Isaiah Grace

Prof. Gray

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Three Generations of Faehmels: An allegory of the German People

Heinrich Böll, in Billiards at Half-Past Nine, uses the Faehmel family to explore the experiences of twentieth century Germans. Böll captures the dramatic changes to German life through each generation. The Faehmel family is an allegorical representation of three generations of German history. Each member of the family embodies a critical aspect of German society and serves to translate the grand drama of the German experience down to a relatable human scale. The three Faehmel architects form the central pillar of the family, and the metaphorical Germany that they embody. Each Faehmel architect can be described with an epithet: Heinrich the creator, Robert the destroyer, and Joseph the reconciler.

Heinrich Faehmel, the patriarch and founder of the Faehmel family, was born right after the 1871 unification of Germany. He is among the first generation of Germans who have a unified national identity. His father is a traditional peasant with very traditional views on class society. Especially the rigidity and totality of hierarchical social structures. This is particularly evidenced by his refusal to sing at his own daughters funeral. The only thing that Heinrich remembers his father saying is “No singing for third-class funerals” (92). To Heinrich, and to the new generation of German people, unification, urbanization, and industrialization offer an escape from medieval peasant lifestyles. Heinrich is fiercely ambitious in his youth. He pursues higher education, a career as an officer, and marries into an established family well above the status of his father. In Heinrich, Böll captures the bright optimism, ambition, and intellect of young Germans during the turn of the century. Germany itself was undergoing a tremendous industrial revolution, and Heinrich perfectly embodies the new spirit of Germans, ambitiously perusing what was out of reach for their fathers.

Despite his grand ambition for “seven children who were to present me with seven times seven grandchildren” (104) Heinrich’s new family dynasty has mixed success. Just as the German people were held back, so to do the Faehmels lose many family members to the wars ravaging Germany. As Heinrich himself says “We Faehmels know death very well” (3). Heinrich enjoys immense professional and financial success, but loses three children and one daughter-in-law to tragedy and violence. By 1958 the Faehmel family, just like Germany itself, is prosperous but broken, divided, and decimated by violence. Even the separation of Heinrich and Johanna symbolically represents the division of West and East Germany. Böll uses Heinrich to express the grief and regret felt by the German people in 1958. Heinrich ultimately renounces his professional and military achievements, wishing only that his family had remained intact. In this renunciation, Böll, through Heinrich, questions the achievements of unified Germany. Ultimately concluding that the great accomplishments of industrialization came at the expense of the German society and humanity. The retrospective posture of Heinrich in 1958 allows Böll to critically examine and deconstruct German National identity. Heinrich indeed becomes a patriarch, but he is the father of small and broken family.

Robert Faehmel, born during the Great War, grew up in an established middle class household. Unlike his father, his parents could afford to fund his education and he follows his father’s footsteps to pursue architecture. Robert personifies a new generation of Germans, urban and educated, who become active politically in the 1930’s. He becomes passionately, and violently, involved in local politics. Böll uses Cologne as microcosm of Germany, showing us the personal and familial struggles that occurred in the early years of the Third Reich. Robert has two distinct epithets that describe the character transformation he undergoes during the war: Robert the shepherd, and Robert the destroyer.

Robert the shepherd, is tormented by the abuse of the lambs by those who have taken the host of the beast. Always allegorical, Böll uses Robert to comment on resistance, even violent resistance, to authority. Robert is not a pacifist, he has not taken the host of the lamb. His work instead is to protect the lambs. Here, Böll seems to justify violent resistance to the Third Reich.

However Robert is not universally a good character. Robert the destroyer, despite his early resistance to the host of the beast, does join the army and finds great success and satisfaction as a demolitions expert. His capitulation to the *Higher Power* represents a larger moral failure of “good Germans” to resist the Third Reich. He does not take the host of the beast, but he does execute his job with precision and excellence. While imperfect, Böll redeems Robert – and the German people – from their crimes during the war. Böll shows a good man being forced into the army. Excusing, in a way, a generation of complacent Germans.

