

Group Portrait with Lady Short Guide

Group Portrait with Lady by Heinrich Böll

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Characters

As the central figure of the novel, *Group Portrait with Lady*, Leni is presented as the essence of goodness, the self-sacrificing innocent juxtaposed against a misguided society infected by evil. Of interest to the reader and presumably the motivating factor initiating the investigation of her life is the fact that Leni is at once naively simplistic and immeasurably complex, an elusively private person assimilated within a communal state of bliss. Similar to the character of Hans in *The Clown* (1965) as well as other protagonists in Boll's fiction, Leni is an unnatural phenomenon possessing the enigmatic quality of naturalness. Consequently, with a combination of marked determination and voyeuristic pleasure, the narrator attempts to solve the mystery of Leni by putting her "in the right light." The various informants, representing a cross section of German society and comprising the "Group" of the novel's title, offer an assemblage of factual information, insight, conjecture, and defamation of character, leaving the reader to render the "portrait" of Leni complete.

Of considerable artistic merit, Boll successfully integrates the life stories of Leni's "Group" into the action of the novel which enables him to compact the social and political history of Germany since the turn of the century into a manageable and illuminating format.

In addition, Boll imaginatively structures his material to allow the narrator to shift roles from that of neutral observer to participating character in the story he is telling, virtually replacing Leni as the protagonist toward the end of the novel.

Group Portrait with Lady has been referred to as a testimony of survival, and indeed Leni is the novel's most ingenious and enduring survivor. The question surfacing for the reader is how Leni, despite overwhelming personal loss, humiliation, and blatant persecution, has managed to remain uncorrupted by society and a constant source of strength for others. Now at forty-eight years of age and much to the indignation of her neighbors, Leni is carrying a child fathered by her Turkish lover, and seems incapable of either shame or resentment. The personification of innocence, Leni is intrinsically spiritual, and a motif suggesting an identification between Leni and the Virgin Mary is consistent throughout the novel. Lapsed in her religious faith by the standards of the church, Leni is literally transformed into the symbolic "body" of man, preserving in both thought and action the essential meaning of Christian love and charity.



Social Concerns/Themes

Boll's most subtle satire, *Group Portrait with Lady* is generally recognized as the single work which best represents the artistic summation of his literary career. Similar in context to most of his mature fiction, the novel reiterates Boll's major thematic concerns and reaffirms his moral chastisement of modern Germany. Written in the mode of documentary, *Group Portrait with Lady* is elaborately devised as an investigative study undertaken by an ostensibly objective narrator, referred to in the novel as the author or "The Au." The subject for examination is Leni Pfeiffer, nee Gruyten, the celebrated "Lady" of the novel's title. Developed through a series of interviews with numerous individuals having some familiarity, connection, or past association with the narrator's subject, the novel is at once an in-depth character portrayal as well as a social history of Germany in the twentieth century.

In the novel, the reader is early introduced to Leni and is provided background information concerning her childhood and adolescence, including her convent education where she meets the mystical Sister Rahel, a major influence in Leni's emotional and philosophical development. For Leni, as for many of Boll's fictional characters, the Second World War serves as a significant although unfortunate turning point, shattering the world Leni knew and replacing it with the contemporary Germany she would ultimately reject.

During the war, Leni enters into a short-lived marriage of convenience, witnesses her father's imprisonment and her mother's death, and becomes a wreath-maker in a factory to earn her livelihood, where she engages in a forbidden love affair with a Russian prisoner-of-war with whom she has an illegitimate child. When the child's father is killed, Leni devotes herself to her son as she embraces first communism and then social humanism. The novel follows Leni into the 1970s, illustrating her genuine idealism while enlightening the reader of her altruism and integrity.

About the novel, Boll once stated, "I tried to describe or to write the story of a German woman in her late forties who had taken upon herself the burden of history from 1922-1970." In doing so, Boll creates with Leni a remarkable literary personality: generous, compassionate, and wholesome. Contrasted with the prevailing values of the times, the character of Leni allows Boll an effective vehicle to criticize the hypocrisy, commercialism, and opportunism dominating postwar Germany, epitomized in the novel by the unscrupulous Otto Hoyser and his family. Once again, Boll is instructing his readers that Germany has ignored the moral lessons wrought by war. Underlying the surface pretense of society, Boll detects the dormant but not forgotten soundings of arrogance, greed, hatred, and most disturbing to his sensitivity as a human being, racism.

Techniques

Experimenting with narrative perspective, Boll creates in *Group Portrait with Lady* an intriguing biographical study serving as a social and psychological representation of a single character transposed against the panorama of history. The novel unfolds as an investigation as well as a reconstruction of Leni's life, intertwining the inescapable reality of the past with the unmistakable contrivances of the present. Leni is seemingly oblivious to the world around her, yet the reader is meant to interpret her behavior as an evasive tactic in much the same way as Leni's son, Lev, aspires to negate his association with society by a form of "deliberate underachievement. "

Throughout the novel, Boll maintains a masterful sense of irony and deliberate chronological complexity to both engage and challenge the reader. Although criticized for being overly sentimental in tone, the novel's lasting reputation is based primarily on its satiric wit, its inventive use of language, and its adept presentation of the social issues confronting modern Germany.

Literary Precedents

Group Portrait with Lady was Boll's most impressive fictional creation and clearly the largest in scope. Reminiscent of the expansive narrative tradition of Tolstoy, incorporating numerous characters, intricate plot development, and broad thematic purpose, the novel combines an effective blend of sentiment and satire. As in much of his fiction, Boll also echoes the philosophical conviction of both Brecht and Camus, emphasizing contemporary alienation, the documentary mode of communication, and the universal although ultimately hopeless struggle between good and evil. Of additional importance in relation to Group Portrait with Lady is Boll's intelligent and sensitive treatment of women, compared by some to the fiction of John Updike.

Invariably, however, Boll was most concerned with attempting to capture in the form of the novel the German experience of the twentieth century, and conceivably in conjunction with *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass, Group Portrait with Lady survives as the most significant contribution to contemporary German literature.



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