Gabriele Reuter

From a Good Famil

Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens

Presented by: Charlotte Woodford

Gabriele Reuter's *From a Good Family* (in the original German *Aus guter Familie: Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens*, 1895), engages critically with the gender politics of the bourgeois family around 1900. Reuter's focus is on the figure of the unmarried and childless bourgeois woman, whose fate casts light on notions of gender and class at this time. Since most representations of women in realist and naturalist fiction at this time were authored by men, Reuter is drawing attention to a perspective on society from a woman's point of viewwhich she considered to be marginalised and silenced. The popularity of the novel is connected to Reuter's breaking of taboos and breaking of silences, as well as Reuter's successful representation of the inner life of her female protagonist.

Reuter casts light on the family politics of the bourgeoisie and its moral double standards. She critiques how women lack the freedoms and education needed for self-determination and a role outside of the family. It is suggested in the novel that the German nation gains strength at the expense of women.

As the novel opens, Reuter draws attention to women's exclusion from the realm of the political by having the protagonist's father outline the 'duties' of the female citizen (Staatsbürgerin). The protagonist's father, Heidling, makes a speech after Agathe's confirmation in which he asserts that women are the invisible roots on which the state has its foundations. Use of narrative irony enables the reader to recognise the effect of such attitudes on women's sense of self. Reuter in this respect puts forward a constructivist approach to gendered identity, showing how the power of the social is written on the body, with compliance with the norm brought about by discipline (Agathe as a child is whipped by her mother for the act of rebellion of refusing to observe the family rules). Reuter's protagonist, Agathe Heidling, is 'from a good family', she experiences a high degree of financial security thanks to her father, who works in the service of the state, and she lives in her parents' comfortable home. However, Agathe is raised in the context of bourgeois gendered norms which limit her sphere of activity. Her cousin, Martin Greffinger, by contrast, tries to politicize Agathe in the light of his own social democratic conviction. The novel also draws attention to society's double standards of sexuality morality and (in a subplot in relation to Agathe's servant Luise) the sexual exploitation of working-class women.

Reuter's novel focuses on the 'Leidensgeschichte' (sorrows) of the protagonist, Agathe Heidling, and echoes with this subtitle the title of the successful and influential eighteenth-century novel *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, by Goethe (1774). In focusing on the failure of the protagonist to

marry, Reuter also breaks away from the plots of contemporary romances. The protagonist's life is shaped by day-to-day repetition of routines, and the novel employs the structural device (used also in Goethe's Werther) of a repetition of episodes in the first and second parts of the novel. This repetition includes two occasions when her father refuses to allow Agathe to read books which will expand her knowledge of the world and replace them with books that reinforce notions of a socially acceptable feminine role. Reading is therefore shown to have potential for freedom, and the control of reading to be an instrument of discipline. The books removed are notably a volume of political poetry andscientific works on theories of evolution. Both stand in opposition to religious and social works of instruction for women and undermine the discourses of socialisation to which she is exposed.

Agathe's experiences culminate in a nervous breakdown, an outbreak of violence directed towards her best friend, and her subjection to the violence of a wide range of medical therapies which correct her behaviour. These leave her, not yet 40 years' old, living in her father's home in a state of indifference. Reuter therefore also deliberately avoids a conciliatory ending. However, the novel aims to expose the damaging effect of society on the protagonist through its attention to her internal perspective and her questioning of her upbringing. In this way, the novel brings about a critical awareness on the part of the reader.

Reuter's novel was published by the influential German publisher Samuel Fischer and ran to 28 editions before its reception history was interrupted by the Nazi regime. Subsequently, it was rediscovered by feminist critics (see Brinker-Gabler, 1988), republished in the English translation by Helen Chambers in 1997, and in a German critical edition by Katje Mellmann in 2003. The recent paperback Reclam edition (2024) finally makes it available to a wide readership.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: