NEGOTIATING THE PAST IN WEIMAR CULTURE:
NEUE SACHLICHKEIT AND IRMGARD KEUN’S DAS KUNSTSEIDENE MÄDCHEN

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

Irmgard Keun’s 1932 novel Das kunstseidene Mädchen (The Artificial Silk Girl) exposes many of the social and cultural issues existing in the Weimar Republic, such as unemployment, the metropolis and mass culture, modernity, and the Neue Frau (New Woman). During this time, Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) was one of the dominant literary and artistic movements, encouraging rational, unsentimental reporting of the facts, free of ornamentation or embellishments. A reaction to the illusions that lured Germany into World War I, New Objectivity focused primarily on the present, a problem for a country that needed to reconcile the effects of a destructive war. The past rarely arises as a topic of interest in New Objectivity literature, in contrast to the period after World War II when the past and memory were important topics in German literature, such as Holocaust studies.

My thesis seeks to answer the question of how New Objectivity negotiates the past by examining examples of historical and personal memory within Keun’s novel and analyzing the different ways in which characters relate to their past. The protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, Doris, for example, records her present in a diary that also functions as a means of reconciling generational differences with her parents. Ignoring her lack of education and working-class origins, Doris’s primary goal is directed at the future as she aspires to become a Glanz, a shining brilliance. During the course of the novel, however, she also encounters individuals who nostalgically long for the Wilhelmine Empire, a world apart from the rapidly modernizing Weimar Republic. While Keun does not issue a verdict on how to cope with the past, she does in fact acknowledge its importance in Germany’s current definition of itself by incorporating it into the themes of Das kunstseidene Mädchen.
To my grandparents,

Don and Betty Bangasser
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In a 1929 essay, Max Brod reflected on the prevailing attitudes among his younger literary colleagues:

Die modernen Autoren haben vor nichts so sehr Angst wie vor Illusionen. Durch Illusionen wurden wir in den Krieg hineingezerrt. Da ist es zunächst höchst richtig und gesund, wenn eine Generation von Desillusionierten heraufwächst. Wenn man [...] solche Not und nie zu vergessende Erniedrigung der Menschenkreatur erlebt hat, dann hat man das gute Recht, alles für Schwindel zu halten [...] Vom Alltag, der als das einzig Wirkliche betrachtet wird, hinter dem es nichts Wirklicheres, Gültigeres, Liebenderes (Frauenhafteres) gibt, kann man sich nur durch Witz und Ironie distanzieren. (Brod 386)

Brod’s reaction to the younger generation recognizes disillusionment that resulted directly from World War I and remarks that they have perfectly good reasons to grow up disillusioned by the unforgettable humiliation of humankind. Similar to the way generations wanted to avoid the illusions of the past, so too did literary styles move to distinguish themselves from Expressionism through irony and wit, both of which are mechanisms often used to mask deeper emotions. But Brod alludes to the idea that the only existing reality is the Alltag, or everyday, behind which there is nothing else – especially not anything loving, which he labels as a female trait. While it is not wrong to analyze and investigate everyday life for the new Weimar generation, mystifying it was strictly forbidden. This passage is particularly useful for seeing Weimar Germany’s outlook on the past and the present. “Illusion” and the avoidance thereof was a great preoccupation of the literary and artistic movement known as Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity, New Sobriety), an early twentieth-century movement that attempted to present the world in a realistic way as a direct reaction to Expressionism, the dominant artistic movement from 1910 until approximately 1920. Neue Sachlichkeit was a ubiquitous cultural movement, lifestyle, and political ideology during the Weimar
Republic (1918-1933) that encouraged a focus on objective, unsentimental expression. It touched countless areas of German life, including literature, art, architecture, politics, and economic theory. In addition, it de-emphasized the importance of the past and encouraged focus on the present and on Germany’s future which, as Brod’s noted, would be free of illusion.

As Jost Hermand writes, the younger generation embodied “the new democratic Weimar spirit,” (Hermand 58) the sobriety needed to carry Germany out of the problems brought about in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The end of the war called for distinction of pre-WW1 Germany from modern Weimar society. The pre-war generation was said to hold a “bourgeois-romantic” ideal of life, while the Weimar generation had a more objective approach to society’s troubles. Unlike the Wilhelmine Empire, Weimar’s ideology advocated flexibility and more realistic expectations for the future, and coolheadedness and presence of mind were needed when dealing with the “decay” of the religious and cultural principles of the past (Hermand 58ff). The horror of WW1 and Germany’s involvement in such primitive behavior “neither informed the introspection nor generated confessions,” but instead spurned the creation of a guilt culture (Lethen 11). If we analyze Das kunstseidene Mädchen through the lens of Lethen’s research, it then becomes clear that the past is more important than New Objectivity claimed it to be.

Of interest for this thesis is how writing in the vein of New Objectivity deals with the past when it thematizes exactly what it wants to avoid. How did New Objectivity negotiate the past, the very aspect it most wanted to overcome? How did the older and younger generations view the past, and how was the past involved in their present selves and in their future plans? What role did the past play in a cultural movement that looked
to define itself by its present state, and how does the older generation deal with nostalgia and sentimentality?

We can begin to answer many of these questions by looking at the early novels of Irmgard Keun (1905-1982) and her 1932 novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*. One of the most popular female authors in late Weimar Germany, Keun published two novels during the Weimar period: *Gilgi, eine von uns* (1931) and *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932), the latter of which will serve as the focal point for exploring New Objectivity’s negotiation of the past. Originally received as Frauenliteratur and not taken seriously because of their colloquial language, Keun’s Weimar novels and her entire oeuvre have received more scholarly attention since the late 1970s for the critical Weimar issues they address. Noteworthy are the similarities Keun shared with her young female protagonists, which she worked into her earlier novels. She belonged to their generation and therefore empathized with their experiences. Keun incorporated many of her own life events into her novels, using them as material for a critical Zeitroman of Weimar society (“Irmgard Keun,” Kosta 776). In fact,

> [m]any of her minor characters in her early works are modeled after ‘little’ people she observed and befriended: salesgirls, washroom attendants, her father’s secretaries. But she also drew on her past experiences with men and women from different walks of life with employers, theater people, and friends. Physical proximity to her material was of the utmost importance to her[.] (Matijevich 70)

Irmgard Keun, herself a citizen of the Weimar Republic, was in a perfect position to criticize the society in which she lived, for her own life was filled with rich experiences and people that she could include in her prose.

*Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, for example, treats all the main themes of Weimar culture: new challenges for a Neue Frau, sexuality, Girlkultur, Massenkultur, issues of
body, urbanity, and modernity. While these themes have been much debated in the extensive scholarship on Keun, few scholars have touched on the subject of memory and the past in her Weimar novels, leaving this area still in need of inquiry. There has already been much research done on memory and the past in later German literature, but these two topics have been a theme in more than just the second half of the twentieth century. Keun’s novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* is useful for addressing the intersection of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the past, because its protagonist Doris struggles with distinguishing her generation from that of her parents. Several characters, in addition, such as Ernst and *der rote Mond*, deal with the past in different ways from Doris. Doris and her fellow characters live in a country where attempts are being made to redefine Germany on a larger scale, which helps us to understand the relevance of *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* in larger historical, social, and cultural contexts.

*Das kunstseidene Mädchen* is the diary of Doris, a flirtatious and spunky eighteen-year-old typist from an unnamed Rheinland city who lives in 1931. From the very first sentence, she distinguishes herself from other girls “in denen nichts großartiges vorgeht” (3). She herself wants to become what she calls a “Glanz” (3), a multifaceted metaphor for a goal she does not clearly define or know how to achieve. Being a Glanz appears to mean primarily being respected and having a secure future, a topic that will come up in future chapters. She initially works in an office as an Angestellte, which was at this time a new white-collar role for women. In the workplace, she is sexually harassed by her boss and leaves her job as a result. She then secures a spot in a production of Schiller’s *Wallensteins Lager* through her mother, who works at the coat check of a local theatre. To gain respect among the other actresses, who hold themselves
for “was Besonderes” (17), Doris spreads a rumor that she is having an affair with the director. But when her tall tales backfire on her, she decides to flee to Berlin, where no one knows her and she can re-invent herself. In what turns out to be a symbolic act, she steals a fur coat from the coat check where her mother is working, leaves her own shabby raincoat hanging in its place, and has her old friend Theresa take her to the train station so she can escape to Berlin.

Life in the big city fascinates Doris to no end, and she describes Berlin in great detail in her journal and to her friend Herr Brenner, her forty-year old neighbor who became blind in World War I. But like many others in Weimar Germany, she is unemployed. She somehow survives, using her street smarts and femininity to her advantage and moving from man to man, taking whatever she can from them, whether it be meals, clothes, taxi rides, or a night in a warm bed, or even a nap in the back of a taxi. Her attractive personality and figure lend themselves easily to meeting others, but she is constantly worried about her uncertain situation as well as her general lack of knowledge, more specifically her lack of education (Unwissen). On Christmas Eve, when a lover comes home in a drunken rage, Doris must sleep on a bench in the Berlin Tierpark. It is here that Doris hits an ultimate low point – she is hungry, exhausted, cold, undernourished, and out of options. After deciding to work as a prostitute for a few days to help herself financially, Doris goes to Alexanderplatz. The first man to approach her – a man whose voice sounds like “dunkelgrüner Moos” – invites her to come back to his apartment with him (90). Doris anticipates staying only one night, and balks at the thought of having to sleep with this completely unattractive man, whose name is Ernst. Ernst’s wife left him before he met Doris, leaving him to recount fond, nostalgic
memories of her to Doris and giving her a good reason to fear the past, since the wife could return at any time. Although she does not plan on staying for long, she ends up staying for several weeks with him, cooking and doing housework. She eventually falls in love with him, allowing him to read her Tagebuch - an action that transforms her from someone who is socially, educationally, and financially below him, to a much more equal, feeling Mensch – and on his suggestion agrees to return the Pelzmantel to its original owner. When the wife wants to come back to Ernst, Doris decides to leave, feeling it would be better to let Ernst have what he really wants. The end is put best by Doris herself: “wir sind ja doch nur gut aus Liebe und böse oder gar nichts aus Unliebe – und wir verdienen auch keine Liebe, aber wir haben ja sonst gar kein Zuhause“ (130). The ending is open, leaving the reader to wonder what happens to Doris. It is suggested that Doris somehow survives, though never explicitly stated that she achieves her ambitious dream of being a Glanz. In fact, Doris even realizes that “[a]uf den Glanz kommt es nämlich vielleicht gar nicht so furchtbar an” (Keun 130), rendering Glanz as a fundamentally unrealistic and unachievable aspiration.

Keun’s novel treats the critical issues of Weimar society in the style of New Objectivity. Doris’s matter-of-fact style of observing the people and events around her reflect New Objectivity’s notions of sober observation and anti-sentimentality. Keun situates Doris in a world that she observes through the supposedly objective eyes of Doris, who, as we will see, is not very objective at all. The novel’s present-focused Tagebuch style, the way Doris distances herself from Weimar’s societal issues through her Unwissen, and Doris’s overall negative relationship to the past makes it representative of New Objectivity.
Through Doris, Keun problematizes the new cultural movement that otherwise received such high praise from many cultural critics. In her novel, Keun uses Doris to point out the generational problems that arise from ignoring the past. The fact that her rare discussions of the past are almost exclusively in conjunction with negative perceptions of her parents and her wish to separate herself from their generation demonstrates some of the discourse surrounding New Objectivity. By the time Keun’s novels were published in the early 1930s, New Objectivity had also begun to receive harsher criticism from cultural critics about its weak points. The disregard for emotions and the past contribute to a denial of past selves and “home” and a struggle to establish an identity unrelated to the generation of their parents. By trying to squelch its memories of the past, New Objectivity only reveals the centrality of the past for its own constitution.

Considerable amounts of research have already appeared on New Objectivity as a cultural and artistic movement, its connection to sentimentality (or the lack thereof), and on Irmgard Keun. Many authors – Detlef Peukert, for example, in his book *The Weimar Republic* and Anthony Phelan and Stephen Lamb’s chapter on Weimar in *German Cultural Studies* – touch on the anti-sentimentality of New Objectivity, elaborating on why there was a need to turn away from the past, but fail to discuss in greater detail how the past appears despite its supposed absence. Sabine Becker’s comprehensive two-volume study of *Neue Sachlichkeit* has become the seminal source for today’s Weimar scholars. She includes an extensive collection of relevant contemporary texts as well as a thorough definition of the movement and examination of its aesthetic dimensions (*Nüchternheit, Reportagestil, and Antiexpressionismus*, to name a few). In her chapter on
Entsentimentalisierung, Becker comments on literature’s turn towards being a functional art form that de-individualized characters, making them represent a type of person rather than an individual (Becker, Neue Sachlichkeit: 1, 246). These two studies lead to the question of whether New Objectivity followers considered the past something about which it was impossible to be objective. The past does not necessarily always need to be at the forefront, but taking it into consideration when defining oneself is unavoidable.

