

# Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, the Trauma of Second-Generation Germans

**Gamze Sabancı Uzun**

Assistant Professor at İstanbul Aydin University

## Abstract

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995) has been a very controversial book since its publication. Not only it portrays a sexual relationship between a 15-year-old Michael and 36-year-old Hanna without any judgment on the part of the author as the voice of the society, but it also leaves a space for the reader to sympathize with a Nazi criminal. The analyses presented in this article will take the cue from the current discussion of *The Reader* as a Holocaust novel. Thus, it will be argued that Michael's victimization by Hanna is similar to her treatment of the Jews in the camp. The examination of the novel commences with the analysis of his relationship with Hanna, which is the focus of the first part of the novel, revealing that silence is the key element of their oedipal mother-son relationship, which they use as a strategy for safeguarding their bond. This will be followed by the analysis of Michael's silence during Hanna's trial, the findings of which indicate that, as an adult, Michael is keen to put his traumatic past behind him and thus distances himself from language by remaining silent about his experiences. Henceforth, his actions resemble the Jewish survivors' refusal to discuss what happened to them in the camps. Therefore, "silence" emerges as an overarching theme in the novel and will be the key term in this article that links Jewish victims with the German perpetrators, as well as their descendants. In closing, it will be posited that *The Reader* can be viewed as a Holocaust novel, not due to its treatment of the Holocaust through Michael's solidarity with an ex-perpetrator, but because of his genuine empathy with and understanding of the nameless Jewish survivor that is revealed at the end of the novel.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Trauma, Nazi, Abuse, Silence

## Introduction

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995) has been a very controversial book since its publication. Not only it portrays a sexual relationship between a 15-year-old Michael and 36-year-old Hanna without any judgment on the part of the author

as the voice of the society, but it also leaves a space for the reader to sympathize with a Nazi criminal. In the second half of the novel, dedicated to Hanna's trial for the crimes committed as an Auschwitz guard, her horrific acts are seemingly justified by her illiteracy, which rendered her unaware of her assigned responsibilities. Some critics, like Cynthia Ozick take this attempt at justification of Holocaust as an insult to the Jewish victims and in her article "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination" published in the Commentary Magazine she asks a very pivotal question, "Have we ever before, in or out of fiction, been asked to pity a direct accomplice to Nazi murder?" Ozick satirically adds, "Had she been able to read, she would have been a factory worker, not an agent of murder. Her crimes are illiteracy's accident. Illiteracy is her exculpation". By ironically using illiteracy as an excuse for the murder of nearly 7 million Jews, Ozick explicitly avoids any form of apology and tales of German suffering within the Holocaust period. Yet, there are others that do not see Hanna as a murderer only, claiming that she is also a victim, who was presented with a "choiceless choice."<sup>1</sup> Kim Worthington's essay is based on a similar approach, where the author applies Derridianian reading of true forgiveness. In the article, Worthington presents Hanna "as a victim of circumstances rather than an agent of horror" (204). Similarly, Jeffrey I. Roth posits that the author "creates a character that would elicit our pity" (171) whereas Ursula Mahlendorf notes that Bernhard Schlink "encourages the reader to ask about the price the seduced pays for his seduction" (459). Since the majority of the criticism Hanna is subjected to focuses on the causes of her actions rather than their consequences, one wonders whether this is the difference between the Jewish and the German perspective of the Holocaust, whereby the former focuses on its aftermath, and the latter on its source. When discussing Nazi novels, in *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and Their Films* William Collins Donahue explains that, in the novels in which the Holocaust is approached through the prism of German perspective, the aim is not to deny the history, as the authors are merely "retiring, rewriting, or simply thumb indexing the Holocaust" (2). Yet, Donahue also notes that "affirmation of guilt and responsibility ... lead not to a more differentiated consideration of the genocide but precisely away from it" (2). Thereupon lies the distinction between German and Jewish acts of remembering the Holocaust, as—according to Barbie Zelizer—the latter remember in order to live with it, while the former are trying "to forget" (35). This is what Bill Naven and Paul Cooke coin as the policy of post-unification, where the general motto is to normalize the conflicted past by simply moving forward.

As noted above, majority of the critics examine the novel with respect to its presentation of the Holocaust. Although Bernhard Schlink has always maintained that his novel is not about the Holocaust, it is both criticized and praised for its

---

<sup>1</sup> The term is coined by Lawrence Langer in *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (1982), explaining the unusual situations of dilemma Jews experienced in the camps, such as having to kill a relative to avoid being killed.

minor treatment of it. The analyses presented in this article will take the cue from the current discussion of *The Reader* as a Holocaust novel, noting that it is Michael Berg's remembrance of his childhood sexual abuse by Hanna Schmitz. Thus, it will be argued that Michael's victimization by Hanna is similar to her treatment of the Jews in the camp. The examination of the novel commences with the analysis of his relationship with Hanna, which is the focus of the first part of the novel, revealing that silence is the key element of their oedipal mother-son relationship, which they use as a strategy for safeguarding their bond. This will be followed by the analysis of Michael's silence during Hanna's trial, the findings of which indicate that, as an adult, Michael is keen to put his traumatic past behind him and thus distances himself from language by remaining silent about his experiences. Henceforth, his actions resemble the Jewish survivors' refusal to discuss what happened to them in the camps. Therefore, "silence" emerges as an overarching theme in the novel and will be the key term in this article that links Jewish victims with the German perpetrators, as well as their descendants. In closing, it will be posited that *The Reader* can be viewed as a Holocaust novel, not due to its treatment of the Holocaust through Michael's solidarity with an ex-perpetrator, but because of his genuine empathy with and understanding of the nameless Jewish survivor that is revealed at the end of the novel.

*The Reader* is divided into three parts, the first of which focuses on Michael and Hanna's sexual relationship. It begins with Michael vomiting on the street<sup>1</sup> and being assisted by 36-year-old Hanna, who takes him to her house to wash and recover. Following their initial encounter on the street, Michael starts fantasizing about Hanna, waking up "every day feeling guilty" (18). As his fantasies only perpetuate his infatuation, Michael eventually finds the courage to visit Hanna. She acts rather unperturbed by his arrival and asks him to fill the scuttles with coke in the cellar and bring them up to the apartment. When Michael returns completely covered in dust, with a motherly concern, Hanna "slapped her hand on the table. 'Look at you kid [...] You can't go home like that. I'll run you a bath and beat the dust out of your clothes'" (24). Michael obliges and starts washing himself. Shortly after, Hanna returns with a towel. Michael recalls the experience, "From behind, she wrapped me in the towel from head to foot and rubbed me dry" (25), akin to a mother drying her baby. Yet, what the reader immediately witnesses is a metaphorical master-slave relationship consisting of a domineering sexual intercourse:

---

<sup>1</sup> One can also read this vomiting scene in the light of Kristeva's abject theory, suggesting that it signals the process of becoming by excluding the excess that is not a part of him. 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*' (Powers of Horror, 3). By vomiting, Michael excludes any motherly attachment—Kristeva would see this as the vomiting of the breast milk.

“Take your clothes off carefully...”

...

“Come!” I turned my back as I stood up and climbed out of the tub. From behind, she wrapped me in the towel from head to foot and rubbed me dry. Then she let the towel fall to the floor. I didn’t dare move. She came so close to me that I could feel her breasts against my back and her stomach against my behind. She was naked too.

...

I was afraid: of touching, of kissing, afraid I wouldn’t please her or satisfy her... I explored her body with my hands and mouth, our mouths met, and then she was on top of me, looking into my eyes until I came and closed my eyes tight and tried to control myself and then screamed so loud that she had to cover my mouth with her hand to smother the sound. (25–26)

Although, at the beginning, the scene is indicative of motherly care, it develops into a coercive relationship between a woman and a child. Indeed, the child is so submissive and innocent that he succumbs to sexual abuse by a mature woman whose intentions are unknown to both Michael and to the reader. His victimization is not apparent to him, because it is not reflected back at him by anyone, since nobody knows about his relationship with Hanna. As he remains silent about it, it prompts the reader to wonder if he is choosing not to speak about their relationship in order to safeguard it.

