



2019-02-04

Gottfried Keller and the Fictionalization of Switzerland

Richard Hacken

Brigham Young University - Provo, hacken@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>

Original Publication Citation

Swiss American Historical Society Review, vol. 55, no. 1 (February 2019)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hacken, Richard, "Gottfried Keller and the Fictionalization of Switzerland" (2019). *All Faculty Publications*. 2992.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2992>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Gottfried Keller

and the Fictionalization of Switzerland

by *Richard Hacken*

The Swiss author Gottfried Keller (1819-1890) was a major figure within the late nineteenth-century German-language literary movement known as “Poetic Realism” (“*Poetischer Realismus*”). The very name of the movement suggested that “Poetic Realists” had retouched or revised reality by “poeticizing” it. Keller’s artistic technique, which was influential on other writers of his time, transmuted outwardly observable actuality again and again into poetically coherent inner realities.¹ This article explores how and why Keller found it artistically and socially beneficial to turn the factual contours of the Swiss Confederation essentially inside out—from fact to fiction—in the course of writing a thematically connected set of ten entertaining novellas.

In response to the social and cultural tumult surrounding Switzerland’s great industrial boom of the late nineteenth century, Keller had affirmed his poetic right to refract outer reality through the prism of poetic fiction:

I quietly call this the imperial immediacy of literature, i.e., the right at any time, even in the age of tuxedos and railroads, to craft parables and fables, a right that we

¹ Sabina Becker, *Bürgerlicher Realismus* (Tübingen & Basel: Francke, 2003), 102-110, drawing on nineteenth century literary practitioners and theorists, describes the Realism movement as a set of “transfiguration strategies” (“*Verklärungsstrategien*”) that served as a “gesture of reconciliation” (“*Versöhnungsgeste*”) between visible reality and its more positive ideals. Its plausible reality separated it from Romanticism, while its idealism distinguished it from Naturalism.

should not—in my opinion—allow to be wiped away by any cultural changes.²

Keller wrote this literary defense seven years after publishing his completed cycle of novellas entitled *The People of Seldwyla* (*Die Leute von Seldwyla*).³ In these novellas Keller's theory of artistic innovation in a materialistic age became the instrument of his literary practice, as he allowed nineteenth-century Swiss fact to metamorphose into *Seldwyla* fiction.⁴ This "sun-drenched and breezeless" town, "somewhere in Switzerland,"⁵ related only obliquely to historical Helvetian realities. Yet the similarities are there: Keller's claimed in the second volume of *The People of Seldwyla* that: "there is a tower of Seldwyla rising up in every city and valley of Switzerland, and [Seldwyla] is thus to be seen as an amalgam of such towers, as an ideal city, which is only painted on the mountain fog."⁶

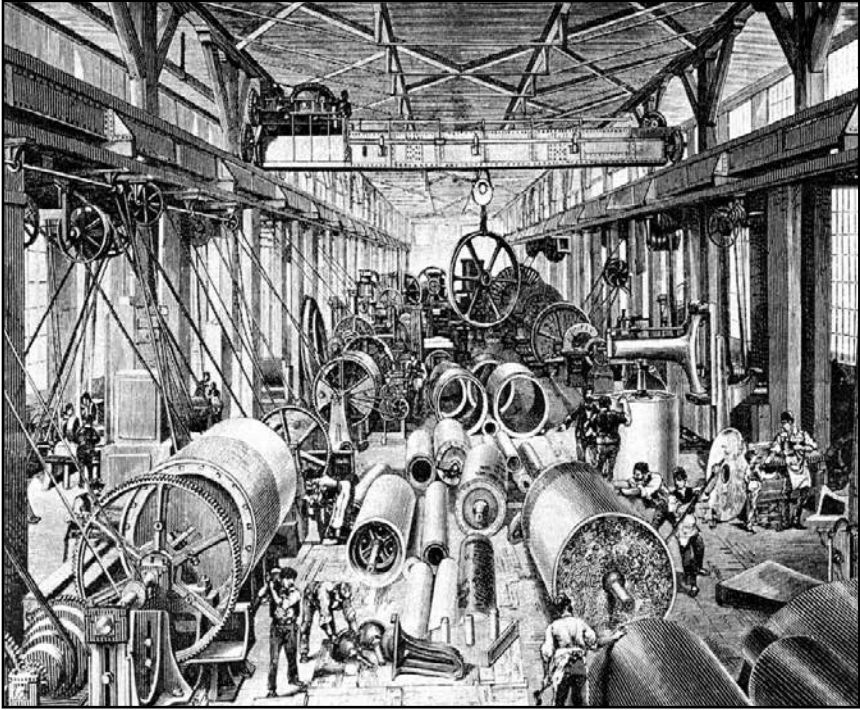
² In a letter to Paul Heyse of 27 July 1881. Gottfried Keller, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 4 vols. In 5, ed. Carl Helbling (Bern: Benteli, 1950-1954), III/1, 57. This edition of correspondence is abbreviated in the text as GB. ("Im Stillen nenne ich dergleichen die Reichsunmittelbarkeit der Poesie, d.h. das Recht, zu jederzeit, auch im Zeitalter des Fracks und der Eisenbahnen, an das Parabelhafte, das Fabelmässige ohne weiteres anzuknüpfen, ein Recht, das man sich nach meiner Meinung durch keine Kulturwandlungen nehmen lassen soll.") All translations are by the author.

³ Quotations are from the historical critical edition of Keller's works: Gottfried Keller, *Sämtliche Werke. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Walter Morgenthaler et al. Intro. vol. + 32 vols. (Zürich: Stroemfeld Verlag; Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1996), subsequently abbreviated as Keller's Collected Works. Volume 4 contains the first five novellas of *The People of Seldwyla*, volume 5 the second five novellas, and volume 21 the editorial notes and scholarly apparatus for the entire *Seldwyla* cycle.

⁴ We distinguish three forms of the town's name in this article: "Seldwyla" for the proper noun of the town (italicized when referring to the title of the novella cycle), "Seldwylan" as an adjective describing aspects of the town, and "Seldwyler" as an adjective or noun describing the citizens of the town.

⁵ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 7. ("so dass wohl die Sonne herein kann, aber kein rauhes Lüftchen.") ("irgendwo in der Schweiz.") Keller took the name "Seldwyla" to signify the town's rosy physical climate and to juxtapose it ironically against its thorny moral climate.

⁶ Keller's *Collected Works* V, 7. ("es rage in jeder Stadt und in jedem Thale der Schweiz ein Türmchen von Seldwyla, und diese Ortschaft sei mithin als eine Zusammensetzung solcher Türmchen, als eine ideale Stadt zu betrachten, welche nur auf den Bergnebel gemalt sei.")



Swiss 19th century industrial boom: Machine factory Escher Wyss in Zurich. Courtesy:Wikimedia Commons.

Keller wrote these tales fully conscious of the rare historical situation of his age, specifically the rapid economic and social change in the Swiss Confederation. As a result, his narrative conflicts flowed from confrontations centering around a socio-economic calculus. Middle-class society in Seldwyla revealed itself as dualistic in his cycle, with petty speculators and idlers forming the dark backdrop against which the ideal productive citizen—the local anomaly—stood out. A dichotomy of appearance vs. reality (“*Schein*” vs. “*Sein*”) manifested the dilemma of a contestant in the game of life between willingness to adjust to realities or to surrender to its opposite, the petty Seldwylers’ reliance on pretense and deception. Keller showered fictional rewards on individuals according to their degree of adherence to the social ideal, with the highest rewards found in love, social contentment and financial success necessarily situated, of course, physically and mor-

ally outside of Seldwyla—often in an idyllic spot that combined the best attributes of nature and society.

Seldwyla Society: The Folly of the Counterfeit Swiss

It would tax social theory to explain a town, founded a “good half-hour from the nearest navigable river as a clear sign that nothing was meant to come of it,”⁷ combining a wealth of vineyards, timber, and good weather such that “...the town is rich and the citizens destitute to such a degree that nobody in Seldwyla has anything, and nobody actually knows what they have been living on for centuries.”⁸ A lending and borrowing fever among young entrepreneurs led invariably—for as long as the indebtedness would allow—to exploitation of workers, followed by a predictable slide to bankruptcy (culminating between the ages of thirty-five and forty), and such subsequent grinding poverty that the former captains of credit were forced, according to some bylaw of poetic justice, into a hand-to-mouth existence themselves.⁹ Social legislation had passed Seldwyla by. Earnings from the municipally-run timber industry were sufficient only to support and feed their great indigence. Yet the people smiled through their poverty.

