The Reader

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BERNHARD SCHLINK

Bernhard Schlink was born in 1944 to Edmund and Irmgard Schlink. Growing up, theology and religion were major influences in the lives of Schlink and his three older siblings. Their mother Irmgard was a Swiss theology student who was deeply concerned with justice and morality and who instilled in her children a sense that they must do good in the world. Their father Edmund was a German theologian, professor, and pastor. As part of a nightly ritual, the family would read the Bible together after dinner. After his father was fired from his teaching position for anti-Nazi affiliations, Bernhard and his family moved to Heidelberg, where he grew up. In the 1960s Schlink studied at the Free University in West Berlin, where he was able to observe the wave of student protests that swept Germany. Fueled by poor economic conditions and anger at the remnants of the previous generation's Fascist past, the student protests peaked in 1968, the same year that Schlink graduated. Though Schlink was not heavily involved in the demonstrations, his interest in them during his student days later manifested in his creative writing. The generational conflict expressed by the student protests would later emerge as a central theme in Schlink's novel *The Reader*. In the 1970s, Schlink married Hadwig Arnold, who gave birth to their son Jan, and obtained his J.D. from the University of Heidelberg. In 1981 he was conferred his PhD at Freiburg University and soon began teaching as a professor. It was in the 1980s that, as a young academic, Schlink began to feel as if something were missing from his life. He decided to explore other pursuits, and while visiting America, he took a massage course in California and became a qualified masseur. In Germany, he decided to learn goldsmithing and began to make jewelry. However, his massage and jewelry careers were short-lived, and he eventually turned to creative writing. While serving as a judge in North Rhine-Westphalia, he wrote and published a series of post-war detective novels about a reformed Nazi prosecutor who becomes a private detective. In 1995, he published *The Reader*, which also explored life after the Holocaust and which was met with great acclaim. *The Reader* was awarded numerous literary prizes and became a global bestseller. In 2008, it was adapted into an award-winning and critically acclaimed film. Since the success of *The Reader*, Schlink has published a number of literary works, as well as legal texts. He teaches at Humboldt University in Berlin and the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust, the mass murder of over six million Jews, Romani, homosexuals, and communists in Europe during the Nazi regime. This genocide was facilitated primarily by the use of concentration camps, which were instituted by Hitler and devised by Adolf Eichmann as part of the "final solution" to exterminate the Jews. The camps were used to torture and systemically kill their prisoners, either by poisoning them in gas chambers or by working them to death in labor camps. After the war, many of the Germans who helped perpetrate the Holocaust or who accommodated the perpetrators were accepted back into society. As Germans began to question recent history in the 1950s and 1960s, and as Germany underwent an economic recession, students in particular became increasingly dissatisfied with their living conditions, university curricula, and the remaining Nazi presence in government and universities. In the late 1960s, there were several student protests in West Germany, some of which were instigated by violent reactions from the police. The student movement peaked in May 1968, when tens of thousands of students and workers protested against the German Emergency Acts, which would grant the government the power to limit civil rights. Nevertheless, the opponents of the law failed to stop it from being passed, and the student movement began to peter out. However, despite these obstacles, the movement left a legacy of student activism and democratic spirit.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though *The Reader* is not a Holocaust novel, the Holocaust is the main reason for the generational divide between the perpetrators and accommodators and their children. Notable examples of survivor literature are Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Primo Levi's *If This Is Man*, and Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is particularly relevant when comparing Hanna's motives and thoughtlessness to those of Adolf Eichmann, a major organizer of Nazi concentration camps. One of the main focuses of the novel is the tension between the second generation's filial love and their moral responsibility to condemn their parents' crimes. This struggle to deal with the Nazi past—specifically a child's difficulty in coming to terms with his or her father's Nazi past—is a major feature of Väterliteratur, or "father literature," a German and Austrian literary genre in which protagonists struggle in their relationships with their fathers. Examples of Väterliteratur include Sigfrid Gauch's *Traces of My Father* (originally *Vaterspuren*), Dörte von Westernhagen's *The Perpetrators' Children* (*Kinder der Täter*), and Niklas Frank's *In the Shadow of the Reich* (*Der Vater: Eine Abrechnung*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Reader* (original German title: *Der Vorleser*)
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** Germany
- **When Published:** 1995 (1997 for the English translation by Carol Brown Janeway)
- **Literary Period:** German Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism, historical fiction, bildungsroman, Väterliteratur ("father literature")
- **Setting:** Post-war Germany
- **Climax:** Hanna is sentenced to life in prison
- **Antagonist:** Hanna Schmitz
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

International Success. Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* was the first German book to become a number one *New York Times* bestseller.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, Michael Berg, tells the story of his teenage affair with a former Nazi prison guard and its aftermath. In Part 1, a 15-year-old Michael is on his way home when he becomes violently ill by the side of a **building**. One of the building's tenants, 36-year-old Hanna Schmitz rescues him, cleaning him up and bringing him back home, where his doctor diagnoses him with hepatitis. Months later, after urging from his mother, Michael returns to the woman's apartment in order to thank her, but as the woman is preparing to walk him out, he finds himself unable to stop watching her get dressed. Embarrassed to be caught, he flees and later is plagued with guilt for fantasizing about her. However, a few days later, he visits Hanna's apartment again, intending to apologize. To his delight Hanna is not annoyed with him and merely asks him to fetch some coal from the cellar. He does so but returns covered in coal dust after accidentally dislodging a pile of coal. Hanna runs a bath for him and seduces him. The two then begin a continuing affair, including this ritual of showering and sex. Later, when Hanna becomes interested in Michael's studies, she makes his reading aloud to her a condition for sex, and their routine soon incorporates reading before their shower.

During his Easter vacation, Michael plans a bicycle trip for the two of them. Hanna leaves all the logistics to Michael, who orders food from menus, registers them as mother and son at the inns, and plans their route on his maps. On their vacation, they begin their days making love and spend the rest of the day cycling. One morning, Michael decides to get Hanna breakfast before she wakes up and leaves a note. However, when she returns, she is furious. To Michael's great shock, she hits him with a belt, and then bursts into tears, because he left with no explanation. Michael tells her that he left a note, but Hanna claims that there was no note.

When Michael starts a new school year in the 11th grade, he makes new friends, including Sophie, on whom he has a crush. He begins to go to the swimming pool with his classmates, and becomes torn between spending time with his friends and spending time with Hanna. Whenever he has fights with Hanna he comes increasingly resentful of how she bullies him into surrendering, but he also always begs for forgiveness, as he is afraid of losing her. As he grows closer to his friends but neglects to tell them about Hanna, he begins to feel as if he is betraying her by denying her importance in his life. One day, while Michael is at the swimming pool, he sees Hanna from a distance. Unsure of what to do, he hesitates before getting up, but in that moment she is gone.

The next day, Hanna is nowhere to be found, and after asking around at her building, her employer, and the citizens' registration office, he discovers that she has denied a promotion and moved away. Plagued by guilt, Michael believes that his betrayal and his hesitation caused her to leave.

Part 2 begins with Michael's struggle to overcome the pain of losing Hanna, who haunts his dreams and thoughts. As time passes, along with his pain and guilt, he appears to move on, adopting a mask of "arrogant superiority." Though his friendships and relationships come easily to him, he is at times cold and at others overemotional. Six years later, Michael is a young law student taking a class that centers on a trial concerning the concentration camps. Michael, along with his classmates, become zealous crusaders intent on uncovering the atrocities of the Third Reich. The students condemn not only direct perpetrators of the crimes but also the bystanders and accommodators who had accepted the perpetrators' activities during the Nazi regime and accepted them back into society after the war—in short, the previous generation.

As part of the class, the students attend the trial on a weekly basis. At the court, when the defendants' names are called, Michael discovers that Hanna is one of the former Nazi guards on trial. However, despite the pain that Hanna's departure once gave him, he "felt nothing" at learning this news. During her preliminary hearing, Hanna reveals that she rejected a promotion at her factory job shortly before signing up as a prison guard, making it appear to the jury that she had voluntarily, if not enthusiastically, joined the SS. Hanna's lawyer does not do much to help her salvage this first bad impression, and Hanna is kept under detention for having ignored summonses. Unlike his classmates, who attend only weekly, Michael attends the trial every day, always watching Hanna. As Michael becomes exposed to more horrors for a prolonged period of time, he begins to feel numb and is emotionally distant, not unlike the survivors and even perpetrators of the

Holocaust who are exposed to evil on a regular basis.

The main charges against Hanna and the other four women are that they were involved in selecting 60 people to send to their deaths every month and that they had locked hundreds of women and girls in a burning church. The trial goes poorly for Hanna, whose initially bad impression becomes worse as she continually contradicts the indictment, despite her opportunity to review it before the trial began, and who cannot seem to understand the gravity of her actions at the concentration camp. When the judge asks Hanna if she knew she was participating in murder, she seems entirely concerned with the task of clearing out barracks space and indifferent to the fact that she sent people to their deaths. Though Hanna denies certain charges, she admits others that she finds true, regardless of their impact on her conviction. For example, she admits to being aware that her prisoners would die. The other defendants' lawyers use her admissions to their advantage, claiming that Hanna was the leader of the other guards, the most culpable and most cruel, and the only one aware that the prisoners would die. They point to Hanna's "special prisoners," young girls to whom Hanna would give better food and barracks space and with whom she would spend evenings before sending them off to Auschwitz. At this point, a Jewish woman who had survived the church fire with her mother suddenly remembers a secret that one of Hanna's favorites had told her: Hanna had not molested the girls as they all thought, but rather had made them read to her. Though the woman's testimony provides Hanna a good opportunity to gain the sympathies of the court, neither she nor her lawyer takes advantage of it.

When the judge asks the defendants why they didn't unlock the church doors, most of the defendants claim that they were otherwise preoccupied, despite a report that they had actually been guarding the church to prevent the prisoners from escaping. The women claim that the report is false, and one defendant accuses Hanna of writing the report as a cover up. However, Hanna tells the judge that they had all decided together what to say on the report. When a prosecutor suggests calling in an expert to compare the defendants' handwriting to that of the report, Hanna confesses to writing the report.

Michael realizes that Hanna cannot read or write, and he debates whether or not he should tell the judge, as testimony of Hanna's illiteracy would most likely result in a shorter prison sentence for her. However, Hanna clearly does not want to be exposed as illiterate, and Michael seeks his father's advice as a philosopher. His father tells him that though he may believe he knows what is good for his friend, he cannot go behind her back, as it would violate her human dignity; rather, he must try to convince her to do what is best for her. However, Michael is unsatisfied with this answer, as he does not feel ready to meet Hanna face-to-face. Michael decides to visit the judge but cannot bring himself to visit Hanna. He chats amicably with the judge but does not mention Hanna or her illiteracy. At the end of the trial, Hanna is sentenced to life in prison.

In Part 3, after the trial is over, Michael spends much of his time obsessing over his studies and avoiding others, so that the numbness that had come over him during the trial remains. Despite his aloofness, Michael is invited to a ski trip with his classmates and he accepts. Both emotionally numb and indifferent to the cold, Michael comes down with a fever, but once he recovers, he feels the pain and horror he had during the trial.

By the time Michael finishes his studies, the student movement is already underway, and the narrator contemplates his generation's struggle to deal with collective guilt for the Nazi past. Like most of his generation, Michael had assigned blame to his parents. Though Michael eventually realizes that his parents are blameless, Hanna is not, and he feels guilty for having chosen and loved her.

As a law clerk, Michael marries his girlfriend Gertrud when she gets pregnant. Over the course of their marriage, Michael never tells her about Hanna but often compares Gertrud to Hanna in his mind. The marriage lasts only five years, and Michael's guilt over making his daughter Julia suffer through their divorce pushes him to become more open about Hanna in his relationships. However, he doesn't appear satisfied with the women's reactions to his past with Hanna and he eventually stops talking about her.

After the divorce, Michael is restless and feels haunted by thoughts of Hanna. To pass the time, he records himself reading books aloud to her and sends her the **cassette tapes**. Though the tapes become Michael's way of communicating with Hanna, he never includes personal messages on the recordings. Four years later, Michael receives a handwritten thank you note from Hanna. While Michael is delighted that Hanna has finally learned to read and write, he feels sorry for how long it took her, and for how it delayed her life. Hanna begins to send Michael notes regularly, commenting on her life or the books, but Michael never writes back. However, he continues sending her tapes for the next ten years, until she is granted clemency by her parole board.

When the warden at Hanna's prison writes Michael a letter to ask for his assistance during Hanna's upcoming release, Michael is hesitant, as he still cannot face Hanna. Though he agrees to set up an apartment and job for her, he does not visit her in prison or write her letters. After a year, the warden calls to let him know what Hanna will be released in a week. When Michael finally visits the prison, he is shocked to find Hanna an old woman, and he cannot find in her the woman he once loved. Their reunion is awkward and bittersweet. Though Hanna is happy to see him, both realize that they can no longer continue the relationship they had built through the cassette tapes. Michael still feels uneasy about trial and asks her whether she

had thought about her time in the SS when they were together. Hanna evades the question, claiming that only the dead can "call [her] to account," but tells Michael that the dead visit her every night in prison. Michael, however, believes this is too easy of an excuse and secretly feels that he deserves to call Hanna to account too. The next week, the day before Michael is to pick Hanna up, he decides to call her at the prison, asking her to think about what she wants to do the next day. When Hanna teases him, he notices that her voice still sounds young.

The next day, Hanna kills herself. The warden shows Michael Hanna's cell and reveals that Hanna had been reading up on survivor literature and books about the concentration camps. When Michael sees that Hanna had kept a newspaper photo of his high school graduation, he begins to cry, realizing how much Hanna must have cared for him. The warden informs him that Hanna had left a will. She wanted Michael to give the money in her bank account and some money in her **tea tin** to the daughter who had survived the church fire.

Months later, Michael visits the Jewish woman in New York to explain the situation. The woman refuses to take direct responsibility for Hanna's money, nor to allow it to be donated to a Holocaust organization, as to do so would be to grant Hanna absolution. She does, however, take Hanna's tea tin, as it reminds her of the tea tin that had once held her childhood treasures and that was stolen from her at a concentration camp. The woman tells Michael that he can choose an organization and donate the money himself. Michael donates the money under Hanna's name to the Jewish League Against Illiteracy before visiting Hanna's grave for the first and only time.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Michael Berg – The story's protagonist and narrator, who as a fifteen-year-old boy has an affair with an older woman named Hanna, only to discover years later that his lover was once a Nazi prison guard. Born to an educated middle-class family, Michael is an affable and moderately intelligent boy. Because of his strong moral upbringing, he often feels guilty and questions the morality of his actions and thoughts. When Hanna leaves him, Michael becomes distant from others and takes on a posture of arrogance and indifference, vowing never to feel guilty again. However, as a young law student, he crusades against the previous generation for their accommodation or perpetration of Nazi crimes, but when he discovers that Hanna is on trial for having worked for the SS, he begins to question whether he too is guilty for loving her. Years after Hanna is in prison, Michael resurrects his relationship with her by sending her **tapes** of himself reading aloud. Despite his delighted surprise when Hanna sends him a handwritten note, he does not write back to her or see her until she is about to be released from prison. When Hanna kills herself shortly after he visits her in prison, the pain and guilt surrounding their relationship still haunts him, even ten years after her death, when he begins writing their story.

Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz) – Michael's lover and the story's antagonist. Often described by Michael as "tired," Hanna's emotions, motivations, and personalities can be seen only through the eyes of Michael, who is often conflicted about her. Older than Michael by 21 years, she is commanding and at times dismissive toward him. Whenever she and Michael fight, she stubbornly refuses to take any blame, bullying Michael into holding himself responsible for what are often her misunderstandings or misinterpretations. During the affair, Hanna is evasive about her past and emotionally distant; however, decades later, Michael discovers that she had kept a newspaper clipping of his high school graduation with her until her death. Throughout most of the novel, Hanna puts considerable energy into hiding what she views as her most shameful secret, her illiteracy, despite the fact that she also participated in war crimes as a former Nazi prison guard. Initially unable to understand why she is on trial and so ashamed of being seen as uneducated, she falsely confesses to being the other prison guards' sadistic leader rather than admit she cannot write. However, years into her prison sentence, Hanna is finally able to relinquish her pride in others' perception of her and dedicates herself to learning how to read from the **tapes** Michael sends her. Once she learns to read, she begins to understand the extent of the horrors in which she has participated and commits suicide the day before she is to be released from prison.

Michael's Father – A philosophy professor who is distant from his wife and children. Though he doesn't appear often in the story, Michael's father and their relationship are mentioned more often than his other family members. Growing up, Michael often believed that his father regards the rest of the family as his "pets"—that though his father may be fond of them, they do not occupy a significant portion of his mind or time, which are devoted almost entirely to his work. This is evident from the fact that Michael and his siblings would always have to schedule appointments if they wanted to speak to their father. When Michael arranges a meeting to seek his advice, he speaks not as his father but as a philosopher. However, during this conversation, his father seems to regret his past neglect of his family, as he is unexpectedly emotional.

The Jewish Woman / The Daughter – The daughter (nameless in the book) who had survived, with her mother, in the church fire in which Hanna was complicit. During Hanna's trial, she gives testimony that the secret activities between Hanna and the younger, weaker girls in the camp was that the girls would read aloud to Hanna in exchange for slightly better care. The daughter also wrote a book about her time in the camps; the

book was made available to the people involved in the trial, including Hanna, but was only published after the trial. When Michael reads it, he finds that the book "creates distance" and "exudes the very numbness" that Michael feels from being exposed to the trial's horrific evidence. After Hanna dies, she leaves Michael with instructions to send her money to the Jewish woman. Michael visits her in New York, and describes the woman as "matter-of-fact." She refuses to grant absolution to Hanna or to accept responsibility for her money, but she keeps Hanna's **tea tin**, which reminds her of the tea tin that was stolen from her at the camps.

The Prison Warden – The warden of Hanna's prison seems to care sincerely for the welfare of Hanna and the other prisoners. She writes to Michael to inform him of Hanna's release and ask for his help, and after Hanna dies, she tells him about Hanna's life in prison. Described by Michael as "a small, thin woman," she "seemed insignificant until she began to speak, with force and warmth and a severe gaze and energetic use of both hands and arms."

The Driver – The driver who allows Michael to hitchhike with him to Struthof, a nearby concentration camp. When Michael tells the driver where he is going, the man rants that it was not hatred of the Jews, orders, or obedience that led to their mass murder, but rather indifference. When the driver describes in detail the mentality of a particular soldier killing Jews in a photograph, Michael asks the driver if he was the soldier—and is kicked out of the car.

