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### The Reader

Bernhard Schlink's famous novel *The Reader*, which posed at first as a romantic story about an affair between a young boy, Michael Berg, and an older woman, Hanna, later turns into a discussion of the morality of the Holocaust, the denial of those directly involved, and the guilt felt by the generation of children after the events of the Holocaust. There are many different interpretations of this story and many people object to the way that *The Reader* causes audiences to feel sympathy for Hanna. But Bernhard Schlink very intentionally designed Hanna's character that way; he wanted a reaction from his audience and he certainly got one, from people all over the world.

Having found this book at a church book sale and read it when I was in high school for pleasure, I was eager to reread it through a political lens. I will admit that I did not understand first time through the very serious implications and dilemmas the book presented. But upon discussing it in an academic setting, I found this book to be truly incredible and eye opening. Students, especially in America, are taught all about the Holocaust in school, but the gravity and tragedy never really sinks in through those class lectures and textbooks. Schlink's *The Reader* literally forces the audience into the scenario, insisting that he or she make a decision regarding Hanna's guilt at the same time Michael does. It is brilliant and it opens up

discussion and conversation among people all over the world. It makes some audience members very uncomfortable to find themselves feeling sympathy for a concentration camp guard because people all over the world "villainize" anyone associated with the Holocaust as monsters, as evil, for being capable of performing such gruesome tasks. And while that may be true for some, it is also completely for inaccurate for others. There were plenty of concentration camp guards out there just like Hanna. They were people, too, after all, just trying to survive in a time of such economical unrest and political change.

The guilt that Michael Berg's character felt is a very real sense of guilt. He takes on the guilt "of the post-war generation, ... the guilt of his parents in a crippled society, condemns them for their apathy and/or dreadful deeds during the Holocaust," (Finn, 317), a feeling that many children of this generation struggled with. Being an age during the Holocaust that was too young to understand or participate, the children of the post-war generation found themselves struggling to cope with the actions or sometimes inactions of their parents, of the horrors they committed or didn't revolt against, something known as "survivor's syndrome," a very common psychological experience (Finn, 318). This caused the children of this generation to not know "what to say to both victim and perpetrator " (Finn, 318). This theme is extremely prevalent in *The Reader* once Michael learns of Hanna's involvement in the Holocaust. When he confronts her in prison, he quite awkwardly asks, "Didn't you ever think about the things that were discussed at the trial...when we were together, when I was reading to you?" (*The Reader*, 198), very unclear of the way to word things, yet yearning for an answer: did Hanna ever feel remorse for

her actions? To his question she replies, "...when no one understands you, then no one can call you to account. Not even the court could call me to account. But the dead can. ... They don't even have to have been there, but if they were, they understand even better," (*The Reader*, 198).

Not only did Michael feel guilt in regard to his parents' involvement in the Holocaust, or rather their responsibility by omission, he felt an extreme amount of guilt for pursuing this relationship with Hanna, even though he hadn't known about her past at the time of their relationship. That increases the amount of guilt that he felt. Yet Michael's character himself takes on a certain amount of responsibility by omission when he chooses not to tell the judge that Hanna is illiterate. He "is taking on the burden of a miscarriage of justice, a perversion of law, and taking a revenge on Hanna" which the reader can decide she does or does not deserve (Finn, 316). This is a point in the book when he has the ability to bring justice to Hanna, to literally save her from a life in prison, but he chooses to keep her secret to himself, making him in a sense guilty as well. This action also highlights his ever-present "deferral of responsibility and avoidance of conflict" (Mahlendorf, 463). Michael's character is quite literally a "personal failure of a man of the post-WWII generation" because he refused to confront the impact of the Holocaust on his life and "to deal with his traumatization" (Mahlendorf, 471). This, ironically enough, makes him just like Hanna's character, leaving him without an excuse for his actions much the same as Hanna's participation in the Holocaust.

There is also the question of who "the reader" actually is in the story. There are several answers to this question. Michael Berg is the reader. Hanna Schmitz is

the reader. And we as an audience are the reader. Each of these characters goes through a transformation throughout the novel. Hanna's learning to read literally allows her to become a reader, which acts as a catalyst for her to begin to feel remorse. Upon reading the book that the one survivor from her death march wrote, Hanna begins to see that the people in the concentration camps were human beings; they had feelings and felt pain and fear, just like she does. This is when the demons arrive to haunt Hanna and eventually drive her to kill herself. Michael is the reader because literally reads for Hanna before she teaches herself to read, and he even continues after she has learned. We as an audience are the reader because we are reading the account of Michael and deciding for ourselves Hanna's culpability. There is no right answer and that was Schlink's intent. He wanted to create discussion without spoon-feeding the audience to his own opinions.

What was Bernhard Schlink's ultimate message to readers across the world, though? He was trying to make audiences think, but also trying to highlight that this is a very difficult experience for people of his generation to go through. It is not easy to be the children whose parents were directly or indirectly involved in the Holocaust. But it is important to note that these adolescents did the best they could, as is evidenced by the students in Michael's law seminar and his thoughts as well.

