

# Siegfried Lenz's *Das Vorbild*: Reflection on the Controversial Meaning of an Exemplary Model Through Main Characters

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**Abstract:** Three educators are given the task of completing the textbooks representing Germany by the Ministry of Education. They have a lot of discussion to find an exemplary model that young people can trust and follow in their textbook. However, despite their numerous discussions, their assessment and judgment on a role model do not reach consensus. The private stories of the main characters in this work allows us to reflect on the appropriateness and legitimacy of these characters who play a role in presenting the exemplary model to others. In other words, they must undergo a process of review by writers and readers in the process of finding a role model. This work has educational intent in that the discussion surrounding the example implies the inevitability of doubt and the impossibility of absolute truth to readers. It is natural that they can't find an exemplary model. Because the author Lenz thought that modern people are living in a society that is open to education and that society should maintain cooperation among different forms of life in social free space. Textbooks where a variety of exemplary models are discussed and different ways of life and different modes of behavior are allowed are justified. Clearly, there is no absolute role model without any doubt, and the absolute model must always be retractable. Lenz sets the example to critical questions. He just questions and doubts. This is because he wants to teach his readers.

**Keywords:** Exemplary Model, Main Characters, Educational Intent, Inevitability of Doubt, Impossibility of Absolute Truth

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## 1. Introduction

Siegfried Lenz's novel *Das Vorbild (The Role Model)*, which appeared in the Frankfurt book market in the fall of 1973, was at the time a bestseller in West Germany. But when it was published, some critics and readers criticized it. In their opinion, this is why the writer of Post-war Literature is trying to become a social participant in a very emotional narrative way in this work. However, such a protest needs to be reconsidered. Because, like other postwar writers, Lenz wanted to sharpen the situation on the one hand, but in essence he was a writer who refused to portray it in any literary fashion. He was a writer who tried to describe it logically with justification in all respects, and unlike other postwar writers, he was not agitated. He tried to convince his readers, but he confessed to the reader that the possibility of refutation must always be open. [1] He tried to teach the reader something and to make the reader to doubt. [2]

In fact, Lenz did not suddenly deal with the subject of 'an role model'. He has long been devoted to this problem, based on personal and political experience, especially by setting the leader of the Third Reich as a figurative character in his work. Not only in his autobiographical essay [3], we confirm this fact, but also in his novels, short stories, dramas and radio dramas. Especially in his previous work *Deutschstunde (The German Lesson)* (1968), the issue of "exemplary model" was mentioned. The writing theme that Siggi Jepsen punished was 'my example'. Therefore, 'an exemplary model' can be regarded as related to the previous work of Lenz.

In this paper, I will examine the difficulties experienced by the major characters in the process of searching the role model and the true meaning of an exemplary model through it. At this time, I would like to review the life of each of these characters. This is because these characters do not appear arbitrarily but perform their roles and functions in the process of searching the model according to the intended idea of the

author. I would like to raise the question that there is an absolute example in the process of discussing these characters in order to find an exemplary model. I will therefore consider the possibility of cancellation or withdrawal of the model. In conclusion, I will think about the position of the author in relation to the 'model' in this work.

It is 45 years since the publication of this novel, but the analysis of this novel will be meaningful because the research on this work is not yet sufficient compared to Lenz's other works. The analysis of the work will be based on this text, Lenz's confessional essays and articles in the press.

## 2. Characters Looking for an Exemplary Model

Three educators meet in Hamburg and stay for a while. They were assigned by the Ministry of Education to complete the textbooks representing Germany. In particular, it is their task to find a role model that can be posted in school textbooks and which young people in Germany can trust: "The first two chapters are put together, reviewed, decided; swiftly, almost without resistance, one has agreed on 'work and holidays'; Tough, listless, on the other hand, 'home and stranger' has emerged (13)." [4] At the end of the enthusiastic debate, it is the most important task for the three educators to complete chapter three of the book entitled "Model of Life" in the book. On the other hand, the characteristics of these experts are introduced. The retired Principal, Valentin Pundt, had a typical German appearance. Dr. Rita Süßfeldt is the principal of libertarian propensity living in Hamburg. She always wears a little crumpled clothe and is somewhat distracted. Janpeter Heller is a 40-year-old high school teacher who is usually wearing red-burgundy sweatshirts and is bearded to hide his chin as if he does not want to show it.