According to Ernestine Schlant, there are two kinds of silence, whereby one signifies too much knowledge, while the other implies repression of guilt and memory:

One might be tempted to identify “too much knowledge” with the silence of the victims and the “refusal to become aware” with the silence of the perpetrators, but such an identification ignores the undoubted fact that the perpetrators kept silence because they had “too much knowledge” and that many victims, in an effort to survive after they survived the Holocaust, took refuge in a “refusal to become aware” of the atrocities to which they had been subjected. (7)

Schlant implements the idea that silence has two distinct functions that are employed by perpetrators and the victims. According to the author, the perpetrators are silent because they know too much about the atrocities they committed, whereas the victims resort to silence in order to forget about the atrocities they were subjected to. In light of this interpretation, Michael’s silence during his relationship with Hanna is akin to the silence of camp victims. They refuse to speak about their horrific experiences, not to safeguard them from the others, but from themselves. Similarly, Michael refuses to reason or rationalize his sexual affair with an adult, which he at some level must perceive as inappropriate. Yet, an alternative interpretation about Michael’s silence is also possible. According to Lacan, there are three stages in the individual’s psychosexual development. He calls the first stage

Real, which pertains to the neo-natal period that ends once the infant starts acquiring language. It is followed by the Imaginary order that corresponds to the Mirror stage, during which the child starts recognizing the separation between his/her body and the world, and thus his/her mother. The process culminates with the Symbolic stage, whereby the child becomes aware of his/her uniqueness and starts expressing opinions through language. This stage is considered the period when the child learns to accept the norms and dictates of the society, and shapes and limits his/her desires accordingly. Therefore, silence can be seen as a rejection of language, refusing to be separated from the (m)other through the use of language.

A closer inspection of Michael's relationship with Hanna from a mother-son connection perspective makes his silence more comprehensible. The son who desires to achieve completeness with the mother can only do it in the Real stage, at the time when language does not yet exist. Therefore, by remaining silent in and about their relationship, Michael rejects the Lacanian Symbolic order, the rules and norms of society, in order to remain in the secluded world of the Real with the (m)other.

The rituals of their sexual contact in the context of the mother-son, master-slave relationship can also be seen as the alternative order of their secluded world. Every time they are in Hanna's "windowless apartment," their contact starts with Michael being bathed by Hanna like a baby, only to be taken to her bed for the intercourse, which ends with Hanna demanding that Michael reads the German classics to her. The first and the last steps present a contrasting image of Hanna, who is the creator of this plotline, first as a powerful mother, only to be transformed to a helpless infant. In parallel, Michael who experiences Hanna as his pre-oedipal phallic mother, his object of desire, finds himself first as Hanna's toy, then her master. Henceforth, his silence can also be seen as a result of his suspension between the pre-oedipal mother and the oedipal mother figure. She is simultaneously castrating Michael during their domineering sexual affair, and feels her castration more strongly when she forces Michael to read to her because she does not want to admit that she is illiterate.

Hanna, as the mother-lover, simultaneously castrating and castrated, slowly starts consuming Michael's life by encouraging him to be submissive and withdrawn. Whenever they have a fight, which resembles a fight between lovers, Michael "instantly and unconditionally surrendered... [He] took all the blame... admitted mistakes [he] hadn't made... Whenever she turned cold and hard, I begged her to be good to me again, to forgive me and love me" (49). The more time they spend together, the greater Michael's passive victimization becomes. During their four-day bike trip, Hanna no longer acts as a caring mother/lover, but a violent abuser, as seen in the scene in which Hanna hits Michael on the face with a belt, because she could not see him in the room when she woke up. Clearly, her fury is not aimed at Michael per se, but rather at what he represents. A working-class illiterate woman,

when faced with an upper-class educated boy, starts fully appreciating her impotence. She acts as a typical Freudian castrated women, enraged by her inferiority, channeling her revenge toward the most suitable target.