What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews? We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible, we may not compare the incomparable, we may not inquire because to make the horrors an object of inquiry is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors

themselves are not questioned, instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame and guilt. Should we only fall silent in revulsion, shame and guilt? To what purpose? (*The Reader*, 104).

This passage highlights extremely well Schlink's entire point: this is a very difficult position for an entire generation of people to be in. But Michael presents another equally complicated issue that the generation faced: "Pointing at guilty parties did not free us from shame, but at least it overcame the suffering we went through on account of it. It converted the passive suffering of shame into energy, activity, aggression. And coming to grips with our parents' guilt took a great deal of energy," (*The Reader*, 170). They knew that their actions wouldn't absolve them or make them feel less shame, but it was something to do, a reaction against the horrors of the Holocaust.

Many revolutionary books like *The Reader* are transformed into cinematic versions for many reasons: to make these incredible stories more accessible to audiences everywhere, to make bold political statements, to name a few. But the issue with book to film adaptations is that the screenwriter has the power to alter the book to cater to a cinematic audience. This sometimes results in dissatisfied filmgoers and it can often times change the overall tone or meaning of a book. It is very difficult to create a film adaptation that follows the book closely enough to satisfy all viewers and *The Reader* is no exception to this phenomena.

The American film version of *The Reader*, starring Kate Winslet as Hanna, while it sticks mostly to the book, strays in some regards. The changes only detract

from Schlink's overall message for the book because they made it much more "Hollywood." In the film, the scene where Hanna forces Michael to go to school and stop skipping class is omitted and I found that scene to be vital to the book. It illustrated how Hanna regretted not learning to read and embarrassment for being illiterate, even though the audience doesn't know at that point. It gives her character another level of likability, something that is important. She isn't merely using Michael, she cares for him on some level and wants him to be intelligent and succeed academically.

The scene in which Michael hitchhikes to the concentration camp is also removed in the film, which I found to be an important scene because it highlights exactly "what a member of the second generation can expect from any personal inquiry into what happened during the Holocaust: derision, berating, ... intimidation, physical assault..." (Mahlendorf, 476). It startles Michael and makes him question Hanna's actions even more as he sits in the concentration camp and feels nothing, as well as forcing him to think more critically about how to address those directly involved in the generation of the Holocaust.

The scene in which Michael visits Hanna in prison is different in the film as well. It has been expanded in the film and the dialogue exchanged between Michael and Hanna makes it seem as though Michael's character condemns hers more for her actions and places more blame on Michael for her suicide that follows. I think that this also detracts from the guilt that Hanna's character feels upon learning to read, and takes away from the concept that her learning to read opens up a world of literature where she can truly understand the horrors the victims of the Holocaust

felt. She reads the memoir of the one survivor and this is what drives her to commit suicide more so than her interaction with Michael. But the way the film portrays the events allows Michael's character to take more of the blame and takes the attention away from the fact that Hanna finally came over her fatal flaw of illiteracy and paid for it by taking her own life.

The ending of *The Reader* is also changed in the film, which is the worst atrocity. The book ends with Michael having little to no redemption. He did not bridge the gap between his generation and that of the Holocaust; he did not bring true justice to Hanna; he did not really grow or learn from the whole experience. Nobody ever learns about his affair with Hanna, so he never admits to being a Nazi Sympathizer. In the film, however, he finally decides to tell his daughter about Hanna, thus granting him some absolution and redemption. He changes as a character in the film, creating the conversation with the next generation and thus finally addressing the horrible events of the past. This is unrealistic for his character as the novel describes him and it ruins the whole point of the book. While this ending caters more to the "Hollywood" aspect of the film, it is too happy and is characteristically unrealistic. There's something haunting about the book's ending, with Michael unchanged and knowing that he never really will learn from his past.

While the cinematic adaptation of *The Reader* has only good intentions to bring to light for Americans everywhere the most prevalent issues presented in Schlink's novel, it falls short due to the changes throughout and at the end. While it is not a drastic change, it changes the entire tone of the story; Michael relieves himself of any and all the guilt he felt throughout the progression of events. Altering

this message leaves audiences not truly understanding the complexity of the guilt felt by Holocaust members. Many people could never find the courage to admit that they were Nazi sympathizers, even though Michael only really sympathized with one and it was unknown to him at the time that she was directly involved with the Holocaust. I believe that Schlink's ending seemed much more realistic and left a bigger impact.

Regardless of the cinematic adaptation, Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* is one of the most thought-provoking novels regarding the events and aftermath of the Holocaust. It made many people uncomfortable to think of people involved with the Holocaust as human, to think that they had emotions and feelings just like any other person. It highlighted the emotional journey that many second-generation Germans went through, exploring their own sense of guilt and shame for their parents. Many condemned the older generation and wanted them tried for their crimes. While this did not absolve this younger generation from the shame they felt, it was taking action and they did not know how else to respond without looking just guilty themselves. Bernhard Schlink was extremely successful at writing a novel that starts conversations and creates an active response from audience members regarding a very tragic yet complicated time in history. His novel should be a required read in classes all over the world for generations to come.



Works Cited

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