These characters have different positions, and it is not only for the theme of 'exemplary model' that these different tendencies are given to them. They have images that symbolize the massive political forces that are often encountered in West Germany at the time. [5] Pundt is a representative of a "conservative and authoritarian" line, as he is known at his age. Rita is an intelligent female spokesman who represents "liberal" ideology, and Heller is "progressive". However, it is doubtful that the evaluation and judgment of three experts on role model becomes increasingly difficult and almost impossible to reach consensus.

The contents of this work are spread out in two plot areas. One is presented in a discussion process to find the role model, and the other is presented in the context of the personal life of each expert. This personal plot allows us to reflect on the suitability or legitimacy of the three educators who play a role in setting examples for others. As the three educators look for an exemplary model that is right for the times, they have to take the process of being reviewed by the writer and the reader.

### 2.1. Valentin Pundt

During his stay in Hamburg, the retired Principal Pundt tries to find out about the suicidal cause of his son Harald, who has passed the test with excellent grades and has unexpectedly finished his life. But the conversation with his son's previous friends reveals that Pundt himself has a great responsibility for his son's death. Education at Pundt's home was so strict that, for example, that Harald had to record on his calendar every day when he got out of school and when he got home, and had to explain to his father about all the uncertain times. Pundt ordered his son to look back on his daily life through the reflection of the day and was thinking of this method as a good education. In fact, the strict Prussian style of education has led the son to commit suicide. The process of tracing the cause of his son's death shows a negative impact of past education through conflicts caused by old-fashioned education methods and resistance to them. His son's ex-girlfriend, Lilly Fligge, says about the principal's mistake: "[...] perhaps you could tell me why it was that he was always on the hunt for reasons, for evidence. Everything had to be proven and substantiated, every absence, every thought and every wish, and if he did something then it had to be justified in advance [...] I personally suspect that what Harald could so well hide was fear (156)." [4] Harald's response to this incredible authoritarian education was in a quiet protest, and he was increasingly expanding the methods of protest: "Even suicide was right for him to draw attention to evils (270)." [4] In his letter to his wife, the unsociable and rugged educator speaks of his awakening to his mistakes. He perceives ways of behavior that he had never noticed before as a heavy burden now. For example, he had a habit of simply letting the student alone when he did not know the answer, and none of his colleagues understood the attitude of letting the student succumb. Pundt finally decides to get off the plan to make the textbook in the course of a hard step, approaching self-awareness. Because he became self-aware that he was not someone who could provide an exemplary model for others.

### 2.2. Rita Süßfeldt

Rita Süßfeldt, who is also involved in determining the Example, is a character whose author and reader will examine her suitability as the storyline progresses. She has a tendency to oppose the customs. She is active in women's emancipation, and she has chosen a job between her career success and marriage, but she is not wider in scope. She is an active new woman, but it is hard to say that she is a liberated woman because she spends most of her free time at home without a boyfriend. The critics are mentioning that when the author describes the features of this person, the certainty is insufficient and her outline is being gradually eradicated as the plot proceeds, [6] and that this person has a weak function in the work. [7] However, this is hardly accurate. Because Rita is obviously a character standing in contradistinction to Pundt, which is what Lenz originally intended. For example, her neglected and careless manner of

behavior [8] is in stark contrast to Pundt's ruthless and attentive attitude.

Up to the mid-point of this work, three educators agree that they will continue their efforts to find a role model that is right for the times, despite the difficulties. By this time, they seem to believe in the possibility of finding an exemplary person. However, as it approaches the second half of the work, it turns out that it is almost impossible to decide to associate an exemplary model with the present. Deciding on the model is not to lead in the wrong direction of unconditional consent, nor should it tempt young people to imitate without reflection. The exemplary model should demonstrate its influence and convey motivations that are meaningful and stimulating for growing young people. In the end, Rita suggests declaring that it is impossible to determine the model. She says: "[...] temporary and limited validity of an example and the fact that it must be refuted by changing positions; let's say this: the respective constellation decides which behavior can be called exemplary; other constellations claim other appearances (166-167)." [4] However, the reason why this proposal is logically somewhat contradictory is that it is still difficult to clearly define what is appropriate for the times.

### 2.3. Janpeter Heller

Heller is one of the most left-wing political figures. As indicated by the expression: "[...] though washed out, but still burgundy (21)", [4] some of his progressive and leftist features are already implied in his coat color. Heller and publisher Dr. Dunkhase don't have close contact with each other. At the end of the work, the two characters even argue with each other, but they have a common point in forming anti-governmental fronts. [9] He says that Pundt's old idea is an old hat. He is a supporter of SPD (Social Democratic Party) like Lenz. He is anti-authoritative and opposed to Pundt. In short, the arrangement of the three educators, Heller of the left-wing, Rita of the middle-class, and Pundt of the right-wing, gathered together to find an exemplary model is the part that makes this novel a very traditional work.