In his article “The Aetiology to Hysteria”, Freud declares that adult violence in an ill-matched relationship is a substitution of impotence:

People who have no hesitation in satisfying their sexual desires upon children cannot be expected to jib at finer shades in the methods of obtaining the satisfaction; and the sexual impotence, which is inherent in children inevitably forces them into the same substitutive actions as those to which adults descend if they become impotent. All the singular conditions under which the ill-matched pair conduct their love-relations—on the one hand the adult, who cannot escape his share in the mutual dependence necessarily entailed by a sexual relationship, and who is yet armed with complete authority and the right to punish, and can exchange the one role for the other to the uninhibited satisfaction of his moods, and on the other hand the child, who in his helplessness is at the mercy of this arbitrary will, who is prematurely aroused to every kind of sensibility and exposed to every sort of disappointment, and whose performance of the sexual activities assigned to him is often interrupted by his imperfect control of his natural needs—all these grotesque and yet tragic incongruities reveal themselves as stamped upon the later development of the individual. (108)

The relationship between an infantile and an adult can be viewed as a power exchange, where the adult, who feels impotent in the outside world, creates an alternative world, which promises the authority and power he/she is lacking (yet craving) in the real world. In order to escape from the feeling of insubstantiality, the adult establishes a relationship where he/she has the full authority and right to punish, as the sense of being punished evokes the experiences of life outside.

In Hanna’s case, her illiteracy is the greatest punishment she has had to face through her entire life because, as a woman who lacks the ability to read, she was obliged to move from one place to another like a shadow, always remaining on the margins. Being invisible seems to be her mission in life, as she goes to work at dawn, comes to a windowless home in the morning, making sure not to interact with her neighbors, none of whom knows who she is. Thus, as long as she lives in a shadow, she is in need of someone who is much more powerless and defenseless than she is. The micro world that she creates with Michael within the confines of her windowless apartment is a substitute for the outside world, where she hardly exists. Her existence does not extend beyond the darkness of her room, and she is in need of another to resolve her existential crisis.

The first part of the novel finishes when the tender mother–son relationship transforms into a domineering master–slave relationship, which urges Michael to look for comfort elsewhere, seeking company of his peers. When Hanna realizes his

temptation to forge a life in the real world without her, sensing that their micro world is no longer enough, she leaves the city and thus Michael. Her departure evokes a sense of guilt in him, as he sees it as a direct consequence of his betrayal. This separation can also be interpreted as the breaking of the bond between the mother and the son as the first step of subjectivity, which is also the primal repression.

The second part of the novel commences with Michael as a law student. As a part of his studies, he observes the trial of six female Auschwitz guards—one of whom is Hanna—charged with war crimes with potential sentence of life imprisonment. He is no longer the naïve submissive child, wearing a posture of superiority so as not to “let [himself] be humiliated after Hanna, never to take guilt upon [himself] or feel guilty, never again to love anyone whom it would hurt to lose” (88). Michael’s emotional distress stems from losing Hanna, as well as his present acknowledgement of his past humiliation. Yet, he is still incapable of seeing himself as a victim of sexual abuse. Schlink’s maneuver towards drawing attention to Michael’s victimization starts with the account of the atrocities Hanna committed during the war.

As a law student, attending the trial of Holocaust ex-perpetrators, Michael easily recognizes his responsibility towards the victims of the Nazis.

Exploration! Exploring the past! We students in the seminar considered ourselves radical explorers. We tore open the windows and let the air in, the wind that finally whirled away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horrors of the past. We made sure people could breathe and see. (91)

He, as the explorer, assigns himself the task of breaking the silence of his parents about the Holocaust, so they can see and breathe, hoping that they will find the way to live again. Schlink’s dust metaphor is a very apt representation of the German wartime generation remaining silent because they know too much. Such description has been previously associated with perpetrators by Ernestine Schlant, who is of view that those that remain silent about the Holocaust atrocities can be equated to the Nazi perpetrators. However, being aware of the silence as a way a hiding the reality, the second-generation Germans find themselves in a similar situation. They are as silent as their parents:

What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews? ... instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt? To what purpose? ... that some few would be convicted and punished while we of the second generation were silenced by revulsion, shame, and guilt—was that all there was to it now?

