**Irmgard Keun: Where Critiquing Modern Weimar Gets You**

*Who was Irmgard Keun?*

Irmgard Keun could be described as a feminist author, one of the leading writers in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity art movement, which was a reaction against expressionism and valued modern realism to reveal concerns with modernity after the First World War.[[1]](#footnote-1) She was born on the 6th of February 1905 in the town of Charlottenburg, before it was into Berlin.[[2]](#footnote-2) She encountered immediate success when publishing her first novel, ‘Gilgi, Eine von Uns,’ in 1931. Soon thereafter she published ‘Das Kunstseidene Mädchen’ in 1932, which would become her most popular novel. However, due to their societal criticisms along with the controversial subject matter around female identity (surrounding topics such as abortion), her books were confiscated and banned in 1933 to 34 by the Nazis. [[3]](#footnote-3) This did not stop Keun however, who continued writing under a variety of pseudonyms until 1935, when she tried to sue the government for loss of income, a case which she loss and resulted in her exile to Belgium. However, she spent the war years in Cologne, possibly due to a fake British newspaper report in August of 1940 that claimed that she had committed suicide. Her life in the 1960s was polluted by alcoholism and homelessness, up until her admission to a psychiatric ward in 1966. She was not discharged until 1972. However, the final year before her death in 1982 saw some improvement for the life of Irmgard Keun, who was rediscovered in *Stern* Magazine in 1977 and henceforth able to live from her literary profits.[[4]](#footnote-4) She had several relationships of importance. She was married for five years to writer and director Johannes Tralow, whom she claimed to divorce for his affiliations with Nazism. Whether this is true is uncertain. She also had a romantic relationship with the Jewish doctor Arnold Strauss, who was treating her for her alcoholism. Whilst he fled to the United States in 1935, it would seem that they maintained their relationship through letters and Keun even visited him in 1938. Finally, the literature emphasizes her relationship with Joseph Roth and his positive influence on her writing.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Context of “Das Kunstseidene Mädchen”*

“Das Kunstseidene Mädchen”, translated into English as The Artificial Silk Girl, is considered a classic of Weimar literature. It follows its lower-middle-class protagonist Doris who seeks a more glamourous lifestyle, reinventing herself as a woman of sophistication and allure. The novel is set in the chaos of contemporary Berlin, addressing relevant socio-political issues from the time, such as economic stability, Nazism,and a rapidly changing society.[[6]](#footnote-6) Since its rediscovery, the novel has been described as engaging with themes of a disillusionment with consumerism, not unlike similar American literature at the time, and a ‘disenchantment with modernization that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Naturally, we can deduce why these critiques on Nazi society and modernization could have led to the restrictions on her publishing. However, Keun and particularly “Das Kunstseidene Mädchen”, although her other novels addressed similar themes, was instrumental in starting conversations about the concept of the ‘New Woman’, challenging literary, and non-fictional, preconceptions about women. For example, she heavily criticizes, through protagonists such as Doris, the ‘notion of consumer culture of empowering for women’, simultaneously exposing how the illusion of women’s liberation was not being achieved through chaining her identity to mass culture.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Contemporary Reviews of the Novel*

As mentioned above, Keun’s first two novels experienced immediate successes, with many readers enjoying her sense of humour and appreciating the subject matter. For example, in one magazine, *Der Querschnitt,* published in July 1932, a review claimed that Keun was the first female German humourist (‘was es noch niemals gegeben hat: eine deutsche Humoristin’) whilst another asserted that her novels should be read everywhere (‘Irmgard Keun sollte nicht nur als Dichterin, sollte auch als Frau und Mensch überall gelesen, überall verstanden werden’).[[9]](#footnote-9) Another newspaper review, from *Sherl’s Magazin,* describes Keun’s novel as ‘the novel of the young’ (‘das Buch aller jungen Menschen’) and engages with the more modern analyses of the issues of materialism, saying ‘not everything that is gold, shines’ (‘nicht alles Gold ist, was glänzt’).[[10]](#footnote-10) Some criticisms of the time seem to take issue only with her narrative style, with one Carlotine arguing that she only wishes that the novel was a little less ‘uniform’ (uneinheitlich) and a little too brash, wanting her writing to be a ‘bit quieter’ (etwas leiser).[[11]](#footnote-11) However, it appears that, at least in Weimar Berlin, Keun mostly met with much literary success indeed.