Taken at face value, actual Swiss economic history contradicts Keller’s fictional adaptation on several points. Seldwyla stands in stark contrast to the progress of the so-called industrial “take-off period”¹⁰

⁷ Keller’s *Collected Works*, IV, 7. (“eine gute halbe Stunde von einem schiffbaren Flusse angepflanzt, zum deutlichen Zeichen, dass nichts daraus werden solle.”)

⁸ Ibid. (“dass die Gemeinde reich ist und die Bürgerschaft arm, und zwar so, dass kein Mensch zu Seldwyla etwas hat und niemand weiss, wovon sie seit Jahrhunderten eigentlich leben.”)

⁹ Keller’s *Collected Works*, IV, 8. Also cf. Jörg Kreienbrock, “Das Kreditparadies Seldwyla. Zur Beziehung von Ökonomie und Literatur in Gottfried Kellers *Die Leute von Seldwyla*,” in: *Gottfried Keller, Die Leute von Seldwyla*, ed. Hans-Joachim Hahn and Uwe Seja (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 117-134.

¹⁰ Cf. Walter Wittmann, “Die Take-Off Periode der schweizerischen Volkswirtschaft,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 119 (1963), 592-615. Two main forces that accompanied the Industrial Revolution in Switzerland were the desiccation of cottage industries—particularly in the textile trade—by the rapid growth of machine technology, and, from 1830 on, the increasing transfer of labor from agriculture to industry.

and to the image of the Swiss Confederation extending into the 1850s and 1860s as described by Wilhelm Bickel:

The natural tendencies of the native population, their entrepreneurial spirit, technological aptitudes, industriousness and thriftiness... the centuries-long continuity of scarcely ever broken historical development, the capital wealth available precisely thanks to this continuity and thanks to the thrift habits of the populace, and not least the access to hydraulic power essential for the mechanization of industry made the early industrialization possible and gave it a sustainable impetus.¹¹

The natural predisposition of the Swiss for labor, in fact, make up for “the disfavor of the natural conditions... the dearth of mineral resources, the small domestic market and its location in the heart of Europe far from the oceans.”¹² Hence, the economic historian describes the geographic setting as one of Switzerland’s chief liabilities, while in fictional Seldwyla it is a chief asset. Conversely, he shows the true Helvetic asset to be the work capacity of the people, a trait which Keller narrates as Seldwyla’s liability.

Keller’s intent behind a fictional transmutation of nineteenth-century Swiss reality¹³ became clearer as he negated the inert and fallow society, claiming that the tales were not drawn from

¹¹ Wilhelm Bickel, *Die Volkswirtschaft der Schweiz: Entwicklung und Struktur* (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1973), 41. (“*Die natürlichen Anlagen der einheimischen Bevölkerung, Unternehmensgeist, technische Fertigkeiten, Fleiss und Sparsamkeit ... die jahrhundertlang kaum je unterbrochene Kontinuität und dank dem Sparsinn der Bevölkerung vorhandene Kapitalreichtum und nicht zuletzt das Vorhandensein der für die Mechanisierung der Industrie unerlässlichen Wasserkräfte haben die frühzeitige Industrialisierung ermöglicht und ihr immer wieder neue Impulse gegeben.*”)

¹² *Ibid.* (“*die Ungunst der natürlichen Verhältnisse ... die Armut an Bodenschätzen, die Kleinheit des Binnenmarktes und die Lage im Herzen Europas fern vom Weltmeer.*”)

¹³ Beatrice Weder and Rolf Weder, “Switzerland’s Rise to a Wealthy Nation....” In: *Development Success: Historical Accounts from More Advanced Countries*, ed. A. K. Fosu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192-193, hypothesize further key Swiss success factors after the early nineteenth century beyond financial and trade policies, political neutrality, work ethics and entrepreneurial spirit: those additional factors included competition in goods and markets along with a political system that guaranteed contestability, which in turn supported stability and prosperity.

the characteristics of the Seldwyla lower classes at all, but rather from peculiar (i.e., laudable) anomalies, from exceptions to the rule (“*einige sonderbare Abfälle*”).¹⁴ With such figures forming the main pool of actors throughout the entire cycle of novellas, Seldwyla had been fashioned as a negative ground against which to highlight productive Swiss figures who did not fit in with the prevailing inertia.

Keller’s Motives for Fictionalizing Switzerland

Clearly, Gottfried Keller understood the contours and currents of his country well, politically, historically and economically. He had served as First Secretary for the Canton of Zurich for most of the nearly twenty-year lapse between the publication of his first volume of *The People of Seldwyla* (1856) and the appearance of its second volume (1875). As a political appointee, painter and author he was far from one-dimensional. A newspaper column he published in 1861 shows that he commingled strong patriotism with a well-tuned social sense of democratic morals:

We are also proud that Swiss freight is being shipped
on all the oceans and that our decorations for marksmanship



Arnold Böcklin's decorative frontispiece to Keller's Gesammelte Werke (Collected Works), 1889. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁴ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 12.

are pouring in from points all around the earth; but we would also like to be proud of the free hand that we should have in such a liberal and transparent communal existence as our own, not letting matters get out of hand but mastering them with reason and humanity.¹⁵

It was this ethical sense that impelled Keller to invent a fictional Switzerland—as a literary foil. In each of the ten novellas of the *Seldwyla* cycle the author implanted narrative tension in his protagonists. He artfully instilled high speculative hopes in his characters within a socio-economic setting that proved humbler than generally required to achieve success. As a result, the feigned Switzerland he had crafted brought into stark profile a clash between supply and demand in which the low supply was *material* and the high demand was *mental*. Hence, mind and matter had to battle it out.¹⁶ In these fictional cases—concocted counter to Swiss actuality—the high price required was strength of character. After Gottfried Keller had set up the contours of that rectitude, he served as judge and jury over the creation he had peopled. As Gail Hart has postulated:

Nearly all of Keller's fiction issues from a single basic situation: an ordinary person, seized by extraordinary ideals or aspirations, constructs an alternative world of the imagi-

¹⁵ *Zürcher Intelligenzblatt*, 27 March 1861, as cited in *Keller's Collected Works* XV, 176. (“Auch wir sind stolz darauf, dass schweizerische Fracht auf allen Meeren fährt und dass die Schützenpreise von allen Punkten der Erde einlaufen; aber wir möchten auch gerne stolz auf die freie Hand sein, die man in so einem freien und durchsichtigen Gemeinwesen haben sollte, die Dinge sich nicht über den Kopf wachsen zu lassen, sondern sie nach Vernunft und Menschlichkeit zu bezwingen.”)

¹⁶ A retrogression in the primacy of mind over matter occurred during the course of nineteenth-century German and German-Swiss philosophy and literature. Idealism of both the Romantic and Classical varieties set up matter, or materialism, as a paper tiger in the early part of the century, which was then easily defeated by the ideals of mind, e.g., by the Classical strivings of Goethe's *Faust* (1828-1829) or the Romantic dreams of Eichendorff's *Taugenichts* (1826). In Naturalism, by the end of the century, matter had gained such unremitting hold—and had, in fact, become so alien to spirit—that the mind either made way for it or was crushed, as were the lucid mind and first offspring of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* (1888), where a railroad locomotive became the agent of destruction. Keller's poetic realism fell in between, at a transitional stage where, despite the obvious momentum of materialism, the philosophical struggle between mind and matter remained relatively even.

nation and lives according to its values until he is enlightened or eliminated by the “reality” he has chosen to ignore.¹⁷

The final judgment—reward or punishment—had to fit the interests of society.

Progression and regression were central to the calculus of the individual’s place in society within Keller’s narratives. Most of the model citizens did not start out that way but first had to tamp down their imaginative aspirations to accept and adapt to hard realities before they could achieve a newly enlightened state with its positive consequences.

