential part of the democratic system, this should not be allowed to throttle individual freedom. Böll criticizes the Springer Press, particularly the “Bild”, for encroaching upon the individual’s right for dignity and self-respect. “The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum” is a story showing how a misrepresentation of the lady as an abettor of crime, just because she happened to fall in love with a young man whom she gave shelter in her apartment, leads ultimately to the emergence of violence.

Criticism of capitalism is a constant note in Boll’s works. He distrusts free trade which is based on profit motive. He is against the unrestricted exploitation of the earth’s resources. The philosophy of consumerism is harmful to the human society. In many essays and stories Böll laughs at the greed for money, at blind consumerism (‘the sinking of working morality’) and unnecessary academic pursuits (‘in the land of Rujuks’). Resistance is closely associated with criticism. In addition to being a critic Böll was a leader of resistance movements. He was not just an arm chair critic, but a fighter for people’s rights and liberties. Boll’s participation in the war was characterized by an inner resistance. Böll was known for his polemics. He supported the students’ movement of the 60’s, defending the extra parliamentary opposition as a necessary move, when no other effective means of resistance was at hand. Literary examples for Boll’s resistance are ‘The Will’, “On the Bridge”, “My sad face”, “The scales of Baleks”, “Dr. Murke’s splices of silence”, “Group Portrait with Lady” etc.

Boll’s criticism appears in the form of satirical representation. “Not only at Christmas”, are “In the Land of Rujuks”, “Here is Tipten”, “The undying Theodora”, “Something is going to happen”, “The laughter” etc. are examples.

Böll has, in his non-literary and literary works, mocked at the social systems or organizations which are inimical to the individual’s freedom. Criticism is the other side of the coin of man’s idealism. Though Böll shows sometimes features of existentialism, he is at the same time a seeker of truth, an explorer for a world with less injustice, less exploitation, less discrimination and more humanity.

Böll's defence of many other writers and statesmen lets us know that he holds them as sacred and valuable. Böll hoped to effect social reform through writing. He liked the ideals of poverty and love-enunciated by Leon Bloy. Böll set up the ideal of sympathizing and helping the poor. In Karl Marx Böll found a great man who fought for a classless society, free from exploitation. He admired the goodness of Mother Ey. Böll could recognize the passion for justice in Georg Buechner, the humanity of Solschenizyn. He agreed with the criticism of Sachrow against excessive use of machines. Böll shared Tolstoy's sympathy for the poor. He admired Willy Brand's effort to ensure peace. He approved of the methods of Guenter Wallraff to expose the unscrupulous practices of the Springer Press. Kopelew represents, according to Böll, the highest form of internationalism.

Böll considers a society worthy of respect when it rejects consumerism and practices the principle of equitable distribution of wealth. Real spiritualism is ensuring social justice and not just taking part in the rituals of the Church. The synthesis of Christianity and socialism is the ideal that Böll sets before the world. Böll was deeply disappointed that socialism did not become a reality in the Federal Republic but became bogged down by currency reform and rearmament. Böll believed in nationalization because that would serve the purpose of general welfare. He sets great store by the dignity of man, which should not be degraded by any means of oppression. He is a defender of freedom. Freedom is the prerequisite for man's ability to avail himself of his rights. Of course, Böll's utopia doesn't exclude the consideration of the harshness of reality. He is aware that the utopia of technology has become a reality but not the utopia of socialism. Böll's ideal nation is a nation where the values of peace and social brotherhood prevail.

"The train was on time" deals with the hope for happiness, peace and home, though contrasted with their negatives. Andreas enjoys in the company of Olina a short period of idyllic happiness. "House without protectors" deals with the possibilities for a new life. "And said not a single word" suggests the healing powers of love. Leni, the heroine of "Group portrait with a lady" is the model of many virtues of mankind; sympathy, fearlessness, sensibility, love. Böll is a practical idealist. He passed from an exclusive period of social criticism to a period of political engagement. He pleaded for an intervention in matters affecting freedom, whether it was at the national or at the international level. Böll has an international consciousness. His themes are not limited to the national level: Love, sympathy, fear, poverty misery of soldiers, life, suppression, death, and the search for freedom, rebellion and protest, the unwillingness to obey. "Irish Diary" is an expression of Boll's internationalism. His views on Marx extend to consider his influence on the workers'

movement in the entire world. Böll believes in the need to distribute the available resources on the basis of equity. Böll is against fanaticism and extremism. He would like to seek the third alternative which can avoid a direct conflict between the extremes. He hopes that the human race would be ultimately unified. The problem of the human race is more important than provincialism. He makes no distinction between Jews and Christians.

Though Böll refused the citation, he has been called a moral instance, the keeper of his nation's conscience. In Böll's own words, politicians, the parliament, the law are the conscience of a nation, but he too, as a conscious writer should be considered a keeper of his nation's conscience. Böll insists on justice which he associates not with punishment but the need for an individual to make use of his rights. Therefore, Böll defends the democratic system. He calls upon artists to help establish the democratic order.

Böll's democracy requires the fulfilment of the condition of equality of opportunities, and the establishment of a classless society which is free from the motive of profit. Böll favours democracy because it protects the dignity of man. He holds the view that the freedom of the individual should be preserved at all costs.