In the Holocaust literature, the term “second generation” pertains to the descendants of Jewish victims and survivors. Yet, this term can also have the

connotation of “secondary”—those that have to come to terms with living under the shadow of their survivor parents. However, in recent studies, this term is increasingly being applied to the cohorts of children of the bystanders or perpetrators of the Holocaust. The 1945–1960 period was marked by German silence on the WWII atrocities. In the early 1960s, the second-generation Germans finally broke their silence about the crimes their parents committed. As explained by Harold Marcuse, the children of the perpetrators and the subsequent generation “felt that they had somehow been victimized by the silence of their 1943er parents, and they were determined to teach about it themselves.”<sup>1</sup> This German tendency of coming to terms with their Nazi past, which lasted into the 1980s, was not aimed at apologia, but rather at victimization. Instead of asking for forgiveness for the mass murder their ancestors committed, they presented themselves as the victims of the Nazism. In 1985, when Ronald Reagan gave a speech marking the fortieth anniversary of the war’s ending, he pointed out that SS soldiers were “victims of Nazism also... They were victims, just surely as the victims in the concentration camps,” since the bombings killed around 600,000 civilians, millions were left homeless, thousands of German women were raped by Red Army soldiers. With an emphasis on their loss, German literati created rhetoric of victimization, rather than aptly ascribing responsibility for the loss lives. Schlink emphasizes such rhetoric of victimization through the court case that is in the focus of the novel’s second part, prompting the reader to ponder on who the real victim is. In the way he depicts Hanna, Schlink presents a twofold victimization, as she was victimized by the Nazis, and later on by the other female defendants. When the judge asked her if she was sending the prisoners to death because she wanted to make room for the newcomers, Hanna’s reply was enlightening for the audience, yet their silence persists:

“ I ... I mean ... so what would you have done?” Hanna meant it as a serious question. She did not know what she should or could have done differently, and therefore wanted to hear from the judge, who seemed to know everything, what he would have done (47).

The judge’s failure to respond appears to signal indulgence of Hanna’s crime, acceptance of the harshness of the environment Hanna belongs to, one that did not

---

<sup>1</sup> Harold Marcuse delineates the Nazi generation into six categories. The first category is the group who were born between 1903 and 1915, described as **1933ers**, who experienced the Weimar Republic and the transition to Hitler’s government and saw Nazism as a positive turning point. They were the generation of the perpetrators. The second group is called **1943ers**, born in the 1916–1925 period, who grew up under Nazism and fought for it during WWII. Following this group is the group of **1948ers**, born at the end of Nazism and referred to as reconstructing generation. According to this nomenclature, **1968ers** are the first postwar generation born between 1937 and 1953, the children of the 1943ers. Similarly, **1979ers** are the children on 1948ers, the second postwar generation, who grew up under historical information of the Nazi government. Finally, **1989ers** are the children of 1968ers; as neither they nor their parents had any contact with the Holocaust, they learned of the Nazi past through media. They are the third postwar cohort.

provide any other possibility but to let the Jews die. Hanna's implied victimization stems from the absence of choice, which Lawrence Langer described as "choiceless choice," albeit in reference to the Jews. Yet, the unavoidable response still exists, for she had the choice when she was offered the job as a camp guard.

In *Mothers in the Fatherland*, Claudia Koonz explains that "Germans, whether or not they were Jewish, did not comprehend that Hitler really meant what he said in *Mein Kampf*. It seemed too insane. True, Nazi propaganda was laden with portentous metaphors, but few translated those images into concrete threats" (347). Madeline Kent also emphasizes the difficulties in perceiving Nazi's intention as "Their vocabulary was oiled with euphemisms which served a treble purpose: They deceived the simple-minded at home and abroad, added insult to the injuries of the persecuted, and pleased... the slave mind of the masses" (216). As Koonz summarizes "Deception, diversion, and euphemism shrouded Hitler's true intent" (347). Nazi ideology presented the camps "as a legitimate, necessary institution, in which aliens of the community would have to be re-educated" (Gellately 184). Therefore, "for a long while the dominant opinion was that it was quite proper that 'enemies of state' be confined in a concentration camp" (Gellately 53). Moreover, Hitler's propaganda that the Jews were responsible for losing World War I and that they were the enemies within allowed the civilians to repudiate the reality behind the Holocaust especially, in the wake of a new threat after Britain's and France's declaration of war on Germany in 1939.