The Judge – The judge who presides over Hanna's trial. Michael observes the judge's near constant expression of annoyance, especially at Hanna's contradictions to certain claims about her. When Hanna asks the judge what he would have done if he were in her situation, Michael realizes that the judge's annoyance is a "mask" that allows him to take more time to answer questions. However, the judge has no satisfactory response for Hanna, as he answers only generally, rather than in personal terms.

Gertrud – Michael's wife, and later ex-wife. A law clerk and later a judge, Gertrud is described by Michael as "smart, efficient, and loyal." Michael marries Gertrud after she becomes pregnant with their daughter Julia. Though Michael never tells Gertrud about Hanna, he cannot stop inwardly comparing her to Hanna, which causes the marriage to fall apart. Nevertheless they maintain a friendly relationship with each other.

Michael's mother – Michael's mother seldom appears in the story, and as Michael's girlfriend Gesina notes, he rarely mentions her when discussing his past. However, the initiation of Michael's affair with Hanna evokes in Michael a childhood memory of his mother pampering him with a bath. From what little else the narrator tells us, Michael's mother often worries about her children.

Michael's older brother – Like Michael's other siblings, his brother also appears only rarely in the novel. Michael tells us that he shared a room with his brother and as young boys they often fought, either physically or verbally. Michael's brother, who is older by three years, likes to complain about him and tries to get Michael in trouble.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Julia – The daughter of Gertrud and Michael. Julia is five when her parents divorce. Her unhappiness at seeing her parents' marriage fall apart fills Michael with sorrow and guilt, causing him to try harder in his relationships.

Michael's older sister – Michael's older sister rarely appears in the novel but is described as "the confidante of all my childhood secrets." Michael imagines that if he had confessed to her that he was fantasizing about Hanna, she would not scold him but rather "lecture [him] with loving concern."

Michael's younger sister – The youngest of the Berg family. Michael's little sister is described as "cheeky." When Michael plans to stay home alone, she blackmails him into shoplifting clothes for her.

Sophie – Michael's friend and crush from high school. A few years after Hanna leaves Michael, he briefly dates Sophie, who becomes upset at how coldly he treats her.

The Lawyer – Hanna's public defender. Described by Michael as "hasty" and "too zealous," the lawyer is inexperienced, and his mistakes undermine Hanna's defense.

Michael's Professor – The law professor who decides to make Hanna's trial the subject of his seminar.

Michael's Former Classmate – Another student in the concentration camps seminar, and later a lawyer turned pub owner who meets Michael at the professor's funeral.

Rudolph Bargen – Michael's good friend from high school.

Holder Schlüter – One of Michael's good friends from high school.

Helen – Michael's former girlfriend and an American literary critic who does not respond much to his confessions about Hanna.

Gesina – Michael's former girlfriend and a psychoanalyst with whom Michael discusses Hanna, and who believes that he needs to work on his relationship with his mother, as she barely appeared in his story.

Hilke – Michael's former girlfriend and a dentist who can't seem to remember what Michael tells her about his past.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GUILT, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE HOLOCAUST

The primary concern of the novel is guilt about the Holocaust. Examining the role of guilt in post-war Germany, *The Reader* presents guilt as a pervasive and inevitable force. An important motif running throughout the story is the question of who must be held responsible for atrocities committed during the Holocaust. Michael and his generation lay blame on not only the Nazi perpetrators but also the bystanders — the previous generation who looked the other way, either by their inaction during the Holocaust or by accepting Nazi sympathizers and perpetrators back into society after the war. However, Michael also holds responsible his own generation for having accepted their parents, some of whom worked for Hitler's regime and many of whom were bystanders. Filial love, Michael believes, "made them irrevocably complicit in their crimes." That he identifies love for the previous generation as a kind of complicity speaks to the long-lasting role of guilt in a nation's history. For Michael, this guilt becomes a collective national inheritance passed down from generation to generation, an unavoidable "German fate."

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 generations. 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. Another example of guilt's destructive power is the damage that Michael's guilt over disavowing Hanna inflicts on him. Michael's resulting decision "never to take guilt upon [him]self or feel guilty, never again to love anyone whom it would hurt to lose" closes him off emotionally, sabotaging his relationships with others. Yet however destructive guilt may be, it also motivates people to take responsibility for their actions, to recognize mistakes and wrongdoing, and to avoid them in the future. For example, the collective guilt that Michael's generation inherits from the Holocaust is what drives them to acknowledge and condemn Nazi war crimes. After his marriage fails, Michael feels guilty for the negative impact of his divorce on his daughter, motivating him to become more open in his relationships. That the novel presents both positive and negative consequences of guilt suggests that guilt must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility — responsibility not only to own one's mistakes and wrongdoing but also to accept guilt in a way that is productive. Essentially, Schlink is arguing that Germany must face and deal with its Nazi past in order to move forward.

But even as Germany must accept guilt and deal with its Nazi past productively, absolution for the atrocities committed during the Holocaust is seemingly impossible. At the end of the novel, the Jewish woman in New York — the only remaining survivor of the church fire in which Hanna was complicit — refuses to accept Hanna's money, because to do so would be to grant her absolution, and thus to relieve a Nazi criminal of responsibility. The woman's inability to forgive Hanna suggests that some crimes are so heinous that they cannot be forgiven or atoned for. The guilty must always remain in a state of guilt, because to forgive would be to allow the guilty to forget their guilt and their victims. Though Hanna is already dead by the time Michael meets the woman, the woman's refusal to grant Hanna absolution suggests that even the dead cannot be forgiven for such crimes.

SECRETS, INDIFFERENCE, AND EMOTIONAL DISTANCE

Indifference and emotional distance are near constant presences in Michael's and Hanna's lives. As the novel moves forward, we learn that part of this distance is caused by the secrets they keep from those around them. When Michael tries to keep his relationship with Hanna a secret, he becomes increasingly distant from his friends and family. For example, after returning home from sleeping with Hanna for the first time and lying about where he has been, Michael "felt as if [he] were saying goodbye. [He] was still there and already gone," foreshadowing his emotional absence throughout the novel. After Hanna leaves him, Michael tries to hide and repress his emotions, wavering between "callousness and extreme sensitivity." Even years after the affair is over, Michael is unable to form successful relationships with others because he is unwilling to fully confront his past with Hanna. Like Michael, Hanna also has a secret that dramatically influences the course of her life and causes her to become distant from others. Hanna's shame over her inability to read constantly pushes her to rearrange her life. In order to hide her illiteracy, Hanna takes jobs she views as "idiotic," and when presented with the possibility of a promotion, she quits and moves to a different town in order to prevent her employers from discovering her secret. Hanna's secrecy brings her down a path that leads to the SS. When faced with the choice of either hiding her illiteracy and being sentenced to life in prison, or of admitting her illiteracy and receiving a shorter sentence, she chooses to keep her secret. Though Hanna is physically intimate with Michael, her unwillingness to share her past or her illiteracy causes her to be emotionally absent—and not only does she keep herself distant from Michael, but she is also distant from herself. When Michael questions her about her life, Hanna is evasive and only divulges basic facts "as if she rummaged around in a dusty chest to get [him] the answers…as if it were not her life but somebody else's, someone she didn't know well and who wasn't important to her."

Hanna's disconnection to herself is perhaps a consequence of the exhaustion of maintaining her secret. When Michael, as an

older man, researches illiteracy, he discovers "how much energy it takes to conceal one's inability to read and write, energy lost to actual living." Like Hanna, whose secrecy is partly responsible for her distance, Michael spends a considerable amount of energy repressing his emotions for and about Hanna. And because they decide to keep their secrets, Michael and Hanna become emotionally distant from others, which prevents them from living their lives.

However, as the novel presents a strong relationship between indifference and the potential for evil evil, the emotional distance that Hanna exhibits also speaks to the horrors that she committed and to which she was exposed during the Holocaust. When Michael hitchhikes to Struthof, a concentration camp, his driver claims that the Nazis killed not out of hatred but out of indifference, recalling Hannah Arendt's ideas about the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt proposed that Adolf Eichmann, a powerful Nazi organizer, did not commit his crimes out of monstrous bloodlust or ideological zealotry; rather, his actions were motivated by his desire to advance his career, a desire accompanied by indifference to the suffering caused by his work. Like Eichmann, Hanna regards her role as a concentration camp guard as a professional obligation without consideration the consequences of her actions. And like Eichmann, she is partly responsible for the Holocaust because of her indifference.

Indifference can allow evil to flourish not only at the hands of perpetrators like Hanna but also because of the inaction of its bystanders. The novel assigns guilt to the "willfully blind, accommodators and accepters" of the Holocaust, because they were indifferent in both attitude and action. Just as indifference can lead to the rise of evil, evil can foster indifference. As Michael and the other spectators at the trial experience, frequent exposure to evidence of atrocities leads to emotional numbness. Reflecting on survivor literature, Michael notes that like the victims, the perpetrators too are emotionally numb, "exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference" that allows them to continue their atrocities. This suggests that not only is the relationship between evil and indifference reciprocal, but it is also one of positive feedback: evil can lead to indifference, which can lead to even more evil, and so on. The implication of this feedback loop of indifference and evil is that emotion and openness are necessary to recognize and stop wrongdoing. The novel's main project, the emotion of guilt, motivates Michael and his classmates to uncover acts of evil committed by the Nazis, as well as more personal secrets within the lives of the two main characters.

GENERATIONAL AND PARENT-CHILD CONFLICT

The novel, which is deeply concerned with guilt, explores the tension that collective guilt creates between parents and children. The generation of Michael's parents, as well as that of Hanna, is a "generation of perpetrators, voyeurs, and the willfully blind, accommodators and accepters." Their children face the uncomfortable question of whether they too are complicit by loving their parents, and therefore accepting the previous generation's crimes. Michael and his peers "condemned [their] parents to shame, even if the only charge [they] could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst." However, Michael is unable to maintain this condemnation, thus representing the anxiety of his generation to reconcile their love of their parents with the moral responsibility of condemning them for their actions or inaction.

Michael's struggle to negotiate his love for his parents with their supposed complicity foreshadows his struggle between "understanding and condemnation" of Hanna's crimes. Like Michael's relationship with his parents, Hanna's and Michael's affair can also be viewed through the lens of parent-child conflict. Though Hanna is not Michael's parent, she does take the role of a mother figure for him. Over 20 years his senior, Hanna often addresses Michael as "kid," bathes him as part of their sexual ritual, insists that he does well at school, and engages in fingerplay with him, as if he were a small child. When Hanna and Michael vacation together, they rent a room under the guise of mother and son. Michael's affair with Hanna puts him in a unique situation that separates him from the rest of his generation. Whereas Michael and his peers did not choose their parents, regardless of their complicity in the Holocaust, Michael *chose* Hanna, a former Nazi prison guard, as his lover, adding another layer of conflict—guilt—to their relationship. Yet despite the separation Michael feels from his peers, he nevertheless identifies his conflicting feelings about Hanna as "the fate of [his] generation, a German fate," suggesting that his relationship with Hanna both deviates from and magnifies, almost allegorically, the generational conflict created by the Holocaust.

READING AND ILLITERACY

The novel presents the inability to read as a form of dependence. Hanna's illiteracy severely limits her options, determining the course of her life. Because she is unable to read, she is forced to decline promotions and must resort to jobs she views as "idiotic." Not only does Hanna's illiteracy limit her life choices, but her shame for being illiterate pushes her to make certain choices to hide her secret. These choices — her decision to work for the SS, her false confession to being the leader of the prison guards — prove disastrous and life-altering.

Reading in the novel can also mean the interpretation of contexts and people, and the understanding of one's actions and their consequences. For example, Michael might be considered a skillful "reader," as he is able to easily decipher the

mistakes made by Hanna and her lawyer during the trial. By contrast, Hanna seems unable to fully understand why she is on trial in the first place and how she comes across to the jury. When the judge asks Hanna if she was aware that she had sent prisoners to their deaths, she gives the trial's spectators the impression that she cared more about the logistics of clearing out space for new prisoners than about the lives of the people she sent to Auschwitz. Hanna's inability to read the written word thus mirrors her inability to comprehend situations around her.

Further, Hanna's illiteracy serves as a metaphor for the willful ignorance of her generation to the evils or existence of the Holocaust. Reflecting on the impact of her illiteracy at her trial, Michael notes that the enormous amount of energy Hanna must have spent on hiding her illiteracy could have been applied to learning how to read. Rather than address the problem, Hanna chooses, for most of her life, to hide it, leading her to work for the SS, where she seems unaware of the untold harm she is inflicting on others. Similarly, those of Hanna's generation who perpetrated or turned a blind eye to the Nazis' Final Solution could have spent their energy trying to understand why they were targeting the Jews, but instead agreed, either actively or passively, to mass murder without considering the consequences, or at the very least without caring enough about the consequences to intervene.

The book's title, *The Reader*, prompts us to ask who, exactly, is the reader. The readers within the novel represent three major groups of people involved in the Holocaust: the victims, the perpetrators, and the next generation. Michael, a member of the generation that followed the Holocaust, reads aloud to Hanna as part of their ritual of reading, showering, and sex. The victims of the Holocaust, the concentration camp prisoners, read to Hanna in secret before she sent them off to Auschwitz. While in prison for her crimes, Hanna teaches herself to read from Michael's **tapes** and begins to learn about the concentration camps through Holocaust literature. Hanna's newfound ability to read is especially important as it demonstrates the possibility of remorse through understanding. It is only by learning how to read that Hanna is finally able to understand her role as a perpetrator of the Holocaust and the impact her actions have had on her victims.

THE IMAGE AS MEMORY AND THE GAZE

A recurring motif in the novel is the idea that images function as memory. For example, Michael remembers a younger Hanna through "pictures" on a "mental projector," and for post-Holocaust Germany, images of Nazi atrocities "derived from Allied photographs and the testimony of survivors" become part of the nation's collective memory, serving as both a record of knowledge and a warning to avoid past mistakes. As a law student, Michael and his classmates use the image and the gaze as a means to bring Nazi war crimes to light by pointing to and reinforcing this collective memory: "Even when the facts took our breath away, we held them up triumphantly. Look at this!" As a facilitator of memory, the gaze is thus presented by the novel as the acknowledgment or recognition of evil.

However, the gaze can also lead to the desensitization of its viewers and thus the dehumanization of others. Unlike his classmates, who "kept being horrified all over again" because they attended the trial on a weekly basis, Michael becomes numb to the horrors of Nazi war crimes because he attends the trial every day. He no longer feels the same righteous, voyeuristic fervor he once brought to uncovering the atrocities of the Holocaust. The defendants, who were exposed to the Holocaust's atrocities on a daily basis, and the trial's regular spectators are also subject to this numbness, which makes them more susceptible to dehumanizing others. As Michael recalls from survivor literature, "the gas chambers and ovens become ordinary scenery" for the perpetrators, who became used to committing murder. Desensitized to the trial's horrific evidence, the spectators also engage in dehumanization (though to a much lesser degree) in their demonization of Hanna and the other defendants. By showing the gaze's potential both to uncover and to cause evil, Schlink presents the gaze as a double-edged sword, one that must be used economically in order to reinforce, rather than anesthetize, our humanity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BUILDING ON BAHNHOFSTRASSE

The building on Bahnhofstrasse is the wide, balconied building not far from Michael's street. The site of their affair and Hanna's home, the building can be seen as a metaphor for Hanna herself. For example, as a small child, Michael fantasized about the building, imagining it to be elegant and full of grand things and people. When he visits Hanna in her apartment, however, he discovers that the building's interior is shabby and plain, in contrast to its lavish façade. Similarly, Hanna's façade—her body—occupies Michael's fantasies, only for him to discover later that her inner nature is, if not monstrous, then at least unquestioning and passively immoral, leading her to commit war crimes as a Nazi prison guard. Later, as an adult, the building haunts Michael in dreams where he can never enter the building, nor see through its windows. Like the building, the memory of Hanna haunts Michael but never fully presents itself to him. Just as the building's windows are opaque in Michael's dreams, so too are Hanna's thoughts and motivations.

CASSETTE TAPES

Eight years into Hanna's term in prison, Michael makes a series of cassette tapes of himself reading books aloud to her. The tapes are, in a way, a resurrection of their previous relationship, as Michael would always read aloud to Hanna before they slept together. Though the cassettes represent Michael's continuing connection to Hanna and his way of speaking to her, they also represent Michael's distance. Michael never leaves Hanna any personal messages on the tapes nor writes back to her when she finally learns how to read. The tapes form the "small niche, certainly an important niche" that Michael dedicates to Hanna, but no more than that.

THE TEA TIN

When Michael visits the Jewish woman to give her Hanna's money, she tells him the story of how someone at the concentration camps had stolen her tea tin, which was full of her childhood treasures, not for its contents but to use the metal for some sinister but unspecified purpose. Though she does not accept responsibility for Hanna's money, the woman does keep the tea tin in which Hanna's money was stored. The woman's decision to take Hanna's tea tin but not its contents is perhaps a way of reclaiming her experience at the camps, and to reclaim at least a small part of what was taken from her at the hands of the Nazis. At the same time, her rejection of the tin's contents—like the Nazis' dismissal of her childhood treasures within the original tea tin—is a rejection of what Michael interprets to be Hanna's desire to be recognized for her atonement.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Reader* published in 1997.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I remember that her body and the way she held it and moved sometimes seemed awkward. Not that she was particularly heavy. It was more as if she had withdrawn into her own body, and left it to itself and its own quiet rhythms, unbothered by any input from her mind, oblivious to the outside world. It was the same obliviousness that weighted in her glance and her movements when she was pulling on her stockings. But then she was not awkward, she was slow-flowing, graceful, seductive — a seductiveness that had nothing to do with breasts and hips and legs, but was an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After recounting his voyeuristic gaze at Hanna putting on her stockings, the narrator reflects on why he found her so attractive. It was Hanna's seemingly un-self-conscious demeanor, her "obliviousness" to the world that Michael found seductive.

However, the temptation of this obliviousness is problematic, as forgetting the world and its other inhabitants can lead to disaster. Because Hanna's actions, like the rhythms of her body, are "unbothered by any input from her mind," she is indifferent to the suffering of her victims in the concentration camps. The seduction of Michael, who succumbs to this obliviousness, is then an allegory for the accommodation of Nazi perpetrators in Germany after the war. Just as regular German people figuratively got into bed with Nazis, turning a blind eye to their crimes, Michael literally gets into bed with Hanna.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ My mother had pushed a chair up close to the stove for me to stand on while she washed and dressed me. I remember the wonderful feeling of warmth, and how good it felt to be washed and dressed in this warmth. I also remember that whenever I thought back to this afterwards, I always wondered why my mother had been spoiling me like this...Because the woman who didn't yet have a name in my mind had so spoiled me that afternoon, I went back to school the next day.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Michael's mother, Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After Michael and Hanna have sex for the first time, Michael feels as if he has been indulged and thinks back to a memory of his mother bathing him. The novel's first explicit comparison of Hanna and Michael's mother, this passage sets up Hanna as Michael's mother figure as well as his romantic interest.