Böll's concept of the ideal leads to his prescription of a moral duty. He calls for an intervention in the affairs of other societies or other nations when human rights are endangered. As the President of the international PEN Club he took up the cause of several persecuted authors. In his appeal to Brezhnev Böll acted as the defender of human rights. Böll is against violence. His ideal is that of the Guevara who said that he did not have the courage to shoot. He is not in favor of relativizing terror. But Böll is not against protest movements and resistance. Even extra-parliamentary measures are not a threat, but he warns against the possible proclamation of emergency. Böll is not in favor of a showdown in the face of a conflict. He would seek a third alternative to ease the conflicts and to bring about a reconciliation. Because Böll lays great stress on human dignity he is opposed to all kinds of denunciation, which he considers to be an expression of violence. It is not on the basis of the result that Böll decides whether an action is violent or not. A driver of a car, in causing death by careless driving, is guilty of violence but not the one who, while being arrested tries to push aside the arm of the policeman, who comes to arrest him. Böll is not much worried about the legal formulations of guilt and innocence. Persecution and fear are the roots of violence. Violence has been universally practiced; even Homer deals with violence. Violence arises when freedom is threatened.

Some critics have found in Böll a destructive tendency, a tendency to debunk and negate everything. A superficial survey of his literary works may lead one to conclude that



Böll doesn't disapprove violence. In Böll's words of support to Fritz Teufel, ("An endearing anarchist") Klaus Bresser finds a justification of violence.

Böll himself denies the charge that he ever defended violence. He would provoke the society but not with violence. He doesn't absolve all kinds of protest groups and rebels in the same way. His pleading for the trial of the Baader-Meinhof group was not a case of defending terrorism.

Though Böll has claimed to have never spoken in defence of violence, the suspicion has remained that he does not totally keep out the use of force. A few situations in the literary works lead to this surmise. "No tears for Schmeck" is a story where physical assault seems to be considered as a way of wresting justice. Even in the novels there are quite a few figures who act aggressively and whose aggression is not openly condemned. Mrs. Hostelge (House without Protectors) slaps on the cheek of Rai, in "End of the official Trip" the Gruhls burn a jeep belonging to the Federal Army and "The lost honour of Katherina Blum" is apparently nothing but finding an excuse for the use of violence by the heroine.

But we should remember Böll's own words of caution that delineation of violence in literature doesn't amount to a defence of it.

We see thus two contradictory views about Böll's attitude towards violence but certainly Böll was not deliberately a defender of violence.

Humanity is Böll's ideal, it is also his moral principle. Böll offers people comfort and hope. His literature is nothing but the expression of his sense of duty, his feeling of being involved in the suffering of people.

Böll sympathizes with the outsiders in the world, who think differently, who feel differently. The humble, anonymous people interest him. He reflects on their needs, on their feelings, on their fortune. Böll has been called the author of the ordinary people. His humanity finds its focus in his praise for the seven acts of kindness: to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty to drink, to comfort the sick, to bury the dead, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoners and to shelter outsiders. The principle, Böll is sure, can apply to all humanity. Böll underlines the principles of equality and brotherhood. Brotherhood involves suspension of all conflicts, the preferences to brotherly feeling and reconciliation. He calls upon the students to demonstrate against injustice, because that is the only way left for redressing evils. He pleads on behalf of several persecuted authors like Wolf Bierman from GDR. Böll is against sanctions and boycotting etc., because the worst-affected by such measures would be the poor people themselves.

Several of the literary works reveal this aestheticism of humanity. The indefinite “they” in “And never said a Word” refers to the forces to which the helpless individual is exposed. Böll sympathizes with the people who are affected by the war. “Message”, “Seeing again in the Alley”, “Lohengrin’s Death”, “The Will” express this aspect of Böll’s morals. Uncle Otto of “the Black Sheep” is a typical outsider, an unsuccessful individual, the likes of whom win Böll’s sympathy. “Wanderer” is also a touching story of a wounded soldier. There are many other stories of this kind.

Böll assigns to man a place of dignity. When legal issues arise Böll considers man to be superior to rules. (“Politeness in several Instances of deviating from Rules”) Morals and religion are closely related. Religion is perhaps a systematized moral code, though religion is traditionally associated with the belief in God. Böll as a moralist has a high respect for religion, but just for this reason he distrusts the institution of the Church which has shown in practice the lack of true religious feeling. Böll never misuses the word God, who is not a dumping ground for human problems. His theology is one of kindness and gentleness, in which he finds the essence of religion. Religious feeling goes with purity of conscience. Religion makes no distinction between human beings and avoids all kinds of exploitation.

There is a secular touch in Böll’s religious attitude. Böll uses the word “God” not in the orthodox sense. In his view religious attitude is essentially following one’s conscience. In Böll there is a greater stress on the moral responsibility of man in society than a complete dependence on God. Böll finds the celebration of religion, not in the rites or rituals of the Church, but in the togetherness, in the union of the family in everyday life. That a wife or husband works the whole month for the sake of the family has something holy in it. Even a breakfast where all the members of the family take part would be a celebration. Böll doesn’t value the idea of heaven. Heaven is nothing but metaphysical fake coins which wouldn’t really buy anything.

In a world threatened by war and destruction, the only source of comfort and moral strength seems to be love as maintained by Matthew Arnold. The story “Stay in X” seems to uphold this sense of resignation. “The Bread of Earlier Years” is also a story which seems to imply this view. The relationship between individuals interests Böll a great deal. Love is a means of support for many suffering individuals as seen in “So were Evening and Morning” and “Hide in the Thundering Valley”.

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