

The reader; critical study

Business



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BUSTER**

How and why is a social group represented in a particular way? "How could it be a comfort that the pain I went through because of my love for Hanna was in a way, the fate of my generation, a German fate..." This quote from Bernhard Schlock's *The Reader* illustrates how and why two small social groups are represented in a symbolic way.

In other words, Michael and Hanna's love story is an allegory for the relationship between different generations in Germany: those who experienced the war first-hand, and those born after the war, the 'second generation'.

This allegory is troubled, for several reasons. Firstly, after Michael learned about the atrocities of Hanna, his opinion of her changed. Secondly, Michael tries to relieve his guilt for loving Hanna. Thirdly, both Hanna and Michael avoid being confronted with what happened in the WI.

Throughout the story, Michael is confronted with new and disturbing information about Hanna's past, which causes him to see her and their relationship in a more negative light. In Part II, Michael witnesses a trial of World War II criminals.

After learning that Hanna was an SS guard, he imagines Hanna during their time together, earning "a mask of ugliness" (p 145). Bernhard Schlock uses Michael's altered memories to illustrate that when people like Michael hear about what happened during WI, the way they think about how those involved changes. Information about the Holocaust also, in a way, caused Michael to change his opinion of his father: "I had no one to point at.

Certainly not my parents, because I had nothing to accuse them of I had condemned my father to shame, had passed, and it embarrassed me. This quote highlights the fact that children born after WI were confronted with the crimes of their parents, causing them to question their parents. Other factors that conflicted the relationship between the two social groups being represented, were blame and guilt. To reduce his own guilt, Michael made many attempts to point the finger of guilt at Hanna: “ I accused her, and found it both shabby and too easy, the way she had wriggled out of her guilt. ” (p 199).

Michael, Like many post-war Germans, can't accept his feeling of shame at having loved a criminal.

Thus, he accuses Hannah of an even greater shame: too easily shrugging off her guilt. To show how this is representative for the relationship between first and second German generations, a second illustration is needed.

Pointing at the guilty parties did not free us from shame, but at least it overcame the suffering we went through on account of it” (PI 68). Michael is explaining that by blaming their parent for not having done enough during the war to stop injustice, the students are trying to relieve their own guilt.

This collective guilt was partly a result of having loved members of the first generation, like their parents and Hanna, whom they now saw as criminals. A third factor is avoidance, in *The Reader* it means keeping away from certain memories. For example, each time Hanna is asked at trial why she articulated in the many horrors of the Holocaust, she avoids comment.

Michael, and the Judge, also fail to find a valid explanation as to why such atrocities happened. The fire started.

She replies: " What would you have done? " (Pl 10).

The Judge fails to give a satisfactory reply. However, Bernhard Schlock is also directing this question to the readers, the generation born after the war. It is a question that the author wants every reader to ask himself. Is the concept of collective guilt really valid for all Germans, are they really all to blame? The fact is that, in the reader, both enervation avoid dealing with the past. For example, when Michael asks Hanna if she ever thought about her past as an AS prison guard when they were together, she answers that only the dead can understand her.

Her generation believes that the post-war generations would never understand, because they have never experienced anything like the war. So there is actually no point in explaining. Michael also averts confrontation with Hanna and his relationship with her: " I didn't want to visit her How could we meet face to face without everything that had happened between us coming to the surface? (IPPP). The reason Michael keeps avoiding Hanna is that he doesn't want be reminded of having loved an AS guard, in other words: of having loved a criminal.

In a nutshell, the romance between Hanna and Michael is symbolic for the conflict between German generations who experienced WI and those born afterwards.

After learning new facts about the Holocaust, Clinks generation's thoughts about the past cause them to doubt their loved ones whom encountered WI. To relieve their self-guilt, the post-war generation constantly keep blaming their parents and demand a Justification for heir deeds. Unfortunately, their parents fail to do this and keep evading a logical answer.

Bernhard Schlock has chosen to represent these two social groups in the form of a relationship, to explore shame, blame and guilt passed from one generation to the next. " The guilt that Michael Berg feels is the guilt of keeping the secrets of those who committed the crimes of the Holocaust. Certainly he loves Hanna and feels some solidarity towards her, and he never fully stops loving her, though later he reduces communication drastically.

" (Bernhard Schlock in Opera Winfred Show, 2009).