Michael's feeling of being "spoiled" causes him to feel

somewhat guilty, and to make up for it he decides to go back to school earlier than expected (he's been sick). Michael's attitude toward sex and school thus divides the two and sets them as contrasted to each other. Whereas sex with Hanna is an indulgence that allows him to forget the outside world, his studies allow him to learn more about the world (which is often harsh and complicated). Years after the affair, Michael's decision to become a legal historian, and thus to spend much of his time in study, is perhaps his way of making up for the complicity he later feels for loving Hanna.

I felt as if we were sitting all together for the last time around the round table under the five-armed, five-candled brass chandelier, as if we were eating our last meal off the old plates with the green vine-leaf border, as if we would never talk to each other so intimately again. I felt as if I were saying goodbye. I was still there and already gone. I was homesick for my mother and father and my brother and sisters, and I longed to be with the woman.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Michael's younger sister, Michael's older sister, Michael's older brother, Michael's Father, Michael's mother, Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Michael returns home from his first sexual encounter with Hanna, he feels suddenly nostalgic for his family. Though he is surrounded by his parents and siblings at dinner, he feels distant from them, as if he were "already gone."

This is the novel's first instance of the wedge that Hanna will form between Michael and those around him. As Hanna herself is distant from Michael, the fact that Michael mirrors this distance in his other relationships suggests that emotional distance fosters emotional distance. After Hanna leaves him, this distance worsens and later sabotages Michael's marriage, friendships, and other relationships.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

I asked her about her life, and it was as if she rummaged around in a dusty chest to get me the answers. She had grown up in a German community in Rumania, then come to Berlin at the age of sixteen, taken a job at the Siemens factory, and ended up in the army at twenty-one.... She had no family. She was thirty-six. She told me all this as if it were not her life but somebody else's, someone she didn't know well and who wasn't important to her. Things I wanted to know more about had vanished completely from her mind, and she didn't understand why I was interested in what had happened to her parents, whether she had had brothers and sisters, how she had lived in Berlin and what she'd done in the army.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in their affair, Michael discovers that Hanna doesn't like to talk about herself or her past. When he asks her questions about her life, she maintains her emotional distance from Michael by evading his questions or by only giving him the most basic information about herself.

Hanna's apparent inability to understand why Michael wants to know more about her is perhaps another evasion tactic (to keep herself distant from him, and to avoid talking about her crimes as a Nazi guard) but could also be rooted in her inability to interpret motivations and contexts. It is also possible that she simply does not place much value in herself or her life, as the few answers she gives Michael are reported as if they belong to "someone she didn't know well and who wasn't important to her."

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

The trip on the streetcar had been like a bad dream. If I didn't remember its epilogue so vividly, I would actually be tempted to think of it as a bad dream. Standing at the streetcar stop, hearing the birds and watching the sun come up was like an awakening. But waking from a bad dream does not necessarily console you. It can also make you fully aware of the horror you just dreamed, and even of the truth residing in that horror.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Michael has just gotten off Hanna's streetcar after a failed attempt to make a romantic gesture for her. When Michael tried to surprise her on her streetcar, he felt hurt and rejected after she ignored him the entire time he was there.

Michael's comparison of leaving the streetcar to waking from a bad dream anticipates his later description of the numbness that overcomes him during the trial and that was often found in Holocaust survivors. Just as Michael only realizes how painful his experience on the streetcar was once it was over, Michael later feels the full force of the pain and horror from the beginning of the trial only after it ends.

Part 1, Chapter 12 Quotes

It is one of the pictures of Hanna that has stayed with me. I have them stored away, I can project them on a mental screen and watch them, unchanged, unconsumed. There are long periods when I don't think about them at all. But they always come back into my head, and then I sometimes have to run them repeatedly through my mental projector and watch them.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Referring to the image of Hanna in his father's study the first time he invited her to his house, Michael describes the visual manner in which he stores memories of Hanna in his mind. Like the images of Nazi atrocities during the trial (later in the novel), Michael's images of Hanna become engrained into his mind as memories. That these images often pop into Michael's head suggests that the memory of Hanna is still haunting him. Michael's urge to "run them repeatedly through [his] mental projector" evokes in the reader a sense of nostalgia, but also a kind of nostalgia that is impossible to escape. Michael's nostalgia as well as his sense of being haunted by Hanna are manifestations of his inner conflict about her after the revelations of the trial.

Part 1, Chapter 14 Quotes

She didn't know it was my birthday. When I had asked her about hers, and she had told me it was the twenty-first of October, she hadn't asked me when mine was. She was also no more bad-tempered than she always was when she was exhausted. But I was annoyed by her bad temper, and I wanted to be somewhere else, at the pool, away with my classmates, swept up in the exuberance of our talk, our banter, our games, and our flirtations. 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.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of their affair, Michael finds himself increasingly torn between his desire to be with Hanna and his desire to spend time with his friends. As Hanna is often bad-tempered and domineering, Michael finds himself growing resentful of her, as their relationship is almost entirely determined by the bounds that Hanna sets for them.

The fact that Hanna and Michael don't know each other's birthdays illustrates how little they actually know each other. That Michael asks Hanna's birthday, but that Hanna does not do the same, is one of many examples of Hanna's lack of reciprocity. The imbalanced nature of their relationship is also evident from their fights: Hanna always treats Michael as unimportant in order to manipulate him into apologizing.

Part 1, Chapter 16 Quotes

I never found out what Hanna did when she wasn't working and we weren't together. When I asked, she turned away my questions. We did not have a world that we shared; she gave me the space in her life that she wanted me to have. I had to be content with that. Wanting more, even wanting to know more, was presumption on my part. If we were particularly happy with each other and I asked her something because at that moment it felt as if everything was possible and allowed, then she sometimes ducked my questions, instead of refusing outright to answer them.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

It is towards the end of their affair, and Hanna still does not open herself up to Michael. Whenever he asks her questions about herself, she still dodges or rejects his questions. Hanna decides on all the terms of their relationship, and any attempt by Michael to learn more about her feels like "presumption."

The nature of Hanna and Michael's relationship represents the generational conflict between Nazi perpetrators and bystanders, and their children. Though Michael was unaware at this time of Hanna's Nazi past, his desire to know more about her past mirrors the second generation's calls for accountability, just as Hanna's refusal to answer Michael's questions mirrors Nazi perpetrators' resistance against accepting responsibility.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I know that even if I had said goodbye to my memory of Hanna, I had not overcome it. Never to let myself be humiliated or humiliate myself after Hanna, never to take guilt upon myself or feel guilty, never again to love anyone whom it would hurt to lose — I didn't formulate any of this as I thought back then, but I know that's how I felt.
I adopted a posture of arrogant superiority. I behaved as if nothing could touch or shake or confuse me. I got involved in nothing, and I remember a teacher who saw through this and spoke to me about it; I was arrogantly dismissive.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88-89

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Part 2, after Hanna leaves him, Michael is initially haunted by thoughts of her but then is eventually able to put aside his feelings and his guilt. However, he overcompensates for this by excluding all feelings of guilt or emotional investment from his life. Though Michael is now able to move on with his life to a certain extent, he does not recognize the useful qualities of guilt and strong emotion. For example, his newfound ability to block out guilt prevents him from recognizing how his display of "arrogant superiority" hurts his grandfather and friend Sophie, and he becomes unable to take responsibility for hurting others.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ It was evident to us that there had to be convictions. It was just as evident that conviction of this or that camp guard or enforcer was only the prelude. The generation that had been served by the guards and enforcers, or had done nothing to stop them, or had not banished them from its midst as it could have done after 1945, was in the dock, and we explored it, subjected it to trial by daylight, and condemned it to shame… We all condemned our parents to shame, even if the only charge we could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91-92

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, it has been six years since Hanna's sudden and unexplained departure. Michael is now in law school, taking a seminar that centers on one of the Nazi trials. The students in the seminar become zealous crusaders who aim to bring Nazi atrocities to light and who condemn not only the perpetrators but also the accommodators and bystanders, shaming them for their actions or inaction during the war, as well as after the war, when the perpetrators were accepted back into society and into universities and government positions. Michael and his peers, the children of this generation, assign guilt to their parents, thus stirring generational conflict.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ After a time I thought I could detect a similar numbness in other people.... The effect was strongest on the judges and the lay members of the court. During the first weeks of the trial they took in the horrors — sometimes recounted in tears, sometimes in choking voices, sometimes in agitated or broken sentences — with visible shock or obvious efforts at self-control. Later their faces returned to normal; they could smile and whisper to one another or even show traces of impatience when a witness lost the thread while testifying. When going to Israel to question a witness was discussed, they started getting the travel bug. The other students kept being horrified all over again. They only came to the trial once a week, and each time the same thing happened: the intrusion of horror into daily life. I, who was in court every day, observed their reactions with detachment.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

When he discovers that Hanna is one of the defendants on trial, Michael starts watching the trial every day rather than once a week, like the rest of his classmates. However, the longer he stays, and the more often he's exposed to the horrifying evidence of the Nazis' crimes, the more numb and detached he feels. Like Michael, the judges and other spectators of the court also seem to feel this numbness. Whereas in the beginning of the trial, they had strong emotional responses to witness testimony, after a few weeks, they become somewhat indifferent. By contrast, Michael's classmates are horrified each time they visit, as the images of Nazi atrocities are not part of their daily lives, but are only a weekly spectacle. Michael's experience with and observations of this phenomenon demonstrate that repeated or prolonged exposure to trauma can cause this numbness or indifference.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "Did you not know that you were sending the prisoners to their death?"
"Yes, but the new ones came, and the old ones had to make room for the new ones."
"So because you wanted to make room, you said you and you and you have to be sent back to be killed?"
Hanna didn't understand what the presiding judge was getting at.
"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.

Related Characters: Michael Berg, Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz), The Judge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

The judge is questioning Hanna about one of the principal charges against her and the other defendants: that they selected sixty women every month to be sent to Auschwitz to die. When the judge asks Hanna if she knew the women would be killed, she not only admits that she knew but she attempts to justify their deaths by saying that "the old ones had to make room for the new ones." Hanna does not understand the intent of the judge's question, which was meant to determine whether she was aware that she was assisting in murder. But Hanna seems to view the prisoners' deaths not as murder or as the loss of human life, but rather as numbers to check off in the name of efficiency or making space. When Hanna asks the judge what he personally would have done, she doesn't understand that her question in inappropriate in the context of a trial—yet this personal, rather intimate question then implicates the judge as well, especially as another member of the generation that accommodated the perpetuators of the Holocaust. (And the question might well be aimed also at the reader.) Hanna's misinterpretation of the question's intent, as well as her question to the judge and her inability to empathize with her victims, all stem from her social and moral "illiteracy."

Part 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ During the trial the manuscript was available, but to those directly involved. I had to read the book in English, an unfamiliar and laborious exercise at the time. And as always, the alien language, unmastered and struggled over, created a strange concatenation of distance and immediacy. I worked through the book with particular thoroughness and yet did not make it my own. It remained as alien as the language itself. Years later I reread it and discovered that it is the book that creates distance. It does not invite one to identify with it and makes no one sympathetic, neither the mother nor the daughter, nor those who shared their fate in various camps and finally in Auschwitz and the satellite camp near Cracow…. It exudes the very numbness I have tried to describe before. But even in her numbness the daughter did not lose the ability to observe and analyze.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), The Jewish Woman / The Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118-119

Explanation and Analysis

A manuscript written by the Jewish daughter who survived the church fire served as a key piece of evidence against the trial's defendants (including Hanna). Michael, who at the time only had access to the English version of the manuscript, felt that the book created distance for the reader and that distance was a result of the language. Later, however, when he rereads it (presumably in German), he realizes that this distance originates from the book itself, as it "makes no one sympathetic" and "exudes the very numbness" that Michael himself experiences. Like the woman, Michael is, for at least part of his story, both analytical and numb in his writing. Yet unlike the woman, Michael has not experienced as many and as horrific traumas that she experienced in the camps. He is therefore able to break free from his numbness, as evident from his frequent discussion of his emotions and his at times sympathetic portrayal of Hanna.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ I was oddly moved by the discrepancy between what must have been Hanna's actual concerns when she left my hometown and what I had imagined and theorized at the time. I had been sure that I had driven her away because I had betrayed and denied her, when in fact she had simply been running away from being found out by the streetcar company. However, the fact that I had not driven her away did not change the fact that I had betrayed her. So I was still guilty. And if I was not guilty because one cannot be guilty of betraying a criminal, then I was guilty of having loved a criminal.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Hanna has just falsely confessed to writing a report, and Michael realizes that Hanna is illiterate. Reflecting on how her illiteracy explains some of her behavior, he now realizes that Hanna did not leave suddenly because he betrayed her by denying their relationship, but rather because she was trying to hide her illiteracy from her employer (who had offered her a promotion). Though Michael believes that he may not be technically guilty for driving her away or for betraying her, he does not excuse himself from guilt for loving her. Though Michael feels guilty for loving a criminal because he *chose* to love her, it is also possible that this is merely a justification for his guilt. That Michael changes the reason for his guilt not once but twice suggests that his insistence on his own guilt may have more to do with his inescapable feelings rather than with an intellectual conclusion that he is guilty – that is, rather than feeling guilt as a result of deducing his culpability, he seems to be searching for reasons to justify his feelings of guilt.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ When I think today about those years, I realize how little direct observation there actually was, how few photographs that made life and murder in the camps real.... We were familiar with some of the testimony of prisoners, but many of them were published soon after the war and not reissued until the 1980s, and in the intervening years they disappeared from publishers' lists. Today there are so many books and films that the world of the camps is part of our collective imagination and completes our ordinary everyday one...not just registering, but supplementing and embellishing it. Back then, the imagination was almost static: the shattering fact of the world of the camps seemed properly beyond its operations. The few images derived from Allied photographs and the testimony of survivors flashed on the mind again and again, until they froze into clichés.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147-148

Explanation and Analysis

When the court flies to Israel to receive another witness testimony, Michael has two weeks away from the trial to himself. Yet he can't help but think of the images from the trial, mixed with his own images of Hanna. Michael compares the scarcity of images of Nazi horrors back then with the preponderance of Holocaust media today. For Michael at that time, the atrocities of the Holocaust were so horrifying they were impossible to imagine and could only be understood through "clichés" from the few (and thus overused) photographs and testimonies that were available. Michael's desire to break free of these clichéd images is then what pushes him to visit a nearby concentration camp.

Part 2, Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ "You're right, there was no war, and no reason for hatred. But executioners don't hate the people they execute, and they execute them all the same. Because they're ordered to? You think they do it because they're ordered to? And you think that I'm talking about orders and obedience, that the guards in the camps were under orders and had to obey?" He laughed sarcastically. "No, I'm not talking about orders and obedience. An executioner is not under orders. He's doing his work, he doesn't hate the people he executes, he's not taking revenge on them, he's not killing them because they're in his way or threatening him or attacking him. They're a matter of such indifference to him that he can kill them as easily as not."

Related Characters: The Driver (speaker), Michael Berg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Hitchhiking to Struthof, a nearby concentration camp, Michael is forced to listen to his antagonistic driver's argument that it was not orders, obedience, or hatred that caused the Nazis to kill, but rather indifference. Though Michael is reluctant to believe this, the driver's opinion is similar to Michael's previously expressed belief that Hanna had fallen into her job with the SS out of ignorance, and she continued to do her job because of a kind of willful indifference. The driver's claim about indifference also recalls Hannah Arendt's theory about the "banality of evil" and her argument that Adolf Eichmann organized the concentration camps not because of a strong belief in Nazi ideology, but because he sought to advance his career and simply didn't consider the lives of his victims as important.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks — understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

After he discovers her illiteracy and visits the concentration camp, Michael is torn between his loyalty to and past relationship with Hanna, which would entail attempting to understanding her crimes, and what he feels is his moral obligation to utterly condemn her crimes. Michael's struggle between "understanding and condemnation" is an example of the parent-child conflict involving the generation of Nazi perpetrators and that of their children. Later described as "a German fate," this struggle is one that

Michael's peers also experience, but Michael's guilt stems from loving and *choosing* to love a criminal, and thus separates him from the rest of his generation. For Michael, this struggle is ultimately unresolved, as questions of whether Michael betrayed Hanna or should feel guilty for loving Hanna haunt him even after her death.

