



Dieter Klemenz

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Effi Briest 5

Working on an European Understanding

Dear Grundtvig-participants,

may I introduce myself? I am a retired professor of education at the University of Kiel and a member in the ZKE-team. Since some weeks I am a new member of your community, full of hope in regard to my membership with you.

Why full of hope?

My grandfather was killed in the First World War in 1914, my father was killed in the Second World war in 1945. They died believing that Germany was surrounded by enemies.

They had no chance – or: they took no chance – to proof what they were told, before war began. Had they any contact with people speaking foreign languages?

No, they hadn't.

The only thing they knew: France was the *Erbfeind* (the eternal sworn enemy) of Germany.

You know the end of the story.

It is the luck of my life to know that they were wrong. To read books of authors written in foreign languages, to contact you in Bucharest, to hear your opinions, to discover differences as well as similarities: What a chance for me!

In the headline of our Project is the name of Grundtvig. As I know Grundtvig was one of the few men who supported women's movement at the beginning, and also he was a pioneer of Adult Education in Europe. His name is a good name for an important thing we have to do.

I look forward to see you all in Bucharest.

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Effi Briest's answers (1895) on the ZKE-Questionnaire (2014)

Let us have a look at the women's movement in old Europe, before it is named with the word "Emancipation" in the 20th century. Whoever wants to sketch the various and difficult ways of women's attempt to break through the restrictions of social life, is – at the beginning – invited to get acquainted with some heroines of European novels in the 19th century, with Anna Karenina, who threw herself in front of a train, with Emma Bovary, who took arsenic, with Effi Briest, who died of a broken heart.

Following the novelists, we learn that liberation from social narrowness and oppression was not only a painful procedure: it was a struggle of life and death. Less dramatically expressed, in the diction of social sciences of the 19th century, we can observe a process which intends to liberate women and men from the state of alienation in society which can also be observed within the individual persons.

But now we concentrate on "Effi Briest", one of the female protagonists of the novelist Theodor Fontane. And it may be mentioned, that for the English editor of "Effi Briest" "Fontane's sensitive portrayals of women's lives are unsurpassed in European literature". His literary style is called "realism", so we hope that we can get a realistic impression of the role of an individual among social forces and interests, without perspective abridgements, in a – fictitious, as it seems in our beginning – case study.

What is the plot of this novel, published in 1895?

Let us sketch the occurrences in a shortened form, and afterwards let us try to get some answers by Effi on our questions.

Effi was the only daughter in the house of Landrat Briest. When she was seventeen years old, Baron Instetten asked her father for her hand. Her mother was sure, that Instetten was a "man of character". His reputation, his status was decisive for her mother to accept his proposal, though he was twenty years older than Effi. That same day, after her mother has delivered Instetten's proposal to her daughter (who stayed silent), Effi was engaged. This was the be-



ginning of her marriage. Their residence was at first Kessin, a small country town, but later – Effi’s daughter in the meantime was now seven years old – Instetten moved ahead in his career, and their residence was Berlin, the capital. Some months after the removal from Kessin to Berlin Effi stayed at a spa in Bad Ems for six weeks.

Now we take the opportunity – without Instetten’s knowledge – to tell Effi about the ZKE-questionnaire. We suppose that Instetten would have refused to answer our questions on “domestic violence”. But Effi was ready and accepted to be asked by us after she had skimmed the questionnaire and we assured her anonymity. At first she was a bit reluctant, but after a few minutes she focussed her attention on the questions and answers, after we had explained our methods and procedures on this example:

Example 0

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why don’t you remember our wedding anniversary?”

Effi answers: “I remember that my husband – it may be three years ago - said to me, ‘We are going to entertain, and when winter comes they all will be saying at the Ministry, ‘Yes, there is no doubt, Frau von Instetten is the most delightful wife in town ... It’s our wedding anniversary, you must make allowances” (161).

Question 1

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why don’t you help me with the household?”

Effi: “What a question is this? I manage my household. We have two maid-servants, Roswitha and Johanna. There is no need for another helping hand“.

