

# Guilt and responsibility in the reader by bernhard schlink

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BUSTER**

The Reader presents guilt as an inescapable force. An integral motif that runs throughout the whole novel is the question of who is to blame and is responsible for the monstrous crimes committed during the Holocaust. In the novel Michael and his generation seem to blame the previous generation who simply looked the other way and dismissed or ignored the gravity of the situation, either by their lack of action during the Holocaust or by accepting the Nazis and their sympathizers back into their society after World War 2. However, Michael also holds his own generation as responsible for letting and accepting their parents back as some of them worked for Hitler during his rule or they were simply just bystanders as it happened.

Michael believes, loyal love, “ made them irrevocable complicit in their crimes.” He recognizes love for the first generation Nazis as a complicity that speaks to the long-standing role of guilt in Germany’s history. For Michael this becomes a guilt that is passed down from generation to generation throughout the whole nation and is described as an unavoidable “ German fate.” Schlink first portrays the theme of guilt in the novel when Michael meets Hanna. Towards the beginning of the novel when Michael is at Hanna’s house and is ready to leave, Hanna says she’ll walk him out, but she decides to change her clothes first so Michael then waits in the hall while she changes in the kitchen. However, the door is left marginally open so that Michael can see her and he watches her undress. Michael who is unable to stop himself from watching, “ takes in the sight of her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her hips, and her stocking-covered legs”. But when she then sees and realizes that Michael is watching her and continues on watching with a look that is “ surprised, skeptical, knowing, reproachful.” Michael, full

of guilt and shame, leaves the apartment and the building. This is the first time that Michael is feeling a sense of shame and it suggests that the second generation, represented by Michael, should be ashamed of their love for the first generation which is shown through the rest of the novel as guilt.

Bernhard Schlink further presents Hanna and Michael's relationship as generational conflict between Nazi perpetrators, and their children. Michael identifies Hanna's comfortable grace as "an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body." However, Michael at 15 years old did not realize it yet, the images of Hanna are replaying in his mind over and over again.

The younger Michael uses his memories of Hanna to fulfill his youthful desire. His older self narrating the story reflects that it is Hanna's unawareness that attracted Michael, yet it is exactly this obliviousness that helped facilitated her crimes as a Nazi. Her obliviousness stemmed from her illiteracy which could also possibly suggest that had she been able to read that she wouldn't have had a major role in the crimes and so Michael can excuse what happened and try to be absolved of the guilt that he feels for loving her as Michael surrenders to the tempting feeling of trying to "forget the world in the recesses of the body", that is, to forget their past for the sake of their love affair.

Schlink portrays guilt as both destructive and necessary. Guilt is destructive in that it creates inner conflict as well as conflict within relationships and across both the generations of Nazi perpetrators and their children. The guilt arising from the Holocaust causes Michael's generation to be torn between

love for their parents and the moral obligation of condemning them for their complicity in during World War 2. Another example of guilt is its destructive power as the damage that Michael's guilt over rejecting Hanna inflicts on him. Michael's resulting decision " never to take guilt upon himself or feel guilty, never again to love anyone whom it would hurt to lose" makes him close off emotionally, sabotaging and ruining his relationships with other people. Despite how destructive guilt can be, it also is the driving force to motivate people to take responsibility for their actions, and to recognize their mistakes and wrongdoings, and also to avoid doing them again in the future. The collective guilt that Michael's generation inherits from the Holocaust is what drives them to acknowledge and condemn the Nazi war crimes. After his marriage fails, Michael feels guilty for the negative impact that the divorce had on his daughter, encouraging him to become more open in his current and future relationships. The novel presents both positive and negative consequences of guilt suggests and that guilt must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility, responsibility not only to your own mistake and wrongdoing but also to accept guilt in a way that is productive. Schlink is arguing that Germany must face and deal with its Nazi past in order to be able to move forward.

Schlink portrays responsibility as necessary because in order to move on as a society everyone must take responsibility for either taking part or enabling the Nazi crimes. It is necessary as it allows society to feel a sense of being guilty without feeling responsible no change would be made in the future as they would not feel the guilt that would drive them to change. But as

Germany has to accept the guilt and deal with its Nazi past adequately, forgiveness for the atrocious crimes committed during the Holocaust is perceivably impossible. Towards the end of the novel, where we see the Jewish woman in New York, who was the only remaining survivor of the church fire which Hanna was responsible for, refuses to accept Hanna's money, because by doing so it would relieve Hanna of her guilt and thus consequently absolve the Nazi crimes committed. The woman's inability to forgive Hanna possibly suggests that some crimes are so monstrous that they can never be forgiven or compensated for. This indicates that the Nazi perpetrators and those who are guilty must forever remain guilty or otherwise if they are forgiven then their crimes and actions will be forgotten and consequently the victims may be forgotten leaving space for such events to happen again in the future. Though Hanna committed suicide and is therefore dead by the time Michael meets the woman, the woman's rejection to grant Hanna forgiveness suggests that even those who are dead cannot be forgiven for such heinous crimes. Michael is portrayed as unable to escape guilt as he felt shame and guilt whilst being together with Hanna and even after Hanna died he felt guilty as he thought he betrayed her and was responsible for her death. Michael refuses to forgive himself to absolve any guilt as he says "if I was not guilty because one cannot be guilty of betraying a criminal, then I was guilty of having loved a criminal." and towards the end of the novel he goes on to say "In the first few years after Hanna's death, I was tormented by the old questions of whether I had denied and betrayed her, whether I owed her something, whether I was guilty for having loved her. Sometimes I asked myself if I was responsible for her

death.” This further reinforces the idea of the guilt must remain in a state of guilt in order to avoid such things to happen again.

Overall Schlink shows guilt as a powerful and destructive force capable of creating conflicts within one’s self as well as generation. Schlink portrays guilt as an integral part of the novel as it shapes the future generations by giving them a sense of responsibility in their actions or inactions proving that it is also necessary to move forward as a society.