Part 2, Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ I don't know if Hanna knew how she looked, or maybe she wanted to look like that. She was wearing a black suit and a white blouse, and the cut of the suit and the tie that went with the blouse made her look as if she were in uniform. I have never seen the uniform of the women who worked for the SS. But I believed, and the spectators all believed, that before us we were seeing that uniform, and the woman who had worked for the SS in it, and all the crimes Hanna was accused of doing.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162-163

Explanation and Analysis

On the day the verdict is the to be announced, Hanna arrives at the court dressed in a black and white suit, which the spectators — despite their ignorance of what an SS uniform actually looks like for women — all imagine as her uniform as a Nazi prison guard. Throughout much of the novel, Hanna seems to take great care and pride in maintaining her clean and neat appearance. Though Michael is unsure of why Hanna wore this particular outfit, it is possible that Hanna saw the suit as appropriate, professional attire for the verdict. However, regardless of how she herself views her appearance, Hanna seems to have been unaware of the impression that this outfit would make on the spectators, who more easily imagine her committing the crimes charged against her because of her appearance. Hanna's decision to wear the suit displays once again her inability to read her surroundings and to anticipate people's reactions.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I had no one to point at. Certainly not my parents, because I had nothing to accuse them of.... But what other people in my social environment had done, and their guilt, were in any case a lot less bad than what Hanna had done. 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 in which children love their parents. But love of our parents is the only love for which we are not responsible.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Michael's mother, Michael's Father, Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Michael has already graduated, the student movement has begun, and he is reflecting on generational conflict and the struggle to come to terms with Germany's Nazi past. While pointing at the previous generation's guilt was part and parcel of this struggle, Michael does not feel that he could point to his parents as guilty the way that his peers pointed to their parents. The only person whom Michael can personally condemn is Hanna, but in his mind, Hanna's guilt necessitates his own, as he feels complicit for loving her. Unlike his peers, who did not choose their parents, Michael chose Hanna and thus feels all the more complicit in her actions.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I don't know what I would have done if a professor of legal history had not offered me a research job. Gertrud said it was an evasion, an escape from the challenges and responsibilities of life, and she was right. I escaped and was relieved that I could do so.... Now escape involves not just running away, but arriving somewhere.... Doing history means building bridges between the past and the present, observing both banks of the river, taking an active part on both sides. One of my areas of research was law in the Third Reich, and here it is particularly obvious how the past and present come together in a single reality. Here, escape is not a preoccupation with the past, but a determined focus on the present and the future that is blind to the legacy of the past which brands us and with which we must live.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Gertrud

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Faced with the prospect of having to choose a career, Michael decides not to become a defense or prosecution lawyer or a judge, as the trial has left him with a distaste for these professions. He falls into a research position, and despite his and his wife's belief that it is an escape from the responsibilities of the present, Michael is "relieved" to escape, recalling his youthful attraction to Hanna's "invitation to forget the world." However, unlike his teenage escape to his affair with Hanna and to her "obliviousness" to the world, Michael's position as a legal historian allows him to better understand the world. Michael's research on the Third Reich allows him to study the recent past, and thus to come to terms with it, even as he also escapes responsibility for Hanna in the present and struggles to comes to term with their relationship.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ I also read books I already knew and loved. So Hanna got to hear a great deal of Keller and Fontane, Heine and Morike. For a long time I didn't dare to read poetry, but eventually I really enjoyed it, and I learned many of the poems I read by heart. I can still say them today.
Taken together, the titles in the notebook testify to a great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture. I do not ever remember asking myself whether I should go beyond Kafka, Frisch, Johnson, Bachmann, and Lenz, and read experimental literature, literature in which I did not recognize the story or like any of the characters. To me it was obvious that experimental literature was experimenting with the reader, and Hanna didn't need that and neither did I.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Eight years after the trial, Michael begins to send Hanna tapes of himself reading aloud. Though the cassette tapes evoke their old routine of reading, bathing, and lovemaking, Michael maintains his distance, never visiting Hanna in person or even sending her personal messages on tape. His sole means of communication with her are the readings themselves, and he sends her tapes of his favorite books and poems, largely by German writers. While much of the novel concerns Germany's struggle to deal with its past, Michael's exclusion of experimental literature could be seen as a conscious decision to move away from the past, as his reference to experimental literature is perhaps an allusion to the brutal experiments performed by Nazi doctors, or to the general fragility and complexity of his and Hanna's relationship as it is. Michael's selection of German classics is an acknowledgment, and perhaps a celebration, of the nation's literary culture.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ I read the note and was filled with joy and jubilation. "She can write, she can write!" In these years I had read everything I could lay my hands on to do with illiteracy. I knew about the helplessness in everyday activities, finding one's way or finding an address or choosing a meal in a restaurant, about how illiterates anxiously stick to prescribed patterns and familiar routines, about how much energy it takes to conceal one's inability to read and write, energy lost to actual living. Illiteracy is dependence. By finding the courage to learn to read and write, Hanna had advanced from dependence to independence, a step towards liberation.

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

A few years after Michael first sends Hanna the tapes, Hanna sends him back a thank you note that she's written, much to Michael's delight. After he had discovered that Hanna could not read, Michael read up on illiteracy and the severe dependence it imposed on people. Hanna's illiteracy and inability to deal with many everyday tasks, such as "finding one's way" and "choosing a meal in a restaurant," explains some of her behavior during her affair with Michael, whom Hanna had left to deal with all the logistics of their bike trip together. Though Michael recognizes Hanna's literacy as "a step towards liberation," "liberation" is not truly possible for Hanna, as she is in prison. Though she is later granted clemency, Hanna kills herself, perhaps because she is unready to face the outside world, but

perhaps also because her literacy has allowed her to more fully comprehend her complicity in all the horrors of the Holocaust.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ But why should I have given her a place in my life? I reacted indignantly against my own bad conscience at the thought that I had reduced her to a niche. "Didn't you ever think about the things that were discussed at the trial, before the trial? I mean, didn't you ever think about them when we were together, when I was reading to you?"
"Does that bother you very much?" But she didn't wait for an answer. "I always had the feeling that no one understood me anyway, that no one knew who I was and what made me do this or that. And you know, when no one understands you, then no one can call you to account. Not even the court could call me to account. But the dead can. They understand. They don't even have to have been there, but if they were, they understand even better."

Related Characters: Michael Berg, Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

A week before Hanna is about to be released, Michael visits her in prison for the first time. Though their conversation begins in a friendly manner, Michael soon tries to confront her about the horrifying secrets she kept from him while they were together. Seemingly unconcerned with her words' effect on Michael, Hanna claims that only the dead can "call [her] to account," as other the dead can understand her. Though Hanna recognizes that she is guilty, she implies that she cannot be held responsible by those whom she may have hurt and who are still alive (i. e. Michael). Hanna argues that she can only be held accountable by those who understand her motivations — and that is, in her opinion, only the dead. However, this argument seems somewhat disingenuous, and it would suggest that a perpetrator's motivations be privileged above her criminal offenses against a victim.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Only occasionally, when I was driving my car, or when I was in Hanna's apartment, did thoughts of it get the upper hand and trigger memories. I saw her on the bench, her eyes fixed on me, saw her at the swimming pool, her face turned to me, and again had the feeling that I had betrayed her and owed her something. And again I rebelled against this feeling; I accused her, and found it both shabby and too easy, the way she had wriggled out of her guilt. Allowing no one but the dead to demand an accounting, reducing guilt and atonement to insomnia and bad feelings — where did that leave the living? But what I meant was not the living, it was me. Did I not have my own accounting to demand of her? What about me?

Related Characters: Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Michael has been preparing for Hanna's release and can't help but think of how she "wriggled out of her guilt," claiming that only the dead can hold her responsible for her wrongs. Michael, however, feels that Hanna has wronged him, and that he deserves his "own accounting to demand of her."

Though Hanna seems to accept at least some guilt for her actions during the war, she does not take responsibility for how she treated Michael. Her disregard for Michael's feelings had been a major element of their relationship when he was a teenager, and it continues to haunt him in the form of his recurring memory-images as an adult. Not only did she often ignore his feelings but she kept her Nazi past a secret from him, apparently indifferent to the effect that her past might have on him. Later, when Michael meets with the Jewish woman, we are presented with another reason (albeit muted in Michael's perception) for Michael to hold Hanna responsible: the affair itself. Michael had only been 15 when he met Hanna, and effect of the affair sabotaged his relationships with his family, his friends, his wife, and his daughter.

Part 3, Chapter 11 Quotes

I told her about Hanna's death and her last wishes.
"Why me?"
"I suppose because you are the only survivor."
"And how am I supposed to deal with it?"
"However you think fit."
"And grant Frau Schmitz her absolution?"
At first I wanted to protest, but Hanna was indeed asking a great deal. Her years of imprisonment were not merely to be the required atonement: Hanna wanted to give them her own meaning, and she wanted this giving of meaning to be recognized. I said as much.
She shook her head. I didn't know if this meant she was refusing to accept my interpretation or refusing to grant Hanna the recognition.

Related Characters: The Jewish Woman / The Daughter, Michael Berg (speaker), Hanna Schmitz (Frau Shmitz)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Attempting to fulfill Hanna's last wish, Michael travels to New York to give the last Jewish survivor of the church fire—the daughter who wrote a book about her experiences—Hanna's money. However, the woman refuses to accept responsibility for the money, as this act would symbolically grant Hanna absolution, and thus relieve her (after her death) of her guilt. Michael believes that Hanna wanted to give her own meaning to her imprisonment and to be recognized for it, but both he and the woman realize that this would be inappropriate, and is a lot to ask, especially of one of Hanna's victims. The woman's refusal to take Hanna's money and to grant absolution to a Nazi war criminal suggests that some crimes are so terrible that they cannot be forgiven. And even Michael, who is still tormented by his love for and attempts to understand Hanna, can accept this.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

The novel begins with Michael, a fifteen-year-old boy in Germany, weak with illness. One day in October, Michael is walking home from school when he becomes violently sick near a **building on Bahnhofstrasse** (the name of a street). Already ashamed for becoming increasingly weak, he becomes even more ashamed for vomiting.

Part 1 opens with Michael's illness and feelings of shame, sowing a sense of unease in the novel and setting the stage for the complexities of guilt that the narrator will later explore.

A woman comes out and rescues Michael, handling him roughly "almost [like] an assault." She brings him into the courtyard of the **building**, and cleans the vomit off him and the sidewalk with water from an outdoor tap. Realizing that he is overwhelmed and crying, she hugs him. Though she calls him "kid," Michael is very much aware of her body, as well as the smell of his vomit, and stops crying.

The woman's actions are presented as both kind and antagonistic (her assistance is "an assault"), foreshadowing the conflicting feelings Michael later harbors about her. This moment marks the first instance of the woman's role as Michael's mother figure as well as the beginning of Michael's sexuality.

After inquiring where he lives, the woman walks Michael to his building on Blumenstrasse. When Michael is home, he tells his mother about his sickness and the woman who helped him. His mother calls a doctor, who diagnoses him with hepatitis. Michael's mother instructs Michael to buy the woman some flowers once he is better, to say thank you and to introduce himself. Four months later, Michael heads out to **Bahnhofstrasse** to visit the woman.

That Michael's mother is the one who initially insists on his visiting the woman, which triggers their affair, reinforces the woman's role as a kind of mother figure for Michael.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

The narrator, an older Michael, reflects on the **Bahnhofstrasse building**, noting that it is eventually torn down and replaced by a crowded five-story apartment building with ever-changing tenants. Michael finds this new building lacking compared to the old one. Whereas the new building has a smooth plaster façade, the old building was more ornate, with brickwork, balconies, and lion statues. As a small child, Michael had been aware of the building, which "dominated the whole row" with its breadth. He had imagined the building's interior to be elegant and lavish, and that its inhabitants would be "grand" but "somber" people.

As the narrator compares the past and present states of the woman's apartment building, he shows himself to be nostalgic for his past. The dominant position of the building on its street, as well as Michael's unrealistic childhood fantasies about the building, mirror the dominant role of the woman, whom the building represents (at this point), and the misconceptions he has about her.

Later on in his life, Michael had recurring dreams about the **building**. In the dream, he would be walking on an unfamiliar street in an unfamiliar town, or he would be driving in the countryside, when he spots the building, which he recognizes from a previous dream. He approaches the house, whose windows reveal nothing, and just as he is about to open the door, he wakes up from the dream and realizes he has dreamed it before.

When Michael is older, the building haunts him in his dreams, no matter where he is. Like the woman, the building is always in his mind, but simultaneously distant and inscrutable.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

With flowers in hand, Michael goes to the **Bahnhofstrasse building**, where another tenant tells him that the woman's name is Frau Schmitz and that she lives on the third floor. Michael enters the building and discovers that the interior is clean, but also shabby, plain, and nowhere near as grand as he had imagined it.

Michael's discovery that the interior of the building is rather shabby, contrary to his grand childhood fantasies about it, presages the dismay he will later feel when he discovers the horrifying truth about Frau Schmitz.

Though Michael does not remember how he greeted Frau Schmitz, he remembers in great detail what her apartment looked like. The kitchen was the largest room and contained, along with a stove, sink, and table, Frau Schmitz's bathtub, boiler, wardrobe, and couch. The only other rooms in the apartment were a small living room and a toilet. Michael doesn't remember what they talked about, but does remember that Frau Schmitz was ironing her clothes on the kitchen table. Though he is embarrassed to watch her while she is ironing her underwear, he watches her nevertheless, attentive to details such as the red and blue pattern of her shirt, the style of her blond hair, the paleness of her skin, and the blue color of her eyes. Michael, as the narrator, is able to remember that he found her beautiful, but he finds himself unable to recreate her beauty in his mind.

That Michael does not remember what he and Frau Schmitz talked about but that he does remember in detail what she and her apartment looked like suggests a strong association between the visual and memory. Michael's description of Frau Schmitz evokes Nazi racial ideology about the superiority of the "Aryan race." That Frau Schmitz, as a blond-haired, blue-eyed white woman, fits the Nazi Aryan model so closely foreshadows the revelation of her work for the Nazis, as well as Michael's complicity for being attracted to her.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

When Michael is ready to leave, Frau Schmitz says she'll walk him out, but she decides to change her clothes first. Michael waits in the hall while the woman changes in the kitchen. However, the kitchen door is slightly open, and Michael watches her undress and put on stockings. Unable to stop himself from staring, he takes in the sight of her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her hips, and her stocking-covered legs. But the woman soon realizes that he is watching her and returns his gaze with a look that is "surprised, skeptical, knowing, reproachful." Michael, full of shame, flees the apartment and the **building**.

Michael's nascent sexuality begins to grow as he stares at the half-naked woman. His gaze on her is both voyeuristic and objectifying, as he looks at her in this moment not as a whole person but as a series of body parts. Only when the woman returns his gaze, expressing her subjecthood with a "reproachful" look, does Michael become ashamed.

On his way back home, Michael dawdles along the familiar streets and buildings, his heart still pounding. When he calms down, he is both angry with himself for running away like a child and puzzled about why he was unable to stop staring at her. Unlike the girls he liked to watch at the swimming pool, Frau Schmitz is much older and more womanly.

Michael is angry with himself not for violating the woman's privacy but for acting like a child. His confusion over his attraction to an older woman stems from his usual attraction to girls from his own age group, whom he also subjected to his voyeurism.

The narrator reveals that he realized years later it was not just the woman's body that attracted him but the way she carried herself. Reflecting that the woman's movements were seductive but not purposely so, he attributes this seductiveness to her apparent "[withdrawal] into her own body…unbothered by any input from her mind, oblivious to the outside world." Michael identifies Frau Schmitz's unselfconscious grace as "an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body." However, the fifteen-year-old Michael does not realize this yet, and only focuses on the excitement the incident brings him, replaying in his mind the images of the woman again and again.

The teenage Michael uses his memories of the woman to fulfill his voyeuristic desire. The older Michael narrating the story reflects that is the woman's obliviousness that he found attractive, yet it is precisely this obliviousness that also facilitated her crimes as a Nazi. That Michael succumbs to the temptation to "forget the world in the recesses of the body" — that is, to forget the recent past for the sake of their affair — renders him complicit and more deeply entrenches him in the generational conflict between Nazi perpetrators and accommodators, and their children (a topic that will be explored later in the book).

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

The next week, Michael returns to Frau Schmitz's apartment. The previous week, he had tried not to think of her, but as he is still unable to attend school because of his hepatitis, he found himself with little else to do. The narrator then appears to shifts gears, proclaiming that being sick as a child is "such an enchanted interlude," as the "outside world…is only a distant murmur in the sickroom." While the outside world may be become more distant, the interior world of one's imagination and of books becomes more vivid. Michael's illness leaves him in a "labyrinth" of "desires, memories, fears, passions."

As he hinted in the previous chapter, Michael becomes more distant from the outside world as he retreats into the world of his imagination. That Michael's illness is what causes the "labyrinth" of his desire for the woman suggests, as he does explicitly later on in the novel, that the woman, with all the guilt that her crimes and secrecy bring with her, is like an illness.

Every day Michael feels guilty as he not only has wet dreams about the woman but actively fantasizes about her during the day. Despite his "moral upbringing," he finds himself rationalizing his desire, and decides that he will visit Frau Schmitz to apologize in order to avoid "the risk of becoming trapped in [his] own fantasies." Unable to recall why he actually went, the narrator reflects that his conscious decisions to do something do not always correspond with his actions. He claims that his behavior has "its own sources" or motivations, to which he has no conscious access.

Michael's feelings of guilt for desiring the woman anticipate his later guilt for loving her, and thus for implicitly accepting her crimes as a Nazi prison guard. Though Michael decides to visit the woman to avoid being trapped by his fantasies, this is a rationalization, and his visit actually roots him more deeply in his fantasies, as he takes the woman's "invitation to forget the world."

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

Outside the woman's apartment, Michael finds that she is not home and decides to wait outside her door until she returns. When Frau Schmitz finally arrives in the uniform of a streetcar conductor, she appears unsurprised but not annoyed that Michael is there. Tired, she asks him to fetch two coal scuttles from downstairs, and Michael, eager to comply, runs to the cellar, only to accidentally dislodge a mountain of coal around him. When he returns to Frau Schmitz's apartment with the coke (a type of fuel made from coal), she bursts into laughter, and he realizes that he's completely covered in coal dust and laughs with her.

That Michael must wait for the woman and that he eagerly complies with Frau Schmitz's request signals the dynamic that will dominate their affair. While Michael is usually waiting for the woman, both logistically for their lovemaking sessions and emotionally, the woman is the dominant and more powerful partner in their relationship.

Frau Schmitz offers to clean his clothes and run Michael a bath in the kitchen. Though she promises not to look as he undresses, she does so anyway as he self-consciously climbs into the tub. While Frau Schmitz beats the coal dust out of his clothes, Michael washes himself and has an erection. The woman soon returns with a towel, stretching it out in her arms for Michael, whose back is to her. She rubs him down but lets the towel fall, hugging him from behind, putting her hands on his chest and his erection. Frau Schmitz, who is also naked, says, "That's why you're here!" and the two have sex. Michael is at first tentative, but soon becomes more confident.

Again, the woman takes the role of a mother figure by offering to clean Michael. However, the woman shows that she is aware of Michael's desire for her. Just as Michael stared at the woman voyeuristically, she returns his gaze by watching him bathe. Though the woman is able to determine why Michael is there, she seems not to have considered the morality of her seduction of a 15-year-old boy, nor the consequences that the affair could have on him.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

The next night, while longing for Frau Schmitz, Michael feels that he falls in love with her. As the narrator, he wonders whether his love for her is the price for sex and confesses that he views sex as an indulgence that he feels obliged to make up for by "trying at least to love her…by facing up to it." He then recollects an early childhood memory in which his mother gave him a warm bath. As his room was unheated, he viewed that bath as an indulgence, and wondered why his mother was "spoiling" him. Returning back to the main story, the narrator recalls that he returned to school the next day both because Frau Schmitz "had so spoiled [him] that afternoon" and because he wanted to show off his "new manliness."

The narrator reinforces Frau Schmitz' role as his mother figure by comparing sex with Frau Schmitz to the warm bath that his mother gave him as a child. Michael's urge to make up for the sex by going to school suggests that he feels guilty for having "indulged." It also creates a divide between his affair with the woman and his schooling. While Frau Schmitz represents Michael's desire to forget the world, and thus to become complicit in forgetting the crimes of her generation, his school represents his education about the harsh realities of the world and the past.

After he sleeps with Frau Schmitz, Michael returns home late to find his parents and siblings already eating dinner. When asked why he is late, he lies, saying that he had gotten lost, and announces that he will be returning to school. Michael's mother reminds him of the doctor's recommendation to wait an additional three weeks, but turns to her husband for the final decision.

Michael's decision to cover up his time with the woman signals the distance that his affair with her will create between himself and the people around him.