Keller fictionalized Switzerland in order to create Seldwyla as a proving ground for his protagonists, expelling them from a surging Swiss economy analogous to an expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Thus, he tested the figures of his creation to see if they could withstand this town’s rampant triviality of spirit, if they could reject its materialistic bias. Gottfried Keller—the creator, the narrative God of Seldwyla—most often endowed success on those exceptional individuals in or around Seldwyla of whom he had demanded moral and intellectual courage.¹⁸

Keller’s Craft of Balancing the Books

Since the *Seldwyla* cycle consists of ten distinct but thematically-related novellas, the following synopses illustrate how ten different iterations of the author’s narrative prowess wove humor, irony and psychological insight into a universal, not just Swiss, tribute to benevolence, honesty and industry. At the same time, they show socially-engaged ethics battling self-interest in a fictive world where two linked motivations guided human activity, as Goetschel concluded:

¹⁷ Gail K. Hart, “Keller’s Fictional Readers: Heinrich, Pankraz, and Jacques,” *Seminar* 23 (1987), 115.

¹⁸ Cf. Uwe Seja, “*Seldwyla—A Microeconomic Inquiry*,” in: *Gottfried Keller, Die Leute von Seldwyla*, ed. Hans-Joachim Hahn and Uwe Seja (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 97.

Economy and love are the two forces which determine life, or so Keller's stories tell us. In Keller, love is—and seemingly can only be—expressed in economic terms... The two metaphorical systems become interchangeable as they are used to represent each other. Yet neither one can fully replace the other.¹⁹

Pankraz, the Silent Sulker (Pankraz der Schmoller)

Pankraz was the first of Keller's dreamers to waken himself to reality. As a young boy, Pankraz yearned for gold but lived in poverty. Rather than working in the family potato patch, he would draw sketches in his notebook's gold-tinged pages. Every evening without fail he would watch golden sunsets from the mountain top, a reverie that the narrator depicts as speculation: "It appeared to be for him the approximate equivalent of merchants day-trading on the stock market."²⁰ Another symbol of the affluence eluding him was buttery gravy pooled atop the mashed potatoes at dinner that his younger sister somehow always connived to direct in wide rivulets her way rather than his.²¹ Silently sulking, Pankraz one day simply left town without a word. In retrospect, he could only have begun facing reality once he had left the town's influence. Even away from Seldwyla, though, Pankraz continued to rely on escape mechanisms—most notably in an affair of the heart—until, as an officer of the French Foreign Legion, he stumbled into an unarmed confrontation with a lion, something he could not turn his back on or pretend away. Eventually he returned to town as a changed and emotionally whole man. Economic security surrounded him once he had resettled in the cantonal capital, "where he found opportunity, given his experiences and knowledge, to be and to remain a useful man for his country, and he was ... held in high esteem and [was] popular ... because of his competency."²² Then the protagonist himself

¹⁹ Willi Goetschel, "Love, Sex and other Utilities: Keller's Unsettling Account," in: *Narrative Ironies*, ed., Raymond A. Prier and Gerald Gillespie (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 223. Italics added.

²⁰ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 14. ("*Sie schien für ihn etwa das zu sein, was für die Kaufleute der Mittag auf der Börse.*")

²¹ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 15-16.

added a touch of self-deprecating humor: “[Pankraz told his mother and sister that] the moral of the story was simple: thanks to a woman and a wild beast, he had been cured of his bad habit of sulking.”²³

A Village Romeo and Juliet (Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe)

The best-known tale of the Seldwyla cycle relied for its tragic material both on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and on an actual happening between two young star-crossed lovers, an account of which Keller had read years before in a Zurich newspaper.²⁴ In the fields surrounding Seldwyla, two farmers had been plowing their fields year after year, row by row. The two farmers, Manz and Marti, had been tossing stones into an abandoned field lying between them. They gradually took *de facto* possession of it, only to argue over it. Sali, son of Manz, and Vrenchen, daughter of Marti, often brought them lunch and then played together in a sort of children’s paradise. The stones from the field, according to Mary Beth Stein, became symbolic for the farmers’ alienation from each other:

The initial image drawn by Keller—that of an idyllic community defined by harmonious relations and natural rhythms—will be meticulously subverted as part of the author’s narrative strategy to expose the problems of village life. The pile of stones becomes a wall on the contested middle property; the stone wall symbolizes frustrated love, human greed, economic injustice, and social division.²⁵

By the time Sali and Vrenchen had grown, the fathers were enemies, battling over the misappropriated property via long years of litigation and lawyers’ fees that finally sent both families into poverty. Pushed

²² Keller’s *Collected Works* IV, 72, (“wo er Gelegenheit fand, mit seinen Erfahrungen und Kenntnissen ein dem Land nützlicher Mann zu sein und zu bleiben, und er ward ... dieser Tüchtigkeit ... wegen geachtet und beliebt.”).

²³ Ibid. (“Die Moral von der Geschichte sei einfach, dass er in der Fremde durch ein Weib und ein wildes Tier von der Unart des Schmollens entwöhnt worden sei.”)

²⁴ *Zürcher Freitags-Zeitung*, 3. September 1847. See also the first paragraph of the work (Keller’s *Collected Works* IV, 74.)

²⁵ Mary Beth Stein, “The German Village as Site of Ethnographic Knowledge,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 47, 1-2 (2010), 119.



Woodcut of 'Sali and Vrenchen as Children' by Ernst Würtenberger, *Schweizerland*, vol. 5, 1919. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

to reject each other by family and society, the two secret lovers decided to spend one last day together and then go their separate ways. At the end of that chosen day, though—unable to leave each other but also unable to remain together by Seldwylan society's strictures—they climbed aboard a hay barge and set it adrift down the river. After spending a night on the barge together (later decried in the local papers as "...yet another sign of the growing moral decadence and impulsivity of the passions"),²⁶ the couple took the only path evident to them: "As [the barge] neared the city... two pale figures, holding each other tightly, slid in the frost of the autumn [dawn] from the dark mass down into the cold waters."²⁷

²⁶ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 159 ("abermals ein Zeichen von der um sich greifenden Entsittlichung und Verwilderung der Leidenschaften.")

²⁷ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 158 ("Als [das Heuschiff] die Stadt näherte, glitten im Frost des Herbstmorgens zwei bleiche Gestalten, die sich fest umwanden, von der dunklen Masse herunter in die kalten Fluten.")

A Village Romeo and Juliet was obviously a deviation in narrative tone and social context from those of the other nine tales. Yet Sali and Vrenchen's solid and unwavering refusal to succumb to Seldwylan societal morals—which largely equated to the values of pretense and idleness—did touch on the character issue. Even their farmer fathers, up until their corruption through land theft, had modeled the best attributes of industry known to the working class—with healthy attitudes toward work as a connection between nature and society.²⁸ But then they had fallen from grace.

Though Manz and Marti were the only two characters of the *Seldwyla* cycle to have regressed from productivity to pettiness, their children were the only two who became neither productive members of the middle class nor caricatures of triviality. The sins of the fathers were visited upon the heads of the children to some degree, as they boastfully lied before a Seldwyler acquaintance that their dreams of a lottery win and upcoming marriage were coming true.²⁹ Yet they never seriously contemplated a return to what would have been the fringes of society. The narrative escape for Sali and Vrenchen had to be other than a geographic one, as the mechanisms of reform we find in Pankraz and others did not exist for them. Their choice of death together rather than life apart distinguished the universal artistry of *A Village Romeo and Juliet*.

Mrs. Regel Amrain and her Youngest Son (Frau Regel Amrain und ihr Jüngster)

The rules of behavior that Keller imposed on his imagined community included those of industriousness, insight, productivity, sobriety, social engagement, reliability, patience, emotional maturity,

²⁸ Part of Keller's view of insightful activity in the ideal citizen may likely be traced to Ludwig Feuerbach, who envisioned man attaining his true self through "the urge to act" ("*Tätigkeitsdrang*") in L. F., *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion* (Berlin: Akademie, 1967), 30. The concept of action as a basic unit of society was endorsed in socio-economic terms by Max Weber in the early twentieth century as "*Gemeinschaftshandeln*" ("Communal Action"), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1922), 417-428.

²⁹ *Keller's Collected Works* IV, 131-134.

diligence, adaptability, cleverness, modesty, in short: self-mastery. The given name “Regel” (“Rule”)—short for “Regula”—reveals the fact that Frau Regula Amrain in the third novella had led a well-regulated life of following the Keller-crafted “rules”—rather than the decadent principles of Seldwyla, of which she was appropriately non-native.