Many scholars have focused on the anti-sentimentality associated with Neue Sachlichkeit, but few have given attention to where the past fits in with such a strong focus on the present.

Like Sabine Becker, Helmut Lethen comes closer to talking about the past and emotions in his book Cool Conduct, which handles the prevalent cool persona of the 1918-1933 period, primarily in literature. His study goes beyond the “political core” of Weimar society to take a look at what Weimar culture was really about – namely distance and what Lethen terms “the fending off of shame” (Lethen 1). Lethen is often very close to talking about the past, because he writes about the “cool persona’s central ambition to become a self-conscious agent of history,” commenting that “[t]he suppressed sense of remaining subject to blind fate is the underlying motivation for its magical thinking” (Lethen 20). Shame itself involves negative, guilty feelings toward events that happened in the past. Lethen’s arguments will be useful for my discussion of Das kunstseidene Mädchen in order to demonstrate where the past and New Objectivity meet.

Emotions also play a role in my research, since New Objectivity stresses anti-sentimentality. In a pivotal article, Urte Helduser discusses how Keun’s protagonists in Gilgi and Das kunstseidene Mädchen articulate their emotions through pop culture.
Helduser also argues that the absence of a thorough discussion of emotions actually indicates a constant discussion of them. This is exactly what is happening in *Neue Sachlichkeit* with regard to the past— not talking about the past leads to its place in the very heart of Weimar culture.

Since the late 1970s, there has been much research on Keun’s work, ranging from her earliest Weimar novels in the early 1930s to her exile writings and beyond. One of the most important scholars in this regard has been Kerstin Barndt, who has written on numerous aspects of Keun’s literary life, including the role of the New Woman in Weimar literature. This is her focus in *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit*. In a study of Keun’s *Gilgi-eine von uns, Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, and Vicki Baum’s *stud. chem. Helene Willfüer* – she examines the intersection of emotions and objectivity. She discusses at length the problem of language in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, sometimes briefly touching the issue of Doris’ past. Some of her most interesting observations concern the fur coat that Doris “borrows” from the coat check before she flees to Berlin. Barndt asserts that the coat substitutes a maternal figure for Doris, which is evident in several of Doris’ remarks about it. Not only is it an *Ersatzmutter*, however, but it is also the only place where Doris can be “bei sich,” making her life a “fragile Konstruktion” (Barndt 194). The fact that Doris tries to replace her mother indicates the importance and necessary presence of a maternal figure, someone to guide her. Barndt also comments on the *Tagebuch* genre and Doris’s use of it to give herself a history (Barndt 168). Barndt’s arguments support my claim that the past has an important place within New Objectivity.

Such gaps in research on the negotiation of the past within New Objectivity expose the question of where the past fits into such a unique movement such as *Neue
Sachlichkeit, which defines itself in terms of what it is now and not of what preceded it. Through the anti-sentimentality of the protagonists in Keun’s novels, we can examine the way the characters seemingly objectively explain the events of their lives. But it also becomes clear that through their “objectivity” they stifle their emotionality, and their need to define themselves in terms of what they once were. The problem with ignoring the past is that even defining oneself in new terms requires reliance upon previous definitions of the self. After all, a culture that reinvents itself fundamentally defines its new identity in terms of what it once was, therefore ruling out the possibility of disregarding the past completely. This ties in with the notion of illusion: New Objectivity claims to see reality as it actually is, not as what it wants to become or what it used to be. Using seminal texts on memory and the past, I analyze the implications of Doris’ homelessness for both the novel and for late Weimar literature at a time when Germany itself was attempting to re-establish its own identity and come to terms with its history at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The past is undeniable, and plays a critical role in personal development and definition of self. It shapes communities and individuals in ways that may not always be immediately noticed. The Weimar Republic is certainly neither the first nor the only culture to have wrestled with the question of how to position itself in relationship to the past and how to negotiate memory and nostalgia. Especially in this century, Germany continues to grapple with the problem of its past, which can be seen in Das kunstseidene Mädchen with its embodiment of “a more rational, albeit far more pessimistic stance” (Matijevich 9). Whether by an individual, a community, or an entire country, self-definition takes place by taking into consideration previous identities and defining the
current self in terms of the past. Therefore, the past is impossible to escape. Now we
will more closely examine New Objectivity itself, combine it with relevant scholarship
on memory and the past, and see how these three notions play out in Keun’s novel.
Chapter 2: New Objectivity and Memory

Like many modern cultural movements, New Objectivity attempted to establish a cultural and historical *tabula rasa*. What made this such a challenge in particular for Weimar were the physical and emotional reminders of World War I and its devastating results: a land in ruins, costly reparations, a destroyed reputation, a ravaged economy and country, and a complete lack of hope. These products of the war called for a new start and brought about the need for a practical approach to life in the new Republic, thus creating perfect circumstances for the rise of a new cultural movement: *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which lasted roughly from 1923 until 1932, though scholars do not agree on exact dates (“Neue Sachlichkeit”).

Sabina Becker believes that the term was first used in 1922 in a discussion about “die Möglichkeit zur Überwindung des spätexpressionistischen Stils.” Most scholars agree that art historian Gustav Hartlaub coined the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1923 to describe the new realistic tendencies in art, but it was soon directed towards literature as well. The term itself also did not always mean objectivity; it was first understood as a new kind of naturalism, then as “Wirklichkeit,” “Einfachheit,” and eventually “Sachlichkeit,” when Lion Feuchtwanger used the term to describe the anti-Expressionist movement of the early 1920s (Becker, “Neue Sachlichkeit” 14).

How to classify New Objectivity remains a heavily debated point among scholars. While some define it as an ideology or a cultural movement, others view it as a theory or an art movement. Jost Hermand explains how loaded the combination of the terms *new* and *objectivity* really was, stating that, on the one hand, New Objectivity “saw itself as post-revolutionary, but on the other hand, it wanted to face the future” (Hermand 58).
The paradox of combining the more optimistic term *new* with a more sobering one of *objectivity* was exactly what New Objectivity was all about (Hermand 58f). Even its name indicated a focus on the future, suggesting that in the past, Germany might not (and, in fact, was not) so objective. What was actually new about New Objectivity was objectivity itself, putting the emphasis on rational thought, description, and planning than on hopes for an optimistic future. In short, being realistic took prevalence over the need for optimism. In this process of planning for a rational future, rational thought about the past – or rather, any thoughts at all about the past – seem to be missing from New Objectivity.

The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* lends itself to use in many areas of politics, society, and culture. It was a socio-economic and political ideology in its attempt to “introduce new technologies and rationalize industrial production techniques” (Hermand 58f). *Neue Sachlichkeit* can also be defined as an artistic movement, based on its influence on painting and architecture, where paintings looked “without atmosphere, […] like objective photographs” (Hermand 65). New Objectivity affected fashion, consumer goods, and interior decoration as well, emphasizing function over form with its minimalist designs (Hermand 63). Far-reaching New Objectivity is difficult to classify as one kind of phenomenon, so it is useful to keep in mind the new face it brought to every part of Weimar society.

Germany continued to take steps towards complete modernization, functionalizing in the process every aspect of modern life, including art, architecture, and literature. Modernization refers to the adaptation to modern needs or habits by updating equipment and/or using modern ideas or methods; German society was modernizing
since the late nineteenth century, though the pace of modernization accelerated further in the twentieth century. One example of modernization in Weimar society is the trend towards urbanization and increased educational opportunities for members of all classes (Peukert, 81f).

Functionalization, a 1920s phenomenon that existed especially in the arts, refers to the movement to emphasize function over form, allowing function to be the primary influence on an object’s appearance. Bauhaus architectural design is an example of functionalization, because while a building may not be necessarily beautiful by traditional definitions, it fulfills a certain function and therefore embodies beauty by addressing a practical need. Functionalization was a reaction to the attempts by Expressionism at “Verseelung” of art and literature (Becker and Weiß 16). Authors of Neue Sachlichkeit maintained a commitment to sober, objective, logical observation and the reporting of the facts, and literature and art were no longer a means of expressing inner emotions or intuition (Becker, Neue Sachlichkeit: 1, 245). The goal now was the sober reporting of the facts as they were – and most importantly for the purpose of this thesis – reporting them without sentimentality or nostalgia.

New Objectivity was initially a reaction to Neo-romanticism and Expressionism, described by Becker as having many goals, one of them being “Entsentimentalisierung” (Becker, Neue Sachlichkeit: 1, 320ff). Expressionism (1910-1920), the dominant movement during World War I (1914-1918) took a stand against the bourgeois society of the Wilhelmine period and embodied many contradictory elements, such as the excited anticipation of the developments in technology (futurism), the “Thematisierung der Angst- und Entfremdungserscheinungen der Moderne,” and the simultaneous acclaim of
violence and advocacy of pacifism (“Expressionismus”). It was the goal of the
Expressionist movement to pave the way for a new culture and a social utopia (Hermand and Trommler 137). In contrast to New Objectivity, Expressionist authors considered the purpose of writing to wake up readers, call them to action, and accompany them into the future (Becker, “Neue Sachlichkeit” 10f) and aimed to exemplify subjectivity and depict reality as they experienced it (Hermand and Trommler 36). Eventually, however, Expressionism gave way to New Objectivity. Max Weber, one of New Objectivity’s later critics, wrote in 1918 that the only way to true conscience was a feeling of shame, and equated Expressionism with an “irresponsible mysticism” (Gay 120). Most importantly, after the war, experiences of reality shifted, and thus of the literary forms to represent and express them. According to both contemporary and modern scholars, New Objectivity was brought about just when Germany’s intellectuals needed a relief from Expressionism.

By contrast, New Objectivity emphasized the functionalization of literature as a “Gebrauchskunst,” or art with a function (Becker, “Neue Sachlichkeit” 16). In New Objectivity, literature now existed for a greater purpose than mere entertainment. In fact, it fulfilled a certain need to distract readers from that which they had experienced in World War I, and not to remind them of glorified Wilhelmine heroes to whom they could no longer relate.

Contrary to Expressionism, New Objectivity succeeded, according to some modern scholars, in coming to terms with the realities and drawbacks of modernity. Its aim, according to Detlef Peukert, was to reconstruct reality with a degree of cool appraisal, the other option being to surrender itself to modern society (Peukert 168ff).
The question for Weimar was whether to restore the familiar – that is, the stifling, now outdated traditions of Wilhelmine society – or to surrender to modernity. Followers of New Objectivity wanted to acknowledge Germany’s difficult situation, lower their expectations of life, and have an attitude of moderation and flexibility towards change (Hermand 59).

There is little explicit discourse among intellectuals of both Weimar and today about *Neue Sachlichkeit*’s reconciliation of the present and the past. Before continuing, I will define the terms *present* and *past*, since they are discussed at great length in the chapters below. My research addresses the negotiation of both the historical past and the personal past. In terms of New Objectivity, I am referring to the historical, collective past of German society. For purposes of my work, I use *past* to indicate any previous event that is not still continuing during the Weimar period, such as World War I. When referring to characters in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, I will use it to refer to the personal past. While I acknowledge that the personal past and historical past are two different things, I see in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* the reflection of the historical past within the personal. The term *present* refer in all cases to the current time of the late Weimar Republic. It is important to keep in mind that past and present are both fluid, and that there is no clear line between them. As Maurice Halbwachs writes, “[t]he present (understood as extending over a certain duration that is of interest to contemporary society) is not contrasted to the past in the way two neighboring historical periods are distinguished. Rather, the past no longer exists” (Halbwachs 142). Finally, I discuss literary representations of both the personal and historical past, which are different from history since they are recreated from memory.
Though not treated explicitly, there is some discourse about the past to be found in scholarship on *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Objectivity itself is defined as dealing with things unrelated to feelings, but instead to objects and experiences outside of the mind. Its goal is to recognize facts without taking into account any emotional coloring such as sentimentality or nostalgia, since these two concepts belonged to the Expressionism movement and were exactly what *Neue Sachlichkeit* intellectuals were working to counter. After all, Germans were dealing with a catastrophic war and leaving behind the outdated traditions and ideology of the Wilhelmine Empire, so the past was not something that could be easily locked away and forgotten. Yet the primary foci of the Weimar Republic were both the present and the establishment of a sensible future – it was not the intent of New Objectivity to analyze why things are the way they are, but rather to document and present the facts in a sober manner free of opinion. Even as early as the close of the nineteenth century, sentimentality was synonymous with nostalgia, which had entered unnoticed and unwanted into German society (Helduser 13).