Even though voluminous studies have addressed the killings and the terror of the concentration camps, a few authors have scrutinized the cultural foundation of these institutions. For example, it would be important to elucidate what led civilians to choose a career as concentration camp guards. Anna Pawelczynska claims,

Acceptance of a job in Auschwitz (w)as especially alluring because it satisfied a need for daily experiencing one's own dominance and strength, the right to decide life and death, the right to dispense death personally and at random and the right to abuse one's power over the prisoners, even in relation to the limits prescribed by regulation and camp custom ... (19)

According to Pawelczynska, besides seeing it as a career occupation, being a camp guard was alluring as it entailed practice of omnipotent power. It provided an opportunity to acquire a prosperous life under the shelter of the divine Third Reich. Without oversimplifying, the majority of the employees were selected among the uneducated section of the lower class thirsty for self-enrichment, who would succumb to Nazi training of moral depravation. People like Hanna—alone, in need of income and social status—would not have questioned the responsibilities of the job due to their own fear of authority and sense of inferiority. Hanna simply stated, "SS was recruiting women as Siemens and other factories for guard duties and she had applied and was hired" (96). At the beginning, it was only a job she had applied for

and was given, yet once inside, she was captivated and eventually paralyzed by the power assigned to her. As Michael also reveals:

[...] behavior becomes completely selfish and indifferent to others, and gassing and burning are everyday occurrences. In the rare accounts by perpetrators, too, the gas chambers and ovens become ordinary scenery, the perpetrators reduced to their few functions and exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference, a dullness that makes them seem drugged or drunk. (42)

Although the novel is at the risk of exculpation, as Richard Wiesberg notes “Hanna never loses her quality as victimizer” (231) for what she caused to Michael after she sexually abused him. The trial has two significant consequences for Michael. First, the distance between him and the Nazi past is shattered because of Hanna’s stance at the trial. Comparing his family to other parents who had direct roles in the Nazi regime, he feels distance from such cooperation, since his father “had got himself and us through the war as an editor for a house that published hiking maps and books” (37). Therefore, his involvement in the trial is mainly “out of sheer curiosity” about the events he “read and heard about” (37). Even though the Holocaust is a national responsibility, as he does not have any personal involvement because he “had no one to point at. Certainly not [his] parents, because [he] had nothing to accuse them of,” he implicitly remains an outsider. He is therefore the third person in the history, observing from distance, until he sees Hanna at the courtroom accused for participating in the selections as a camp guard. Henceforth, for Michael, the murderous Nazi regime is no longer political, but very personal. Furthermore, when it dawns on Michael that Hanna is illiterate, as she contradicts herself by denying some of the charges, yet easily acknowledges the most evil acts and refuses to give a sample of handwriting, he keeps his silence. In line with Ursula R. Mahlendorf’s argument that the silence of the Germans about the Holocaust “becomes collusion with the perpetrators” (464), Michael’s silence about Hanna can be considered as his alliance with an ex-perpetrator, which he strongly rejects at the beginning of the trial. His view of himself as a “radical explorer” who “tore open the windows and let air in” to “whirl away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horrors of the past” so that “people could breathe and see” (91) has also been shuttered. One may surmise that, by simply keeping silent about Hanna’s illiteracy, which could be an implied justification for her crime, Michael let Hanna be punished. Alternatively, as Jeffrey Roth claims “by not helping her, he has repeated the conduct of some ordinary German during the Nazi era. Like them he stood idly by while someone he could have helped suffered injustice” (168). Yet, it should be noted that it is Hanna’s choice to keep her illiteracy secret, which she does because she is ashamed of it. Thus, Michael’s silence is also a sign of his desire to honor Hanna’s wish. The second effect of the trial is that it evinces Michael’s trauma. While trying to solve the trauma of his nation, Michael de facto discovers his personal trauma, finally coming to terms with the fact that he was sexually abused by an elder.