Nothing symbolizes Robert the destroyer more than his demolition of the abbey. Fulfilling his deranged Generals orders, Robert meticulously and perfectly demolishes his father’s magnum opus. However Böll makes it clear that it is not the General who is to blame for the destruction of the abbey. While Böll does criticize the German military through the insanity of General “Field of Fire” Otto, the destruction of the abbey is different, it is familial and personal. Robert’s destruction is not the blind and frenzied madness of war, but a cool, calculating, and disciplined, stab at the symbolic achievement of his father. As his father symbolizes the first generation of unified Germans, the abbey represents their outward achievements. Although Heinrich himself is not particularly upset when he learns that Robert is responsible for the abbey’s destruction, the generation of Germans that Heinrich represents is devastated. Böll uses Heinrich's ambivalence to criticize societies valuation of structures over lives. Robert says that the pile of rubble the abbey is reduced to is a monument to the forgotten lives lost to violence. He is incensed that most people grieve longer for the abbey than for the dead.

In addition to the destruction being a monument to the forgotten dead, the abbey as a structure represents the spirit of the city of Cologne. The three generations of Faehmels involved with the abbey represent the three phases of twentieth century Germany. Construction, destruction, and reconciliation; “Grandfather built the monastery, Father blew it up, and Joseph has rebuilt it” (238). Almost every character outside the Faehmels is absolutely enthralled with the abbey. The contrasting lack of interest by the Faehmels shows Böll’s criticism of Germans preoccupation with their material achievements: “consider carefully whether you are truly reconciled to the spirit which destroyed the monastery” (235). The multifaceted symbolism of the abbey continues as a harsh criticism of the churches endorsement of the Third Reich. Robert, the shepherd and Robert the destroyer exact vengeance on the institution that endorsed his brother’s violent ideology.

Robert and Otto’s relationship is fundamentally broken and unreconciled. Böll explores the pain of the Third Reich through the relationship between brothers. They find themselves on opposite sides of the *Higher Power*. Fighting each other while living under the same roof. The division within the Faehmel family symbolically embodies the painful division within Germans during the Third Reich. The division remains agonizingly unreconciled because of Otto’s death in Kiev. Despite their differences, the brothers share some similarities. Both write back home requesting money in discrete, almost abashed, ways. They simply say “need 3” or “need 5”. Both brothers are radical and passionately involved in political life, something their parents aren’t nearly as invested in. Indeed, a duality of character can be found within Robert and Otto. They symbolically embody the same generation of Germans, but express their passionate political ideologies in opposite ways. In Otto, Böll explores the neighborhood kids who got swept up in the violence of fascism. In Robert, Böll shows and alternate path, equally passionate, of compassion and empathy within communities. Böll uses the brothers to reflect the new waves of populism and greater political engagement in the German political life.

Joseph Faehmel’s life and legacy is largely unknown. The third generation of architect in the Faehmels, he must live up to both his father’s and grandfather’s expectations of him. He belongs to a now solidly established family, but one that has been torn apart by the two world wars. Again, Böll uses the Faehmels to mirror themes from the larger German narrative. Germany has become fully industrialized by 1958, it has enjoyed two generations of ambitious urbanization and construction, and a new generation of German youth have come of age in a post war society. The trauma of the war is still present and close, but young Germans are looking forward, not backward. Joseph does not want to inherit his grandfather’s estates in the country, symbolically refusing the fruits of past generations to instead build something different. He also moves out of his families house on modest street, further signifying both his independence, but also a departure from the norms of the last fifty years.

Joseph represents the future of Germany, of reconciliation, and reconstruction. The choice, as Böll puts it, between war and peace. By 1958 Germany is a divided nation at the epicenter of the Cold War. The future is unknown and uncertain. A war potentially more devastating and gruesome than the last looms on the horizon. Joseph has neither taken the host of the lamb, nor the host of the beast. He must chose the future of Germany just as he must chose his architectural discipline: construction or demolition. Böll again uses allegory, construction representing a path of peace and reunification, while demolition represents a path of war and division. His grandfather chose construction, and his father chose demolition. Through Joseph’s decision, Böll confronts German society, making it clear that the choice is theirs, but offering no guidance for them: “what will you do, Joseph, when you’re thirty? Will you take over your father’s architectural estimates office? Will you build or destroy” (235)