

The Clown Short Guide

The Clown by Heinrich Böll

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Characters

Hans Schnier is the "Clown" of the novel's title and invariably the spokesperson for Boll as the author. A contradiction of terms, the twenty-seven-year-old Hans is at once worldly and naive, emotional and lethargic, antagonistic and remorseful. Possessing a genuine faith in humanity, Hans is searching for a meaningful existence, yet his quest seems inevitably doomed to failure. Agnostic as well as enigmatic, Hans rejects the organized institutions of society in favor of self-conceptualized isolation. Consequently, although his integrity as an individual is preserved, his personal life and professional reputation are sadly destroyed.

Throughout the novel, Hans remains the primary focus of attention, and apart from a visit by his father, the only character physically introduced to the reader. Of interest, however, either by telephone conversation or recollection, the reader becomes intimately familiar with the major participants in the protagonist's life: family, former friends, professional associates, and personal enemies. Boll is most attentive in the novel to the female characters, illuminating Hans in light of the contrast between the hypocrisy of his mother and the innocence of his sister Henrietta, whose unnecessary death during the war triggered Hans' systematic withdrawal. In addition, the character of Marie is presented as an enticing mixture of human sexuality and sensualness, ultimately corrupted by the conventions of a manipulative and unfeeling society. Without Marie, Hans is aimlessly adrift, consumed with despair, yet unfailing in his love and impenitent in his belief.

Social Concerns

Deeply affected by the horror and the extent of human misery he encountered during World War II, Boll emerged from the experience with a sense of moral outrage toward political and social injustice as well as a deep compassion for the defenseless and the oppressed. Boll clearly professed a belief in the intrinsic responsibility of the writer to the general public and with genuine conviction was a leading and influential activist and spokesperson for a humane, democratic society.

In his early work, Boll primarily focused on the absurd futility of war and depicted in his fiction either wartime experiences or the difficulties encountered by a defeated people attempting to regain a semblance of their former lives. Gradually, however, Boll broadened his perspective to analyze both the historical development and the troubled aftermath of the war and to question, often with embittered cynicism, the direction and ideology of the "new" Germany.

In *The Clown*, Boll is commenting on prevalent trends in modern German society that he finds threatening, distasteful, and at times abhorrent. Suspicious of intention and mindful of past experience, Boll points a disparaging finger at both church and state, and through the character of Hans Schnier, he incessantly rails against the narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, and opportunism dominating the West German society of the novel. Relentless in his criticism, Boll simultaneously offers the reader a despairing view of the present as well as a pessimistic and disheartening vision of the impending future.



Techniques

Spoken discourse is Boll's primary method to portray character development, to unveil thematic concerns, and to regulate the "action" of the novel.

Using first person narration and interior monologue, Boll presents with precision and grace the life and symbolic death of his protagonist Hans Schnier. Moralist and satirist, Boll relies on his stark, realistic prose to create a powerful image of the individual's struggle against conscience and conformity. Satire is clearly Boll's most effective weapon to define the character of Hans as well as to accentuate the ills of modern society. Through the extensive use of flashback, the reader relives the events of the past which have formulated the protagonist's present predicament, and the persona of the "Clown" becomes frightfully understood.

Arranged in a complex, often disorienting sequence, the novel demands the attention and commitment of the reader as part of the creative experience. In essence, Boll is forcing the reader to accept the "action" of the novel as an extension of reality, while granting the reader access to the protagonist's ultimate rejection of society.

Obsessed with the concept of self, Hans is portrayed as a singular figure maintaining a private existence; consequently, his only contact with the outside world is by the telephone, which becomes a symbol of his isolation.

Through a series of telephone conversations, preceded, followed, and at times interrupted by the protagonist's monologues, Hans vents his rage against a society which will not forgive and in return will not be forgiven.

Themes

Representative of Boll's literary oeuvre, *The Clown* incorporates many of the prominent thematic elements considered by Boll to be of fundamental significance in his work: the alienation of the individual by a dehumanizing, materialistic, and often emasculating society; the corruption of Christian ethic and spirituality; the loss of traditional familial and social unity; and the failure of mankind to accept the moral responsibilities of the age. In the novel, Hans Schnier, the son of a wealthy industrialist father and socially-dominated mother, emerges as the unique and endangered protagonist, artistic, temperamental, at times irrational, yet inherently kind and decent.

Refusing as a young man to conform to middle-class standards, Hans chose instead to become a clown, surely a personal statement directed toward his family as well as a means to express in his performances the absurdities of existence. Successful in his profession, Hans falls in love with Marie Derkum, seemingly his counterpart in rebellion, who eventually leaves him, rejecting both his lifestyle and his refusal to adopt her religious ideology. Typical of many of Boll's protagonists, Hans represents the individual victimized by the world in which he lives, struggling to survive, yet refusing to compromise his principles for mere survival.