For the reader, following Hanna's sentence at the end of the trial, it is poignant to learn that Michael left the house, "brushed off the few acquaintances" and rented a small room all by himself. In so doing, he refuses to deal with his traumatization, for he restages it. His loneliness is reminiscent of his childhood loneliness, and the small room he rented is akin to that he shared with Hanna. He refuses anything that is not a reminder of Hanna and the time they spent together. His marriage is an example of his rejection. Gertrud, his wife, "was wrong, that she moved wrong and felt wrong, smelled wrong and tasted wrong" (77). She is wrong simply because she is not Hanna. Inevitably, they get divorced and Michael's subsequent relationships remain under the shadow of Hanna's memories.

The final scene of the novel presents the similarity between Michael's relationship with Hanna and her bond with a Jewish girl in the camp, who also used to read to her. The two children Hanna used as her readers share the same past. The victimization of the second generation of Germans is akin to that of the Jews, in a sense that they are victimized by silence. As a conclusion, it can be suggested that the post-unification German literature not only unites the two sides of the nation in the culpability for the Holocaust, but also aims to create a community of the Jews and Germans with victimization by the previous generations as the common denominator. In other words, both Jews and the Germans can be considered as the victims of the same silence.

## References

- [1] Bernhard Schlink's 'Der Vorleser' and the Problem of Shame." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 98, no. 2, 2003, pp. 381–396. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3737818](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3737818).
- [2] Cooke, Paul. *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006.
- [3] Freud, Sigmund. "The Aetiology to Hysteria", 1896.
- [4] Gellately, Robert. *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- [5] Kent, Madeline. *I Married a German*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1939.
- [6] Koonz, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*. St. Martin's Press, 1987.
- [7] Langer, Lawrence. *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*. State Univ of New York Pr; 1982.
- [8] MacKinnon, John E. "Law and Tenderness in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*." *Law and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 179–201. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.179](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.179).
- [9] Mahlendorf, Ursula R. "Trauma Narrated, Read and (Mis)Understood: Bernhard Schlink's 'The Reader': "... Irrevocably Complicit in Their Crimes ...". *Monatshefte*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2003, pp. 458–481. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/30161685](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30161685).

- [10] Marcuse, Harold. "Generational Cohorts and the Shaping of Popular Attitudes Towards the Holocaust" in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in the Age of Genocide*. Ed. By John K. Roth et al. Palgrave, 2001.
- [11] Metz, Joseph. "'Truth Is a Woman': Post-Holocaust Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Gender of Fascism in Bernhard Schlink's 'Der Vorleser.'" *The German Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2004, pp. 300–323. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3252259](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3252259).
- [12] Niven, Bill. "Bernhard Schlink and the Legacies of 1968." *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 48, no. 1/2, 2015, pp. 35–42. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44478222](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478222).
- [13] Ozick, Cythia. "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination". *Commentary Magazine*. March 1, 1999.
- [14] Pawelczynska, Anna. *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach. University of California Press, 1979.
- [15] Revesz, Eva B. "Introduction: Bernhard Schlink's 'The Reader' and the Problem of German Victimhood." *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 48, no. 1/2, 2015, pp. 3–12. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44478219](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478219).
- [16] Roth, Jeffrey I. "Reading and Misreading *The Reader*." *Law and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 163–177. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.163](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.163).
- [17] Schlant, Ernestine. *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust*. Routledge, 1999.
- [18] Schlink, Bernhard. *The Reader*. Vintage, 1997.
- [19] Weisberg, Richard H. "A Sympathy That Does Not Condone: Notes in Summation on Schlink's *The Reader*." *Law and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 229–235. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.229](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/lal.2004.16.2.229).
- [20] Worthington, Kim L.; Suturing the Wound: Derrida's "on Forgiveness" And Schlink's *The Reader*. *Comparative Literature* 1 June 2011; 63 (2): 203–224. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-1265484>.
- [21] Zelizer, Barbie. *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004.