Michael's father "looked thoughtful, the way he always did when [his] mother talked to him about the children or the household," and Michael wonders if his father is actually thinking about his son or his work as a philosophy professor. Though Michael sometimes resents his father for privileging his work over his family, he feels a sudden love and understanding for his entire family, realizing that soon he will be an adult and more distant from them. Though surrounded by his family at dinner, Michael feels "as if [he] were saying goodbye." Even as he yearns for Frau Schmitz, he feels "homesick" for his family. Recognizing his son's announcement as a statement rather than a request, Michael's father agrees that he can return to school. Though Michael is happy, he feels as if "[he'd] just said [his] final goodbyes."

As Michael's father thinks about his son's return to school, Michael reflects on his father's relationship to the rest of the family, revealing his inner conflict over his father's emotional distance. Though he has lingering feelings of resentment, Michael also feels nostalgia for his family—even as they are still presence—demonstrating the growing distance between himself and his family created by his desire for Frau Schmitz.

PART 1, CHAPTER 8

Over the next few days, Michael skips his last class to meet the woman. They shower and have sex. Frau Schmitz teaches Michael to be more sexually confident, and when they have sex, she "took possession of [him] as a matter of course" until he learns to "take possession of her too." After about a week of this ritual, Michael asks her, "What's your name?"—they've been avoiding until now choosing between formal and familiar forms of address. The woman asks why he wants to know, but seeing Michael's confusion at her suspicious response, she tells him that her name is Hanna.

By "taking possession" of each other, Michael and Hanna objectify each other, an aspect of their relationship exemplified by the fact that they don't know each other's names. Hanna's suspicious response to Michael's question indicates both her evasion of her past and her inability to read certain situations. Michael's avoidance of the formal and informal forms of address is a reference to a grammatical distinction in the German language when addressing someone of equal or lower social status. We can assume that Hanna uses the informal form of address for Michael, as she is older and calls him "kid," reinforcing her dominant role in the relationship. Though Michael's usage of the formal or informal is lost in translation, his hesitation to use either suggests his uncertainty of where he stands in the relationship.

Hanna then asks him for his name, and Michael, who thought she already knew from his schoolbooks, tells her his name is Michael Berg. Testing out his name, she says "My kid's called Michael, he's in college." Though Michael admits that he is actually in high school, he fails to correct her when she assumes that he is seventeen, rather than fifteen. In their first real conversation together, Michael confesses that he is skipping school to be with her and that he would have to "work like an idiot" to make up for the lost work. Hanna, who is suddenly angry, tells him to get out and scolds him for thinking his work is idiotic. She angrily describes her own work as idiotic and makes his schoolwork a condition for continuing their affair.

Hanna's seemingly irrational anger is a result of her misreading of Michael's idiomatic remark that he would have to "work like an idiot." As the novel later reveals, her anger is a result of her insecurity about her own inability to read. That Hanna makes Michael's education a condition of their affair reinforces her positions as a mother figure and as the dominant partner.

Shocked but still longing for Hanna, Michael agrees to do his schoolwork in order to keep seeing her. Hanna is "dismissive" toward him, and Michael is left confused as to what just happened, as he had never said either of their work was idiotic, and as to what he means to her. When Michael kisses her goodbye, she doesn't respond.

As a mother might withhold a reward in exchange for her child's completion of schoolwork, Hanna withholds affection and sex. Michael is once again mystified by Hanna's seeming inability to interpret certain situations and statements.

PART 1, CHAPTER 9

The narrator opens the chapter by reflecting on his sadness whenever he thinks back to the time of his affair with Hanna. He wonders whether his sorrow is due to nostalgia or to the "knowledge of what came later, and that what came out afterwards had been there all along." Speaking in abstractions, he wonders why beauty can be destroyed retroactively because of "concealed dark truths." Despite his happiness at that time, he is unable to remember it as happy because "it ended unhappily." Thinking about his younger self, Michael recognizes the awkwardness of his body, his average performance in school, his low self-esteem — and despite all of this, his energy and belief that he will succeed. He wonders whether he remembers his younger self with sadness because he had expectations that have never been fulfilled.

The adult Michael is filled with uncertainty about his feelings toward his past affair. Thinking of it saddens him, but he's unsure whether this is because he wishes to go back to that time with Hanna or whether it is because he later learned Hanna's "dark truths" — that she was complicit in the murder of countless people as a Nazi prison guard. Like Michael's childish fantasies about the Bahnhofstrasse building, the optimistic expectations of his teenage self are unfulfilled.

By contrast, Hanna was "rooted in the here and now." When Michael asks her about her life, she is evasive and hesitant to answer. She only gives him basic facts about herself, such as her age and her job, but "as if she rummaged around in a dusty chest to get [him] the answers." She doesn't seem to understand why Michael would want to know more about her. The future too seems unimportant to Hanna, as she is unwilling to discuss her and Michael's future relationship, nor even the immediate future, such as the bicycle trip Michael wants to take with her during Easter vacation.

Hanna's evasiveness is an example of the emotional distance that she keeps between herself and Michael. When Hanna does talk about herself, she does so in a detached manner, demonstrating that she is distant not only from Michael but also from herself. Her apparent inability to understand why Michael wants to know more about her is perhaps rooted in her inability to read certain situations, such as the fact that Michael wants more from her than just sex.

At this point, the narrator notes the strangeness of Michael's proposal, which included the suggestion that they rent a room together as mother and son. Whenever the teenage Michael had gone out with his mother, he was embarrassed to be seen by his friends. Yet the thought of being seen with Hanna, who is old enough to be his mother, makes him "proud." The narrator reflects on how a woman Hanna's age seems young to him now, and how a fifteen-year-old boy is merely a child. Nevertheless, his relationship with Hanna gave him a confidence that reflected in his interactions with his teachers and other teenagers.

Again, Hanna's role as a mother figure is apparent, as Michael is the one who proposes that Hanna pose as his mother. Michael's embarrassment when seen with his actual mother is a typical example of conflict between a teenager and his parent. Though Michael is proud to be seen with Hanna, his pride ultimately becomes a source of conflict for him, as their relationship comes to represent the accommodation of Nazis by everyday Germans

The narrator remembers his younger self's life as a blur at that time, as his days were busy with schoolwork and with his regular meetings with Hanna. Michael begins to lie to his family to miss dinner in order to stay with Hanna longer, because he starts reading to her. One day, after Michael tells her about the texts he is reading for school, Hanna asks him to read something to her, but he refuses. The next day, she makes reading aloud to her a condition of their having sex, and their routine of showering and sex is from then on preceded by his reading aloud. Hanna is an enthusiastic and attentive listener, and Michael, who is "completely happy," reads longer to stay with her longer.

As Michael spends more time with Hanna, he distances himself even more from his family by keeping Hanna a secret and by missing time with his family. Just as she made his schoolwork a condition for sex, Hanna makes their reading sessions yet another condition, establishing her dominance over Michael. Hanna's stubborn insistence that Michael read aloud to her is a hint to the reader of her illiteracy, which Michael will only discover years later.

PART 1, CHAPTER 10

At the beginning of his Easter vacation, Michael decides to surprise Hanna one morning by going on her streetcar. Expecting a private kiss on the second car, he is hurt to be rejected by Hanna, who stays in the first car, talking to the driver. Stop after stop, Michael "tried to impale Hanna with [his] stare," but she looks at him only once and otherwise ignores him.

Michael makes a romantic gesture toward Hanna, but Hanna ignores him, demonstrating the apparent one-sidedness of their relationship. Michael's intense stare at Hanna is an attempt to make her remember him, but she still ignores him.

Eventually, Michael leaves in tears and goes to Hanna's apartment to ask her why she acted as if she didn't know him. However, she returns the accusation, saying that he got onto the second car when she was in the first. When Michael tries to explain that he had gotten up early during his vacation to surprise her, she sarcastically mocks how hard that must have been.

Michael discovers that Hanna ignored him because she apparently misunderstood his intentions. Her cruel insistence that his actions have nothing to do with her demonstrates both the distance she imposes between them and her inability to empathize with him or to discern the consequences of their affair on his feelings and actions toward her.

Despite Hanna's poor treatment of him, Michael tries to understand her point of view and begins to apologize for upsetting her, only to be told that he "[doesn't] have the power to upset [her]." Though she dismisses him from her apartment, he returns and takes on all the responsibility, asking for forgiveness and claiming that he understands she is upset not because of him but because "she simply couldn't allow [him] to behave that way to her."

Unlike Hanna, who does not seem able or willing to empathize with Michael, Michael easily empathizes with Hanna and apologizes. However, in order to maintain her distance, Hanna does not accept his initial apology, as it would assume Michael's power over her emotions.

Hanna forgives and bathes him, and they have sex as usual. When Michael finally explains why he had gotten into the second car and not the first, Hanna lightheartedly dismisses the whole episode, but it sets a precedent for the rest of their relationship. Every time Hanna threatens to "send [him] away and withhold herself," Michael caves, taking all the blame for mistakes or intentions that weren't his and begging for her forgiveness.

Once again, Hanna's domineering behavior toward Michael—always dangling her attention before him as a "gift" she can take away—shows that she is the more powerful partner and controls the nature of their relationship.

PART 1, CHAPTER 11

Despite their fights, the narrator describes this time with Hanna as generally happy. Michael notes that Hanna "had trumped herself with her accusation that [he] hadn't wanted to know her," and to prevent him from accusing her of the same thing, they went on the bicycle trip that he had earlier proposed. The narrator then wonders excuse what he had told his mother and father, but he cannot remember.

Hanna inadvertently shows that her pride prevents her from admitting she was wrong and leads her to agree to things she was previously unwilling or uninterested in. Later, when Hanna is on trial, it is this same pride that proves her downfall. The narrator's inability to remember the lies he told his family about the bike trip is another example of his distance from others.

As Michael's pocket money isn't enough to cover the trip for both himself and Hanna, he sells his stamp collection at a much lower value than it is worth. Days before they leave, Hanna gets restless, fussing over what to bring and leaving Michael to plan out the route they will be taking. When they leave, the weather is beautiful, and they cycle past rich green woods, castles, and rivers, pointing out the sights to each other. They begin a routine of having sex in the mornings, cycling during the day, and sleeping through the nights.

Michael's decision to sell his stamps, a collection of monetary and possibly personal value, for Hanna signals his growing distance from his past self. Hanna's insistence that Michael handle all the planning, even minute details such as choosing food off the menu, is another hint from the narrator about Hanna's illiteracy.

Hanna lets Michael plan not only their bicycle routes but also the other logistics of their trip, such as choosing the inns, where they register as mother and son, as well as the food from menus. One morning, Michael decides to wake early to bring Hanna breakfast and leaves her a note. However, when he returns, she is inexplicably furious that he left. She whips his face with a leather belt and then breaks down into tears. Michael, who is shocked at her violence and sobs, doesn't know what to do. Eventually, after Hanna has calmed down and they have had sex, Hanna tells Michael that she was upset because he left with no explanation. When Michael tells her he left a note, Hanna claims that there wasn't one. Brushing off Michael's protests, Hanna has Michael read to her, and she becomes fully engaged with the story.

Michael's second attempt at a small romantic gesture is again thwarted by Hanna's inability to read and domineering attitude. Unable to understand the note he left her, she becomes angry and violent against him, but doesn't explain the real reason for her distress in order to hide her illiteracy. Just as Michael lies to his parents about his time with Hanna, Hanna lies to Michael about the note. This sudden act of violence also hints at a darker side to Hanna.

Again, the narrator feels to need to declare his and Hanna's happiness in spite of their fight. He feels that the fight and his witnessing of Hanna's tears made their relationship more "intimate" and that their lovemaking transcended mere "possession" of each other. The narrator then mentions a poem his teenage self wrote for Hanna. Imitating German poets Rainer Rilke and Gottfried Benn, the young Michael writes that when he and Hanna open themselves and become submerged in each other, they are more themselves.

Whereas Hanna and Michael had previously "taken possession" of each other, thereby objectifying each other, Michael believes that their fight allows them to grow closer and to know each other better. Ironically, though, the origin of the fight — Hanna's secret illiteracy — also illustrates how little they truly know each other.

PART 1, CHAPTER 12

Though he doesn't remember the lies he told his parents to cover up his trip with Hanna, Michael does remember what he had to do to convince his mother and father to let him stay home alone for the last week of his vacation while the rest of the family went elsewhere. His younger sister, who had threatened to stay at home with him rather than go to a friend's house, blackmails him into getting her jeans and a sweater. Because Michael had no money, he and his sister shoplift the items from a department store. Soon after that, Michael shoplifts a silk nightgown for Hanna from the same store and only narrowly escapes.

Now that Michael is fully engaged in his relationship with Hanna, he is not the same person he once was. Whereas at the beginning of Part 1, he was consumed with guilt over desiring Hanna, now he willingly steals for her, and he is no longer disturbed by the immorality of his actions. Michael's willingness to commit crimes after succumbing to his desire for Hanna allegorizes the complicity of those who excuse or accommodate wrongdoers.

Having successfully stolen the clothes for his younger sister, Michael looks forward to spending his week home alone with Hanna. One night, he invites her to his house for dinner. Though she examines the house's spacious rooms and objects curiously, she appears uncomfortable.

Though Michael regularly stays at Hanna's apartment, this is the first time she has seen his house. The sharp contrast between their homes represents the contrast between their social classes and daily lives. Whereas Michael belongs to a middle-class, educated family, Hanna is a member of the lower class, is illiterate, and has no family. These social differences cause Hanna to feel uncomfortable, creating even more distance between the two.

The narrator then describes the many "pictures" of Hanna that he has kept in his mind and the way he can watch them on his "mental projector." These pictures include Hanna putting on her stockings, Hanna standing naked with the towel stretched out in front of her, Hanna riding her bike, and Hanna standing in his father's study, her eyes looking tired.

Here the narrator elaborates a bit on the theme of memory as a series of lasting images, as he disconnects from the linear narrative to run through "slides" of his recollections of Hanna.

In the study, Hanna asks Michael to read something from one of his father's books. Though he does, neither of them understands it. Hanna asks if he will write books himself, but Michael replies that he doesn't know. After they finish dessert, they go to Hanna's apartment. Though Michael wants Hanna to stay at his house, she wants to leave, and Michael intuits that she feels like an intruder in his house. At Hanna's apartment, Michael gives her the nightgown, much to Hanna's delight. The image of Hanna laughing, dancing, and checking her appearance in the nightgown is another picture that has stayed with the narrator.

That neither Hanna nor Michael understands the passage about analysis mirrors their lack of understanding of their roles in the world or to each other, a fact that will only become apparent to them in Part 2. Hanna's discomfort in Michael's home is a sign that they will never be able to be completely open with each other. When Hanna asks Michael if he will write books himself, she is perhaps trying to gauge whether he will become as distant and unreadable to her as the book in his father's study.

PART 1, CHAPTER 13

Michael is now beginning a new school year in the eleventh grade. Because many students in his class had failed, his class is rearranged and he now has female classmates (there were only boys before). One of the girls, Sophie, sits next to him and is friendly toward him. Michael is excited to be in a class with girls, and he notices that unlike his male friends, he is comfortable around girls, because of the confidence his sexual experience has given him. Michael reflects that when he was young, he was either overconfident or insecure, and that his self-confidence was often determined more by his mood than by his actual successes or failures. Despite his fights with Hanna, their affair made him happy, and he viewed the start of his classes in a positive light.

Like his affair with an older woman, Michael's confidence separates him from his peers. Though he enjoys his unique position at first, it sets him up for disappointment and alienation later in life, when he begins to feel that his distance from his own generation makes him complicit in the previous generation's crimes.

Michael then describes the starkness of the classroom. When his eyes wander away from the room, he finds himself staring at Sophie, who returns his gaze with a smile. The teacher scolds him for being distracted, and he is called on to translate the *Odyssey*, which Michael loves. He wonders whether he should imagine Nausicaa, a beautiful princess from the *Odyssey*, as Hanna or as Sophie.

Michael turns his gaze toward Sophie and begins to feel attraction for her as well as for Hanna. His experience of having to "choose" which one to fantasize about shows a generational conflict even within Michael's romantic desires.

PART 1, CHAPTER 14

The narrator compares the failure of his relationship with Hanna to the failures of an airplane's engines. Like airplanes, which do not immediately fall out of the sky but rather glide, Michael's love for Hanna began to fail without either of them noticing. They maintain their ritual of reading, showering, and sex. When Michael reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Hanna, she is "absorbed" but doesn't comment as enthusiastically as before.

Michael and Hanna's relationship begins to dwindle. Hanna's less enthusiastic response to their latest reading session is perhaps partly because Tolstoy's novel is more concerned with questions of ethics and morality than the previous romances Michael had read her, and partly because Hanna, as the novel will later reveal, is now preoccupied with the thought of leaving to hide her illiteracy from her employers.

Michael and Hanna begin to call each other pet names. In addition to Kid, Hanna calls him Frog, Toad, Puppy, Toy, and Rose. When Hanna asks Michael what animal she reminds him of, he responds with "a horse," because of the muscles in her body. Turning over Michael's answer in her mind, Hanna is unusually uncertain but eventually decides that she likes it. One day, Hanna and Michael go to the theater in the next town to see a Schiller play. Though Michael doesn't care what people will think of them together in the theater, he realizes that he would care in their own town.

Though Michael and Hanna call each other pet names, apparently growing closer to each other, they maintain a certain distance from each other's lives by hiding their relationship from others. Though Michael was initially proud to be seen with Hanna, now he realizes that he would be embarrassed for his friends to see him with her, just as he would be embarrassed to be seen with his mother.

Michael begins to spend more and more time at the swimming pool with his classmates, and becomes torn between spending time with his friends and spending time with Hanna. Whenever Michael becomes annoyed with Hanna's bad temper, he wants to spend more time at the pool, but when Hanna "treated [him] like a nonentity," he becomes afraid of losing her and begs for forgiveness, but also becomes increasingly resentful.

Tension between Michael and Hanna mounts, as Michael becomes closer to his peers and thus to his own generation. Hanna, however, still stubbornly domineers Michael, as well as their relationship, causing Michael to resent her even as he continues to need and desire her.

PART 1, CHAPTER 15

Around this time, Michael begins to "betray" Hanna by keeping her secret from his friends. Michael, Sophie, and their friend Holger often go to the pool together, but Michael finds himself unable to talk about Hanna with them. Sophie asks Michael if his disappearances to spend time with Hanna have something to do with the hepatitis he had come down with earlier. Michael tells her that he is no longer sick, but is still unwilling to talk to her about Hanna. He offers to tell her another time, but that time never comes.