Thus, when Mrs. Amrain encountered a situation where she wanted to form an opinion about some controversy, she didn’t listen to what the Seldwyler had to say but to what the people of her hometown said, and guided her thoughts accordingly.³⁰

It is the tale of a single mother whose one big error in life was in misjudging the character of the man she married, a true Seldwyler, before she knew the reputation of Seldwyla well. Her husband had slipped away from creditors and fled to America, leaving her and her three sons with a heavily debt-burdened stone quarry. Through hard work and wise custodianship, she and a young master craftsman had saved the enterprise and made it profitable again. At one point her youngest son Fritz, then barely five years old, chivalrously defended her against the advances of the master craftsman, who had less than noble designs on the beautiful woman and her now-thriving business. As Fritz grew up—educated at his mother’s side—she reciprocated for his service by freeing him from the clutches of a few Seldwyler women of dubious reputation. Following the relationship lessons Regula had imparted, Fritz married a woman of good character (from his mother’s hometown). Regula then guided him, as a married man with a young child of his own, into a productive and active attitude towards his civic duties. Not able to vote in a caricature of nineteenth-century Switzerland herself, she made certain that her son did. Reminiscent of Pan-kraz, Mr. Amrain returned in the end, having reformed himself by his long absence from town and having matured by learning the virtues of labor:

³⁰ Keller’s *Collected Works* IV, 185. (“Wenn also Frau Amrain in den Fall kam, ihre Meinung über einen Streit festzustellen, so hörte sie nicht auf das, was die Seldwyler, sondern auf das, was die Leute ihrer Jugendheimat sagten, und richtete ihre Gedanken dorthin.”)

[H]e had at least watched ceaseless, efficient work and some of it had rubbed off on him among the Americans, so that this constant sitting around and idle chatter no longer appealed to him.³¹

Then it became the son's turn to educate the father and oversee the quarry.

Regula Amrain was one of only two exceptional model citizens within the ten novellas whose socio-ethical development had been already complete when the tale began. Both were, of course, outsiders: Regel was non-native to Seldwyla and the other model citizen was a cat in a fairy tale (see *Spiegel the Kitten* below).

Death in Seldwyla was no tragedy when unaccompanied by shame. After Regel Amrain had converted her family (husband, son and grandchildren) to the ways of social maturity and economic productivity, earning for them a satisfying and plenteous life style, she went to her narrative reward in a body bursting with middle-class pride: "As she died she proudly stretched her body out in death, and never in Seldwyla had such a long woman's coffin ever been carried into the church, never one that bore such a noble corpse."³²

The Three Conscientious Comb Makers (Die drei gerechten Kammacher)

The title of the fourth novella is ironic, since the three journeymen comb makers quickly show themselves to be intensely self-righteous and self-serving. The irony of the title extends to the first lines of the novella, where, in preparation for the story about to unfold, Keller's admonishments arrive in a barrage of weaponized humor attacking the twin hypocrisies of sham innocence and self-directed utilitarianism. For purposes of enduring as a society, at least in this ficti-

³¹ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 213. ("[E]r hatte ein tüchtiges rastloses Arbeiten wenigstens mit angesehen und sich unter den Amerikanern ein wenig abgerieben, so dass ihm diese ewige Sitzerei und Schwatzerei nun selbst nicht mehr zusagte.")

³² Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 214. ("Sie selbst streckte sich, als sie starb, im Tode noch stolz aus, und noch nie ward ein so langer Frauensarg in die Kirche getragen und der eine so edle Leiche barg zu Seldwyla.")

tious town, Keller suggests, the citizens' blatant self-serving prejudice succeeds where simulated fair-mindedness had failed:

The people of Seldwyla have proven that an entire town of deceptive or reckless residents can, when necessary, persist amid the changes of time and human interaction. The three comb makers, on the other hand, prove that three conscientious persons cannot live under one roof for long without getting in each other's hair.³³

Three visiting craftsmen arrived as foreign journeymen in Seldwyla one after the other, Jobst from Saxony, Fridolin from Bavaria, and Dietrich from Swabia. All three were equally hard-working, neat and frugal. Forced to live together under the master's roof—sleeping in a communal bed—each of them nurtured the progressively not-so-secret goal of taking over their common master's comb-making business. Pursuing that goal, they toiled, saved and put their best foot forward. The master, seeing the craftsmen's zeal, set them on a cruel footrace against each other, the winner to obtain the business. The second attraction narratively devised to corrupt the three craftsmen in the story—besides the business—was the love interest, Züs Bünzlin, who possessed a ready rhetoric, a significant inheritance, an education and other laudable charms. The three journeymen begged her to choose one of them. Due to her deceitful and cruel heart, Züs eventually drove two of them, Jobst and Fridolin, to ruin. The third, Dietrich, got what he wanted, the woman and the business, but it was to be a Pyrrhic victory: he lived out his life miserably subject to Züs's whims and demands.

The Three Conscientious Comb Makers supplies perhaps the best example of Keller's antipathy towards economic utilitarianism, expressed as a narcissistic competition for personal satisfactions and goods devoid of social responsibility and ethical values. In the introduction, Keller condemns the actions found in the novella as illustrating "... that sallow sense of justice ... by which [a worker] may indeed

³³ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 215. ("Die Leute von Seldwyla haben bewiesen, dass eine ganze Stadt von Ungerechten oder Leichtsinigen zur Not fortbestehen kann im Wechsel der Zeiten und des Verkehrs; die drei Kammacher aber, dass nicht drei Gerechte lang unter einem Dach leben können, ohne sich in die Haare zu geraten.")



Woodcut of 'Züs Bünzlin Preaching to the Three Conscientious Comb Makers' by Ernst Würtenberger, Munich, 1920. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

want to work and earn money without spending a thing, finding no joy in faithfulness to labor, but only utility."³⁴ The comb makers confuse material goods for psychic or even spiritual attainment: "Their expectation of salvation is reduced to a tight-fisted financial calculation."³⁵

Spiegel, the Kitten. A Fairy Tale (Spiegel, das Kätzchen. Ein Märchen)

Not having been (narratively) born a native Seldwyler is, within this cycle of Keller's fictional character studies, a decided advantage, as we have seen. But being non-human and a fairy-tale figure

³⁴ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 215. ("jene blutlose Gerechtigkeit... [wobei man] wohl arbeiten und erwerben, aber nichts ausgeben will und an der Arbeitstreue nur einen Nutzen, aber keine Freude findet.")

³⁵ Hinrich Siefken, "Kellers Novelle *Die drei gerechten Kammacher*. Vom Eigentum und den höheren Sphären der Meisterschaft," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 104 (1985), 206. ("Ihre Heilserwartung ist verengt auf eine knauserige finanzielle Kalkulation.")

from the late Middle Ages³⁶ frees the protagonist of this novella from the slovenly lassitude of Seldwyla to an even greater degree. As does Regel Amrain (see *Regel Amrain and her Youngest Son* above), Spiegel—though a kitten—comes to the page fully formed as an enlightened social actor, speaking human language and proving his virtues of rationality, intelligence and moderation—while still retaining a few animalistic ways.

The tale was based on an old idiomatic expression, “buying the fat from a cat” which meant to make an unwise or disadvantageous transaction.³⁷ After the death of his mistress, Spiegel became a homeless kitten. On the streets he met the Seldwyler city sorcerer Pineiss, who needed the fat of cats for his spells. In order not to starve to death, the kitten signed a Faustian feline contract by which Pineiss promised to feed Spiegel, who was quite skinny at the time. In return, reminiscent of Shylock’s demand for a pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*, Pineiss reserved the contractual right to butcher Spiegel once the kitten had put on enough fat. But when it came to the matter of self-preservation, the clever kitten survived by amending the articles of the agreement. After a lengthy feline diet to keep his fat content at a minimum, he told the sorcerer the story of a pot of gold that only he, Spiegel, could obtain for him.

The inner story of a “*Goldschatz*” (“golden treasure”) within the framed tale artistically mimicked a classic love story in the style of the *Decameron*, since a lovely young wife was to be part of the reward for Pineiss. The sorcerer—blinded by lust and greed directly parallel to that of *The Three Conscientious Comb Makers*—agreed that the dual treasures would satisfy the pact.³⁸ Spiegel, with the help of his girl-

³⁶ Keller depicted the town’s uniform pattern of shirking and self-induced financial despair—with little respite—from the Middle Ages to Modernity. The Seldwyla Syndrome was so strong that a century after Keller the celebrated Swiss author Max Frisch (1911-1991) situated his play *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (“*Biedermann and the Arsons*”) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002) in a still disreputable twentieth-century “Seldwyla.”