Beginning with the publication of *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1962), Boll initiated a creative process to systematically investigate and analyze the development of German society while intertwining in his fiction the generation which experienced the First World War and the generation which grew up under Hitler. As part of this process, *The Clown* represents a satirical commentary on contemporary Germany.

Compressed within a single evening following a disastrous performance, the novel unfolds with stinging clarity as Hans purges himself of association with society and accentuates his rejection with symbolic protest dressed in clown-white and costume. Although set in the present, *The Clown* is undoubtedly intended as a reflection of the past, permeated with the unmistakable presence of the war, its futility, its waste and destruction, and its impact on the Schnier family. Similar to the character of Hans, Boll demands and will accept nothing less than unmitigated truth, infinitely aware that its realization could prove to be painfully final.

Adaptations

Capitalizing on the cinematic techniques employed by Boll in his fiction, the Czechoslovakian film director Vojtech Jasný collaborated with British cameraman Walter Lassally to adapt *The Clown* to the screen. Released in West Germany in 1975, *Ansichten eines Clowns* attempted to capture the satirical elements of the novel in a highly stylized artistic statement. Far more successful as a commercial commodity, however, was the film version of *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1976), released first in West Germany and later in the United States. Written and directed by frequent collaborators Volker Schlöndorff and his wife Margarethe von Trotta, the film is largely a faithful adaptation of Boll's novel as well as an impressive visual experience. Effectively compensating for the loss of the novel's narrator by fusing the action of the film with emotional intensity, Schlöndorff and von Trotta shifted the creative focus from social and political thematic concerns to the presentation of vivid and sympathetic characterization. As a result, the performance of Angela Winkler as Katharina Blum was generally acknowledged as the high point of the film.

Literary Precedents

Throughout his career, Boll acknowledged the influence of numerous literary figures including German as well as non-German authors indicative of his familiarity with and appreciation of world literature. Descending from the German narrative tradition associated primarily with Heinrich Heine and Thomas Mann, Boll has also been compared in his concern for social justice with Bertolt Brecht; however, his contemporary rival in German letters was unmistakably Gunter Grass whose body of work mirrors Boll's in exploring the terrain of the postwar era in Germany. Grass, particularly in the epic novel *The Tin Drum* (1959), demonstrated as Boll attempted in the majority of his fiction to define the present by its inextricable relationship to the past, while simultaneously enlisting literature in the cause of social change.

Highly appreciative of Western authors, Boll professed his indebtedness to both William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, and stylistically, his terse, eminently readable language is often attributed to the influence of Hemingway. In addition, Boll has been compared to Saul Bellow, primarily in relation to characterization and theme.

Seeking a means to communicate in a non-communicative world, Bellow's protagonists, particularly the character of Herzog in the novel (1964) by the same name, often demonstrate striking similarities to many of Boll's protagonists, most significantly the character of Hans in *The Clown*.

Determined to create a "habitable" language and to renew the legacy of German literature, Boll emerged from the war philosophically aligned with existentialism which in part conflicted with his inherent belief in religious faith. Consequently, although most predominant in his early fiction, an existential outlook reminiscent of Camus is certainly recognizable in *The Clown* intertwined with the prevailing dominance of religion, similar in context to the novels of Graham Greene, which is characteristic of Boll's entire body of work. In addition, and clearly of major importance, Boll was profoundly influenced by both Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, extremely significant in *The Clown* where the character of Hans is undoubtedly Boll's "underground man," disassociated and withdrawn from society.

Related Titles

"I am a clown," says Hans. "I collect moments." Ostensibly intended by Boll as a simple definition of character, the statement offers considerable insight into Boll's philosophical perspective and could easily be attributed to any number of Boll's protagonists, among them Roberg Fahmel in *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, Leni Pfeiffer in *Group Portrait with Lady* (1973), and Katharina Blum in *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1975). Boll was uniquely adept at creating sympathetic, humane characters, genuinely sincere, yet often passive in their opposition to the world around them, through which Boll could criticize the German society responsible for victimizing their lives. Refusing to conform to social norms and unwilling to compromise their intrinsic sense of value, Boll's protagonists form a varied collective of displaced yet remarkably solidified individuals. Consequently, Boll's literary oeuvre, including fiction as well as non-fiction, survives as a lasting tribute to his determination as an artist to remind his audience of the atrocities of the past and to preserve the sanctity of the future.

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