Question 2

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why is it only my job to educate the children? Who is responsible for the children?”

Effi: “I remember that my Papa and I took a walk last year. He asked me: ‘Do you take strolls like this in Kessin, and does Instetten accompany you and Annie and tell you all sorts of things?’ He was surprised to hear from me: ‘No Papa, I don’t take strolls like this. Only Rollo, the dog, goes with me.’ ‘Always Rollo,’ laughed Briest. ‘If I didn’t know better, one might always think Rollo was closer to your heart than your husband and child.’” (87).

Question 3



“Did you ever ask your partner: Why don't you allow me to exercise a profession ?”

Effi: “I ask you, who would ask such a question? But sometimes I think: What I need is to have so much to do that I don't know which way to turn. That would be the thing for me. There are those societies where young girls learn to be housekeepers or sewing teachers or kindergarten nurses. Have you never heard of them? But what do I do? I read, I play patience, I play Chopin.” (195).

Question 4

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why did you touch me roughly?”

Effi: “There was no reason to ask such a question. There is a lot of good in his nature, and he is as noble as anyone can be“. And then she added, after a short break: “Who lacks the real capacity for love” (216).

Question 5

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why don't you talk with me?”

Effi: “Before our marriage I thought: He's so good and kind to me and he is so considerate, but ... I'm afraid of him (25). Some years later, after a walk, I said to him: “You could give me a kiss. But you never think of that. All the long way never a touch, frosty as a snowman. And always that cigars of yours, nothing else.” (49)

Question 6

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why did you shout at me?”

Effi: “He never shouted at anyone”.

Question 7

“Did you ever ask your partner: Why don't you allow me to open an account?”

Effi: “This is a question I never asked him”.



Supplement

We concealed from our reader: during Effi's weeks at the spa (when she tried to answer our questions) a collection of letters was found, at the Berlin residence, in a drawer of a bedside-table, bound with a red ribbon. For those of our readers, who are not experts with profound knowledge of Theodor Fontane's works, it may be added, that nobody intended to discover those letters. The discovery happens while searching for a bandage for a wound of daughter Annie, who fell down at the staircase. What Instetten now carried in his hand, was proof for an affair, which Effi had had with Major Crampas, seven years ago. Baron Instetten challenged Major Crampas to a duel, which ended with Crampa's death.

Annie, the daughter, was separated from her mother, and Effi was repudiated by Instetten and her parents. But in the end, by advocacy of her father, Effi was taken in again in her parents' house, strictly said, in a hospital bed of that place, where she died a short time later.

Still lying on her bed Effi commissioned her mother to contact Instetten and let him know: "I want to be sure he will know that it all became clear to me here during the days of my illness, which have been my most beautiful days of all almost, that it became clear that he was right. Everything he did was right. The business with poor Crampas – what else could he possibly have done? And then – that was what hurt me most – bringing my own child up to ward me off. They kept Annie away from me. Hard as it is for me, and painful as it is, that was right too. Let him know that I died convinced of that." (216).

At last we have to reevaluate her answers on our questions regarding "domestic violence" in a contradictory way: On the one hand we cannot ignore the presence of violence in Effi's family, on the other hand, looking back Effi accepts it as inevitable.

All fiction?

And now, in our last sentences we have to add that Effi, the character in Fontane's novel, is a person who had actually lived. Elisabeth von Ardenne was her name, and the whole story is based on a story of a sensational adultery in the 80th years of the 19th century, which was reported in the "Vossische Zeitung". We know about Elisabeth von Ardenne that she – other than Effi – had decided after her forced divorce from her husband, to take her life in her own hand and to work as a nurse of a neurotic patient, named Margarethe Weyersberg, in Lindau am Bodensee, Hofbucher Weg 45. There she died, ninety-nine years old, on February 5th, 1952.



It would be an attractive task to compare the real Elisabeth von Ardenne with the invented Effi Briest. But maybe it is better to join with the old Briest, who said calmly: “Ah, that’s enough... That’s *too* vast a subject.”

These are the last words of Fontane’s novel.