*Publication History*

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| Author/Translator | Title | Date | Publication |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 1932 | Berlin: Universitas |
| Irmgard Keun, Trans. Clara Mairaux | La Jeune Fille en Soie Artificielle | 1934 | Paris: Gallimard |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 1980 | Berlin: Dt. Buch-Gem |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 1980 | Bergisch Gladbach: Luebbe |
| Irmgard Keun, Trans. Aira Buffa | Polkkatukka, Silkkisukka | 1981 | Hki, Tammi (Finland) |
| Irmgard Keun, Trans. Dominique Autrand | La Jeune Fille en Soie Artificielle | 1982 | Paris: France Loisirs |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 2001 | München: Ullstein |
| Irmgard Keun, Trans. Katharina von Ankum, Introduction by Maria Tatar | The Artificial Silk Girl | 2002 | New York: Other Press |
| Irmgard Keun, Ed. Jörg Ulrich Meyer-Bothling. Contributors: Irmgard Kojn, Irmgarde Keina. | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen: Roman | 2007 | Leipzig: Klett-Schulbuchverlag |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 2014 | Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein |
| Irmgard Keun, Maria Tatar, trans. Kathie von Ankum, narrated by Erin Mallon | The Artificial Silk Girl | 2016 | Grand Haven, Michigan: Audible Studios on Brilliance |
| Irmgard Keun | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen | 2017 | München: Ullstein 2017 |
| Irmgard Keun | The Artificial Silk Girl | 2019 | London: Penguin Books Ltd |
| Irmgard Keun, Magret Möckel | Das Kunstseidene Mädchen von Irmgard Keun – Textanalyse und Interpretation: mit Zusammenfassung, Inhaltsangabe, Charakterisierung, Szenenanalyse, Prüfungsaufgaben uvm. | 2024 | Hollfeld: Bange C. |

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Carlotine. “Irmgard Keun, Eine von Uns”*,* from *Das Leben* April 1933. Accessed from <http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id364572701-19331000> on 7 February 7, 2024. Pp. 15.

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(Unknown Author), “Imgard Keun: Das Kunsteidene Mädchen”, from *Sherl’s Magazin,* November 1932. Accessed from [http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id363877630-19321100 . pp. 827](http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id363877630-19321100%20.%20pp.%20827).

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3. Barndt, Kerstin. “Aesthetics of Crisis: Motherhood, Abortion, and Melodrama in Irmgard Keun and Friedrich Wolf.” *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 24, 2008, pp. 71–95. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688294. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024. Pp. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wikipedia, ‘Irmgard Keun’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wikipedia, ‘Irmgard Keun’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wikipedia contributors. (2023, October 22). The Artificial Silk Girl. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 01:29, February 25, 2024, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Artificial_Silk_Girl&oldid=1181319533> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Katharina von Ankum, “Material Girls: Consumer Culture and the «New Woman» in Anita Loos’ ‘Gentlemen Prefer Blondes’ and Irmgard Keun’s ‘Das Kunstseidene Mädchen.’” *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1994, pp. 159–72. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23980412>. Pp.161 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Von Ankum, “Material Girls”, pp.161 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kurt Tucholsky, Hanns Martin Elster et al. “Imgard Keun, Das Kunsteidene Mädchen”, from *Der Querschnitt* July 1932. Accessed from [http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id355966999-19320700 Pp.531](http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id355966999-19320700%20%20Pp.531). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Imgard Keun: Das Kunsteidene Mädchen” (Unknown Author) from *Sherl’s Magazin,* November 1932. Accessed from [http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id363877630-19321100 . pp. 827](http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id363877630-19321100%20.%20pp.%20827). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Carlotine, “Irmgard Keun, Eine von Uns”*,* from *Das Leben* April 1933. Accessed from <http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id364572701-19331000> on the 7th of February. Pp. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)