³⁷ Keller’s *Collected Works* IV, 266, (“*der Katze den Schmeer abkaufen*”).

³⁸ The “dual treasure” enticements were the gold treasure (“*Goldschatz*”) and a new sweetheart (“*Schatz*”). On the confusing mix of lust and greed, see also footnote 19 (Goetschel: 227).

friend, an owl, succeeded, and Pineiss did receive the pot of gold and a lovely young wife to satisfy the terms for Spiegel's freedom. But on the wedding night, the lovely wife turned into Pineiss's hated neighbor, pious Beghine, who was actually a malicious witch in disguise herself. It is Spiegel's active self-help that distances this novella from typical Romantic fairy tales and allows him to "land on his feet" as a model citizen in socio-economic territory familiar to the other nine tales. Pineiss, on the other hand, is driven by unsociable speculative considerations throughout. His reward, a Züs-Bünzlin-like wife who governs his possessions, is fittingly commensurate with his greed.

Notable in this work is also a strikingly positive image of a businessman within the inner tale, that of a young and honest Milanese merchant, who is also sincere in his relationships with others.³⁹ Such a glowing image for businessmen was to dissolve in Keller's later prose.

Clothes Make the Man (Kleider machen Leute)

The second volume of *The People of Seldwyla* begins with this novella, the second best known of the ten narratives—second only after *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. Erika Swales sees a subtle but sure sense to the order in which the tales appear:

Thematically, [*Clothes Make the Man*] establishes a close link with [*Spiegel the Kitten*, which preceded it] ... The poverty and hunger of Strapinski recall the sufferings of Spiegel on the death of his mistress, and beyond the immediately adjacent text we hear the echo of [*The Three Conscientious Comb Makers*], [with] its sharp note of economic deprivation.⁴⁰

The Silesian journeyman tailor, Wenzel Strapinski, was walking along the road to a Swiss town a few hours by foot from Seldwyla named Goldach—a rich locale, as the name indicates.⁴¹ He had lost

³⁹ Keller's *Collected Works* IV, 287-291.

⁴⁰ Erika Swales, *The Poetics of Skepticism: Gottfried Keller and Die Leute von Seldwyla* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 125.

⁴¹ A small town of this name does exist today on the southern shore of Lake Constance, in Canton St. Gallen.

his job, along with any possible severance pay, when the master tailor who had employed him suddenly went into bankruptcy. As an indigent journeyman tailor, the only luxury Wenzel could afford was a fine set of clothing. The fact that Wenzel had no possessions except for his elegant coat as the tale began is doubly emblematic. It is an expression not only of his mother's wish for his upward mobility, but of the cloaking of reality to follow. Wenzel's inner identification with his outer wrap makes him become whatever his clothes make him seem to be.⁴²

A compassionate coachman who happened to have an itinerary that led through Goldach, picked him up. Since he arrived in a count's stately coach—and because of his fine dress and manners—the people of Goldach considered him to be a Polish count in exile. They were right on one “count:” he was a native Pole. Several times Strapinski attempted to slip away from the gratis wining and dining imposed on him. But then he fell in love with Nettchen, the rich and pretty daughter of a Goldach municipal counselor and was unwilling to leave her, even while continuing to struggle with how to resolve the matter of his involuntarily adopted deception.

When the couple held a ball to celebrate their engagement, a group of carnival celebrants from Seldwyla exposed the “count” for a phony by putting on a play with the motto: “Clothes make the man.” Wenzel fled into the winter night, ashamed and not caring if he froze to death. But Nettchen followed him, pulling him half frozen out of the snow and confessing her love to him after she had convinced herself that he truly loved her. The two fled to Seldwyla in spite of the local buffoons and carried through with their marriage against the violent resistance of the Goldach residents. A new Trojan war almost broke out over the affair, in Keller's words, when the Goldach citizens arrived with a large police force. The Seldwylers, however, unwilling to let Nettchen's fortune slip out of their hands, formed a mob to turn away the invaders. With Nettchen's funds, Wenzel was able to open up his own tailor shop, making fine clothing for the Seldwylers, who

⁴² Cf. Hans Bänziger, “Strapinskis Mantel: Zu einem Motiv in der Erzählung *Kleider machen Leute*,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 51 (1972), 816-826.



A 1940 Helmut Käutner film remaking *Clothes Make the Man* in Germany was able to evade Nazi censors. Courtesy: Udo Rotenberg.

begrudgingly paid off their debts to him before ordering new quality couture from him.

One main takeaway from *Clothes Make the Man* is that pretense can be hard to give up when you are directly benefitting from it. But the good-hearted Wenzel Strapinski is able to do so, adapting at last to reality and earning a good income through the virtues of modesty, industry and shunning of pretense: “[Over time] he became plump and imposing and almost completely lost his appearance of dreaminess. He grew more skillful and experienced at business ... so that his net worth doubled.”⁴³

Not just portraying—but becoming—a model citizen, the post-pretense Wenzel incorporated an undertone of economic revenge against the Seldwylers who had unmasked and humiliated him. When he left town a second time, it was on a solid bourgeois basis with Net-

⁴³ Keller's *Collected Works* V, 62. (“Dabei wurde er rund und stattlich und sah beinah gar nicht mehr träumerisch aus; er wurde von Jahr zu Jahr geschäftserfahrener und gewandter ... dass sich sein Vermögen verdoppelte...“)

tchen and considerable savings: “But in Seldwyla he left behind not a penny, be it from ingratitude or as revenge.”⁴⁴

The Master of his Fate (Der Schmied seines Glückes)

The German-language title of this seventh tale (literally: *The Smith of His Fortune*) is based on an old adage whereby individuals can hammer out their own fortunes on the forge of destiny. A Seldwyler, Hans Kabis, a proponent of neither honest self-help nor gradual attainment of goals, convinces himself he can reap quick riches by manipulating appearances, by engineering the manner in which people saw him.

One such imaging project was designed to maximize the impact of his name by what today would be called “effective name branding,” had it been done correctly. Changing his given name to “John,” he thought to give himself an Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurial nimbus. When fortune failed to shower down upon him, he changed the spelling of his family name from “*Kabis*” (“Cabbage”) to “*Kabys*” or “*Kapes*” (“White Cabbage”) after a few years. He then attempted to win the favors of the daughter of a Mrs. Oliva, hoping for an eventual hyphenated family name of “*Kabys-Oliva*.” Learning that the daughter had been an illegitimate child and bore the family name of “*Häuptle*,” though, he realized that the family name “*Kabys-Häuptle*” (“Cabbage-Head”) would not be impressive on business cards, so he tried to woo the widowed mother instead and was rejected.

John did invest—after a few more failures—in a small barbershop. There he learned one day that an extremely rich elderly cousin of his lived in Augsburg. He closed his business and traveled to that German city—historically rich in allusions of commercial wealth and finance. There, he won the trust of his cousin, Mr. Litumley. Since the latter was married for the third time and still childless, he declared John to be his natural son and heir. At this point the manipulator could have been satisfied, but he continued

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (“*Aber in Seldwyla liess er nicht einen Stüber zurück, sei es aus Undank oder aus Rache.*”)

to forge his destiny by getting involved with the young wife of his patron.

One day the old man gave Kabys funds for a study trip. Returning after a few months, John Kabys saw a baby crawling through the house, and Cousin Litumley told him that the will was null and void, since he now had an heir. Despite having literally spawned his own defeat, John protested by accusing Madame Litumley of adultery. The old man threw him out.

With the remainder of the money Litumley had given him to travel, John returned to Seldwyla, bought a small forge and learned to make nails.

A forger of schemes who premeditated his misrepresentations—unlike Wenzel Strapinski (see *Clothes Make the Man*, above) who was a victim of circumstance—John Kabys, too, did take up an honest vocation as the tale closed, trading a figurative forge for an actual one. This was quite an unmotivated resolution, though. His intentions had not been those of a hard-working, honest citizen; they had been the machinations of a family parasite. By the usual rules of Keller's reward and punishment, the tools of Kabys's dishonest grasping for paradise should have simultaneously been the seeds of his expulsion. Kabys was indeed expelled from the undeserved riches of Augsburg, but Keller's narrator unexpectedly rehabilitated him.