With Germany’s grim start in the twentieth century, leaving the past behind began to appear as a quite difficult task. Urte Helduser notes, however, that this “Antisentimentalität” was exactly what caused *Gefühle* to become a central topic – discussing the importance of not talking about feelings still meant that sentimentality was a much debated topic (Helduser 17). Karl Jaspers, a German psychiatrist and philosopher, in his book *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, acknowledged the need for a compromise between the rigid objectivity of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the fluidity and flexibility of human history. According to Jaspers, understanding the past is necessary for understanding ourselves now, and in order to understand the changes going on now
and our current historical context, we must understand changes that have taken place in previous times (Jaspers 374). Through these examples, it is clear that the concept of just what to do with Germany’s past was a problem that perplexed and divided Weimar intellectuals. Sentimentality itself is a way of looking at the past that arises out of nostalgia, the wistful remembrance of the past, perhaps also including a desire once again to have the past as present. To understand the present, it is critical to understand the past, since it is the origin of the present. Such a truth makes it clear that in order to understand New Objectivity, we must understand how it came to be the way it was.

By the beginning of the 1930s, however, the excitement with external observation had faded as New Objectivity polarized itself and Germany turned to National Socialism. New Objectivity, with its focus on “material needs” and not on “higher values,” made the way to National Socialism relatively simple: “With their propagandistic emphasis on culture, idealism, and national values, the Nazis spoke to all whose thirst for meaning had gone unquenched by the sober, materialist, and contradictory cynicism of Neue Sachlichkeit” (Hermand 67). Many critics turned to Innerlichkeit and left public issues behind, shifting focus from what was happening with the masses in the streets to what was going on inside the individual (Peukert 173f). In the end, the very paradox that characterized New Objectivity was what caused it to end.

In the mid- to late nineteenth century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche both published essays that bear relevance for New Objectivity, although they were published between fifty and seventy years before New Objectivity even came into existence. The juxtaposition of Nietzsche’s and Marx’s essays not only demonstrates two different viewpoints on how individuals and cultures deal with the past, but are also helpful in an
analysis of Das kunstseidene Mädchen. They give us insight into understanding how such a future-focused movement as New Objectivity came to terms with its past. Their theories on memory, history, and the past resound with the themes of memory, history, and the past in Keun’s Das kunstseidene Mädchen.

Karl Marx opened his essay The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852) by saying that history is not made by choice, but by coincidence and by circumstances with which a culture or individual is confronted (97). He defined revolutions and why they come about, claiming that revolutions exist in order to “exalt the new struggles, rather than to parody the old, to exaggerate the given task in the imagination, rather than to flee from solving it in reality” (98). While New Objectivity may not be the kind of political revolution to which Marx was referring, his remarks here can certainly apply to New Objectivity. It existed as a reaction to Expressionism, portraying the problem of coming to terms with modernity as one that no generation had experienced before. The New Objectivity generation of Weimar was forced to handle different challenges than those their parents had to face – changes that were, in their eyes, more extreme, more rapidly-occurring. Marx’s idea echoes some of the same struggles that every generation faces, especially the claim that the current generation’s issues are worse or more difficult than those of their parents’ generation. The rise of New Objectivity did not arise simply out of a desire to react to Expressionism, but rather as a way to deal with the new experiences that this generation was facing. Keun herself acknowledges this change in experience: “Aber man kann ja nichts verstehn von andern, wenn man nicht alles miterlebt und von demselben Fluidum umhaucht ist, das macht, dass man etwas tut oder nicht” (Keun 36). Young twenty-something females who read this literature probably
understood exactly what Keun meant here, but so, too, would other generations. The use of the word “miterleben” here is particularly important, because it indicates the absence of a common experience. Just as Doris’s mother does not understand what it is like to live in the current time, so too does Doris fail to understand what it is like to live in her mother’s time. Yet Keun neither expects otherwise nor offers any other solutions. Here, generational conflict is simply a problem that cannot be overcome.

Marx also observed that “[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off its superstitious regard for the past” (99). Such a statement also bears relevance for New Objectivity. Within New Objectivity, the past was shunned and the future brought into focus in an attempt to begin “its own work” sooner. The past was something many Germans wanted to forget at this point in time because of the physical reminders of the war that surrounded them. The best way to forget the war, it seemed, was to ignore it and, instead of gazing upon Wilhelmine heroes, soberly hope in the future. This outlook somehow made it easier to forget the past, and the vibrant culture of Weimar served as a perfect distraction from past woes. The stifling bourgeois society of the Wilhelmine era was gone, the war was over, and the time was right for open artistic experimentation. More promising than the past was the sober anticipation of a solid future for Germany and the establishment of a new kind of greatness.

Yet forgetting is harder than it appears, and ignoring the past only caused it to become more of a central topic in Weimar cultural discourses. In his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), Nietzsche acknowledges that a person or a culture may wonder if the past will always be present, their chains always with them
“however far and fast [they] may run” (102). No matter how far Doris runs, she cannot escape her past, even in Berlin. The simple idea that she cannot find employment because she fled without her papers is a constant reminder for her of why she came to Berlin in the first place. In calling herself a *Glanz*, or even simply in the desire to become one, she defines herself in terms of what she used to be and what she is currently not. In order to be a *Glanz*, there must be a community who sees the *Glanz* as someone worth respecting, therefore rendering not only the *Glanz* herself, but also affirmation from those around her as necessary. These issues of redefinition that Keun addresses so well in her novel are also issues that resound within Germany as a whole. Denying a past event does not mean it ceases to exist, not only since the destruction of the country itself serves as a reminder, but also because other nations do so as well.

As time continues, the burden of the past becomes even greater: “Man […] braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown as to excite their envy” (Nietzsche 103). New Objectivity was superb in “appearing to disown” the past, breaking with memories of World War I and wanting to shed the trauma of the war. But in actuality, by not addressing the past, it only became more of an issue, something too painful to reconcile and an ever-growing problem for those who did not want to acknowledge its presence in their lives. We see this in Ernst, who is never able to establish a relationship with Doris in which he accepts her as she is. Instead, he sees her – and all women – as Hanne, his wife who left him.
Balance between the historical and unhistorical thought plays a vital role in an individual’s or culture’s happiness. In turn, this balance leads to happiness, which Nietzsche defines as “forgetting,” which is “the capacity to feel unhistorically,” and the ability to live for the present. Few characters in Keun’s novel have learned either the power of forgetting in order to lead a satisfying life or the ability to feel “unhistorically,” as Nietzsche puts it. Many of them – Herr Brenner, der rote Mond, Hulla’s nostalgic husband, and Ernst in particular – are often interrupted by memories or still seem to be preoccupied with past events and people. The message of Keun’s novel aligns with Nietzsche’s notion that a culture or an individual must do a certain amount of forgetting before they can begin to lead a happy life, as we will see especially in the example of Ernst, Doris’s lover whose wife leaves him clinging desperately to memories of her in order to maintain himself. Characters who take issue with the past never have their problems explicitly resolved – in the reader’s mind, Hulla’s husband remains nostalgic, as does der rote Mond. Keun is not explicit about what happens to Ernst, and whether his wife Hanne returns to him or not. All the reader really knows is that Doris encouraged her to go to him when the two women crossed paths in a Berlin dance hall. My point here is that Keun sends a clear message about New Objectivity and forgetting history: the past cannot be forgotten since individuals and cultures constantly work to re-define themselves in terms of what they were before. This goes against what Nietzsche defines as the way to happiness; Ernst does not live unhistorically, and therefore, according to Nietzsche, he can never live happily. But once the past figure for whom he longs comes back to him, the reader assumes he will be happy, because of the unclear ending to his story. This is further discussed in the next chapter, “Historical Memory.”
The ability to think historically is part of what Nietzsche calls “plastic power,” or the ability to “develop out of oneself in one’s own way, […] transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, […] heal wounds, […] replace what has been lost [and] recreate broken moulds” (Nietzsche 104). This novel is explicit in its treatment of the past, showing that there is no one correct way to deal with previous events and incorporate them into the collective memory. Plastic power is not easy, but with the ending statement of Das kunstseidene Mädchen, Keun suggests that only one thing – love – can help us overcome what once happened: “wir sind ja doch nur gut aus Liebe und böse oder gar nichts aus Unliebe – und wir verdienen auch keine Liebe, aber wir haben ja sonst gar kein Zuhause“ (Keun 130). Keun’s novel criticizes Germany’s inability to acknowledge its past and to balance its abilities to feel historically and unhistorically. What Weimar Germany failed to recognize in its re-definition of itself was that it was defining its new persona in terms of what it was – a war-torn country with a negative image among other nations – while still maintaining a focused gaze on what it wanted to become: a country with a better reputation than it currently had. Keun’s novel points to this irony within New Objectivity.
Chapter 3: Historical Memory in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*

Keun’s inclusion of actual historical, political, and social events situates *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* well within the context of New Objectivity literature, marking it as a *Zeitroman*, or a novel critical of its time. My focus will remain particularly on how *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* incorporates actual events in order to criticize New Objectivity’s effect on Weimar society and assist both the individual and society in coming to terms with an unpleasant past. The weaving of fact and fiction makes this novel particularly accessible to readers who in 1931 were, unbeknownst to them, about to enter yet another new era of German history into a future that did not match the realistic vision of New Objectivity, for the future would bring unimaginable realities.

World War I, which ravaged Germany between 1914 and 1918, makes its appearance in Keun’s work via Doris’s forty-year-old neighbor, Herr Brenner, whom Doris meets while staying with an acquaintance shortly after arriving in Berlin. This older gentleman “ist ein Elsässer und hat aber als Deutscher gekämpft” and “hat die Augen verloren im Krieg” (Keun 56). Although he identified more with his regional identity than with the larger German national identity, he fought for the nation anyway, which cost him his eyesight. Because he has a cantankerous wife who sees him and treats him as if he is a burden to her, he earns the sympathy of Doris, who begins daily visits to him.

At first, Doris is unsure of how to help Herr Brenner. She writes: “Und ich dachte früher immer mal, man kann nur einem helfen mit Geld. Und helfen kann man ja gar keinem, aber wohl eine Freude machen – und das geht aber keinen was an – und mein Taubenbuch nicht und mich nicht und keinen” (Keun 58). Money is for Doris, at this
point in her precarious employment history, not an option as a way to help Herr Brenner; rather, what is more important to her is to make him happy, and by making him happy, making herself happy as well. One day, however, Herr Brenner discovers Doris’ ability to create interesting descriptions of what she sees. He asks her, “Wenn [meine Frau] weint, dann denke ich, sie hat lange gelbe Zähne. […] Hat sie lange gelbe Zähne?” (57). With her response of Frau Brenner’s teeth as “klein und weiß,” Doris realizes what she can do for him: “Ich sammle Sehen für ihn. Ich gucke mir alle Straßen an und Lokale und Leute und Laternen. Und dann merke ich mir mein Sehen und bringe es ihm mit” (57). She, the younger generation who has not been affected by war, will bring Berlin to her older neighbor whose sight has been taken by catastrophic historical events.

On her visits Doris describes to him many collages of the Berlin cityscape, again providing vivid and spirited accounts of her days wandering the streets. According to scholars such as Barbara Kosta, these scenes serve as a kind of literary film technique, transforming the author into a filmmaker and the novel into a film, a new form of media at the time.¹ Were it not for Doris, Herr Brenner would not be able to see such a “film;” therefore, Doris is creating memories for him and turning them into a form he would never be able to see. In this example, we see the younger generation leading the older to things they would not be able to see on their own because of “blindness” brought on by the past. His wife, a member of his same generation, is also too impatient to indulge him in a few descriptions of the scenes she sees. And since they are in the same generation,

¹ Keun employed such techniques not only in Das kunstseidene Mädchen, but also in her other Weimar novel Gilgi – eine von uns. For more explicit discussions of this issue, see Barndt, Helduser, and Kosta.
she might only see things he already knows and might have a similar perspective— one that contrasts with what Doris sees with her “newer” eyes.

These two characters clearly belong to different generations, but what is a generation? Anne Fuchs defines a generation as “based on membership of an age group, which exposes individuals to similar historical experiences and cultural influences.” A generation has “a shared historical perspective and a sense of generational cohesion” (Fuchs 9). During the Weimar period, the idea of the “Neue Jugend” existed, the younger generation in which the emphasis on the self and personal experiences was no longer important, but instead emphasized “das Kollektive, das von allen Erlebte und Empfundene” (Hermand and Trommler 89, their emphasis). Doris, as a representation of Keun’s generation, is not an individual but a type of character to whom many readers could relate. Through her, Keun shows her readership what she and her entire generation was experiencing.