Heller's frustration comes from his failed marriage and his inability to start a new life. When he returned to Hamburg, where he once lived, he meets Charlotte, his wife before his divorce, and his daughter, Stefanie, at a non-meeting time. Although he could not overcome his divorce and wanted to go back to her from time to time, he could not tolerate the reasons for his alienation. In fact, he continued to identify himself with the students he taught, and such behavior led to the abandonment of the family, which resulted in parting. In addition, the failure of his marriage comes from an attitude that does not understand the hearts of those closest to him. His aggressiveness in the progressive tendency is evident even in the conflict with his wife.

In the process of debating in search of exemplary human beings, he decisively rejects all the exemplary person that correspond to the "great figures" in history or to the "distinguished figures": "The excellence should invite for comparison. The excellent is antisocial, says Heller, it

burdens itself; Nobody can show solidarity with the excellent (46)." [4] In his view, attempts to refer young people to, for example, Albert Schweitzer or Mahatma Gandhi as exemplary models are educational suppressions that can't be justified in any way. As opposed to the model, he makes a controversial proposition that people must agree on the following preconditions: "[...] that everyone is his own role model or it can become - if he only gets a chance to be realized in his best ways. And a reading book would just have to go into it: it should show how the unrealized or blocked possibilities can be realized (103)." [4] In fact, the various textbooks used so far in German schools, for example, have suggested students the behavior of people like Albert Schweitzer as a measure of exemplary behavior in the world and society, without much criticism. These exemplary models often do not come into the daily lives of young people and have nothing to do with everyday life. As Lenz wrote at the time of this novel, he had caught up with examples of this unrealistic model of German society - as he said in an interview. [10] - he had asked for a lot of advice to help the textbook for young people. Therefore, when Heller says the following, his words are consistent with the author's view: "If society is really as it is reflected in these books, then all of us seem to be living on a lamb meadow: the fathers just need to roll up their sleeves for all the problems to resolve, and the mothers just seem to be there to reward any experienced suffering with a cup cake (139)." [4]

In this process of finding an example for the times, the three educators face some difficulties. Because although it seems that the subject can't be overcome easily, besides the process of finding the role model, there are obstacles to the process of finding the model, which is continuously caused by one of the experts. In fact, some exemplary models have played an important role in the socialization process of young people, and although all the three agree on the opinion that these models still play such roles, there remains the question of what model should be and what driving force comes from these models. For this reason, the need to find examples has been questioned. Heller was aware of these points as an act of arrogation: "Picking role models, putting them in the reading book and serving young people - here you have your Leonidas, your Doctor Schweitzer, jealous of him. If you ask me, role models are just a kind of educational cod liver oil that everyone swallows with reluctance, at least with their eyes closed. They crush the young man, make him insecure and irritable, and challenge him in an unseemly way. Models in the traditional sense, these are pompous uselessness, fanfare thrusts a failed education, where you shut your ears. Anything that recommends itself from the Thermopylae to Lambarene larger than life is just a radiant annoyance that has nothing to do with everyday life (45)." [4]

### 3. Character Proposed as an Exemplary Model: Lucy Beerbaum

The role models suggested by the three educators are not

accepted because of objections each time. When their discussion reached a difficult and exhausting state, they noticed a woman's life because of Rita's cousin Heino Merkel, who lived in the neighborhood of Rita. Lucy Beerbaum, who teaches at the University of Hamburg, was born in Greece and is a polymer expert and biochemist. After a successful coup in her homeland, she decided to protest, although she was unfamiliar to it. As a sign of involvement and unity with her arrested and detained friends in Greece, she voluntarily imposed on herself the same restrictive conditions as her friends. Her protestations were minimizing the daily intake of food, abandoning her duties as a doctor, and spiritual isolation. Kurt Batt and Theo Elm point out that Lenz, together with her episode, is trying to present an abstract, moral example that is far from politics in fact. In other words, Lucy is suggesting the ideal of still mysticism. [11] Her actions as a moralist did not seem to have an external effect, and her explicit self-sacrifice eventually comes at the expense of death, but her actions were recommended by the three experts as an exemplary model for a new textbook. Although only a few of her biographies fit the needs of the three experts, they find features that are exemplary from her: "[...] the image of this modest, not even very old woman is barely describable: just when grasped reliably, it begins to waver, just with so much effort determined for its exceptionalness, it shows everyday things that narrow the view. Precisely for this reason, however, something can be generated from this witnessed life, something useful in the sense of the task, a model that wants to be confirmed and doubted (179)." [4] Her attempts to promote the uncertain and hopeless unity have both elements of pros and cons, consensus and contradiction. Her behavior and vitality make the experts - as well as the readers - stand for personal position. They expressed their position on whether her conduct was a worthy example or a touching.