Just as Michael's illness magnified his guilty desire into a "labyrinth," now Michael treats his desire for Hanna as an illness by covering it up. Whereas Michael once felt guilty for desiring Hanna, now he feels guilty for keeping her a secret and thus for disavowing her. His secrecy about Hanna forms a wedge between himself and his friends, just as it did with his family.

PART 1, CHAPTER 16

Whenever Michael asks Hanna about her life, about what she does when he isn't there or when she isn't working, she dismisses his questions. Hanna "gave [him] the space in her life that she wanted [him] to have," and to want more would be "presumption" on Michael's part. Whenever Michael asks her about herself, she dodges the question, acting as if the question is ridiculous or intrusive, or counting her fingers playfully as if he were a small child.

Hanna's evasiveness to Michael's questions once again demonstrates their distant and uneven relationship. Taking the dominant role in their relationship, Hanna determines all terms of their affair.

Michael only ever saw her once in public by accident. Near the end of his summer vacation, Hanna was perpetually moody, until one day her stress was suddenly gone. They didn't start reading a new book together after *War and Peace*, but continue with the rest of their routine: Hanna bathes him, and they make love, yet Hanna "[gives] herself in a way she had never done before…as if she wanted [them] to drown together." She then dismisses him, telling him to go to his friends.

Hanna's decision to deviate from their routine foreshadows her departure. Though Hanna bathes him as usual, again evoking her role as a mother figure, they do not read a new book, perhaps because she knows they will not finish it. The difference in their lovemaking, "as if she wanted [them] to drown together," recalls the narrator's earlier comment on Hanna's "invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body."

At the pool, Michael suddenly sees Hanna standing at a distance, staring at him. Frozen, Michael wonders why she is there and what he should do, but when he stands up, she is gone. The narrator notes that the image of her and her inscrutable expression at the pool is another one of his mental pictures.

Hanna's gaze on Michael in public is perhaps her way of saying goodbye. Michael, however, will torment himself with this image for years, reading her expression as hurt and accusatory.

PART 1, CHAPTER 17

The next day, Hanna is gone. Her apartment is empty, and Michael calls Hanna's streetcar company to find that she hasn't been to work. He tracks down the owner of the **Bahnhofstrasse building** and is told that Hanna moved out that morning. He then goes to the streetcar company, where a man tells him that Hanna had rejected a promotion as a driver. Eventually, Michael visits the citizens' registration office, which informs him that Hanna had said she was moving to Hamburg.

Hanna's secrecy about her illiteracy leads her to make a sudden and unexplained departure, causing not only emotional but also physical distance between herself and Michael. This abrupt disappearance has a huge effect on Michael's life.

Days pass, and though Michael feels sick, he hides it from his family and friends. When he goes to the swimming pool, he stays in a remote part where he won't have to talk to others. Longing for Hanna, Michael is filled with guilt for not having immediately greeted her at the pool, and he believes that her departure was punishment.

Michael begins to feel even more guilt about Hanna, blaming himself (as he has always done whenever they had a conflict) and now actively distances himself from his friends as well.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

After Hanna leaves, Michael thinks about her constantly. He daydreams about her in classes and calls out her name and reaches out for her at night. Eventually, however, he is able to stop thinking about her and his guilt fades. After that, Michael remembers being happy at school and during his first few years at university. He describes this time as "effortless," in that relationships and friendships came easily to him and "nothing weighed heavily." Michael takes on "a posture of arrogant superiority" and behaves cruelly toward others, like Sophie, whom he has sex with but isn't interested in, and his grandfather, whose blessing Michael rejects. Yet despite his coldness and apparent indifference, Michael is at times extremely emotional, as "the smallest gesture of affection would bring a lump to [his] throat."

Though Hanna initially haunts his thoughts, eventually (over the course of years) Michael is able to stop feeling guilt for her—or for anyone else. This somewhat relieves his pain over losing Hanna, but his newfound indifference makes him emotionally distant from others as well, and his lack of guilt prevents him from taking responsibility for hurting others. Michael has been enormously affected by his relationship with Hanna, whether he's actively thinking of her or not.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

The next time Michael sees Hanna, it is in a courtroom at a trial concerning the concentration camps. Michael's professor at university is researching the Nazi past and decides to make the trial the focus of his seminar. The students consider themselves "radical explorers" of the past, zealously committing themselves to uncovering the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Michael and his fellow law students become deeply concerned with the crimes of the previous generation in Germany's recent past.

Not only do the students condemn camp guards and enforcers, but they also condemn "the generation that had been served by the guards and enforcers, or had done nothing to stop them, or had not banished them from its midst as it could have done after 1945." Many in the generation preceding Michael's had been involved in the Third Reich, some as army or SS officers, and others as government officials or judges. Michael recalls, "We all condemned our parents to shame, even if the only charge we could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst."

Guilt, to Michael and his classmates, must be assigned not only to direct perpetrators of crimes but also their accommodators and bystanders. That these people comprise the previous generation, and thus the generation of the students' parents, indicates a deep generational conflict over how to deal with the country's Nazi past.

Michael's class becomes known as "students of the camps." Reflecting back on his zealousness, the narrator views their behavior as "repulsive." They became convinced that it was their responsibility to make others aware of the horrible atrocities of the Nazi regime: "Even when the facts took our breath away, we held them up triumphantly. Look at this!" As time moves forward, Michael becomes more and more engaged with the horrors he discovers in his class and enthusiastically takes part in the class's fervor.

The students' belief that they must unearth images of Nazi horrors speaks to the novel's use of the image as both historical record and a kind of voyeurism—a way of preserving the past, but also a way of detaching oneself from it and "othering" it.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Michael and his classmates attend the trial, which is in another town. The defendants are sitting with the backs to the spectators, and when the defendants' names are called, Michael realizes that Hanna is one of them. Though he recognizes her, he "felt nothing."

The indifference Michael finally found after Hanna's departure remains, rendering him numb.

When the judge questions her, Michael learns that Hanna joined the SS voluntarily despite an offer of a promotion at her previous job. Hanna's lawyer is "too hasty and too zealous" in his defense, potentially damaging her chances. Hanna then testifies that she had served in Auschwitz and another camp, and since the war had lived in various towns, registering with the police each time. Now aware that Hanna has been detained by the police, Michael realizes with shock that he "had assumed it was both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody," not because of her crimes but because he wants her completely out of his life so that he doesn't have to face her again. We then learn that Hanna has been detained because she ignored summonses, and her lawyer fails to convince the judge to lift the detention order.

Just as Michael's teenage desire to be with Hanna set his moral compass askew, now his desire to keep Hanna away is compromising his moral judgment. Michael assumes that Hanna should be imprisoned not because of the wrongs she committed (though we don't know what those are yet) but because of his own selfish desire not to face her. The reason for Hanna's detainment — her ignoring of summonses — is another hint to the reader of her illiteracy. Michael is again acting as a kind of voyeur regarding Hanna, watching her trial while she (presumably) doesn't know that he's there.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Though his seminar requires him to attend the trial only once a week, Michael watches the trial every day. While the other defendants talk among themselves or with friends and family, Hanna stands alone, and Michael watches her from behind. He pays close attention to her body language, noting how straight her posture is, how her body reacts to overrulings or attacks during the trial.

Like his younger self in Part 1, Michael is intensely aware of Hanna's body. However, his awareness of her is not the result of romantic feelings or attraction, but rather an indication that despite his emotional distance, he is still haunted by her.

During the trial Michael feels nothing, as if he is numb, not only in the courtroom but in his everyday life. He "saw [him]self functioning at the university, with [his] parents and brother and sister and [his] friends, but inwardly [he] felt no involvement." He observes this phenomenon in the judges and in the court's spectators. In the early weeks of the trial, they reacted to the horrific evidence with tears and shock; later, they become accustomed to the horrors and "could smile and whisper to one another or even show traces of impatience." While the other students "kept being horrified all over again," Michael is detached.

Michael's indifference becomes numbness the longer he watches the trial. Unlike his classmates, who watch the trial only weekly and become horrified at the evidence on a weekly basis, Michael (who attends daily) grows numb and detached, suggesting that prolonged exposure to huge amounts of traumatic images or evidence can lead to desensitization and emotional indifference.

The narrator compares this numbness to that which death camp prisoners experience after being exposed to murder for long periods of time. This numbness is an important theme in survivor literature, which describes how it can cause both victims and perpetrators to become "selfish and indifferent" when "gassing and burning are everyday occurrences." Michael notes that the defendants still seems to be trapped in the "mental paralysis" caused by these horrors.

Michael's comparison of his own numbness to that of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators further suggests that the relationship between horror and indifference is reciprocal. The horrors of the Holocaust caused both its victims and its perpetrators to (often) become desensitized. This indifference in turn allowed the perpetrators to commit more horrors as if they were "everyday occurrences."

Despite his comparison of perpetrators, victims, and their descendants, the narrator confesses that he didn't and still doesn't feel comfortable with this idea. He emphasizes the importance of choice, the difference between "enduring suffering and imposing it on others." Though he is still eager to "explore and cast light on things," he is uncertain as to what his generation, the second generation, should do, and questions the morality of "mak[ing] the horrors an object of discussion."

The narrator's discomfort with this idea is rooted in the apparent equation of victims with perpetrators and descendants. Emphasizing the importance of choice, the narrator turns the focus back to the novel's main preoccupation with guilt. Though he is uncertain what his own generation should do, his consideration of the matter implies that his generation should in some way take responsibility.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

The indictment against the five female prison guards is read out during the second week of the trial. In 1944, they had been transferred from Auschwitz to a camp near Cracow. The camp had been run by a commandant, special troops, and other guards, but most did not survive a bombing raid and some, including the commandant, fled. Two prisoners, a mother and daughter, survived, and became the key witnesses in the trial against the five defendants. The daughter, who published a book about the camps, came to Germany to testify, and the court would be flying to Israel for the mother's deposition.

This chapter briefly recounts the crimes in which Hanna and the other guards were complicit. Located in Poland, Auschwitz was one of the most infamous and deadly concentration camps run by the SS (the German military). Millions of Jews, Romani, and other minorities considered undesirable to the German state were systematically murdered by the means of gas chambers, starvation, forced labor, and death marches.

The two principal charges were that every month the guards sent out 60 women to be killed in Auschwitz in exchange for 60 new prisoners; and that the guards had locked hundreds of prisoners in a burning church the night of the bombing.

In learning that Hanna had been a guard at Auschwitz, Michael must now deal with the fact that she was complicit in the deaths of hundreds of innocents—all before she ever met Michael at all.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

The trial goes poorly for Hanna, who speaks up to correct something in the indictment, only to be told by the judge that she had already had time to read through the charges. Hanna unwillingly agrees that the daughter's book not be read into the record and refuses to acknowledge that she admitted in a signed deposition to having the key to the church. When Hanna asks "why they were trying to hang something on her," the judge interprets her question as an accusation of the court's miscarriage of justice.

Hanna's illiteracy makes her vulnerable during the trial. Furthermore, her decision to hide her illiteracy for the sake of her pride led her to agree to a charge she did not commit. Her ignorance of the evidence—again, a result of her determination to hide her illiteracy—also weakens her defense.

Michael claims, "Hanna wanted to do the right thing" — that she denied claims she thought false and acknowledged claim she thought were true. However, Hanna is unable to see that her insistent contradictions are annoying the judge. Hanna, who "had no sense of context, of the rules of the game," only makes her situation worse by not trusting her lawyer.

Hanna's illiteracy is not confined to the written word, but also extends to her inability to read her surroundings and understand the impression she is making on others. Her perpetual distance from others prevents her from trusting her lawyer, thus worsening her situation.

Yet despite this, Hanna "achieved her own kind of success." When the judge asks Hanna if she knew she was sending people to their death, she answers, "Yes, but the new ones came, and the old ones had to make room for the new ones." When the judge tries to point out that Hanna had callously participated in murder for the sake of logistics, Hanna doesn't understand his point and asks the judge what he would have done. The judge, who wears a mask of irritation to think about his answer, responds in general terms, to the disappointment of the court and Hanna, who had been seeking a personal answer. Though the spectators are amazed that Hanna "won the exchange," Hanna is too busy wondering uncertainly whether she should have signed up for the SS in the first place.

Hanna's inability to understand the intent of the judge's question is an example of her social and moral illiteracy. Her question to the judge is yet another example of this, as she doesn't understand the inappropriateness of this question in the context of a trial. Though Michael believes Hanna was successful in her own way, Hanna's uncertainty even at the end of the exchange demonstrates that she still does not understand what she has done wrong and why she is on trial.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Hanna's admission of certain things harmed not only her own defense but also the defense of the other defendants, who had been favored by the evidence. The only available evidence for the locking of the church fire were the testimonies of the mother and daughter and the daughter's book. But the mother and daughter had been locked *inside* the church and would not have been able to see outside. Hanna's admissions, then, undermine the other defendants' strategies of claiming that they had been under orders, but their lawyers use the opportunity to incriminate Hanna while claiming their defendants' relative innocence. The lawyers argue that Hanna was the only one who knew that the women were being sent to their deaths. They argue that once Hanna was tired of her "special prisoners," young girls in the camp, she sent them to Auschwitz.

Though Hanna did not seem to realize that she was wrong to send people to their deaths, her sense of morality and responsibility seems to include telling the truth at least. Hanna's inability to read others and her own situation leaves her vulnerable to attack from the other defendants' lawyers, and worsens the case for the other women on trial as well.

The daughter suddenly interrupts, having remembered something from the camps, and she gives testimony that Hanna did had her favorites. She didn't make them work, gave them better barracks space and food, and met with them at night; and they were always sent to Auschwitz. Though the other prisoners all assumed that she sexually abused the girls, the daughter discovers from one of Hanna's favorites that they were actually reading aloud to her. At this point, Hanna, her eyes tired, turns around to look at Michael, who realizes she was aware of his presence the whole time. The judge asks the lawyer as well as Hanna's lawyer if they have further questions. Michael, who knows this is a good opportunity for Hanna, inwardly urges Hanna's lawyer to ask her if "she wanted to make that final month bearable" for her "favorites," but neither Hanna nor her lawyer speak up.

The daughter's testimony provides us with yet another hint at Hanna's illiteracy. That Hanna turns around to look at Michael when the daughter reveals that Hanna had the prisoners read to her is perhaps an acknowledgment, to Michael at least, of her illiteracy. It is also a sign that Michael has not been such an invisible observer as he thought—Hanna knew he was there, and has acted as she has with that knowledge of his presence. Though the new testimony provides Hanna an opportunity to mount a better defense, Hanna — either out of her unwillingness to give the barest hint of her illiteracy or out of her ignorance that this is a good opportunity for her — does not take action.

PART 2, CHAPTER 8

During the trial, Michael reads the English translation of the daughter's book, as it is the only version available to him. Though he initially believes the book feels alien and distant because of the translation, when he reads the German version, he discovers that the book itself creates distance. The daughter writes with "sobriety," "exud[ing] the very numbness" that Michael observes in the trial's spectators.

This chapter recounts the events in the daughter's book, which serves as evidence for the trial. Just as Michael noted about survivor literature, the numbness that engulfs Holocaust survivors and that engulfs him during the trial is "exuded" by the daughter's book.

Hanna's name doesn't appear in the book, though he sometimes thinks he recognizes her in the one of guards who is "young, pretty, and conscientiously unscrupulous in the fulfillment of her duties" and who reminds the daughter of "Mare," a guard from another camp who was also "young, beautiful, and diligent, but cruel and uncontrolled."

Hanna's emphasis on the details of her work (and simultaneous ignorance of the big picture, or the real results of what she's doing) seems familiar in this description.

The mother and daughter's last stop after Auschwitz is the camp near Cracow, whose conditions are slightly better and whose selections are smaller than at Auschwitz. However, when the camp is closed, the prisoners are forced to march and run in the winter with inadequate clothing and little more than rags and newspapers to protect their feet. Within a week, half the women die.

The prisoners are forced to participate in a death march. Toward the end of the war, as Allied forces advanced on Germany, the Nazis forced tens of thousands of prisoners to march in poor conditions away from the death camps in order to cover up their atrocities. Thousands died along the way.

While the guards commandeer a priest's house, the prisoners shelter in the church. However, bombs soon fall and the church's steeple burns, crashing through the roof of the church. When the women realize what is happening they scream and throw themselves at the doors, but they don't open. As the roof was open, most of the women did not suffocate but burned to death. The mother and daughter survived only because the mother had hidden them in the gallery, though it was closer to the fire. They stood against the narrow walls, waiting until the next night to leave, much to the astonishment of the villagers.

The chapter concludes with the unexpected survival of the daughter and her mother, whose testimonies are the primary evidence against the guards in the trial. In this brutal first-person account we get a brief glimpse of the kind of horror Hanna is accused of perpetuating.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9

The judge asks each defendant why she didn't unlock the doors, and each answers that she was unable to do so, because they were in shock or wounded or busy helping the wounded, and that they had not seen the church fire yet. The judge tells each of them, "The record indicated otherwise"—as the report from the SS archives suggested that the female guards had stayed behind to prevent the prisoners from escaping and kept them locked in a burning church. The women say the report is false, and one defendant points to Hanna, claiming that she wrote the report as a cover up.

As Hanna cannot read or write, the defendant's accusation that Hanna wrote the report is obviously a lie. Yet as we will see, Hanna seems determined to continue to hide her illiteracy at any cost—even if it means being accused of things she didn't do, and suffering years of prison as a result of such accusations.

When the judge asks Hanna why she did not unlock the door, Hanna tells him they had no other option, as they were outnumbered. Hanna claims that they couldn't let the prisoners escape, because they wouldn't have been able to restore order. Trying to defend herself, she insists that they had guarded the prisoners to prevent them from escaping, as so many had already died, but her attempts to defend herself only make her look worse. Hanna tells the judge that she and the other guards discussed together what they would write on the report, but the other defendant again accuses Hanna. A prosecutor suggests that they call a handwriting expert, but then Hanna tells them there is no need, and she confesses to writing the report.

Hanna is unable to parse the impression her explanations make on the judge and the spectators. Explaining why she did not unlock the door, she shows that she privileged her ability to control the prisoners over their lives. In order to hide her illiteracy, Hanna falsely confesses to writing the report. Just as her pride caused her to agree reluctantly to an Easter vacation bike trip with Michael, her pride pushes her to make a false confession that will severely damage her defense.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10

Though Michael does not remember the Friday seminars for his concentration camp seminar, he does remember his Sundays, which he would spend immersed in nature. One day when he is walking the woods, thinking about Hanna, he realizes, as if he had known it all along, that Hanna is illiterate. Her illiteracy explains many facets of her life — why she made Michael read to her, why she let Michael make all the arrangements for their bicycle trip, why she rejected promotions, why she became a Nazi prison guard, and why she falsely confessed to writing the report.