The fact that a member of the younger Weimar generation collects “Sehen” for a member of the older generation is meaningful on several levels. First, it is noteworthy that Doris sees Herr Brenner as much older than herself and counts him as part of an entirely different generation. The relationship between Herr Brenner and Doris represents one in which the younger generation shows the light to the older one who can no longer see. If Herr Brenner did indeed become blind in World War I, he has been blind for nearly fifteen years by the time he meets Doris. He represents a generation who has had its sight taken away and who is no longer able to see, which is exactly where the younger generation steps in to show them the new ways of living.
Opposite of what is seen as the “normal” procedure – that is, that the old generation takes care of the new one and the new generation learns from the old – this situation becomes significant when we look at the symbolism of seeing. Having lost his eyesight in the war, Herr Brenner embodies the effects of World War I. Herr Brenner’s loss of eyesight carries special meaning. Herr Brenner is literally unable to see the world around him, which is heartbreaking for Doris, who lives in Berlin “für mich erstens und dann für den Brenner” (Keun 59). He must take in visual experiences via Doris, who feels that it is her duty to make him happy with fantastic descriptions of their metropolis. Doris’s memories here are subjective representations of her experiences, constructed in such a way to help Herr Brenner “see” what Doris calls “mein Berlin” (Keun 70). I see this action as a symbol of the younger generation teaching the older generation to “see” all over again, much like New Objectivity provided a new way to “see” and approach the expression of experiences. The German experience and the world had undergone great changes since Herr Brenner’s youth, potentially resulting Herr Brenner remembering a completely different Germany than what Doris describes to him. He likely reconstructs a mental image of Berlin from what he knows, one that differs significantly from contemporary Berlin, thus rendering memory and reality irreconcilable.

Eventually, Frau Brenner tells Doris that she can no longer take care of her husband, and that she will soon put him in a home for the elderly. Doris, after spending many long hours relating her Berlin experiences to Herr Brenner, asks if she can take him on a walk through Berlin; Frau Brenner reluctantly agrees, and so Doris and Herr Brenner set out to give Herr Brenner one last experience of Berlin.
On this walk, Herr Brenner first asks if the stars are out. The neon lights of the big city shut out anything that could otherwise be visible in a night sky, so Doris cannot see stars. In fact, she notes that she hardly notices them: “Ich habe Sterne sehr gern, aber ich merke sie fast nie. Wenn man blind wird, weiß man ja wohl erst, dass man furchtbar viel vergessen hat zu sehen” (Keun 68). Although she cannot see stars but wants to please Herr Brenner, Doris lies and says that there are indeed beautiful stars in the night sky. Since he will never know the difference, there is no reason to disappoint him. This lie is significant on a more abstract level because it can be seen as the younger generation causing the illusion of safety and peace for the older one, when in fact the younger generation was trying to avoid illusions altogether to avoid more catastrophes. The word choice in this passage invokes a particularly interesting idea – that of forgetting to see. Only when one loses the ability to see does one appreciate the sense of sight. Herr Brenner appreciates these things more than she does, and she realizes that she takes her sight for granted because she has always been able to see. Doris and her generation do not understand what it is like to have something so fundamental taken away from them by a war or by some other catastrophe beyond their individual control. In this passage, Keun allows her readership, for at least a moment, to empathize with the older generation and imagine for themselves what it would be like to be in such a situation.

Throughout their evening, during which both of them drink quite a lot, Herr Brenner becomes nostalgic and offers Doris his memories of the Vaterland, pre-war Germany. Doris summarizes his speech as follows:

Im Vaterland sind toll elegante Treppen wie in einem Schloss mit Gräfinnen, die schreiten – und Landschaften und fremde Länder und türkisch und Wien und Lauben von Wein und die kolossale Landschaft eines Rheines mit Naturschauspielen, denn sie machen einen Donner […] welche Stadt hat denn so
was noch, wo sich Räume an Räume reihen und die Flucht eines Palastes bilden? [...] und die Männer können sich den Wein eigentlich nicht leisten – ob denn keiner glücklich ist? (Keun 69)

A close reading of this passage reveals much about nostalgia for pre-war Germany. The tone here is sentimental and evocative, as we can see from the sweeping images of a “kolossale Landschaft,” “Naturschauspielen,” and a “Schloss mit Gräfinnen.” In the midst of experiencing Doris’s present-day Berlin, Herr Brenner’s re-constructed memories of his Germany, a place where nature was still pure, a noble class still existed, and life was slower, do not fit in with modern-day Berlin. Doris has already admitted in the last passage that she forgets to notice simple things like stars, making her part of the problem that Herr Brenner sees with her generation. Gender relationships have also changed since he was as young as Doris – men impress women with clothing and wine they cannot afford; in vain they spend beyond their means to attract women who lack class. Whether happiness is possible in a society that no longer cares about its Landschaften or Naturschauspiele is still a big question for Herr Brenner and his generation. Herr Brenner does not return to memories of his time fighting in the war, but instead reflects only on the time before it, thus leaving a black hole in his history.

Neither he nor Doris bring up the subject; for both generations, the war is something to ignore and brush over on the way to other topics, although it remains an undertone in the conversation, since the reason Doris is describing Berlin to Herr Brenner in the first place is because he lost his sight in the war. In summary, war is something that destroyed the idyllic Wilhelmine life for which Herr Brenner longs.

While these may be Herr Brenner’s memories, they are coming out of Doris’s memory – it is almost as if she is putting words into his mouth by summarizing his
thoughts instead of quoting him directly, which she often does both with Herr Brenner
and with other people she meets. It is still important to keep in mind here that Herr
Brenner’s memories of former Germany, *wo sich Räume an Räume reihen*, and the Berlin
Doris describes to him, do not match.

The scene continues, and Doris and Herr Brenner walk past the *Gedächtniskirche*:
“Wir gehen – eigentlich lügt die Gedächtniskirche, dass sie eine Kirche ist – denn wenn
sie es wäre, müsste man jetzt doch rein und mal dableiben. Wo ist denn nur Liebe und
eins, was nicht immer gleich entzwei geht?” (Keun 71). Surely Keun cannot have
included this very specific landmark by accident. There are many significant landmarks
in Berlin, but the Gedächtniskirche holds a special meaning for Berliners and for
Germans. The Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche was constructed in 1895 to
commemorate Wilhelm I, king of Prussia from 1861 to 1888 and emperor of Germany
from 1871 to 1888 (Seip, *Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche*). With Bismarck under him
as chancellor, Wilhelm succeeded in driving Napoleon III from the remainder of the
Prussian states, creating the second German *Reich* under one monarch. This church was
constructed in the afterglow of Germany’s unification (“Kaiser Wilhelm I”) and is what
Pierre Nora would call a *lieux de mémoire*, or site of memory. Nora writes: “*Lieux de
mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must
deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce
eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (Nora 149).
As a *Gedächtnis*, or commemoration, the church building is meant to evoke memories;
this same idea is also revealed in the etymology of the English word “memorial”
(“Memorial”). It is a deliberate representation of and tribute to a former time. The
church represents Germany’s nostalgia and stands dedicated to a monarch whom many see as a great contributor to a prosperous and idyllic period in German history. As a memorial, it is a representation of history, which itself “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (Nora 145f). Doris’ reaction to the church (‘eigentlich lügt die Gedächtniskirche’) reflects an objective attitude toward a memorial to a time in history that many Germans now see as outdated, a disposition that renders history as something false, suspect and unreliable.

As their stroll around Berlin continues, Doris and Herr Brenner hear “an einer Ecke vier Stimmen von jungen Männern” who are singing “mit große[r] Hoffnung in der Stimme […] mit einem glücklichen Gesicht, weil sie sich gar nicht kaputt machen lassen werden und gar keine Angst haben und gehen ganz sicher. […] und alles ist jung in den Stimmen” (Keun 71). But these young men are not just four young men singing gleefully on a street corner. Rather, they are representative of the younger generation who is more realistic and disillusioned than the older one whose world was devastated by being drawn by illusion into World War I.

The hopeful voices of the young men function as a trigger of memories for Herr Brenner. His reaction indicates that their singing did indeed evoke some kind of memory for him: “‘Das war schön so vier junge Stimmen, die zusammenhalten und Kraft haben und ein Leben – in der freien Luft – das war schön’ (Keun 71). Herr Brenner sounds as if he is mourning his loss of “ein Leben” and people with whom he could “zusammenhalten.” New Objectivity’s level-headedness is absent in the faces and voices of the four young singers. Their camaraderie and joyfulness remind Herr Brenner of his own younger days, when one could have a life “in der freien Luft.” Such nostalgia was
typical for members of Herr Brenner’s generation, otherwise known as the “lost
generation,” according to Fuchs. Characterized as “[r]esentful of the Weimar Republic,”
this generation “channeled its disappointments into a feverish form of nationalism that
wanted to tear down class barriers in favour of a community like theirs that had been
forged in the trenches of the First World War” (Fuchs 10). His mourning clearly has to
do with the fact that he lost this free life and camaraderie he once had, and represents the
older generation looking nostalgically into the past instead of focusing on the present or
anticipating the future. Despite the harsh realities of the war and its aftermath, Herr
Brenner still affectionately longs for the personal relationships he had as a soldier in the
war.

The irreconcilability of memory and reality and the dependence of the older
generation on the younger generation to explain today’s occurrences are two issues raised
by Keun through the figure of Herr Brenner. He functions as a way to evoke historical
memory in Keun’s readers, in the process perhaps stirring up sympathy for the war
generation, since they are, after all, also wondering how they fit into this new society.

Before Doris meets Herr Brenner, she encounters a man called *der rote Mond*
while sitting in the Jockey café. Instantly we can identify him as a nostalgic for
Wilhelmine Germany, since Doris introduces him that way:

Im Jockey lernte ich den roten Mond kennen – seine Frau ist verreist, weil die
Zeiten schlecht sind und Badeorte im Oktober weniger kosten als im Juli. Er war
nur aus Zufall im Jockey, weil er unmodern ist und die neue Zeit ihn ekelt wegen
der Unmoral und der Politik. Er will die Kaisers wieder und schreibt Romane und
ist bekannt von früher her. Er hätte auch Geist. Und Grundsätze: Männer dürfen
und Frauen dürfen nicht. Nun frage ich mich nur, wie Männer ihr Dürfen ausüben
können ohne Frauen? Idiot. […] Er hat viele Romane geschrieben auf das
deutsche Volk hin und jetzt wird Zersetzung geschrieben von kleinen Juden. Da
macht er nicht mit. Und der rote Mond hat einen Roman: ‘Die Wiese im Mai,’
It is not revealed how old this man is, but based on the fact that he was old enough to have published novels nearly fifteen years ago, we can guess that he is at least twenty years older than Doris. He is “unmodern” and disgusted by the current times because of corruption, immorality, and politics. He longs for the old days, when Germany had an emperor and gender roles were how he thought they should be (“Männer dürfen, und Frauen dürfen nicht”). In his desire for a monarchy, he is displaying contempt for democracy and demonstrates anti-Semitic attitudes by insulting the popularity of Jewish literature. To deal with his nostalgia, he writes novels with titles like Die Wiese im Mai. This, as Doris tells us, was his greatest work, but a title like this would have failed to resound with younger readers in Weimar Germany because of its over-romanticized notions of an idyllic past. It lacks both the rootedness in the present and the hope for the future that New Objectivity emphasized. His newest novel, Der blonde Offizier, evokes mental images of an ideal soldier-type of character and already hints at the Aryan ideal of the Nazis, which begins to look forward and not backward in time.

Later, we learn more about this novel when der rote Mond reads parts of it out loud to Doris. Its contents, which consist of “Rebenhügel, wodurch ein Mädchen den Berg runtertanzte, und es lösten sich Flechten – und von neuem Rebenhügel und immer mehr Rebenhügel” (Keun 49f), remind today’s German scholars of the film genre called Heimatfilm. Although these appeared in the 1950s after the second World War, it is important to note the relevance of Heimatfilm themes with the nostalgia of Weimar’s older generations. As der rote Mond continues to read, Doris soon tires of hearing about grassy knolls and beautiful blonde maids who feed chickens and dance down the sides of
mountains. She is simply too young either to remember or care about the heroes that Wilhelmine Germany admired and honored with monuments like the Gedächtniskirche – Weimar’s experiences are so dramatically different from those of pre-WWI Germany that the younger generation disregards this old nostalgia as nonsense. Especially since they define themselves in complete opposite terms, Doris’s young generation of women is not content with feeding chickens and dancing down hills but instead wants to be valued by society as more than wives and mothers. *Der rote Mond* is over-nostalgic, so much so that Doris leaves the apartment after sleeping with him, as he is still engrossed in reading his own nostalgic writing. Much the opposite of Herr Brenner, Keun uses *der rote Mond* to show the ridiculousness of too much nostalgia. What the two men miss about the past is different; while Herr Brenner misses the sense of belonging and fulfilling personal relationships he had as a soldier in the trenches of World War I – something that Doris does not share with him but understands – *der rote Mond* misses the societal system where everything was in order and gender roles were firmly established – something Doris neither shares nor understands.