If the Seldwyla cycle resembles scenes from a social or secular morality play, its unity would break down with such sudden salvation. Mercy robs justice: there seems to be no sense of social awareness or productivity in the narrative of John Kabys that could atone for his fictional life of dissembling selfishness. Yet the author who resurrected his own autobiographical image in the second draft of *Green Henry* ("*Der grüne Heinrich*")⁴⁵—after condemning himself in the first—here likewise gives the miscreant a second chance.

⁴⁵ Keller's *Collected Works* I-III, XI-XII XIX-XX. As explained in footnote #3, the historical-critical edition of Gottfried Keller's works in 32 volumes is abbreviated here as *Keller's Collected Works*. Volumes 11-12 contain the first draft version (1854-1855) of Keller's thinly-veiled autobiographical novel, *Green Henry* (*Der grüne Heinrich*), while volumes 1-3 contain the second version (1889), and volumes 19-20 contain editorial notes and scholarly apparatus for both versions.

The Misused Love Letters (Die missbrauchten Liebesbriefe)

Viktor (“Viggi”) Störteler was the proprietor of a successful general store. A good portion of that success could be ascribed to the significant fortune that his placid and good-hearted wife Gritli had brought into the marriage. In his leisure time he also fancied himself a critic and a literary legend in his own mind, having written some essays and fiction—a few of which had been accepted for publication under the nom de plume Kurt vom Walde (Kurt from the Forest). One day he developed the grandiloquent idea of training his wife to be his literary muse. During a business trip, he declared, he would send lofty love letters to her and she would answer them in the same literary style.

Gritli, untrained in such erudite matters, was quite simply incapable of doing so. To make matters worse, Viggi’s last words to her before leaving had been the following: “Keep in mind that our peace and future happiness rest on this [literary] test!”⁴⁶ In her distress, Gritli transcribed the letters of her husband and sent them to the local schoolmaster, Wilhelm, to see how he would answer them. The wildly enthusiastic young man, while wondering at the bombastic language of the letters, thought that they were real love missives and, falling in love, he answered her back with fiery epistolary eruptions. Gritli transcribed these and addressed them to Viggi, certain that she had found a way to satisfy her husband’s demand and save their marriage. Yet no sooner had the dilettante-husband started planning for a book-length edition of the growing stack of letters than his wife’s ploy came to light. Viggi went into a rage, demanded a divorce, and lost beautiful Gritli and the financial assets she had brought to the marriage. The gossip factories of Seldwyla rocked with laughter.

At this point the story comes to a figurative intermission, a time of introspection for the principal players to either prove their mettle or spin their narcissistic wheels.

⁴⁶ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 113. (“Bedenke, dass von dieser letzten Probe der Frieden und das Glück unserer Zukunft abhängen!”)

The first half of the story is, then, a bitter comedy of delusion which seems to relate to the subsequent narrative only in terms of starkest antithesis. Yet there are subtle points which do suggest a link and anticipate the... process which... informs the second part.⁴⁷

As a result of the scandal, Wilhelm lost his job in the schoolhouse and retired, humiliated, to a place of solitude to forget his beloved and her imagined heartlessness. But Gritli had also been quite moved by him. Seeking him out, she put him to the test of his true feelings, and the two developed into a happy couple together. They married, worked hard and became land owners, something rarely seen in Seldwyla.⁴⁸

Viggi found his new muse in Kätter Ambach, a locally known literary maven. She helped him to spend what was left of his fortune but in return showed appreciation for his literary “genius,” except when the two of them were bitterly quarreling.

Keller’s binary socio-economic pass-fail system is activated in this novella for both Wilhelm and Gritli, with their eventual prosperity and respect set as counterpoints to Viggi and Kätter, with their poverty and social ineptness. Wilhelm, the former schoolmaster, personifies a gradual and believable maturation from the petite and petty bourgeoisie (as an inept dreamer in the first half of the tale) to the productive middle class at last, having built on his unceasing activity and productive communion with nature in the second half. This is not the escape of a hermit, but a new-found balance between nature and society with predictable results:

Wilhelm developed the holdings with diligence and circumspection, increasing them so that he became a respected and well-advised man, while his wife remained constant in her revered gracefulness.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Swales, 151.

⁴⁸ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 179-180.

⁴⁹ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 179. (“*Wilhelm baute den Besitz mit Fleiss und Umsicht und mehrte ihn, so dass er ein angesehener und wohlberatener Mann wurde, während seine Frau in geseigneter Anmut sich immer gleich blieb.*”)

Dietegen (Dietegen)

The events imagined in the ninth tale, the *Dietegen* novella, take place narratively in the same time period as those of the *Spiegel* fairy tale, *i.e.*, in the late Middle Ages.

On the northern slope of the forested mountain chain beyond Seldwyla lay the gray and darkened city of Ruechenstein. The name of the city alone signaled its essence: “*Ruech*,” nicely adorned with its Swiss diphthong, meant “[bad] reputation,” a name closely matched – phonetically and semantically – by “*Rache*” (“revenge”). The pride of Ruechenstein was its special form of blood justice, which the citizens would practice in conjunction with quick trials and gruesome spectacles. Outsiders and unwanted elements were fair game.

Dietegen was an orphan accused unjustly of stealing a cross-bow. The eleven-year-old boy was quickly convicted and led to the gallows. This happened to be on a day when the Ruechensteiners and the Seldwylers had come together to celebrate the end of a long feud between them. The hanging proceeded as a sporting event in the local manner of Ruechenstein. Afterwards, a delegation of Seldwylers came across a tiny procession with a small and cheap coffin on a cart being shoved through the streets. A seven-year-old girl among them, Kün-golt, was weeping bitterly at the sight, but then took action:

As the procession went past the cart, the child leapt up like lightning, climbed up on the wheel and threw the [coffin] cover off, so that the lifeless Dietegen lay before the eyes of all. At the same instant he opened his eyes and took a light breath, since he had been... hanged badly and removed from the gallows too early.⁵⁰

Dietegen’s manner and appearance convinced even the Ruechensteiners that he was innocent, and Seldwyla received the orphan as a gift, with Kün-golt’s family adopting him. Together, Dietegen and

⁵⁰ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 193-194. (“*Wie der Zug jetzt an dem Karren vorbeiging, sprang das Kind wie ein Blitz hinzu, stieg auf das Rad und warf den Deckel hinunter, so dass der leblose Dietegen vor aller Augen lag. In demselben Augenblick schlug er die Augen auf und that einen leisen Atemzug, denn er war... schlecht gehenkt und zu früh vom Galgen genommen worden.*”)

Küngolt grew up in excellent circumstances—assisted by the fact that Küngolt's father was the forester and therefore generally untouched by the town's habitual vices. Dietegen loved her and made himself her protector, though she often offended him, for she regarded him as her personal property and generally exhibited a domineering and vain nature.

After Küngolt had wreaked havoc as a result of her reckless manner, kindling renewed hostilities between the neighboring cities, Dietegen gave her up for lost and plunged into savage war adventures. In the military camp later, he got the news that the Ruechensteiners had captured Küngolt and accused her of witchcraft. On the way to her beheading,⁵¹ she mirrored the humble changes she had been making to her soul:

Step by step she took her death walk... with calm courage, since she had resigned herself to it and dismissed any further hopes of life and happiness. 'Happens to the best of us,' she thought with an almost perceptible smile, and only when she thought of Dietegen did sweet tears fall from her eyes... and she felt comforted by this remembering, so selfless and good had her heart become.⁵²

Meanwhile Dietegen had set off without hesitation to rescue her according to an ancient law by which he was able to marry her at the scaffold and take her away alive, free and clear, from the execution site.

Once this occurred, the two were on an equal footing and became a happy and prosperous couple. Love and social standing were made right, exemplified by the newlyweds' return to the virtue of the forest cottage and Dietegen's emigration for foreign service. The final

⁵¹ Keller's *Collected Works* V, 244. Since Küngolt's blameless father had been killed in military service, her punishment was "mercifully reduced" from burning at the stake to beheading.

