

Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*: Holocaust, Justice, and Guilt in Literature

Recommended Use: The unit was first taught in a lower level "German Literature in English" writing class (this lesson plan emphasizes the human rights aspects of the unit which were preceded by more literature based questions). The unit could be used in introductory classes on human rights, or any class focusing on genocide and/or the holocaust, as well as literature classes in connection with human rights.

Keywords: Holocaust, Frankfurt Trials, Crimes against Humanity, Genocide, Justice

Objectives: Analyze the novel *The Reader* for its standpoints on human rights and the concept of coming to terms with the past. Reflect on the concept of guilt and justice after human rights violations/crimes against humanity.

Reading(s)/ Material(s): Bernhard Schlink. *The Reader*. ISBN: 978-0375707971

Synopsis: Michael Berg, 15, befriends Hanna, 40. Meetings, first purely physical, take on a more meaningful routine when Michael reads aloud from the German classics. There are hints of Hanna's darker side: one inexplicable moment of violence over a minor misunderstanding, and the fact that Michael knows nothing of her life other than that she collects tickets on the streetcar. She leaves the city abruptly and mysteriously, and he does not see her again until, as a law student, he sits in on her case when she is being tried as a Nazi criminal.

Recommended Background Information: Holocaust, Nuremberg tribunals, Frankfurt Trials, Genocide convention, Germany after the war/coming to terms with the past, (Human Rights law for last follow-up)

Discussion Questions/Activity:

Warm- up activity: Think – Pair - Share

What does coming to terms with the past mean? Think about your own country, or culture, what would people have to come to terms with?

Follow-up discussion

In the discussion extend the question to a more global one: what do nations/cultures/ethnic groups in general and also specific example countries/cultures have to come to terms with? Relate the German past to a more personal present (include for instance Native Americans, slavery, racism).

How do they do it? (Trials one option, what else? What role does literature play in this process?)

When can a (group of) people start to come to terms with past crimes (next generation? more?)

***The Reader* as a form of coming to terms with the past:**

How is *The Reader* a way of coming to terms with the past (as a book and within the book)?

Have students find quotes or put together quotes and present them to students. It will be hard for students to grasp why the post-war children felt guilty. Make sure to explain that the question is not whether Hanna and Michael should be lovers (they need to be to bring the point of different generations, guilt and attachment across), but what they stand for: the different generations that were involved in Nazi crimes directly, like Hanna, or indirectly, as some parents and the generation that came after that is deeply attached to that generation, but also detests what that generation has done and tries to come to terms with it.

Guilt-Debate (same lesson or separate one)

Warm up question (students only think, not share): Who is guilty of what in *The Reader*?

Activity: Split class in two groups. Each group will defend one of the two standpoints: Hanna is guilty/Hanna is not guilty. Each group prepares arguments within their groups (10 minutes). Class comes back together. Students sit in two rows facing each other. One group member starts with an argument, throws a ball to a member of the other side who responds. Repeat. (10-15 minutes). Come back together and talk about the difficulties of both sides to defend their argument. Address: What exactly did they argue she was guilty of? Are there other things she could be guilty of (think about her relationship with Michael, not just the church)? Why is it not easy to come to a conclusion /Why is the answer to the question not black or white?

Follow up:

- If students concentrate too much on Hanna: Is Michael guilty, too? Of what?
- "What would you have done?" (quote in book) - Was there something you could do? Possible relation to present issues: What can one do in situations of violence and discrimination?
- In Human Rights focused classes: In what ways did the students' arguments conform to international human rights law? If they didn't, why not? Address different notions of guilt (moral vs criminal guilt).

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