The effects of having such a strong longing for the past, no longer wanting the democracy Weimar provides, and the anti-Semitic attitudes of *der rote Mond* offer a glimpse into Germany’s potentially dangerous future. Although Irmgard Keun could not have predicted everything that would happen to Germany after that time, the National Socialist presence was certainly strong during this time, causing many to wonder what it would become. For Keun, however, Nazis did not seem to be a big concern: “The ‘nationals’ themselves appear rarely, and then usually in connection with comments on anti-Semitism. […] [T]he Nazi threat is not taken very seriously; to the author it was
apparently a subject for ridicule, not one for concern” (Matijevich 90). In this sense, Keun’s novel echoes Max Brod’s sentiment that the present time is all we can really know, warning readers that neither longing too much for the past nor planning for a predictable future are the right solutions for Weimar.

Distraction is one of the solutions Keun offers to deal with nostalgia and memories. Weimar Berlin was an exciting place to be with its bustling streets and array of different people, in which Doris revels. Berlin was “the irresistible magnet for all who sought the excitement of social and cultural modernity” in Germany’s Golden Twenties (Horsley 47f); one aspired to be a “Großstädter [...], und zwar Großstädter, der rein im Hier und Heute lebt, der eher zu Härte und Nüchternheit als zu Seele und Zärtlichkeit neigt” (Hermand and Trommler 91). The metropolis, with its hectic and fast-paced modern lifestyle, helped serve as a distraction from things she would like to forget and failed to allow time for reflection on emotions or on past events. This only seems to be a problem for the younger generation who gets caught up in the culture and who do not have too many experiences about which they can be nostalgic, as Brenner and der rote Mond do. According to Jost Hermand, members of Weimar society were expected to develop an orientation towards life focused on “selfishness, entertainment, change, mobility, the avoidance of frustration, and the release of sexual and psychic pressure” instead of on “love of other human beings, time-consuming higher education, the capacity for intellectual criticism, high culture, and comradely solidarity – values increasingly seen as obsolete and therefore threatening the achievement of a completely free and open lifestyle“ (Hermand 61). Culture itself, according to contemporary intellectual critic Siegfried Kracauer, exists for the very purpose of distraction: people go
out “weil es zu Hause elend ist und sie am Glanz teilhaben wollen” and to distract themselves from the reality of their lives (Kracauer 283). Much like the people about whom Kracauer is writing, Doris too is miserable. She is unemployed, moves quickly from one lover to the next, struggles with her parents, and barely survives from day to day. She too wants to rid herself of her daily misery by becoming a Glanz in order to escape her own intolerable reality.

So although Berlin “ist sehr großartig,” it unfortunately does not offer any “Heimatlichkeit, weil es verschlossen ist. Und das kommt auch, weil es unter den Menschen hier ganz kolossale Sorgen gibt, und daraufhin haben sie alle mit weniger Sorgen kein Mitleid, aber mir sind sie schwer genug“ (Keun 52). In this part of the text, we again see the marks of history, namely the worries bearing down on Berliners, directly affecting personal relationships and causing their reticence. The events that make history and cause Berliners to have “kolossale Sorgen” are reflected in Keun’s prose, only this time not as a distraction, but instead as a hindrance to forming relationships with other people. The worries of the time, which included unemployment, poverty, a very unstable government, and at this point, the up-and-coming National Socialist party, weighed upon the shoulders of Berliners, which made them verschlossen. So while the culture of the city may be a distraction, the people are certainly not. Berlin does not always distract Doris as much as she likes; instead, it sometimes reminds her of exactly what she wants to forget – that she is not at home.

On one of her first days in Berlin, Doris hears a political demonstration at Alexanderplatz. At the rally, “wir haben alle vom Frieden geschrien – ich dachte, das ist gut und man muss es, denn sonst wird Krieg – und Arthur Grönland gab mir einmal eine
Orientierung, dass der nächste Krieg mit stinkendem Gas wäre, davon man grün wird und aufquillt. Und das will ich nicht. Und schrie darum mit zu den Politischen rauf” (Keun 42). Here we see a collective fear of the future and a potential impending war. This time in history was not optimal for taking comfort in the ambiguity of the future, but rather a time to plan and take action to prevent more events that could very well ravage Germany as badly as World War I had done. Doris shouts for peace with the rest of the demonstrators not because she knows (or even necessarily cares) about the political happenings in Weimar and their consequences for wider society. Instead, she worries more about how the next war will affect her personal life. Not only would such a war make her permanently homeless or force her to move back home with her family, but it would also ruin her dream of becoming a Glanz. In short, Doris’s motivation to learn about politics is completely apolitical – she seeks out knowledge not because she is concerned about the greater good of Germany, but instead for the moment of excitement she experiences when participating in a political rally and, most importantly, for the way these politics will personally affect her life.

Another passage shows the failure of the younger generation to see consequences beyond themselves:

aber ich weiß ja nicht, ob es mehr [Huren] sind als früher und was sie alle mit der Zeit immer haben. Wenn man ein kleines Kind ist und gerade hören kann, dann hört man immer von so schrecklicher Zeit und was soll nur werden. Und wenn ich an die Zeit denke, dann muss ich nur denken, dass ich mal alt werde und hässlich und schruplig, aber das kann ich ja gar nicht glauben – aber das ist mir das einzige Schreckliche an der Zeit. (Keun 101)

Similar to the situation with the political rally, Doris fails to see consequences that will occur beyond her own life. The illusion of youth causes Doris to not be able to believe that she will grow old and lose her youthful looks. She demonstrates her inability to look
beyond the personal consequences of historical events, and fails both to see and to believe that the future will eventually be the present. If literary figures in Keun’s novels do represent a type instead of an individual, as Matijevich has said (10), then we could draw the conclusion that the younger generation has solely their own interests in mind when avoiding illusion.

Swept up in the demonstration but realizing she does not know what the demonstration was actually about, Doris asks “ein[en] dunkelblaue[n] […] Norddeutsche[n]” to explain it to her afterwards (Keun 43). This situation is representative of Doris’s concern with her Unwissen, or lack of knowledge, one of the novel’s major themes. She considers herself politically unaware (”Und ich hatte etwas Angst vor meiner Dummheit,” Keun 43), but in this situation she shows how much she really knows about surviving on the street. She takes advantage of this very drunk man, who takes her to a café, where she eats cake and has the “Wunsch nach politischer Aufklärung” (Keun 43) as he explains to her why the National Socialists were against the Jews and the French, and whether there would be another war. By seeking out an explanation from another person, Doris acknowledges her Unwissen, which is connected to her inability to see past the immediate effects that history has upon her own life.

In a comparison with her hometown, Doris remembers: “Zu Hause waren auch viele Straßen, aber die waren wie verwandt zusammen. Hier sind noch viel mehr Straßen und so viele, dass sie sich gegenseitig nicht kennen. Es ist eine fabelhafte Stadt” (Keun 39f). The charm of Berlin’s streets lies in how much they differ from one another, yet the comfort of the streets of home are the fact that they are “verwandt” with each other, just as family members are related to one another. Keun relates here that excitement lies in
unfamiliarity and in being on one’s own and away from home, but that there is also a loss of a familiar and critical network of human relationships. The protagonist abandons the solace of her hometown in favor of a city she does not know, allowing herself to be attracted to the *Großstadt* as if it is something that will help her forget the streets of home. Her descriptions of Berlin are rich, abounding with experiences that Keun, who resided in Berlin for much of her time in Germany, likely had herself (Kosta 776). While Berlin has long been a main hub in German cultural history, there had been no golden age for Berlin previous to Weimar; instead, these are the good old days. Much like Doris is trying to establish a history for herself, so too are Berlin and Germany – something which goes against Hermand and Trommler’s observation that the new generation emphasized the experiences of *das Kollektive*.

The final matter we see occurring in the novel is unemployment, a very serious Weimar social issue. Not only was Doris herself in want of a job, so was her cousin Paul, who was “arbeitslos und trug Anzüge auf von seinem jüngeren Bruder, der verdiente, und er fand nichts und saß da. Und stützt auf den Tisch in der Küche seine Arme, da sagt meine Tante: ‘Ich bitte dich, Paul, nicht die Arme zu stützen, um den Anzug zu schonen, denn du hast ihn ja gar nicht verdient’” (Keun 55). After his suicide his parents wonder “wie konnte er uns das antun, wo wir immer gut zu ihm waren” (Keun 55). In this example we see how the Weimar issue of unemployment affected this young man. For this young man’s family, it is apparent that employment (or lack thereof) constitutes his worthiness to exist. The young man’s inability to employ and support himself made him so miserable that he ended his life. Right before this passage, Doris mentions that “alle sollten nach Berlin” (Keun 55), as if that would have solved Paul’s unemployment
problems, although it certainly did not solve hers. Paul’s suicide is revealing about how social and cultural issues work their way into the lives of individuals in Weimar Germany. Living in Berlin, Doris is free from the problems her cousin and family caused for each other: she is “doch so froh, dass ich fort bin in Berlin, und es ist eine Freiheit, ich werde ein Glanz” (Keun 55). She has physically separated herself from her cousin, although she is very much in his same situation – unemployed and on her own, and completely unable to support herself. The only thing that really separates her from him is the fact that she has not given up, and she is still planning for a future, however vague that future and the plans to achieve it may be. The refusal to give up and keeping the focus on the present is the only possible way to escape the family and the past.

Broader society’s troubles echo those of the protagonist, making Keun’s novel a relevant starting point for discussion about historical nostalgia in Weimar Germany. Contemporary readers could likely relate very well to the problems of Doris and her fellow characters: der rote Mond and his involvement in political conservatism and nostalgia for the past; metropolitan culture and its ability to distract from the misery of the everyday; unemployment and the way that a larger social issue influences personal lives, such as in the example with Doris’s cousin Paul; and coming to terms with the physically and emotionally devastating results of World War I, as demonstrated by Doris’s blind neighbor Herr Brenner. Even Doris’s “zig-zag” story is in itself “an image of the chaos and instability of the last years of Weimar society” (Horsley 48). Keun’s inclusion of these people makes the novel very accessible to her readership, which is part of what made Das kunstseidene Mädchen so successful. Here Keun uses New Objectivity to criticize broader Weimar culture through an individual figure to reveal
observations about generational relationships, the role of war in separating one generation from the next, and the change in experience between Wilhelmine Germany and the Weimar Republic, all through the examples of Herr Brenner, *der rote Mond*, the metropolis of Berlin, and the effects of Weimar’s problems in the personal dimension. In summary, the past is a question that comes up many times in the historical observations that Keun makes, and one that does not always offer simple answers. The next chapter discusses personal memory in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* and how it differs from historical memory in helping to negotiate the past within New Objectivity.
Chapter 4: Private Memory in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*

How historical memory plays itself out in larger society in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, has a corollary in the way that Keun criticizes New Objectivity on the personal level. The goal here is to examine how individuals reconcile difficult memories and pasts within the literature of New Objectivity. First, metaphors and characters shape personal memory and their use leads to brief discussions of homelessness and sentimentality. The style of the *Tagebuch* itself coincides with New Objectivity, since a diary records the present time. Second, the aspects of Doris’s wish to become a *Glanz* and the symbolism of the fur coat remind her of what she was and is, and act as representations of the past. Third, Doris’s relationships with her parents, whose choices she strives not to replicate in her own life. Last, the character of Ernst is himself a sentimental character who is often engaged in thoughts of the past.

That Keun chose the *Tagebuch* as the form for Doris’s story raises several interesting issues. Doris’s motive behind writing is to record her path to becoming a Glanz: “Und ich denke, dass es gut ist, wenn ich alles beschreibe, weil ich ein ungewöhnlicher Mensch bin. Ich denke nicht an Tagebuch – das ist lächerlich für ein Mädchen von achtzehn und auch sonst auf der Höhe. Aber ich will schreiben wie Film, denn so ist mein Leben und wird noch mehr so sein” (Keun 3f). From the beginning it is clear that this is no ordinary journal – rather, it is the documentation of a life via a new medium, the film. Here, Keun is experimenting with a new literary form, the cinematic journal. While this is not an officially recognized genre, it is nonetheless an experimental form encouraged by the creative environment in Weimar Germany.
By keeping a diary, Doris becomes both the author and the reader of her life’s Drehbuch: “[d]ie Populärkultur liefert nicht lediglich den Stoff der Romane, sondern sie dient auch der literarischen Selbstreflexion” (Barndt 169). And, whether or not she realizes it, Doris is also keeping records of her own memories (Helduser 23ff.), documenting that which for her may be the present, but soon will also be part of her history. Technically, she could return to her Tagebuch and re-read her memories at any time, since writing, according to Freud, produces a semi-permanent memory trace (Freud 114). But Freud also notes the imperfection of books and pages that hold our writing – they have an “exhaustive memory capacity,” leaving the writer to reach for yet another page when their page is full. In essence, “devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot” – that is, holding a great amount of permanent memories (Freud 115). A film can serve some of the same functions as a journal – it is only somewhat inalterable and like film, it preserves memories in a form that others can see as well. This is what allows Doris to share her history with Ernst, a situation discussed later in this chapter.