⁵² Ibid. ("*Schritt für Schritt ging sie ihren Todespfad ... gefassten Mutes, da sie sich ergeben und aller weiteren Lebens- und Glückshoffnungen entschlagen hatte. 'So kann es einem ergehen!' dachte sie mit einem fast merklichen Lächeln, und erst als sie plötzlich wieder an Dietegen dachte, entfielen ihre Augen süsse Thränen ... und sie fühlte sich durch dieses Erinnern getröstet, so selbstlos und gut war ihr Herz geworden.*")



*Woodcut of 'Die-
tegen Guarding
Küngolt' by Ernst
Württemberg,
Schweizerland,
vol. 5, 1919.
Courtesy: Wikimedia
Commons.*

narrative glimpses of Dietegen and Küngolt exhibit medieval models looking to the future, a knight and lady linking courtliness and humanity in the early sixteenth century.

The Lost Laughter (Das verlorene Lachen)

In his introduction to the second volume of *The People of Seldwyla*, Keller's narrator indicated that its citizens were getting out into the world more and were increasingly nurturing grandiose thoughts of business deals and profits. He then continued: "At the same time, though, [the Seldwylers] have already gotten increasingly monosyllabic and dull; they laugh less than they used to."⁵³ The specific indicator of a self-subjugated psyche or a narrowing of emotions—lost laughter—is the subject of this last of the ten Seldwyla novellas. It

⁵³ Keller's *Collected Works* V, 9. ("Dabei sind [die Seldwyler] jedoch bereits einsilbiger und trockener geworden; sie lachen weniger als früher.").

shows how good-hearted mirth, an expression of well-bred and happy people, can be lost and, psychologically more telling, how it can be rediscovered.⁵⁴

Jukundus Meyenthal was an officer in the Swiss Army and flag bearer of the Seldwyla Male Choral Society: the tale begins with the lyrics of a festive song he had just been singing.⁵⁵ Justine was the daughter of the incredibly rich Glor Family, a dynasty of silk manufacturers in Schwanau. The two met at a song festival⁵⁶ and fell in love. After Jukundus gave effective advice to the youngest son of the Glor clan in a potential dueling affair, dispelling the family's concerns about his modest means and his origins in a town infamous for its slackers, the couple were married. So far so good.

In the offices of the Glor silk factory, where the new son-in-law had gone to work, however, he showed a total lack of commercial cunning and toughness. Competitors found him to be weak and gullible, since he believed their dishonest and evasive promises. To make matters worse, he behaved coolly towards an ecclesiastical reform movement to which Justine was committed. This all led to marital strife. Jukundus could not put up with a certain word of censure that slipped from Justine's lips, and he angrily left the house on the spot. From then on, the winning smile disappeared from both of their faces.

Separately, they went their own ways—hers religious, his political—and only recognized these paths as aberrations after the shock of two public scandals. A trade crisis had brought the Glor-Family enterprise to the brink of ruin and Justine to the insight that Reform Christianity offered her no support. A popular movement that Jukundus had joined in good faith had degenerated into a slander campaign and had shown its true face. Just as each of them was coping with dismay and newfound insights into their caustic actions, their paths crossed. They stood unexpectedly in front of each other and... fell into each other's

⁵⁴ In this novella we see not the literal but the emotional equivalency of the German adjective "*verloren*" ("lost") and its English cognate "forlorn."

⁵⁵ Keller's *Collected Works* V, 250-251.

⁵⁶ This setting cleverly arose from Keller's poetic design, since heartfelt singing is just as much an outgrowth of merriment and a companion to freewheeling emotional security as is *laughter*. When one is lost, the other probably follows suit.

arms. They talked it out, and then their laughter set in again when he asked her to repeat the curse she had thrown at him. She delivered the expletive once again, this time jokingly and with tenderness: “*Lumpaci!*” (“Rogue!” “Rascal!” “Riff-Raff!”).⁵⁷ Then Jukundus kissed her.

The Keller-crafted compensation was not long in coming:

Justine moved to be with her husband in town, where he prospered without cease and lost his gullibility in matters of business and commerce without becoming untrue and deceptive himself... They had a son and a daughter, whom they called Justus and Jukunde, genetically bequeathing to the future [their] blooming, laughing beauty.⁵⁸

The etymological origins of the names in *The Lost Laughter* presage the action. “Jukundus” means in German what “jocund” does in English: “cheerful,” “lighthearted.” That is the state in which we find him at the beginning and at the end of the novella. Justine means “just” in the sense of “fair.” It is not only her love that leads to the restoration of the lost laughter after both have performed the same introspection, it is also her sense of justice or fairness – gained from judging her own actions. The German word “*glorreich*” (“glorious”) consists in this novella of two possibly ironic parts, “*Glor-*” (a particle representing “glory”), her family name, and “*reich*” (“rich,” her family’s initial financial condition). Finally, her hometown of “*Schwanau*” means “swan meadow,” calling forth images of both beauty and tranquility.

One main impetus for writing *The Lost Laughter*, a motive not found in the other tales of the *Seldwyla* cycle, was Keller’s growing mistrust towards the moral compunctions of businessmen. This mistrust stemmed partially from his encounters with Swiss businessmen and partially from stays in Germany.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 354.

⁵⁸ Keller’s *Collected Works* V, 355-356. (“*Justine zog nun zu ihrem Mann nach der Stadt, wo er ohne Unterbrechung wohl gedieh und seine Leichtgläubigkeit in Geschäfts- und Verkehrssachen verlor, ohne deswegen selbst unwahr und trügerisch zu werden... Sie bekamen einen Sohn und eine Tochter, welche sie Justus und Jukunde nannten und die blühende, lachende Schönheit weiter vererben werden.*”)

⁵⁹ Alfred Escher’s relationship to Keller deserves closer attention for the effect the controversial Swiss banker, rail baron, cotton king and politician may have had on Keller’s economic views and disillusionment with business.

The Lost Laughter struggles to balance humaneness and profit in the world of business. Yet the alert reader may not be able to suspend disbelief when narrative fate in the end afflicts the business markets with an almost universal depression from which only Jukundus is exempt.⁶⁰ Thus, the mature Jukundus becomes a model practitioner of a less than model profession. At the same time, the compensation system of *The Lost Laughter* underscores moral dichotomies seen elsewhere in *The People of Seldwyla*: lazy vs. industrious; manipulative vs. good-hearted; blindly speculative vs. insightfully investing; working against nature vs. working in harmony with nature; inflexible vs. flexible; dishonest in business vs. honest in business; detrimental to society vs. beneficial to society.

Keller as a Social Economist

In cultural orientation, Keller displays the temperament of a social economist rather than a utilitarian one.⁶¹ Social economics involves the relationship between individuals and their surroundings. For Keller that relationship is between the citizen and Seldwyla. Productive values are not to be maximized merely for one man or woman on a momentary basis, but for the overall good of society as balanced with the rights of each person. In that regard Keller parallels, perhaps unconsciously, Article 4 of the Swiss Federal Constitution of 1848, which was newly revised the very year he published *Die Leute von Seldwyla* (1874): "All Swiss are equal before the law."⁶² Accordingly,

⁶⁰ Several critics see the logic and realism of the story damaged by the quick fix of the ending. T. M. Holmes, "Poetry against Realism: The Divided Structure of Gottfried Keller's *Das verlorene Lachen*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 19 (1983), 259, points out that Jukundus worked for an extensive enterprise that should be subject to "the same broad economic context as the Glors' concern." Yet when the economic crisis engulfed the world of commerce, Jukundus's prosperity was miraculously spared; his company was immune from the violent mechanisms of the business cycle. There seems a further inconsistency: How could Jukundus have been so naïve about political and business malpractices and yet so wise about religious hypocrisy?

⁶¹ The criteria in this paragraph are adapted from E. K. Hunt, "Normative Foundations of Social Theory: An Essay on the Criteria Defining Social Economics," *Review of Social Economy* 36 (1978), 285-309.