The three experts reviewed and discussed not only the episode of the professor's protest, but also examined aspects of Lucy's childhood and schooldays. This narrative method of depicting individual trivial things that does not seem to be important on the surface is the storyteller Lenz's unique skill to achieve secondary purposes through instant lighting. Lenz had criticized Hemingway, his literary model, for not paying attention to the meaning of the periphery, and he wanted to avoid such an attitude. Lenz was convinced that what seemed obsolete on the surface might be essential. In Rucy's biography, the stories of this periphery create a meaningful environment, and Lenz tells his thoughts through the character Heller: "Why should not be of designated value, what happens before an exemplary act, or after? Shall the inconspicuous, neutral without color, the equanimous can give no solution? Why not look for the center on the edge, in the past event, in an out-of-the-way incident? Don't we think, Heller thinks, that we need to extend our search to what is without weight and, at first glance, lies next to the topic? (285)" [4]

On the other hand, Pundt, who strolls along the river, tries to help a couple in trouble, but falls to the point of losing

consciousness by the rockers. He is rescued by the police, but decides to withdraw from the text compilation committee due to the experience. He believes that the task of providing an exemplary model for others after he investigates his son's suicide is no longer appropriate for him. But Rita and Heller, who are left to continue the project, see Rucy's story as an increasingly productive Example: "An experience is presented for comparison or as a challenge: is not this exactly the task we have set ourselves with our reading book? And is not this our only chance? Any text that does not give me anything, that commits me to nothing, that makes no need for what it is - such a text leaves me indifferent (349)." [4] The remaining two educators accepted the professor's case because she showed her responsibility and challenging attitude at the same time. And they thought that this woman was accompanied by both favor and rejection. Rucy is presented as a role model in a dilemma that requires determination, but the decisions of the two experts can be subject to different evaluations: "What should count: the situation is timely. The young person can put themselves in their place and look for reasons for the one and the other behavior. [...] If we insist that a model should not be chloroformed but incite to doubt: here we can find it (487)." [4]

#### 4. Character Who Reject the Proposed Model: Dunkhase

With a conclusion agreed after a heated debate, Rita and Heller go to a publisher who is responsible for the textbook. But unexpectedly, their decision is rejected by Dr. Dunkhase. He is a strong activist who wants to change the world through action. Dunkse, who wants to live like a revolutionary, shows a consistent and thorough attitude. He says that Rucy's actions may be considered excellent, but from another perspective it is an example of passive rejection that is not entirely influential: "Protest against illegal material. But it is a private protest. Contemplative, meditative. An elegiac no. A rebellion in humility. An emancipatory education can't be satisfied with this, with a protest that remains in the nature of action and therefore without consequences. And I can't even imagine that our young people are content with a role model who, above all, suffers impressively, suffers (517)." [4] To this publisher, Rucy's behavior is considered a personal gesture that does not say anything and does not motivate any kind of behavior. Heller criticizes this for suggesting blind activism: "Acting as a new form of solution, as a religion, regardless of where the church gets to [...]. I just wanted to alert you to a new breed of arrogance - action at any price (518)." [4] Heller thinks the process of looking for an exemplary model was in vain because the decisions were frustrated by Dr. Dunkhase, who considers justification and active behavior to be essential. On the other hand, Heller replies to Rita, who is disappointed that Heller did not face Dunkhase strong enough: "Even though I did not learn much, I know that for a moment:

whether a convincing attempt is worthwhile or not. And Dunkhase is one of the types that nobody can convince, because for them every other opinion is a suspicious authority. They will never understand our confidence in the contradiction (522)." [4] These words can also be seen as the outspoken expressions of the author who think of the possibility of doubt and contradiction in our time as an essential element of human existence.