In keeping a journal, even if in the form of a film-text, she records a story of her life, using it as an “emotionales Barometer” (Barndt 199) and as a means of establishing a story for herself (Barndt 167f.). Contrary to New Objectivity’s subscription to sobriety, she allows herself to be carried away by her experiences in Berlin, in contrast to some of the machine-human comparisons prominent at the time, such as in the poem “Chor der Frauen” by Erich Kästner. The lyrical I of that poem uses mechanical terms to describe the women who “hämmern” on their typewriters (1) and who have “Liebelei” (10) twice per week “als wär man Mann und Frau” (11). This human-machine comparison appeared
often in Weimar literature as a criticism of New Objectivity’s unsentimental and sterile nature. Keun actually contradicts New Objectivity by allowing her characters – not only Doris, but Ernst as well – to be so connected with her sentimental, subjective side.

Keeping a journal also makes Doris vulnerable to Ernst’s criticism when she shows him her Tagebuch. “Ich will ein richtiger Mensch sein,” she writes as her reason for letting him read her memories (104). The fact that being human is something to which she aspires shows that she may not have considered herself a “Mensch” before, or that she had at least recognized unmenschliche qualities in herself. The fact that Doris makes herself so vulnerable to Ernst, showing him the record of the low points in her life, her drunken ramblings, her reflections on men and love, is a big step in her development towards breaking free of New Objectivity, indicating that sobriety and anti-sentimentality is not the solution to not being a Mensch, but is instead the very problem she faces. She shows herself to him as a human being free of labels, not as an uneducated woman of the working class or a potential Glanz. By doing this, she puts herself on the same level as educated, middle-class Ernst. Doris rejects the very notion of objectivity by exposing her need to be emotional with a person who has been just as open with her. In this way, she actually recognizes that she has a past – simply sharing her Tagebuch with Ernst, she acknowledges her written history as one that is worthy of sharing with another person and a way of sharing herself, confirming that she really has become “ein richtiger Mensch” and attempting to neutralize herself in Ernst’s perception. This episode shows the negative, unfeeling side of New Objectivity, and the importance of occasionally breaking its spell to reveal human nature.
Kerstin Barndt suggests that one of the diary’s functions within the novel itself is to replace Doris’s mother. This is most evidenced in the letters that Doris addresses to her absent mother within the journal itself and in the complaints she expresses about life in Berlin. Alone in the big city, Doris must rely on herself and her own street smarts. Even Ernst, as close as the two become, cannot replace the functions that the Tagebuch or Doris’s mother provides:

Obwohl Ernst neben der ‘väterlichen’ Instanz des rigorosen moralischen Urteils auch ‘mütterliche’ Qualitäten der uneigennützigen Sorge auf sich vereint, kann er Doris die Geborgenheit nicht ersetzen, die ihr Tagebuch auf die leibliche Mutter projiziert. So verlässt sie ihn aus eigenem Entschluss, um zu erkennen, das es kein Zurück gibt: weder zur Mutter, noch zu Ernst. (Barndt 199)

Barndt’s observation further contributes to the idea that Doris does, in fact, need a maternal figure to guide her and listen to her complaints, however many feminine qualities Ernst, or any other fatherly figure, may embody. The reality is, however, that there is no way back to the mother, as Barndt rightly points out in this passage. The fact that Doris needs her mother so badly that she replaces her with other objects and people – the Pelzmantel, Ernst, her diary – is a glaring indicator that the younger generation needs an older guide – and the fact that they always disappear shows that once they are gone, they are irreplaceable. They might have their faults and may not understand firsthand the way of life in a newer, more modern society than their own; they might be too nostalgic and sentimental. The text argues that no matter how much the younger generation needs the older, there is no way back. Doris’s parents cannot fulfill this function for her; not her mother, who has an undesirable relationship with her husband, and not her father, who is lazy but makes no attempts to find employment since he can easily live off of Doris’s meager income by pushing her around.
The novel’s ending remains open for readers to interpret both what happens to Doris and what happens in the larger context of Weimar. At this point in history, the Nazi presence could be felt in Germany but was still a few years away from seizing the government, which meant that the future was still quite open for Germany, too. *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* ends with Doris leaving Ernst after she sees Hanne in a dance hall, and not really knowing what future awaits her. Most important to note is that Doris feels that the only reason she can be happy is to leave Ernst with his nostalgia, whether Hanne returns to him or not, and go elsewhere. After she parts with Hanne, she writes that “Da wollte nun so eine in dem Alter ein Glanz werden, und das konnte ja ich nicht mal bis jetzt. Und nun ist es wohl geordnet, und es brennen dann meine Kerzen” (127). Now it is time, but Doris also has “keine Meinesgleichen, ich gehöre überhaupt nirgends hin” (128). Despite her keen sense for the needs of others and her resourcefulness in getting by, Doris has no one to guide her in the right direction, and is unable to escape the dire circumstances from which she comes. Doris belongs nowhere, and there is no one like her who can encourage her about this.

While all scholars agree that the ending is open, the meaning of Keun’s conclusion could mean several things depending on whether the subject is Doris, her generation, or women or humanity in general. Not knowing what ultimately happens to Doris leads us to ask the question of what comes next. Elke Matijevich comments that the reader need not be optimistic about Doris’s future, because we do not know whether Doris has “enslaved [herself] yet further by giving up relative security [with Ernst] for a future that is, at best, dubious” (Matijevich 73). Not only is the future of Doris and her generation unpredictable, but the future of the *Neue Frau* is unclear as well (Horsley 40).
But Horsley says that despite the open ending, there is one thing we do know: “this seemingly hopeless, inconclusive conclusion also prevents an easy verdict and reasserts Doris’s resistance to classification, leaving us again with a sense of the contradictoriness of the new roles women were trying to live during this era” (Horsley 49). The fact that Doris’s story is not resolved within the framework of the novel de-emphasizes the personal journey, putting importance instead on the collective fate.

Whatever ultimately happens to her, we know that Doris does not want to return to the miserable life she previously led: “Und von Büro habe ich genug – ich will nicht mehr, was ich mal hatte, weil es nicht gut war. Ich will nicht arbeiten, aber ich habe Korke in meinem Bauch, die lassen mich doch nicht untergehen? […] Auf den Glanz kommt es nämlich vielleicht gar nicht so furchtbar an” (Keun 130). At this moment, Doris realizes that there is nothing she can do to escape her circumstances, leaving the reader with a pessimistic image of what finally happens to her. Society has lodged her – and many like her – in a position from which she will never escape. It is implied that she somehow survives, but that this survival is difficult. In the end, even a street-smart girl like Doris will be held back by a lack of education, lack of adequately paying jobs, and sexism. The double standards held for the New Woman – to be simultaneously career- and family-oriented – are unfair and too burdensome, and set up many women for failure.

Like New Objectivity and its focus on the present, and like Keun’s novel, which documents the present in great detail, Doris too lives in the present time, hoping ultimately to become a Glanz for the better part of the novel. In any difficult situation, she consoles herself by reassuring herself that she is better than the problems or people that are plaguing her, especially when it comes to her parents, and that she will someday
rise to be a shining brilliance in the world – a concept that goes against the austerity of New Objectivity. New Objectivity, like Doris, also focused on the present and its advocates hoped that objectivity itself was an answer to Germany’s struggles to re-define itself. In having her character aspire to something so outrageous as being a Glanz, especially given Doris’s background, Keun satirizes Weimar’s objectiveness. This dream, Doris’s constant hope that someday she will rise out of her own circumstances, is what helps her through her struggles in 1930s Berlin with men, finances, and her lack of education. Keun, acknowledging the devastation that occurred from the war, may even be suggesting here that Germany itself needs something to hope for, outrageous and unrealistic though it may be, and that objectivity was satisfying only to a certain extent.

While Doris intends on becoming a Glanz without any specific plans, it is also clear that she really has no resources with which to achieve such an aspiration. Once she moves to Berlin, she moves from man to man in order to survive, because those men, while they may be irritating at times, provide her with food and a warm bed, but her relationships do not last for longer than a few days or weeks. When she feels threatened in her attempts at survival and self-protection, she moves on. This constant movement and complete lack of a more permanent residence is something that indicates Doris’ overall homelessness, and her utter lack of financial resources, including a job, forces her into this position. Her past has been quite gloomy, so she has no choice but to hope for a more auspicious future. But, as she notes, “Jeder Glanz hat über sich einen höheren Glanz” (72), so Doris will perhaps never even actually reach the top. She is the epitome of what Siegfried Kracauer criticizes about the new generation: “Sie lebt gegenwärtig, ohne eine Lehre, zu der sie aufblicken, ohne ein Ziel, das sie erfragen kann” (Kracauer
Doris is a perfect example of the culture to which Kracauer is referring, as shown by the very few references she makes to anything in the past, and her unclear plans for the future. The reality is that there is no one in Doris’s life who could give her the “Lehre” she needs, and she is essentially facing the impossible challenge of overcoming her social background. She is uneducated, unemployed, and from a working-class family, making social and financial mobility impossible for her. This is why she constantly puts on a front of being better than she really is: she has nothing else to use to become a Glanz other than projecting the qualities onto herself of that which she wishes to become. Because of these confining and unalterable circumstances, she will ultimately be unsuccessful.

Doris has many expectations of the fulfillment of her dream to be a Glanz, of which the main one is how she will be treated by others: “Ich werde ein Glanz, und was ich dann mache, ist richtig – nie mehr brauch ich mich in Acht nehmen und nicht mehr meine Worte ausrechnen und meine Vorhabungen ausrechnen – einfach betrunken sein – nichts kann mir mehr passieren an Verlust und Verachtung, denn ich bin ein Glanz” (Keun 27). This passage indicates much about what it means to be a Glanz – being respected and acknowledged, earning the positive attentions of others, and being free to do as one pleases. In addition, being a Glanz means to be free of loss and the necessity of acting and speaking carefully. As a Glanz, Doris will be adored by everyone simply for who and what she is, regardless of where she comes from, her origin, and her level of education. The idea itself is rather ambiguous, but Doris also includes some material aspects of being a star:

“Ich will eine [fertige Künstlerin] werden. Ich will so ein Glanz werden, der oben ist. Mit weißem Auto und Badewasser, das nach Parfüm riecht, und alles wie
Paris. Und die Leute achten mich hoch, weil ich ein Glanz bin, und werden es dann wunderbar finden, wenn ich nicht weiß, was eine Kapazität ist, und nicht runter lachen auf mich wie heute.” (Keun 26)

Doris’s aspirations for stardom stem from her fear of contempt, degradation, and isolation, something which she expresses in her fear of her own ignorance. Matijevich comments that Doris is “keenly aware that ignorance is one of the factors that prevent her from making headway in the ongoing quest for stardom and is constantly seeking to educate herself, though the men with whom she comes in contact make it difficult for her” (Matijevich 87). Doris must constantly be vigilant of her path to becoming a Glanz, despite the fact that there is no real tangible goal to obtain and that the path itself is impossible.

Before fleeing to Berlin, Doris wonders: “Ob man wohl ein Glanz werden kann, wenn man es nicht von Geburt ist? Aber ich bin doch jetzt schon Schauspielschule.” (Keun 28). Doris introduces to the reader the idea of Glanz as a result of natural circumstances. If it is true that no one can become a Glanz unless they were born as one, then Doris is fighting an uphill battle, since she comes from uneducated parents (in fact, she does not even know her biological father) and is herself uneducated and unemployed. Fundamentally, Doris’s struggle to become a Glanz, like her way of life, “is a kind of post, an effort to present herself as more sophisticated and glamorous than she is in reality” (Horsley 48). As previously stated, this is because of her desire to rise out of her life’s misery and be acknowledged as worthy of praise.

Becoming a Glanz in itself is not representative of New Objectivity. Despite her obvious problems of not having a permanent residence and not being able to work because of stealing her fur coat, Doris still focuses on becoming a Glanz through the
whole of her troubles. One could almost say that she is optimistic that she will somehow attain her goal. This optimism is exactly what New Objectivity countered, since optimism could have been seen as an illusion. Doris is not realistic about her prospects and continues to remain hopeful for the future despite obvious signs that she would never be respected and admired by others. Keun’s voice and the path Doris take fit into New Objectivity, but Doris’s hopeless dream of becoming a Glanz is a bleak observation of the social situation of Weimar. As much as it wants to be, there are circumstances that cannot be helped and that will prevent Germany from ever attaining a well-planned future.