⁶² Bernard Moses, *The Federal Government of Switzerland: An Essay on the Constitution* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1889), 204. ("Alle Schweizer sind vor dem Gesetze gleich.") The equivalent legal right in the current Swiss constitution is now found under Article 8.

even in Keller's fictional lair of Un-Swissness, material and psychic rewards or punishment accrue relative to each character's dynamic adaptation to reality, not according to their station in life.⁶³

The materialistic dilemma of production and distribution that Keller presented was extremely relevant to the time in which he wrote. He referred to it as "the bread question" in a letter to Wilhelm Petersen ("*die Brotfrage*" GB 3/1, 381), and within the general idiom of the nineteenth century it was "the social question" ("*die Sozialfrage*").⁶⁴

It would be too simplistic—given the rampant and systemic Swiss poverty of the day—to suggest that Gottfried Keller endorsed the notion that "if you're poor, then it's your own fault." The idealistic proposal he did advance was of bettering your station through clear thinking, hard work and moral fortitude. Success was still by no means certain, though, and to this end the final artistry of his prose went far beyond cheap utilitarianism or preachy didacticism.

From Helvetic Particulars to Poetic Universals: Keller's Editorial Hand

In the final drafts of his works, Keller poeticized and universalized his brand of Realism. This required, among other things, the removal of uniquely Swiss terminology. Therefore, in later revisions the author

⁶³ At the same time, those citizens who chose occupations or activities that required them to face up to the demands of nature and society had the advantage, e.g., Pankraz and Dietegen as soldiers, Pankraz as "lion-tamer," Dietegen as forester, Wilhelm as farmer, Regel Amrain as stone quarry owner and Jukundus Meyenthal as tree-cutter. Those occupations that allowed for pretense were the artist Pankraz, the tavern-keeper Manz, the three speculating comb makers, the sorcerer and witch of *Spiegel the Kitten*, the tailor of the early Wenzel Strapinski, the inheritance hunter John Kabys and the dilettante writer Viggi Störteler.

⁶⁴ A young Swiss contemporary of Keller, the economic historian Traugott Geering, in *Handel und Industrie der Stadt Basel* (Basel: F. Schneider, 1886), v, referred to the "social question" as a timely humanistic dilemma: "...in our days of harshest actuality, positivistic philosophy and realistic art, as the social question of daily bread for the masses takes up almost all of our attention." ("*...in unsern Tagen härtester Wirklichkeit, positivistischer Philosophie und realistischer Kunst, wo die sociale Frage nach dem täglichen Brod der Menge immer ausschliesslicher den Gesichtskreis erfüllt.*")

In unterzeichnetem Verlage erscheinen gegenwärtig: [586 a St.]

Die Leute von Seldwyla.
Erzählungen
von
Gottfried Keller.

Zweite vermehrte Auflage in 4 Bänden.
Preis des Bandes Thlr. 1. 5 Sgr.
oder fl. 2.

Die unter diesem Titel bekannt gewordenen Erzählungen Gottfried Keller's haben gewissermaßen eine eigene Gattung der novellistischen Literatur begründet. Man glaubt in eine andere Welt zu blicken, so neu und fremdartig scheint erst alles, was er schildert; bald jedoch findet man, dass es die gewöhnlichen Lebenskreise sind, die er darstellt, aber in einer Beleuchtung, welche durch einen tiefpoetischen, das Tragische wie das Barocke und Phylisterhafte gleich meisterhaft behandelnden Humor in die wunderbarsten Farbentöne gebrochen ist. Diese unvergleichlichen Erzählungen erscheinen hier auf das Doppelte der früheren vermehrt, in zweiter, neu durchgesehener Auflage.

Stuttgart, November 1873.
G. J. Göschen'sche
Verlagshandlung.

Publisher's announcement for the 2nd edition of The People of Seldwyla (1873). Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

replaced “*päschelten*” with “*bastelten*” (“made [something] with their hands”),⁶⁵ “*Löhli*” with “*Kind*, (“child,” “foolish child”),”⁶⁶ “*Backe*” with “*Wange*” (“cheek”),⁶⁷ “*Steckkopf*” with “*Starrkopf*” (“pigheaded person”),⁶⁸ “*Bübeli*” with “*Bübchen*” (“little boy”),⁶⁹ “*Ketzerslösl*” with “*Schelmenkind*” (“young rascal”),⁷⁰ “*z'weg*” with “*zurecht*” (“made right”),⁷¹ and replaced a number of other Swiss locutions. In *The Misused Love Letters*, when Gritli was concerned that the neighbors could easily gloat over the couple's literary exercise—for being an “easy target”—Keller revised the “easy target” analogy away from the Swiss expression “a mowed meadow” (“*eine gemähte Matt*” / “*eine gemähte Wiese*”) to the geographically more widely known idiomatic phrase “a discovered feast” (“*ein gefundes Fressen*”).⁷²

⁶⁵ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 162.

⁶⁶ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 183.

⁶⁷ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 185.

⁶⁸ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 186.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 187.

⁷¹ Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 284.

⁷² Keller's *Collected Works* XXI, 277.

Keller used the same technique in steering away from uniquely Swiss financial terms: “*Rappen*” became “*Münzen*” (“coins”);⁷³ “*Geldstage*” became the more general “*Konkurse*” (“bankruptcy proceedings”); “*Gültbriefe*” became “*Werttitel*” (“redeemable notes”)⁷⁵ and “*Fränklein*” became “*Baarschaft*” (“ready cash”).⁷⁶ He avoided a strictly Swiss interpretation of the word “*Gewerb*” as “property,” “farm,” or “estate” by redacting that word in favor of the generic German “*Gut*.”⁷⁷ In each case he led the reader away from a parochial or local atmosphere toward a more cosmopolitan space.

Another means of generalizing and thus poeticizing the material was to moderate overly judgmental economic allusions: “*Geschäftsmann Schwindler*” (“businessman swindler”) became simply “*Schwindler*” (“swindler”).⁷⁸ In the final version of *Dietegen*, Keller excised nearly an entire page contrasting the socially responsible forestry practices of the early sixteenth century with the selfish utilitarian views of the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ It was as if the more mature writer were neutralizing some of the vitriol from his earlier years and in doing so were attempting to give the subject more universal appeal.

In sum, Keller’s motives in formulating *Seldwyla* not as a mimesis of Switzerland—but in counterpoint to the outward historic realities of the Swiss Confederation—were to preserve the inner, psychosocial realism of his prose. His literary project called on citizens of high merit to be loosely connected to *Seldwyla* but not to be arch-*Seldwylers* by nature, to stand out as bright spots against a morass of mediocrity by their purposeful activity and social awareness. Aside from two medieval tales situated in the same known moral universe (*Spiegel the Kitten* and *Dietegen*), we observe Keller’s Swiss-like heroes battling against the fictionalized un-Swissness of their societal environs in a chronological and economic progression of tales that trace

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Keller’s *Collected Works* XXI, 217.

⁷⁵ Keller’s *Collected Works* XXI, 251.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Keller’s *Collected Works* XXI, 282.

⁷⁸ Keller’s *Collected Works* XXI, 234.

⁷⁹ Keller’s *Collected Works* XXI, 296.

the modernization of Switzerland from *Pankraz's* potato patch to the international business offices of *The Lost Laughter*.

The editorial hand of the "Gnome of Zurich"⁸⁰ wiped away identifiable geographic details or volatile temporal events in final drafts of the *Seldwyla* cycle that might have limited the appeal of his fiction to Switzerland and to his age.⁸¹ The resultant universal prose raised him to a place in the pantheon of Poetic Realism. In his final drafts he blurred any crass socio-economic focus in order to allow the universal human element to come through. He did not portray the burgeoning industrialization of the Confederation as a textbook case, but he did paint a humanely realistic portrait of tension created by internalized reactions to a world of material realities. It is through this collision between the actual and the imaginative that "Keller reaffirms the tantalizing dichotomy for which he will forever be remembered."⁸²

⁸⁰ The literary giant from Zürich, Gottfried Keller, grew to a physical stature of only 4 feet 7 inches (140 cm). Cf. Heinrich Lauinger, *Formen und Funktionen des Schmollens in den Seldwylers-Novellen von Gottfried Keller* (Berlin: Frieling, 1994), 7.

⁸¹ This contrasted sharply, for instance, with the Swiss novella of three decades earlier, *Die schwarze Spinne* ("The Black Spider," 1842) by Jeremias Gotthelf (pen name of Albert Bitzius, 1797-1854), which by its use of place names and local dialect could only have been set in Canton Bern, specifically in the Emmental.

⁸² Clifford A. Bernd, *German Poetic Realism* (Boston, Twain, 1981), 47.