## 5. Conclusion: Lenz's Position on an Exemplary Model

The various evaluations that emerged shortly after the publication of this novel were published in articles, and the grades of judgment differed from the ruthless rejection to the enthusiastic agreement. This work has been appreciated by critics as a good and solid book, but it is not a masterpiece. For example, it was pointed out that this work is not in the best position as an object of educational debate, but this criticism was not entirely plausible. Lenz, for example, is not a writer who sees his choice of isolation as an essential condition for writing as Arno Schmidt, and is not completely withdrawn from life in society, but rather an author seeking contact with people. As we have seen in many interviews, he knew that the exemplary model plays a special role not only in the behavior of consumer society but also in the political sphere. [12] It is not unusual for him to accept this problem as his "pedagogical" novel, but it seems clear that Lenz, who had given up the way of the educator he wanted before becoming an author, emphasized the educational aspect through this work.

This work is not a Reportage reporting the fact, but it shows a literary conception using the story of the school textbook as a frame-story to discuss the problems associated with the role model. The main characters Pundt, Heller and Rita can be said to be "fundamentally educational moralists" [13] and their meetings and discussions repeatedly show the inevitability of doubt and the impossibility of absolute truth before the reader's eyes. In this sense, *Das Vorbild* can be considered as a work with educational intent. In this regard, Klose, the textbook maker, also expressed his respect for Lenz: "There are hints in Siegfried Lenz that he knows such problems well; but it is also understandable that they were unimportant to him for his novel *The Model*. The narrator's theme was 'The Model', and the production of a reading book served as a mere framework for narrating exemplary stories. Siegfried Lenz fails his experts in the search for 'the' role model. With full right. The times have been when the schoolmasters 'set' the role models on behalf of churches, authorities and parties. We also live pedagogically in an open society that has to endure the coexistence of different and often conflicting forms of life in a social space of freedom. I think that a German reading book is right when it sets up different models for discussion and, above all, teaches how to tolerate different ways of living and behaving." [13]

In the discussion of three experts in this work, the reader

constantly confronts the so-called "a friction-causing lawsuit" [14], which corresponds to the inner assurance of the author. In this work, Lenz shows that determining a role model is always based on a tough struggle with himself. As evident in Lucy's example, personal decisions for joint liability can often be made by overcoming strong oppositions. Lucy Beerbaum is the opposite of exemplary models that were popular in West Germany at that time, from Marx, Lenin, Che Guevara to Kennedy and Albert Einstein. Her resistance almost shows the consciousness of solidarity responsibility in the sense of Dostoevsky. Her actions clearly show that she has made a lot of personal sacrifices, but Dr. Dunkhase does not accept her as a role model, because he saw her behavior as a controversial example.

The writer did not completely identify himself with any of his characters. Of course, a part of the writer hides in his characters, but the characters do not fully reproduce the position of this author. Pundt, Rita, or Heller, all of which are characters that the author sympathizes with in some way, but are always put into the work with Lenz's reflection. Heller, who is the closest character to Lenz, is actually a "de-idealized" person. An exemplary model that is realistic for Lenz may be found in a rustic, unobtrusive place, not under pressure, not dramatic, not overwhelming. The model must, at any rate, be allowed to withdraw or cancel at any time.

The three educators eventually fail to complete the tasks assigned to them. They repeated their thoughts, but ultimately their ideas were rejected by the publishers. Of course, it does not mean there is no exemplary model that their mission to find a role model is not completed. But it is clear that the role model must always be able to be withdrawn. Because there is no absolute role model that does not allow any doubt.

In addition to the fact that Lenz does not directly reveal his opinion through characters, his play with the characters gives information about the subject of the work and functions to describe the characters themselves. As Jost Nolte says, Lenz speaks with "disguised voices" [15]. When Lenz can't confirm certain things, he opens them in a pending state and does not reduce them to clear information. For this reason, the characters who try to make the school textbook in this work are also observed from various perspectives.

Lenz has always confessed to being open to exemplary models in the realm of literature. In particular, he had a close relationship with Ernest Hemingway, which he used as a literary model in his early writings. But as he later expressed in an essay, [16] he became increasingly critical of such a friendly approach. He pursues this principle of fellowship and approach with critical distance in this work. According to Beckmann, Lenz continues to raise critical questions about a role model. Lenz does not erase one of the exemplary models from the list. He just questions and doubts. Because he wants to teach readers this. [17] His novel *Das Vorbild* certainly proves his ability as a narrator even though we consider the various pros and cons of this work. This work is a good example of how literature can give a driving force for

democracy and human society through warnings about manipulability and misleading possibilities.

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