

Bernhard schlink's "the reader" essay sample

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Bernhard Schlink's "The Reader" Essay Sample

Life is a lesson built up of the experiences one encounters and the challenges they face. One begins as a newborn and from the moment of reasonable understanding their life is what they make it to be. In order for one to grow one must experience life as the days flow forward, so not to place themselves in another's shoes and miss an experience because of it. There is a reason why people organize others in "age groups": so that they will grow together through the examples each one sets. Expecting to grow properly and learn what one must when put in an unfamiliar generation, is as if trying to teach a person to walk through the example of a whale-both are mammals but are impossible to compare. This is evident in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, where fifteen-year-old Michael Berg is involved in a secretive, intense, and passionate relationship with thirty-six-year-old Hanna Schmitz.

Hanna is leading the relationship so much so that when they fight, regardless of who is right or wrong, Michael always gives in and apologizes in fear of losing her. He never stands up for himself. As time progresses, Michael takes it upon himself to be present and involve himself in Hanna's trail. Once Michael figures out the secret Hanna is hiding he is thrown into complete confusion on whether to help Hanna and how to execute this. After the trials, towards the end of the novel, Michael is still unsure of how to define his relationship with Hanna. The passionate, secretive relationship that Hanna imposes on Michael stunts his development, which leads to the confusion that dominates his life.

The audience is exposed, in *The Reader*, to Michael's lack of skill in defending himself against Hanna, due to the intensity of the relationship shared with her and the power of age and sexual dominance she uses to her advantage.

"You want to do it with me in the streetcar too? Kid, kid"...I had not only lost this fight. I had caved in after a short struggle when she threatened to send me away and withhold herself. (Schlink, 49)

Here the reader witnesses Hanna's control in the relationship and how Michael doesn't dare argue in fear of losing her and what she offers. Even further into their relationship, when the reader imagines Michael has grown, Hanna's power is evidently stronger and although Michael is uneasy about giving in to her, he does in fear of losing her and of her not wanting him.

Then when I proceeded to get bad-tempered myself and we started a fight and Hanna treated me like a nonentity, the fear of losing her returned and I humbled myself and begged her pardon until she took me back. But I was filled with resentment. (Schlink, 73)

Through the relationship and its intensity, Michael is unable to grow and learn to stand up for himself. He is too dependent on Hanna and the thought of not being with her is horrifying to him.

A significant amount of time has passed, between part 1 and part 2, where the reader is aware of Hanna's departure from Michael and her next encounter with him; when she is on trial for war crimes committed during the Holocaust. Michael is sitting in on these trials for a law course he is taking

when he encounters Hanna as a defendant. Michael feels obligated, due to their past relationship, and takes it upon himself to be present and involve himself in the trial.

I did not miss a single day of the trial. The other students were surprised. The professor was pleased that one of us was making sure that the next group learned what the last one had heard and seen. (Schlink, 99)

The trial is not going to well for Hanna, it is evident to the reader and to Michael that she is hiding something. With further investigation Michael learns of Hanna's lack of education; how she can't read nor write. Hanna is illiterate. Michael is confused and frustrated on what to do with this knowledge. Should Michael expose this secret to the judge and save Hanna from being sent to prison? Should Michael consult with Hanna first? Michael is unsure of the obligation he has towards her at this point and of how to act on the situation.

Talk to Hanna? What would I say to her? That I had seen through her lifelong lie? That she was in the process of sacrificing her whole life to this silly lie? That the lie wasn't worth the sacrifice? That that was why she should fight not to remain in prison any longer than she had to, because there was so much she could still do with her life afterwards? Could I deprive her of her lifelong lie, without opening some vision of a future to her? I had no idea what might be, nor did I know how to face her and say that after what she had done it was right that her short- and medium-term future would be prison. I didn't know how to face her and say anything at all. I didn't know how to face her. (Schlink, 143)

Here the reader is able to deduce the incredible confusion Michael is going through due to his past, premature, relationship with Hanna. Michael is a law student and just when the reader thought he was over Hanna and away from her, she springs right back into his life, and is now troubled with the query of how to help her and if he should at all.

Michael decides not to expose Hanna's "lifelong lie", and Hanna is imprisoned. Michael's life goes on but not without the thought of Hanna from time to time. Michael marries and has a child, but this marriage fails for Michael has been so involved with Hanna and so deeply imbedded with her that he cannot have another relationship remotely like it. The intensity of the relationship is too much for Michael to forget, which plays as a handicap for Michael throughout his life.

I could never stop comparing the way it was with Gertrude and the way it had been with Hanna; again and again, Gertrude and I would hold each other, and I would feel that something was wrong, smelled wrong and tasted wrong. I thought I would get over it. I hoped it would go away. I wanted to be free of Hanna. But I never got over the feeling that something was wrong.
(Schlink, 173)

Michael's further relationships fail as well. Michael still thinks of the trial and of Hanna's true guilt. Michael is unsure of who is guilty of what took place during the Holocaust and wishes not to believe it was Hanna, his Hanna.

I had to point at Hanna. But the finger I pointed at her turned back to me. I had loved her. Not only had I loved her, I had chosen her. I tried to tell

myself that I had known nothing of what she had done when I chose her. I tried to talk myself into the state of innocence. (Schlink, 170)

It is evident to the reader that Michael is unsure of his complete involvement with Hanna and of his own involving guilt because of it. Michael at this point is uncertain of what he truly owes Hanna, if he owes Hanna. The relationship Michael and Hanna experienced was so intense that throughout his entire life Michael was confused of his obligation, of his position...of his later involvement with Hanna.

" I was very interested in the trial."

" You were very interested in the trial?" He laughed again. " The trial, or the defendant you were always staring at...He talked and talked but I knew he would get back to me eventually and ask: " So what was going on between you and the defendant? And I didn't know what to answer, how to betray, confess, parry...then we were at the entrance of the cemetery and he asked. A streetcar was just pulling away...I called out, " bye," and ran off... (Schlink, 178)

Here the reader exhibits Michael's confusion and frustration with the topic of Hanna and his involvement with her so much so that he runs away, literally, from the question.

The passionate, secretive relationship that Hanna imposes on Michael stunts his development, which leads to the confusion that dominates his life.

Bernhard Schlink exposes this to the reader through proving that Hanna is in control of, immature Michael, so much so that when they argued Michael

always took the blame and apologized in fear of losing Hanna. Further, Schlink illustrates, how even years later, when Michael is in law school and has been removed from Hanna, once he sees her again she, seemingly, still has that powerful impact on Michael. This is when the reader learns of how effected Michael is due the relationship with Hanna, and how confused it makes him about his existing, obligations to her. To conclude, Schlink illustrates how Michael has a difficulty in defining his relationship with Hanna and what he owes her. What one does in their younger years is what builds them to be who they are in the future. One must live their life as it comes, live on the edge but not over it. Take chances and challenges but not crazed dares. One must live in their generation in order to progress. Living in the past slows one down, living in the future skips ones lesson, and living in the present is the only way to succeed. Don't let time move faster then it is... Live your life.