Michael finally realizes that Hanna is illiterate and that her determination to keep it secret explains many of her interactions with Michael and the life choices she has made. This is the key he's been looking for—but finding it only leads to more frustration, as Hanna has seemingly privileged keeping this secret above everything else, including the lives of others and even her own life.

Michael wonders whether Hanna had sent her favorite prisoners to Auschwitz to keep her secret. Though he understands how Hanna's shame might push other people away, he has difficulty grasping the idea that this shame is enough to commit murder, that the reputation of a criminal is better than that of an illiterate. However, Michael rejects the idea that Hanna had actively chosen crime to hide her shame and chooses to believe that Hanna simply wanted to make the weaker prisoners' last month bearable. He believes that Hanna "did not calculate" or weigh her illiteracy against her crimes, but rather was "fighting for her own truth" by keeping her illiteracy secret.

Michael is initially torn between his urge to understand Hanna's motivations for her crimes and his suspicions that she is calculating and cruel. Ultimately, however, Michael choses to see the best in Hanna. Michael's rejection of the possibility that Hanna actively chose crime to hide her illiteracy implicitly endorses Hannah Arendt's theory of the "banality of evil," the idea that evil is not always created by sadistic monsters but can be caused by the indifference and ignorance of regular people.

Michael realizes how different Hanna's worries must have been from what he had imagined. Michael thought that his betrayal made Hanna leave, but she was actually trying to hide her illiteracy from the streetcar company. Nevertheless, Michael does not absolve himself of responsibility for betraying Hanna. He believes that even if he wasn't guilty for betraying a criminal, he was guilty for loving one.

Though Michael had sworn off guilt after Hanna left him, his old feelings return even after he realizes that he did not *cause Hanna to leave. Though he knows intellectually that he may not be guilty for betraying her by keeping the affair secret, he still feels guilty because he loved her.*

PART 2, CHAPTER 11

Because Hanna admitted to writing the report, the other defendants are able to claim that she had made the decisions and forced them to do her bidding. The villagers who had met the defendants cannot confirm or deny this, and are unwilling to admit anything that could incriminate themselves for not having stopped the women. Hanna, who still confirms what she believes is true and denies what is not, eventually gives up and speaks only when questioned.

Because Hanna falsely admits to writing the report—choosing a murder charge and its accompanying punishments over the revelation that she's illiterate—the other defendants are able to take advantage of her confession in order to avoid taking responsibility for the charges against them.

Michael debates whether or not he should tell the judge that Hanna is illiterate, that though she may be guilty she is not as guilty as the other defendants make her out to be. Yet Michael realizes that Hanna is not willing to expose herself as illiterate even for a shorter prison sentence. He wonders what she stands to gain from the "false self-image which ensnared her and crippled her and paralyzed her," noting that the energy she spent hiding her illiteracy could have easily been used to learn to read. Without revealing specifics, Michael uses comparable examples to discuss the problem with friends, but doesn't find any helpful advice.

Michael ponders over why Hanna lied in order to maintain her secret, observing that she could have diverted the energy she used in hiding the secret toward learning how to read, thus allowing her to live her life more fully. Ironically, however, Michael makes and will continue to make the same mistake throughout much of his adulthood—by hiding his past with Hanna, and allowing that secret to strongly affect his life.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12

Michael decides to seek his father's advice, not because they are close but because of the distance between them. During Michael's childhood, his father rarely expressed emotions, despite Michael's now-dissipated childhood belief in "a wealth of undiscovered treasure behind that uncommunicative manner." When Michael and his siblings wanted to speak to their father, they had to schedule appointments with him, like his students.

Like his relationship with Hanna, Michael's relationship with his father is an example of generational or parent-child conflict. Similar to Hanna, Michael's father is emotionally distant, though Michael initially hopes otherwise for both of them.

Michael presents his problem as an abstract and in examples, but his father deduces that it has to do with the trial. His father thinks about the problem, then discusses the right of the individual to freedom and dignity. As an example, his father points to Michael's boyish anger that his mother made all his decisions, saying, "Philosophy has forgotten about children…the way I forget about you." When his father tells him that he must put another's human dignity before one's notion of her happiness, Michael is relieved. His father advises him that he must try to convince the person to reveal her secret for her own good, rather than talk behind her back.

That Michael considers revealing Hanna's illiteracy at all suggests that he feels somewhat responsible for her. However, his relief at his father's initial advice not to reveal Hanna's secret shows that he is unwilling to truly pursue this responsibility. In advising Michael, his father both demonstrates his memory of his son's childhood and acknowledges the distance between them. Speaking in the present tense, his confession that he "forgets" Michael sometimes seems to be an apology for the state of their relationship.

Michael doesn't know how he could face Hanna, however, and though he knows the question is immaterial, asks his father what he should do if he can't talk to her. His father realizes that he can't help his son, and tells him that as a father he finds his inability to help his son "almost unbearable." Michael has nothing to say to this, as he isn't sure if this is true. His father tells him he can visit any time, but Michael doesn't believe him.

Michael is somewhat skeptical about his father's unexpected emotional display. Despite his father's acknowledgment of their distant relationship, and his offer that Michael can visit any time, Michael does not believe him, suggesting that their relationship cannot ever be wholly repaired.

PART 2, CHAPTER 13

While the court flies to Israel as "a combined judicial and touristic outing," Michael plans to spend his two free weeks studying, but finds himself unable to concentrate. He imagines Hanna cruelly standing by a burning church, sending off her readers to Auschwitz, and screaming orders to prisoners, as well as the images of Hanna he has held onto from their affair: Hanna with her stockings, in front of the bathtub, riding her bike, laughing. He also imagines combinations of these images (such as a cruel Hanna listening to him read), which make him simultaneously ashamed, aroused, angry, and afraid.

The mental images of Hanna that Michael has stored in his mind become mixed with the horrific images evoked by the trial, causing him to feel even more conflicted about Hanna. This also complicates the novel's idea of images as memory—nostalgic mementos of the past become mingled with evidence of past horror.

Michael realizes that the images he had of the camps are undermining his memories. The narrator reflects on the scarcity of photographic evidence back then and on the plethora of books and movies that have embedded the Holocaust into collective memory in the present day. The narrator claims that "Back then, the imagination was almost static," as the Holocaust seemed too horrible to imagine. The images from Allied photographs and survivor testimony were recycled so often they became clichés.

Images of the Holocaust function as memory for Michael and the other spectators. Unlike the present day, in which Holocaust movies and media abound, for Michael as a young law student, the atrocities can only be remembered as "static" clichés, as the Holocaust was simply incomprehensible.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14

In order to understand the concentration camps without the "clichés," Michael decides to visit Struthof, a concentration camp in Alsace. He hitchhikes, and his driver asks him why he is visiting the camp. Michael tells him about the trial and how he wants first-hand knowledge. The driver, who seems sarcastic, asks him if he wants to understand why people murder, why the Holocaust occurred when "there was no reason for hatred, and no war." Though Michael agrees, the tone in which the driver speaks is argumentative and sarcastic. Comparing Nazi perpetrators to executioners, the driver claims that they kill not because of orders or obedience but because of indifference.

Similar to Michael's belief that Hanna had fallen into her job as an SS prison guard out of ignorance, the driver's claim that the Nazis killed out of indifference, rather than because of hatred or orders, recalls Hannah Arendt's theory about the "banality of evil." It also supports the idea that people can easily become desensitized and emotionally detached even from the most horrible acts.

Expecting Michael to contradict him, the driver assumes that he was raised to believe in "human dignity" and "reverence for life," mockingly asking "Isn't that what they taught you?" He then starts talking about a photograph he once saw of Jews being murdered in Russia. The driver claims that though he didn't hate the Jews, one of the soldiers standing behind them looked "satisfied, even cheerful… perhaps because the day's work was getting done." Michael asks the driver if *he* was the man in the photo, and the man kicks him out, leaving Michael to walk the rest of the way to the concentration camp.

The driver's over-identification with a Nazi soldier, combined perhaps with his antagonistic attitude, causes Michael to insinuate the man's guilt. The driver's ridiculing of values such as the belief in human dignity and the preservation of life betrays the man's indifference toward others' suffering, hinting at the continued presence of Nazi sympathizers and accommodators in Germany after the war. Once again an image is used as a powerful memory-object.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15

During the narrator's most recent visit to Struthof, the camp is closed, and the grounds are covered with snow, leaving no trace of the camp's horrors. The narrator remembers that during Michael's first visit, he saw the barracks, the crematorium ovens, and the prison cells. He had tried to imagine what the camp must have been like for inhabitants, but could not picture it.

Despite his visits to the concentration camp and his witnessing of the camp's ruins, Michael is unable to imagine the camp during the Nazi regime, suggesting that its horrors could only be remembered through the "clichéd" images he had encountered during the trial.

On his way back, the narrator (on his most recent visit to Struthof) is embarrassed to look for a restaurant and feels awkward, not because of his visit to the camp, but because he self-conscious about how he is supposed to feel. Michael finds a restaurant whose name, Au Petit Garcon (The Little Boy), reminds him of Hanna's nickname for him.

As an older man, Michael's uncertainty about how to feel about his visit to the concentration camp echoes the uncertainty he expressed in Part 1 about his feelings toward Hanna.

On his first visit to Struthof, Michael walked around until closing and felt nothing but emptiness. He then hitchhiked to the next village and rented a room. While eating dinner, he notices four men throwing cigarette butts at an old man with a wooden leg. No one else says anything, but Michael furiously tells them to stop. The old man then takes off his wooden leg, hits the men's table with it, and laughs alongside the four men, as they all mock Michael's "Stop it!"

Michael's feelings of emptiness after visiting the camp for the first time are perhaps a consequence of the emotional numbness the trial has engrained in him. Like the driver's opinions, the absurd encounter in which Michael tries to defend an old man from the bullying of four other men, only to have all five of them mock Michael, demonstrates the omnipresence of indifference and cruelty.

That night Michael is restless and feels unready to face the rest of his life. Though he wants to condemn Hanna's crimes, he also wants to understand them, but feels torn between not wanting to "betray" Hanna by "failing to understand" and not want to excuse her wrongdoing. The next day, Michael hitchhikes back home, his images of Struthof joining the other frozen clichés in his mind.

Michael's conflicting desires to understand and to condemn Hanna's crimes are emblematic of the generational conflict between Nazis, sympathizers, accommodators, and bystanders, and their children.

PART 2, CHAPTER 16

Michael decides to visit the judge but cannot bring himself to visit Hanna. Feeling hurt at being deceived, he questions whether he was no more to her than a reader and "little bedmate" to be used. He convinces himself that he is seeing the judge for the sake of justice, but as the narrator, he admits that he actually wanted to "meddle with her, have some kind of influence and effect on her."

Michael's previous resentment over Hanna's dominance in their relationship resurfaces, motivating Michael to visit the judge in order to somehow influence her, as she had influenced him.

Aware of Michael's seminar, the judge is friendly and happy to talk to him. They chat pleasantly about the seminar, Michael's studies, and the judge's own experiences in law school. Eventually, their conversation comes to an end without Michael mentioning Hanna. By the time Michael leaves, the numbness of the trial dulls his emotions and he is "no longer upset at having been left, deceived, and used by Hanna." He feels as if he can "return to and continue to live [his] everyday life."

Though Michael had grown resentful toward Hanna during the two weeks away from the trial, here he becomes numb again, perhaps as a result of meeting the judge and thus of the return of the trial. After the discussion of indifference (as related to perpetuating evil) that he's just had, however, this numbness now seems more sinister than ever.

PART 2, CHAPTER 17

While the other defendants receive terms in jails, Hanna is sentenced to life. The courtroom is full and loud the day the verdict is to be announced. When the defendants appear, a hush falls over the crowd as they whisper to each other, "Look!"

The crowd in the court voyeuristically watches the verdict, making a spectacle of the defendants' fates.

Hanna is dressed in a black suit with a white shirt, which makes it look as if she is a uniform. Though Michael had never seen the SS uniform for women, he and the other spectators strongly associate Hanna's clothes with the SS. Outraged, the spectators whisper to each other and soon begin shouting out at her. While the verdict is announced, Michael stares at Hanna, who "looked straight ahead and through everything" with "a proud, wounded, lost, and infinitely tired look."

The crowd takes voyeuristic pleasure in condemning Hanna, who does not seem to understand the impression that her appearance gives to the court. Despite the crowd's jeering, Hanna tries to maintain the professional demeanor that she had upheld as a Nazi prison guard and that hindered her defense. It's suggested that her "infinitely tired" look comes from the years spent guarding her secret.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1

After the trial, Michael spends most of his summer and winter semester studying at the library or at home, avoiding or brushing off acquaintances. His feeling of numbness remains, and he moves away from home to rent a room. Despite Michael's aloofness, his classmates invite him on a ski trip and he accepts. Though he is not a skilled skier, he purposefully risks falls by attempting to ski more difficult slopes. Because he doesn't feel cold, he neglects to protect himself from the weather and has to be brought to a hospital for a fever.

Just as he distanced himself from friends after Hanna left him, Michael distances himself from classmates and acquaintances after Hanna is imprisoned. That Michael purposefully puts himself in harm's way indicates that he no longer views his life or himself as important, suggesting a disconnection from himself similar to that of Hanna.

When Michael returns from the hospital, the numbness disappears and "all the questions and fears, accusations and self-accusations, all the horror and pain that had erupted during the trial and been immediately deadened were back." The narrator believes that his numbness had to overwhelm him physically in order to let go of him psychologically. By the time Michael finishes his studies and begins clerking with a judge, the student movements in Germany have begun. Though he is aware of the students' calls for university reforms, protests against the Vietnam War, and most importantly, their struggle to deal with Germany's Nazi past, Michael does not take part because he still feels disconnected from the other students.

Michael regards his numbness as an illness that passes with his fever. Yet though he is no longer numb, Michael still feels disconnected from his peers, many of whom are taking part in the student protests against the continued presence of Nazis and Nazi sympathizers in universities and government. Because of his relationship with Hanna, he doesn't feel as morally sure of himself as someone who is totally non-complicit in the Holocaust, and thus able to judge those who are.

The narrator then proposes that the struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past "was not the reason for the generational conflict that drove the student movement, but merely the form it took." Though every generation seeks to free itself in some way from their parents, the previous generation's expectations were especially "nullified" by their moral failures during the Nazi regime. The narrator notes that this issue even affected children with morally unobjectionable parents: "For them, coming to grips with the Nazi past was not merely the form taken by a generational conflict, it was the issue itself."

For Michael's generation, dealing with the Nazi past was both the form of generational conflict—in that his peers struggled with their parents' past—and the issue itself, in that this struggle caused moral conflict between generations. For example, Michael's condemnation of his parents as complicit, despite their blamelessness, is itself a source of more generational conflict.

For Michael's generation, collective guilt was "a lived reality." The fact that after the war, Jewish graves were still being vandalized with swastikas and that former Nazis were still involved in government and universities contributed to the students' collective guilt. The narrator reflects that "pointing at the guilty parties" for these acts helped to alleviate, if not the students' shame, at least their suffering of shame.

The continued presence of German anti-Semitism and the accommodation of former Nazis in society is a source of collective guilt for the students. The narrator represents their "pointing" at the guilty not necessarily as a moral obligation but as a way to relieve their own shame.

However, Michael feels that he has no one else to blame, especially not his mother and father, whom he is now embarrassed to have condemned during his concentration camps seminar. Michael realizes that the only culpable person that he knows personally is Hanna, and that he must "point at" her. But if he points at her, he must also point at himself, as he had chosen her and loved her. Michael tries to rationalize his love by comparing it to the innocence of filial love, but then decides that love for one's parents is the only love that can be excused.

Unlike his peers, Michael is unable to point at anyone but Hanna and himself. He believes that he is guilty because he loved Hanna, and is therefore complicit in his crimes. Unlike his peers, who despite their love for their parents, did not choose them, Michael chose *to love Hanna.*

Yet Michael then assigns guilt even to filial love, pointing to the supposed incompatibility of feeling guilt with his fellow students' "parad[ing] [of] one's self-righteousness." The narrator wonders if the students' "dissociation" from their parents is "mere rhetoric" hiding their own complicity for loving their parents. Though Michael does not receive comfort from the thought that his pain for loving Hanna was "a German fate", albeit one more difficult to avoid than others, he reflects that "it would have been good for [him] back then" to have been more integrated into his generation.

Michael's claim that even filial love may be subject to guilt is perhaps a way for him to alleviate his own feelings of guilt – though he cannot point at his parents, he can point at his peers. However, Michael envies them all the same, as his guilt over loving Hanna makes him feel disconnected from his generation. Nevertheless, that he identifies his pain as "a German fate" indicates the shared nature of guilt among the entire nation, of which he is still a part.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

While working as a clerk, Michael marries Gertrud, a law student whom he met at the ski lodge and who becomes pregnant with his child. The narrator describes his wife as "smart, efficient, and loyal" and his marriage as unhappy. Despite Michael's desire to "be free of" Hanna, he keeps Hanna a secret from Gertrud and never stops comparing Gertrud to Hanna.

The emotional distance that Michael feels after Hanna leaves him is evident both in his secrecy about Hanna and in his depiction of his wife as "smart, efficient, and loyal" – adjectives that might be better suited to an employer's description of a good employee rather than a husband's description of his wife.

Michael and Gertrud divorce when their daughter, Julia, is five. Though the divorce is smooth and without bitterness, Michael feels "tormented" that he is denying Julia "the sense of warmth and safety she obviously craved." Julia's unhappiness because of the divorce makes Michael feel guilty and pushes him to become more open in his relationships and to discuss Hanna. However, the narrator claims that the women he dated did not want to hear much about Hanna, and so he stopped talking about her, because "the truth of what one says lies in what one does."

Michael's emotional distance makes his marriage to Gertrud unsuccessful, causing him to feel guilt about the impact of the divorce on his daughter. However, unlike his guilt about Hanna, which was ultimately destructive and distanced him from others, his guilt over his daughter's sorrow pushes him to become more open in his relationships. Yet Hanna continues to loom over his life, whether he talks about her or not.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3

At this point, the narrative jumps back in time to when Michael is still married to Gertrud and the concentration camps seminar professor has just died. Despite Michael's initial reluctance to go to the funeral and to be reminded of the trial, the memories come back to him and he takes a streetcar to the funeral "as if [he] had an appointment with the past that [he] couldn't miss." The narrator recollects how different the streetcars used to look. He remembers how each conductor's personality determined the car's atmosphere and inwardly kicks himself for not seeing what Hanna was like as a conductor.

Though Michael tries to avoid his past, Hanna and the trial still haunt him. Michael appears almost nostalgic as he thinks back to his time as a teenager and law student and reflects on his memories of how streetcars looked back then.