Doris’s fur coat and her desire to become a Glanz are intrinsically connected, since the coat constantly reminds her of where she comes from. The Pelzmantel that she steals before fleeing to Berlin stands for several things. First, it represents her official abandonment of her childhood and her home, part of the bigger subject of the past from which Neue Sachlichkeit also aimed to look away. However, by taking it with her on her flight to Berlin, the coat also serves as a reminder of where and why she got it. She feels justified in taking the coat because it belonged to “einer dicken Frau” (38) (whom she later calls an “Unrechte,” 117), but does nothing to right her action until Ernst encourages her to send it back. In the letter she writes to the owner of the coat, she expresses that she might have regretted stealing the fur had she known the face of its owner. She is sending it back not to make the owner happy, but for herself: “es ist nur wegen der Ordnung und meinen Papieren und wegen dem Opfer, was ich tun muss und weil ich besetzt sein will und aus Liebe” (Keun 117). This is part of her plan to become a Mensch and the kind of person that Ernst could love.
While being a reminder of her past, Doris mostly views it as a sign of something she wants to become. The fur serves as an atonement for everything she has been denied in life so far and as a comfort, both physical and emotional, for Doris: “Es sah nach Trost aus und nach Allerheiligen und nach hoher Sicherheit wie im Himmel” (36). It is a representation of her ideal self – a Glanz. Doris uses the coat as a vehicle by which to transform herself into something she is not, and in it she projects an image of herself as a Glanz.

Although it may be a comfort to Doris at times and a means for social mobility, the coat also acts as a reminder of the actual, very practical reason that Doris needed to escape to Berlin: “Arbeiten kann ich nur mit Schwierigkeiten, weil ich ja keine Papiere habe und darf auf keiner Polizei gemeldet werden, denn ich bin doch auf der Flucht. Und man wird schlecht behandelt und ganz billig, wenn man sich anmerken lässt, dass es einem schlecht geht. Ein Glanz will ich werden” (53). Doris lives in constant fear that her past behavior – stealing the coat – will come back to haunt her, since she could technically be arrested for taking the coat if she were found. In addition, she could get into trouble for not having her papers; since she ran away from home with only the clothes on her back, she has few physical reminders of home or her old self.

A final interpretation of the fur is that Doris uses it to replace an absent person. Barndt suggests that it substitutes for her “unerfüllten Sehnsüchte” (Barndt 194).

Anders als die Männer und die Mutter wird der Feh Doris als Materialisierung der Vorstellungen von Schönheit, sozialer Mobilität und Tranzendenz treu begleiten […] Doris überträgt auf den Pelzmantel die Sehnsucht nach Geborgenheit, die vormals der Mutter galt. Sie dient zuerst als Projektionsfläche einer Sehnsucht nach Nähe, von der sich Doris im Laufe des Erzählprozesses zunehmend löst. (Barndt 200f)
The simple idea that Doris needed to replace her mother is an indicator that having a maternal figure in her life is important for her. Shortly after her arrival in Berlin, she begins including unsent letters to her mother in her diary, admitting that “das Neue kann nicht das Alte ersetzen für mich – und das alte nicht das Neue. [...] Ich hatte bekannte Straßen bei euch mit Steinen, die Guten Tag sagten zu meinen Füßen, wenn sie drauf traten. Und es war die Laterne mit einem Sprung in der Scheibe und Gekratze am Pfahl” (49). These nostalgic memories show the reader a more human side of Doris, and a necessity not always to be objective.

Though they are rarely mentioned, Doris’s parents have a large influence over her choices. Very early in the novel, we see that she is not proud of her parents, but instead wants to distinguish herself from them in some way. The first means by which she does this is language: “Dann spreche ich fast ohne Dialekt, was viel ausmacht und mir eine Note gibt, besonders da mein Vater und meine Mutter ein Dialekt sprechen, das mir geradezu beschämend ist” (Keun 3f). While it may be true that Doris speaks without a dialect, but she does use her very own idiosyncratic language, a personal dialect, as the reader constantly sees throughout the novel. That Doris is ashamed of her parents has a relationship to both becoming a Glanz and the past. For her, her parents represent a part of the past on which she rarely comments. Like her, they belong to the working class and are also uneducated. Doris feels that she must separate herself from them if she is to become a Glanz, since she also asks whether it is possible to become a Glanz even if one comes from a background such as her own.

In one of the lengthiest reflections on her parents in Doris’s Tagebuch, she writes that her mother is “ein feines Weib, sie hat noch so was Gewisses von früher her, wenn
She views her mother as someone deserving of respect because of who she was in the past, but in marrying her husband (who is not Doris’s biological father), she ruined her chances for greatness. Her father is “ein vollkommen ungebildeter Mensch und faul wie eine jahrelange Leiche,” who puts on a good face only outside his home (Keun 15). Curious about why such a distinctive woman as her mother would marry such an undeserving person as her father, Doris asks her mother about her – in Doris’ eyes – unnecessary sacrifice. Her mother responds simply with “Irgendwo muß man doch hingehören” (Keun 15f). Although she understands what her mother means by this statement, she also mourns her mother’s loss of a potentially glamorous life in which she is recognized for her greatness, which consisted of “so was Gewisses von früher her,” and vows not to make the same mistake. She consciously distinguishes herself from her mother and wants to become her own person in Berlin, and this promise to compensate for her mother’s lost potential keeps her occupied throughout her attempted rise to become a Glanz.

Before Doris flees the theatre, she remarks: “Aber man kann ja nichts verstehn von andern, wenn man nicht alles miterlebt und von demselben Fluidum umhaucht ist, das macht, dass man etwas tut oder nicht” (Keun 36). Although Doris may look up to her mother for what she used to be, she can no longer see her as a role model for her present life, nor can her mother empathize with Doris’ career aspirations. She therefore feels that her mother is no longer a role model for her, and moves to distinguish herself from her by fleeing to Berlin to survive on her own. She physically and socially separates herself
from her mother by escaping to a completely different geographical setting (from “mittlere Stadt” to \textit{Großstadt}, Keun 54) and ceases contact with her mother except for letters she writes in her diary but never sends.

Once Doris arrives in Berlin, she realizes that she and her mother are not so dissimilar after all, and the focus shifts from disparities to similarities: “Liebe Mutter, du hast ein schönes Gesicht gehabt, du hast Augen, die gucken, wie sie Lust haben, du bist arm gewesen, wie ich arm bin, du hast mit Männern geschlafen, weil du sie mochtest, oder weil du Geld brauchtest – das tue ich auch” (Keun 50). In this passage we can see that the same problems that Doris’s generation of women face is actually very similar to those of her mother’s generation, for they face the same stigmas and challenges.

But although they face the same challenges, Doris’s mother still fulfills an important function for her, namely that of a

Projektionsfläche von Regressionsphantasien. Für Doris bedeutet das Besinnen auf die Mutter zuallererst eine Konfrontation mit ihrem Geschlecht wie mit ihrer sozialen Außenseiterposition. Denn Doris’ Mutter ist in gleicher Weise wie sie selbst sozial und sexuell stigmatisiert. (Barndt 200)

Like Doris, her mother realistically could not have achieved being a \textit{Glanz} because of her social and financial circumstances. By her own desire to become a \textit{Glanz}, Doris attempts to compensate for the life her mother rejected when she decided to marry Doris’s adoptive father. What Doris and her mother both share is stigmatization; what they do not share is that Doris plans on actually fulfilling her own dream for her mother and earning the recognition she feels she – and her mother – deserve.

Just as much as her struggles with her mother drive her to rise above her origins, so does her relationship with her father, a lazy, unemployed man who lives off of his
wife’s and daughter’s hard work. His presence has even, at times, caused Doris to be afraid of home for fear of being victim to his ridicule:

Und Angst zu Hause – ich durfte die Klappen nicht bewegen Sonntagmittag beim Essen – und ich gestiert, bis mir Tränen kamen – ‘was guckste denn, wie ‘ne Verrückte,’ sagt mein Vater – und ich immer die Augen starr – und so stier gucke ich jetzt auch immer, weil ich so viel sehen muss. (Keun 65)

Like Herr Brenner and *der rote Mond*, Doris’s parents represent the older generation that does not understand today’s way of life, where there is much to see. The differences with her parents that she faces seem unable to be resolved, which is shown in her lack of contact with them. While her father is a greater financial and emotional burden to her, her mother is an object of pity and disappointment. Barndt suggests that Doris replaces her mother with the *Pelz* (Barndt 209). But the fact that she continues to write unsent letters to her mother again indicates her desire for a connection with someone who was once like her and might come to understand what it is like to live in today’s world. Keun uses Doris as a vehicle to show that it is not easy living in a time that is so dramatically different from the experiences of her parents.

While Doris struggles in her relationship with her parents to avoid their choices, Ernst, Doris’s lover at the end of the novel, also wrestles with his own past relationships. Doris meets Ernst on New Year’s Eve at her lowest point in the novel: she has just spent a night sleeping on a bench in the Berlin *Tiergarten* and decides to work as a prostitute for a few days. A few moments into 1932, she hears a voice that sounds like “dunkelgrünes Moos” ask her to come with him (90). Thirty-seven-year-old Ernst is interested in human company, not sex or any other kind of reciprocation for housing and feeding Doris. This New Year’s meeting represents a great turn in Doris’s life. Their relationship is a relief for her after struggling with unemployment, and encountering
masses in different forms, including in political demonstrations. For Ernst, it is a comfort – because he finally has someone waiting for him at the end of the day – and a painful reminder of the fact that his wife Hanne recently left him for another man.

Doris’s unintentionally long stay at Ernst’s apartment restores her health and her ambition. The two establish a delicate, cautious relationship with each other, first a friendship and then a romantic relationship. Ernst is still in love with his wife, though, and relates to Doris memory after memory of their time together. Hanne had disappeared without a word, leaving kindhearted Ernst feeling isolated and bewildered. Being with Ernst is a relief for Doris from economic, social, and political strains – namely her unemployment and her Unwissen that prevents her from understanding politics. As part of his household, she is financially cared for and must not worry about finding a job or having enough financial resources for basic needs like food and a place to live. Doris has few other options, while Ernst wants her to stay “‘[w]eil ich eine Angst habe, nach Hause zu kommen und keener ist da und atmet – bleiben Sie doch bitte noch hier’” (Keun 95).

While living with Ernst, Doris plays the role of traditional housewife, cooking, cleaning and making Ernst’s home a comfortable place. For a while, she enjoys the predictable routine of her days, and their relationship initially succeeds because they fulfill each other’s need for human companionship.

The two eventually grow closer and Doris invites Ernst to read her diary, secretly hoping that this soul-baring act will make him fall in love with her. His reaction to Doris’s Tagebuch is primarily concerned with her behavior, not with discovering her humanity or her past struggles with her parents, her jobs, or with her many lovers. Instead, he seeks to help Doris right her wrongs. His first reaction is to encourage Doris
to write to her parents and tell them that she is safe: “Kleine Doris, Sie sind von zu Hause fortgelaufen, glaube ich – wir wollen an Ihre Eltern schreiben, die sorgen sich sicher – Sie dummes Kind, haben Sie denn eine Ahnung, was Ihnen hier alles in Berlin hätte passieren können?”. To herself, Doris responds: “Haben Sie eine Ahnung, was mir schon alles passiert ist!” And finally, Ernst follows with a short lecture on the virtues (or lack thereof) of women: “Frauen laufen wohl immer mal fort, ja? Frauen können es wohl auf einmal nicht mehr aushalten, was? Meine Frau – und erzählt mir von seiner Frau. Und daran merke ich, er hält mich wirklich für eine Unschuldige und bessere Familie” (Keun 97). His reaction is not what she had hoped for – namely, Ernst does not forget Hanne and instead lectures Doris on her “nature” as a woman and treats her like a foolish child who has run away from home. Revealing her vulnerable side brings out the care-giving qualities in Ernst. Instead of romantic love, his response is a desire to take care of her as a parent cares for a child. Given their age difference and the fact that Ernst is already in love with his absent wife, the reader may have expected this. But this is not the reaction Doris was looking for, which only reaffirms the need for her to look out for herself and use the Wissen she does have.

Doris grows tired of Ernst’s nostalgic memories of Hanne, and eventually points out to him that it is simply unacceptable to talk about his love for another woman in front of her. He responds with: “Ich bin einfach so froh, wenn ich von ihr reden kann” (Keun 106), signaling that reflecting on his past experiences with his wife is something positive for him. Annoyed with hearing sentimental stories about Hanne, Doris wonders if she herself is nothing more than a depository for his thoughts, as her best friend Theresa is for her: “Bin ich etwa eine Therese für ihn? Ich habe seine Frau sehr über. Therese
wollte ja immer, dass ich erzähle von meinen Männern. Das ist doch ein Unterschied” (Keun 106). Ernst treats Doris in a parental and at times even maternal manner, viewing her more as a passive listener than as a sexual object. This treatment contrasts with the men she has previously known, and in a way, Ernst is breaking tradition with his behavior.

