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The Post-war Works of Heinrich Böll and the Questions of Humanism

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Abstract. The article analyzes the views of the writer and Nobel Prize winner Heinrich Böll, who was considered the “Conscience” of the German people, on the issues of man and conscience, and how humanity is tested in the most difficult times, in his work. The analysis was conducted by comparing the methods of narrating about a person’s life and his place in society in the author’s early works - short stories and novellas - and the changes in narrative style and expression in the writer’s later major novels.

Keywords: Heinrich Böll, German literature, war, humanity, antimilitarism, the issue of conscience, 20th century world literature.

Introduction

It is known that the life of Heinrich Böll, one of the brightest representatives of world literature of the 20th century, distinguished by the simplicity and popular nature of his works, coincided with the turning points of the era, the most important events of modern history. He lived and worked not in a specific historical period, but in a period dominated by many systemic and structural changes, opposing ideas: he was born in Cologne in 1917 during the reign of the last German Kaiser, grew up in the Weimar Republic, experienced Hitler's rule, the war years, and then actively participated in the reconstruction and, in some respects, the formation of a new West German society. These changes could not but have an impact on the writer's creative style. Böll personally witnessed how great the connection between the system and the person is, and how major changes in society can quickly have a positive or negative impact on people's lives, easily changing their dreams, hopes, and plans.

The tragic consequences of war and the cruelty of death became the main theme of Böll’s early works. His characters reflected the entire generation that suffered, and the images in his works, like Böll himself, are anti-militarist and anti-fascist. These characters are heroes who experienced the hardships that war brings to an entire society and to each of its members.

Discussion and results

Heinrich Böll began to take his first steps in the world of literature after World War II. In particular, the young writer's first book, the novel “The Train Arrived on Time”, was published in 1949. In fact, this story was published in a newspaper two years earlier, in 1947. In the 1950s, the author presented his first collection of short stories¹. Then the book “Where are you, Adam” appeared on the shelves of literary stores. The work skillfully depicted the concepts of war, responsibility for one’s own life, and the belatedness of life. Thus, the early works of H. Böll were filled with vital

¹ Magill, Frank N. ed. The 20th Century A-GI: Dictionary of World Biography, Volume 7. Routledge, 2013. - p. 349.

accuracy and were distinguished by the simplicity of the narrative language. Many of his novels were well received by readers and critics, and he received a national award in the 1950s for the story "Black Sheep"².

The most vivid expression of Heinrich Böll's work and his anti-militaristic, pacifist ideas can be seen in the novels "Billiards at Half-past Nine", "Through the Eyes of a Clown", "Group Portrait with a Lady". These novels were able to more clearly show the life of the most ordinary and diverse classes of German society during the war years.

Some critics have repeatedly "caught" Böll in imperfect style and minor inaccuracies.³ However, his strength lies not in the smoothness and elegance of words, but in his subtle understanding of the fragile human soul, in his ability to reveal deep moral feelings, in the peculiar structure of his plots and in the search for unexpected artistic means, which allowed him to connect individual destinies and everyday life with the most pressing problems of the modern world. In Böll, details, details and dates are given historical, general significance and are interconnected with the era. A distinctive feature of the writer's style was the desire for detail, the system of leitmotifs and the predominance of internal monologues⁴.

Böll believed that a writer could change the world to one degree or another through his or her work⁵. For the sincerity of his works and political activities, Heinrich was often called "the conscience of the nation", although he himself disliked this title⁶. The writer believed that government, legislation, and the legal system were called upon to be the conscience of the nation, but only the Masters of the Pen could awaken that conscience. He said: "When I had the opportunity to speak and think, to write and speak, on matters of literature and politics after the war, I never separated one from the other."⁷ In 1972, Heinrich Böll became the second German writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature after Thomas Mann. The award was given "for his work, which combines a broad range of reality with a high art of image-making and has made a significant contribution to the revival of German literature."⁸

Conclusion

In his works, Böll showed the everyday life of war in all its ugliness, rejected the idea that waging war is heroic, and criticized the romanticization of war. He considered the most important basis of his literary work to be a very responsible work related to the word, because when spoken, words move society, they are capable of action, can call for war and cause the death of millions of people, and whether to allow this or not is a matter of the writer's conscience⁹.

Heinrich Böll, realizing the historical guilt of the German people, showed that responsibility for the crimes of fascism lies with every German. He emphasized the

² Млечина И. В. Литература и «общество потребления». Западногерманский роман 60-х — начала 70-х годов. М.: Худож. лит., 1975. 238 с.

³ Cook Bernard A. Europe Since 1945: An Encyclopedia, Volume 1. Taylor & Francis, 2001.- p. 135.

⁴ Кацева Е. Уроки Генриха Белля // Вопросы литературы. — 2000. — № 2.

⁵ Млечина И. В. Литература и «общество потребления». Западногерманский роман 60-х — начала 70-х годов. М.: Худож. лит., 1975. 238 с.

⁶ Рудницкий М. И. Генрих Белль // История литературы ФРГ. М., 1980. С. 295

⁷ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1972/boll/facts/>

⁸ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1972/boll/facts/>

⁹ Орлова Р., Копелев Л. Писатель и совесть // «Новый мир». — 1967. — № 12. — С. 257.

importance of preserving the memory of the war and the threat of fascism as an “unconquered past.”¹⁰ He set out to find a new literary language untainted by fascist rhetoric. Using original stylistic techniques, he presented fascism as the tragedy of several generations of Germans¹¹.

His growing doubts about the prospects of European society fueled the writer's penchant for satire, grotesque, caricature, and the portrayal of reality as farce and mockery. He opposed the spread of consumer morality through the media, the restriction of personal freedom, and the manipulation of public consciousness.¹² Böll's post-war work focused on issues of personal integrity and freedom. For the author, the individual and his dignity always remained the highest value.

Thus, while the writer's early works were mainly stories with simple plots, his works gradually expanded and covered the social and spiritual problems that arose after the end of the war. In these works, the author mainly narrated his own experiences through artistic images and was able to vividly describe the realities of the first post-war years in Germany.

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¹⁰ Draugsvold, Ottar G., ed. Nobel Writers on Writing. McFarland, 2000. - p. 121

¹¹ Conrad Robert C. Understanding Heinrich Böll. — Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1992. - P.87

¹² Фрадкин И. Генрих Бёлль — писатель, и больше чем писатель // Генрих Бёлль. Собрание сочинений. — М.: «Художественная литература», 1989. — Т. I. — С. 5—28.