At the graveyard, Michael stands apart from the mourners and recognizes one as a former classmate from the professor's concentration camps seminar. They exchange pleasantries, and the man asks Michael why he attended the trial every day, noting that the other students all wondered why he was always staring at a single defendant. The man talks on, chatting about the other students in the class before asking again what was going on between him and Hanna. Unsure of how to answer, Michael dodges the question with a quick goodbye and escapes into a passing streetcar.

Michael's uncertainty about how to answer his classmate's question about Hanna highlights the fact that he has still not come to terms even with their relationship, much less her Nazi past and thus with the generational conflict that made him feel especially complicit. Once again, Michael chooses to distance himself rather than engage these difficult questions directly.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4

By this time, Julia is in kindergarten, Gertrud is working as a judge, and Michael has been having a difficult time deciding what legal profession he should pursue. His witnessing of Hanna's trial led him to believe that prosecution, defense, and judging were all "grotesque oversimplification[s]", and he finds administration "dreary." Eventually, he falls into a research position. Despite Gertrud's claim that it is "an evasion, an escape from the challenges and responsibilities of life," Michael is glad to escape and pursues legal history as a career.

Michael's desire to "escape…the challenges and responsibilities of life" by taking a research position echoes his previous attraction to Hanna's obliviousness. Just as he succumbs to Hanna's "invitation to forget the world," Michael escapes into legal history.

The narrator asserts that studying the past is just as rich as participating in the present, and that "doing history means building bridges between the past and the present…taking an active part on both sides." He points to an example from his own life: law in the Third Reich was one of his research areas. He claims that his escape was not an obsession with the past but "a determined focus on the present and the future that is blind to the legacy of the past which brands us."

While the narrator admits his profession is an escape, he also believes it is productive and allows him to better understand the present in light of the past. Though Michael had been avoiding confrontation with his past, his decision to study the Third Reich allows him take some responsibility for the past, even while escaping responsibility for the present.

Yet at the same time, Michael found it "gratifying" to explore a past that was not immediately connected to him or his present. Michael's study of Enlightenment legal codes, which were founded on the idea that good order is possible, made him happy, leading him to believe that the history of law was generally one of progress. Later, he dismisses this idea as a pipe dream and theorizes that law continually seeks its origin, much like Odysseus from *The Odyssey*, which Michael had been rereading at this time. The narrator claims that like *The Odyssey*, the history of law is "the story of motion both purposeful and purposeless, successful and futile."

The narrator's musings on the history of law compares the course of law to that of Odysseus, whose "story of motion [is] both purposeful and purposeless, successful and futile." Like Odysseus and Michael's conception of law, Michael is constantly seeking his own origin through Hanna, encountering both successes and failures during the affair and in the aftermath of the trial.

PART 3, CHAPTER 5

After Michael separates from Gertrud, he becomes restless. Feeling haunted by Hanna, he records himself on **tape** reading *The Odyssey* and other works aloud. Eventually, eight years into Hanna's prison sentence, he sends her the tapes and continues sending them to her for the next ten years, until she is granted clemency. He records his favorites, German writers such as Theodor Fontane and Eduard Mörike, as well as poetry and his own writing, but never leaves any personal messages for Hanna.

Though Michael now reads to Hanna aloud again, just as he did during their affair, this time he does so at a distance. He records his reading on tape and never leaves any personal messages for her, suggesting that though he may still feel a sense of responsibility toward her, they cannot resume the relationship as it once was.

PART 3, CHAPTER 6

Four years after Michael starts sending Hanna the **tapes**, Hanna sends him a hand-written note thanking him. The handwriting looks like child's writing, but Michael is overjoyed that Hanna can finally read and write. In the past few years, Michael had read about illiteracy, the helplessness that it inflicts on people's lives, and the energy it costs them to hide it. Though Michael is proud that Hanna has taken "a step towards liberation," he also feels sorry for her, for having a "delayed and failed life."

Hanna's newfound literacy is a mark of independence, but it is a bittersweet victory. That Hanna had waited so long to learn left her with a "delayed and failed life," one filled with her struggle to hide her illiteracy and that ultimately led her to prison.

After Hanna's first note, she regularly sends him brief notes thanking him, commenting on the book Michael read to her, or describing her life in prison. Though she assumes all the books Michael records are contemporary, Hanna's literary observations are "astonishingly on the mark." Despite Hanna's many notes, Michael never writes to Hanna but keeps reading to her, even when he is in America or on vacation. Reading to Hanna is Michael's "way of speaking to her, with her." Michael keeps all of her notes, observing that over the years her handwriting became "lighter and more confident."

After she learns how to read, Hanna's observations are "astonishingly on the mark," suggesting that her previous misunderstandings and misinterpretations were not from a lack of intelligence but rather a lack of applied thought. Though Michael keeps sending her tapes, he never returns Hanna's messages, maintaining his distance by withholding himself from her (similar to how she once withheld herself from him).

PART 3, CHAPTER 7

Michael is comfortable with his "both close and removed" relationship with Hanna, and is surprised when he receives a letter from the prison warden informing him that Hanna will most likely be released in the next year. The warden's letter reveals that Michael is Hanna's only contact with the outside world and asks Michael to not only help arrange a job and apartment for her but also to be there to help her adjust to day-to-day life outside of prison.

Michael finds his relationship with Hanna comfortable, as it allows him to stay connected to her (and ease his sense of guilt and responsibility) without being fully invested in her as he once was, or feel like he is truly complicit in her past crimes.

The warden seems to sincerely care about helping Hanna, and Michael, who has heard of the "extraordinary" reputation of the warden's institution, likes the letter but is wary about the future. Though he finds an apartment and a job, and researches social services and educational programs for Hanna, he is afraid that their past will damage the safe relationship they have now. A year passes, and Michael does not visit Hanna until the warden calls to let him know that Hanna will be released in a week.

As Michael feels responsible for Hanna, he makes logistical arrangements for her release, but he does not see her. Michael's hesitation to visit Hanna in prison indicates that he is still not entirely ready to confront the baggage in their relationship.

PART 3, CHAPTER 8

Michael visits the prison for the first time, looking for Hanna. A guard points her out to him, and Michael is shocked to see an old, heavy woman with gray hair and wrinkles. When Hanna realizes Michael is watching her, she is initially happy to see him but then looks "uncertain and hurt" when she sees Michael's disbelief. Though "the light go[es] out of her face," when Michael approaches her, she greets him amicably with his old nickname "kid." The narrator then describes how his younger self had loved the "freshness" of Hanna's smell, regardless of whether it was the scent of her sweat or her perfume. Yet now, in the prison, Michael only "smell[s] an old woman."

By this time, it has been nearly 20 years since the trial, and Hanna is now an old woman. Though Hanna still greets Michael with her pet name for him, Michael does not recognize the woman he once loved in her, suggesting that the relationship they once had cannot be resurrected. Hanna, for her part, seems crushed that Michael no longer sees her as he once did—she has lost her power over him as well as her connection to him.

Michael realizes he has disappointed Hanna with his reaction and tries to make up for it, expressing his happiness about her upcoming release and telling her about the apartment, job, and resources he found for her. Their conversation turns to reading, and Hanna assumes that Michael will no longer read aloud to her. Though Michael does not outwardly agree, he cannot see himself either recording **tapes** for her or reading to her in person. He tells her how proud he was that she had learned to read, but inwardly realizes how much it must have cost Hanna to learn, only to have him fail to answer her notes or visit her. Michael feels guilty that he had confined Hanna to a "niche," but then asks himself indignantly, "Why should I have given her a place in my life?"

Michael is conflicted between guilt that he has somehow failed Hanna and indignation that she has hurt him. Now that Hanna is about to be released, Michael no longer feels able to make the tapes for her, as it would be too similar to their relationship during his teenage years. While Hanna was in prison, Michael had sent the tapes because he felt a sense of responsibility toward her, but was only able to act on it from a distance — whereas in Part 2, when he had felt responsible for her, he refrained from acting because of the possibility of facing Hanna again.

He asks Hanna if she had ever thought about her crimes when they were together, but Hanna evades the question, saying that no one understood her, and that therefore no one, not even the courts, "could call [her] to account"—no one but the dead. Hanna tells Michael that the dead visited her every night in prison, but before the trial, she "could still chase them away." Michael doesn't know how to respond and says nothing. At Hanna's prompting, he talks briefly about his ex-wife and daughter instead, but Hanna has nothing to say either. Michael then tells her he will pick her up next week, and they exchange uncomfortable goodbyes.

Hanna's evasive answer implies that not even Michael really understood her. Though she recognizes her guilt to an extent, her claim that only the dead can hold her responsible for her actions implies that she is excluding the living (such as the Jewish daughter who survived the fire, and Michael himself) as her victims. Though Hanna now seems aware of the impact her actions have had on her prisoners during the Holocaust, she does not seem to empathize with the pain her actions inflicted on Michael.

PART 3, CHAPTER 9

The next week, a restless Michael keeps busy with a lecture and with the final arrangements for Hanna's release. Though he tries to avoid thinking about Hanna and his upcoming visit, he can't help thinking of their last moment together before Hanna left him. He feels, once again, as if he betrayed Hanna, but he fights against his guilt by thinking about how Hanna had "wriggled" out of her own guilt by allowing no one but the dead to hold her responsible for her actions. Michael feels that the living—that *he*—deserves to be able to call her to account too.

Michael is still torn between guilt and indignation. Michael's belief that Hanna is not taking full responsibility for her guilt and that the living should be able to call her to account evokes sentiments from the student protests—the idea that the generation of Nazis, sympathizers, and bystanders owe their children, the next generation, answers.

The day before Michael is scheduled to pick Hanna up, he calls her at the prison, asking her to think about what she wants to do the next day. Hanna teases him for still being "a big planner," and Michael notices that, despite her appearance and smell, Hanna's voice still sounds young.

By making plans with Hanna, Michael shows that he is finally ready to take responsibility for his relationship with her. Finally he starts to recognize in her the woman he once loved.

PART 3, CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Hanna commits suicide. When Michael arrives at the prison, the warden questions him, asking if he had noticed any warning signs during their phone call, how they knew each other, why he sent the **tapes**, and how he knew she was illiterate. Michael tells her that he hadn't noticed anything suspicious but is reluctant and too emotional to answer her other questions.

This is the climactic tragedy of the book, and Michael is devastated by Hanna's death. Despite his resentment about the pain she caused him and her past crimes, he still feels deeply connected to her and she has a been a huge part of his life.

The warden then shows Michael Hanna's cell. Its shelves are filled with **tea tins**, his tapes, and books. Michael remarks that some of the tapes are missing, and the warden tells him that Hanna had lent some to an aid society for blind prisoners. Inspecting her bookshelves, he notices an autobiography by Rudolf Hess, a Nazi politician; Hannah Arendt's report on Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi organizer, during his trial in Jerusalem; as well as various works of Holocaust survivor literature. The warden informs Michael that Hanna began reading about the concentration camps as soon as she learned how to read.

That Hanna donated some of Michael's tapes to blind prisoners demonstrates her capacity for compassion. That she immediately began reading about the camps after learning how to read suggests that she was trying to better understand her role in the Holocaust and to take responsibility for her guilt. Once again it's suggested that part of the reason for her complicity in the Holocaust was ignorance and indifference.

Michael then notices the many pictures and papers hanging above Hanna's bed. Hanna had copied or cut out quotes, poems, and articles from newspaper and magazines, as well as a newspaper photograph that Michael recognizes. In the photograph, a younger version of Michael is shaking hands with his principal at his high school graduation. Michael realizes that as the photo was taken after Hanna had left the city, she must have gone to certain lengths to obtain a copy of the paper. Wondering if she had had the photo with her at the trial, Michael begins to tear up.

To Michael's tearful surprise, Hanna had somehow obtained and kept with her an old newspaper photo of Michael, suggesting that perhaps he meant more to her than he realized. This is also another (and an especially tragic) example of the image as memory—while Michael is haunted by mental "snapshots" of Hanna during their relationship, Hanna keeps a literal photo of the young Michael with her.

The warden tells him that Hanna taught herself to read with Michael's **tapes** by comparing the sound recording to books she borrowed from the prison library. As Michael tries to fight back his tears, the warden tells him that Hanna always hoped he would write back to her. Michael is silent, so the warden, picking up one of Hanna's tea tins, takes out a paper that turns out to be Hanna's suicide note. Hanna had left money from the **tea tin** as well as her bank account to Michael, who was to send it to the Jewish daughter who had survived the church fire. Aside from this instruction, Hanna had left Michael no other message but a hello, much to Michael's dismay.

Hanna's last wish is an acknowledgment of her guilt as well as a sign that she is trying to take responsibility to a certain extent. And quite probably, her suicide itself was another act of guilt, the ultimate expression of shame and remorse. Even to the last (her sparse "hello"), Hanna remains inscrutable to Michael—she was a crucial part of his life and a woman who loved him and who he loved, but also a person he never fully understood.

Michael asks the warden what Hanna was like during her time in prison. The warden compares Hanna's life to that of a nun—Hanna acted as if she had "moved here of her own accord and voluntarily subjected herself to our system, as if the rather monotonous work was a sort of meditation." Hanna was respected by the other prisoners, who turned to her for advice. The warden notes that a few years ago, Hanna seems to have given up—she gained weight and didn't wash as often as she used to. Hanna didn't seem unhappy to the warden, but seemed to regard prison life as too sociable for her. The warden then corrects her earlier assumption that Hanna had given up and claims that Hanna "redefined her place in a way that was right for her, but no longer impressed the other women."

Hanna's initial attitude toward prison is much like her attitude before and during the trial. Her pride in maintaining a certain image to others causes her to act as if she is collected and in control, in spite of her circumstances. Eventually, however, Hanna learns to give up this pride, just as she learns to overcome her shame of her illiteracy to teach herself how to read.

Michael asks to see Hanna's body, and the warden grants the request. She tells him that Hanna's suicide note didn't mention any reasons for her act, and the warden continues that she is angry with Hanna for killing herself and with Michael for giving so little explanation about his connection to Hanna and her suicide. The warden then leads Michael to the infirmary, where Hanna's body lays on a stretcher. Michael gazes at her face and is finally able to recognize the young woman she once was.

Michael's recognition of Hanna as a young woman shows that he is finally able to reconcile the Nazi prison guard who sent countless people to their deaths with the woman he once loved. There is no easy conclusion to be reached here, just the acknowledgment of the truth of this person in all her complexity and the enormity of her influence on Michael's life.

PART 3, CHAPTER 11

The next fall, Michael is in America for a meeting and decides to use the opportunity to meet the Jewish daughter who survived the church fire. On his way to New York, where the woman lives, Michael finds himself dreaming about what his and Hanna's life might have been like if they had stayed together. When he wakes up, Michael knows Hanna is dead and longs for her.

Now that Hanna is gone, Michael finds that his old longing for her has returned. His dream about what his life might have been like with Hanna is perhaps one of the unfulfilled expectations to which he referred in Chapter 9 of Part 1.

When Michael arrives at the Jewish woman's apartment, she serves him tea. The narrator describes her as "matter-of-fact" in both tone and appearance. When the woman asks him why he came, Michael tells her about Hanna's wish to give her the money. However, the woman refuses, believing that to accept it would be to grant Hanna absolution.

The woman's demeanor is much like the analytical numbness "exuded" by her book. Her refusal to grant Hanna absolution, combined with her "matter-of-fact" tone, suggests that some crimes are so horrible that they cannot be forgiven. This is a crucial moment in the book, as the woman takes a moral stand against offering any kind of forgiveness for Hanna.

Michael asks the Jewish woman if she can accept the money without granting absolution, and the woman, laughing, probes Michael about his relationship with Hanna. Michael tells her about his teenage affair and about Hanna's illiteracy. The woman calls Hanna "truly brutal," as Michael was only 15, and asks him if he felt that Hanna knew what she had done to him. Michael evades the question, but tells the woman that Hanna had known what she had done to the camp prisoners.

Though Michael refused to divulge his relationship with Hanna to the warden, Michael now tells the Jewish woman about his teenage affair, perhaps in an attempt to fulfill Hanna's last wishes (or to connect with another person whose life was greatly altered by Hanna, although in a very different way). Like Michael himself, the woman wonders if Hanna knew how much pain she caused, but Michael instead tells her about how Hanna had taught herself about the camps in order to demonstrate Hanna's remorse.

When Michael takes out the **tea tin** and a check, the Jewish woman leaves the check on the table and empties the tea tin. She tells Michael that as a little girl, she had a tea tin for her childhood treasures, but that the tin was stolen from her to be used by the concentration camp. The woman decides that Hanna's money should not be used for the Holocaust, as that would grant her absolution, and Michael suggests that the money be donated to a Jewish organization dedicated to illiteracy. The woman leaves to Michael the responsibility of choosing an organization and donating the money, and decides to keep the tin.

Though the woman insists that Hanna's money not be given to Holocaust organizations, she leaves open the possibility of Michael donating the money to a Jewish organization—an investment in the future, rather than an attempt to erase or smooth over the past. The woman's decision to keep Hanna's tin perhaps symbolizes her reclamation of part of what she had lost in the camps—a small act of asserting her agency and personhood in the face of the Holocaust's enormity. Like the Nazis' theft of her own tin and rejection of her childhood treasures, the woman keeps Hanna's tin and rejects its contents, thus again rejecting any absolution for Hanna.

PART 3, CHAPTER 12

The narrator tells us that Hanna's death and his meeting with the Jewish woman happened ten years ago. After Hanna's death, Michael was plagued with guilt and often questioned whether he had betrayed her, whether he was guilty for loving her, and sometimes whether he was responsible for her suicide. Soon after Hanna's death, Michael decides to write their story "to be free of it" but finds himself unable to access the right memories. Only after Michael "made peace with it" do the details of their relationship resurface. Michael notes that this story is so engrained into his life that new feelings of pain and guilt easily allow his old pain and guilt to reemerge, and he admits that he may never be free of it. The narrator closes by saying that he donated Hanna's money to the Jewish League Against Illiteracy. Michael then visits Hanna's grave for the first and only time.

After Hanna's death, Michael is haunted by the same questions of guilt and betrayal that had haunted him during and after the affair. Though Michael admits he may never be free of his past with Hanna, he finds he is only able to write about their story when he leaves the memories alone, rather than forcing them to the surface. The passage of time allows Michael to "[make] peace with it" and to write their story. Thus the book we are reading is, perhaps, a kind of therapeutic exercise for Michael, an acknowledgment of the truth of his past and his complicated connection with Hanna. Michael's choice of donation is a form of active hope, an attempt to use the tragedies of the past to avoid future tragedies, and to combat ignorance, indifference, and evil in all its varied forms.

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