One day a letter from Hanne arrives for Ernst, an interruption of Ernst’s past in Doris’s present life. Hanne, a woman about whom Doris has only heard nostalgic memories from Ernst, suddenly is no longer a memory, but is instead a letter-writing reality. Upset that Ernst is about to be taken away from her, Doris reads the letter and then hides it under a rug, feeling guilty for weeks afterwards for hiding from Ernst what he has been awaiting for so long. Hanne’s letter represents a past of which Doris was not a part, and this past threatens Doris’ present and future happiness, which is her ultimate goal. Here we see a legitimate reason for Doris to be afraid of the past – because Hanne could return at any time, thereby interrupting and destroying the present. Her fragile construction of a life that allows her to be a feeling, thinking, non-calculating human being is about to be shattered. Doris knows this, and does it herself by one day deciding to pick up and leave, leaving Hanne’s letter on the table, and even sending Hanne to Ernst. The return of the past, in this case, is positive for Ernst and once again negative for Doris.

In her letter, Hanne writes to Ernst that she ran away because of “eine Angst, dass es nur noch diese ruhigen ereignislosen Tage für mich geben würde – bis an mein Lebensende. Und Angst vor dem Altwerden, dem Etwas-versäumt-haben und dem Zuspät. Und weil du gut zu mir warst und alles tatest, begriffst du einfach nicht, dass ich
nicht glücklich war.” (Keun 113) Hanne ran away from Ernst because she anticipated a better future, she was afraid she had ruined something in her life by allowing herself to slip into a routine and an “ereignislos” lifestyle (Keun 113). Like Doris, the only way out of her situation was to abruptly run away from home. Doris and Hanne both need to escape the predictable life of a housewife by leaving Ernst, who lets them fill only the role of housewife. This should be a relief to the Neue Frau, who felt pressured by having two roles to fill, but it was instead an undesirable situation for both Doris and Hanne. Despite the open ending, what we do know is that Doris has refused “to be pinned down to a male-defined, bourgeois identity” (Horsley 49). The situations of both women point to the troublesome situation of the Neue Frau, who was supposed to both support herself and be a wife and mother. Both women rejected the old-fashioned and traditional notion that they simply had to be housewives and opted instead for a lifestyle that allowed them to be in some ways free of the constraints that society placed upon them as women.

Doris reminds Ernst so much of Hanne that he begins to not see her as Doris, but instead as Hanne. Even when they become intimate, Ernst says Hanne’s name and not Doris’s. This devastates Doris, who thought that Ernst finally loved her and not Hanne, after waiting all of this time. At this point, Doris realizes that Ernst will never overcome his nostalgia for his golden days with Hanne, and that the only way for her to continue her life is by ending her relationship with Ernst: “Er liebt sie so. Da kann man nichts machen” (Keun 124). She packs her suitcase, leaves Hanne’s letter on the table, and slips out of the apartment. When Doris encounters Hanne at a dance hall, she sees that Hanne is everything that Doris herself is not: blond, educated, beautiful, and loved by Ernst. Hanne’s place is one that Doris never could have filled simply because of who she is. In
a physical encounter with Ernst’s past, Doris tells Hanne that Ernst sent her and that she should go to him immediately. Like Doris’s own story, the situation with Hanne and Ernst is also left unresolved, leaving the reader to wonder whether Hanne’s return relieves Ernst of his nostalgia and brings him to live in the present again. Hanne had a desire for a present and a future that was different from the one she saw for herself as Ernst’s wife, something that meant that she needed to take action – as an independent *Neue Frau* – in order to change her life’s direction. After all, she is essentially the one who takes care of herself by leaving and showing her independence from Ernst, who was quite dependent on her. Doris simply cannot change the way that Ernst feels about Hanne. No matter how hard she tries, she is unable to cure Ernst’s need for the past or re-create herself as Hanne. Essentially, the past is simply more of a consolation to some people than others, and living with one’s mind in the past is not a healthy lifestyle. Doris does not want to return to her own roots, and instead makes her own way in the world, although it is not explicitly revealed how she does this. The older generation views the past in different ways than the younger generation, and these viewpoints, as Keun points out, are irreconcilable.

This chapter presents many examples of the personal past and its influence on personal lives in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*. There is Ernst, the man who is afraid to live in the present for fear he will forget his wife and happiness for good. Doris simultaneously admires and admonisher her mother, who shares many of the social experiences that Doris has. What all of these characters and their situations have in common is a wish to focus on the present, in most cases, but an inability in everyone to completely forget the past. Doris hopes for a future as a *Glanz* that may never come true.
Ernst lives in memories of his wife and misses out on the present. Doris flees from the past when she flees to Berlin but is reminded by her coat of why she is there and whom she needs to guide her. Few of the main characters in this novel can escape their past, nor can they deny it, since it has made them who they are and is part of both their own and the larger human story. Through these examples, Keun has proven that the past is unforgettable and even crucial to defining the present self. Each character – Doris, der rote Mond, Ernst, Herr Brenner – moves through different models of coping with the past, including rejecting it, embracing it, fondly remembering it, forgetting it, projecting unfulfilled wishes onto it, and using it as consolation. From the examples discussed above, Keun does not issue one unified verdict on how Germany should relate to the past, because there are many. In any case, there is, however, a need not always to be subjective and sometimes to forget objectivity for a moment in order to acknowledge one’s emotional human nature. Overindulgence in either subjectivity or objectivity is undesirable; instead, there must be a balance of head and heart.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

*Das kunstseidene Mädchen* reveals much about New Objectivity’s outlook on the past. Sentimental, nostalgic characters such as Ernst and *der rote Mond* long for the Wilhelmine Empire and a time when life was simple for them. Keun weaves actual landmarks and historical events, attitudes, and cultural items into this work, a feature that situates it as a modern work, a *Zeitroman*. And most importantly, these characters, landmarks, and events are depicted in such a way to criticize not only New Objectivity itself but also Weimar Republic society in general.

In *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, Keun gives voice to contemporary anxieties in the following passage, where Doris summarizes Ernst’s ramblings:

> und es wäre so eine Zeit heute, da wird alles zerstört und zerrissen, und wer ehrlich sein will, muss schon sagen, dass er sich nicht mehr zurechtfindet, und auch gerade ein Gebildeter kann sich gar nichts mehr aufbauen, und alles ist unsicher. Die ganze Welt wäre unsicher und das Leben und die Zukunft und was man früher geglaubt hat und was man jetzt glaubt, und die Arbeit macht nicht mehr so richtige Freude, weil man in sich immer so eine Art von schlechtem Gewissen hat, weil doch so viele gar keine Arbeit haben. (Keun 100)

The only reality is the present, despite its flaws. The world itself, life in general, beliefs, and, most importantly, the future are “unsicher.” It is true that the war destroyed Germany, but in this passage Keun suggests that the current time is just as destructive, if not more so, than war. There is nothing safe about the present time, and there is no more reason to trust it than to trust the future or “was man früher geglaubt hat.” Even if one is lucky enough to have circumstances better than those of Doris, one needs to feel ashamed about it because of the many others who are not so fortunate.

The manner in which Keun aligns herself with some aspects of New Objectivity and distances herself from it is striking. The novel’s style and format is clearly within
New Objectivity constraints – Doris records her present in the form of a *Tagebuch*, recording her present and underscoring the importance of New Objectivity on the here and now. Additionally, Doris’s rare mentioning of the past conforms to New Objectivity’s focus on the present. Keun’s up-to-date descriptions of current Berlin are a part of this idea as well. That Doris sees the nostalgia of Ernst and *der rote Mond* as something ridiculous also embody the ideology.

There are also points on which Keun’s novel strikingly counters New Objectivity. For example, Doris counters New Objectivity by using her *Tagebuch* to establish her own individual narrative, caring little about the consequences that Weimar events have on anyone else but herself. Keun’s humanist perspective, establishing Doris as a *Mensch*, also goes against New Objectivity, which held at a distance anything dealing with emotionality. Ernst, too, resembles this characteristic. Characters in the novel who use the past in comparison to, or as a means of, defining the present, like *der rote Mond* and Ernst, never recover from their nostalgia, showing that the problems of the past are not resolvable. The future, on the other hand, remains ambiguous and uncertain.

*Das kunstseidene Mädchen* is deeply critical of Weimar society, another aspect that situates Keun’s literature within New Objectivity. She sees the disadvantages of Germany’s redefinition, its advantages and its faults. She sees the rise of the National Socialist party and, although satirically, recognizes it as important enough to be included in *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*. She depicts the anti-Semitic attitudes and the political uprisings, the unstable government, and the inequality and callousness of Weimar society. The novel’s ending leaves questions as to whether Doris learns that she can ignore neither her own nor Germany’s history because, although it is gone, it will always
be present in her own and in Germany’s identity. Though many believed the past to be over and gone, it is in fact very present in the waning years of Weimar Germany.

With Doris’s personality, her aspiration for greatness, and her very real experiences in Berlin near the close of the Weimar Republic, Irmgard Keun created a novel whose message was critical of the society she so accurately depicted. And although the popularity of the novel was soon forgotten during the Third Reich until later in the twentieth century, today’s literary scholars recognize Keun as one of the most significant female authors in Weimar Germany. A Zeitroman like Keun’s must “be concerned with events that remain longer in the collective memory (something on which the author can only speculate) as well as fundamental issues as existential questions that always affect much of humanity” (Matijevich 7). This certainly applies to Keun’s novel, which is concerned with both World War I and the nostalgia of the older generation for the Wilhelmine Empire.

In addition, the protagonists of Zeitromane must not be such strong individuals that their fate distracts from what the author actually wanted to criticize (Matijevich 10). They may very well be interesting characters in themselves, but they should represent a type rather than an individual. After all, these characters are “products of [their] time” and “the novelists’ treatment of them implies a judgment of the society in which writer, protagonist, and the initial readers find themselves” (Matijevich 10). By ending the novel in an unsatisfying way and withholding Doris’s ultimate fate, Keun de-emphasizes Doris’s individual fate and instead highlights her journey. She criticizes the path that women like Doris were forced to take and the choices they had to make. Keun’s critique of the conflict between the older pre-WWI generations and the young generation that
helped form the Weimar Republic, in addition to the above points, make this novel a *Zeitroman*.

*Neue Sachlichkeit* failed in part because it denied the fundamental, feeling nature of humans and ignored an important connection with the past: “Die menschliche Seele mit aller Leidenschaft, Sehnsucht, Not und Einsamkeit lässt sich nicht so mit Schlagworten zudecken,” wrote Peter Flamm, a contemporary of Irmgard Keun (385). With its characters’ wide array of ways to work with the past, Keun’s novel shows both the need for human emotion and the acknowledgement of history, encouraging a less rigidly objective outlook on the future and judgment of the past.

*Das kunstseidene Mädchen* serves to document its time, as many Weimar novels do. While Matijevich notes that *Zeitromane* “generally failed to arouse readers to political action or even party allegiance as some authors hoped” (Matijevich 175), this was not the objective of this literature, specifically of Keun’s work. Motivating readers to political action was instead the goal of Expressionist literature, as discussed in Chapter 1. Keun’s motive for writing was to take a critical perspective on the world in which she lived through the eyes of someone much like herself – someone who “observes the world through uncorrupted eyes and against whose lack of guile society’s deficiencies appear to be all the more glaring” (Matijevich 91). Doris is this kind of protagonist with her critical eye and daring pluck. With her keen observations about survival in the Weimar Republic and her view from the lower social strata, Doris’s experiences are tightly connected with the happenings of contemporary Weimar. Since her character represents a type instead of an individual, her story can be interpreted as a metaphor for a society with varying degrees of nostalgia – from the very sentimental, like Ernst, to Doris herself,
who wants to separate herself completely from her origins. The open ending alludes to the idea that Germany needs to find a happy medium somewhere between nostalgia and cold objectivity. Objectivity is acceptable, and at some points needed, but it is also crucial for Weimar society to remember that it is made up of very different individuals who may not conform to just one way of self-examination. By allowing Doris to aspire to a dream she eventually realizes that she will never achieve – a pessimistic image – Keun returns to a humanist position, encouraging a balance between logic and emotion.

The name of the movement “New Objectivity” is inherently contradictory. In the end, *Neue Sachlichkeit* was a movement both new and, as it saw itself, objective, but placed particular emphasis on the new, which was not objective at all. By shifting its focus from history and the past, New Objectivity only made the discussion the past more central of an issue. The term “new” suggests a conscious decision not to remember the past. But in reality, New Objectivity needed the past very much as a means of defining itself and was more about the past than any of its proponents thought it would be. There remains a tension between the concept of an objective cultural movement and the very nature of the feeling human being, rendering these two things as irreconcilable. With its open ending and the different ways characters treat and use the past, the novel exposes the difficulties of Weimar Germany – as a country and as individuals – to deal with the past. *Neue Sachlichkeit* negotiates the past by banishing it to a forgotten corner, but Keun’s novel questions whether such an action is appropriate for the war-ravaged Weimar Republic that does, in fact, have a compelling need for dealing with its past.
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