The Reader by Bernhard Schlink
Question Answers

Part One

1. How does Schlink help to create interest in the story in the first chapter?
   - Emphasis is on detailed description – “When rescue came it was almost an assault”. Juxtaposition is dramatic.
   - Foreshadowing of later events
   - “When I was fifteen, I got hepatitis”. Pg 1 – abruptly starts as a flashback.
   - Employs short sentences – “I’d been feeling weak for days, in a way that was completely new to me. Every step was an effort.” Pg. 2 – The effect on the reader is to propel the narrative and create suspense. Helps engage the reader as the short sentences emphasize action.
   - Use of the first person narrator, who is reminiscing about the past is important and sets the context for the first section of the novel.
   - Use of the past tense eg. “was”, “got” – imply that these events occur in the past (flashback)

2. What impact does Frau Schmitz have upon Michael as a young boy and later in life according to events in chapter 4 and again in chapter 8?
   - Chapter 4 - Context is Michael has come to visit Frau Schmitz and thank her for helping him when he was sick with hepatitis.
   - Michael finds himself attracted to Frau Schmitz, as he inadvertently watches her get dressed. EG. “…her leg, pale and naked, then shimmering in the silky stocking.” We can see that this encounter has had a long-term effect on Michael. Eg. “Years later it occurred to me that the reason I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off her was not just her body, but the way she held herself and moved.” - Reference to the passage of time, highlights Frau Schmitz’s impact. Michael often asks girlfriends later on to replicate her actions.
   - It is also significant that the first character, the reader encounters after the narrator is the Frau Schmitz, highlighting her importance to the narrative.
   - Michael gains confidence (“manliness”) from his affair with Hannah.

3. Why do you believe Schlink does not reveal the characters’ names prior to chapter 8? What impact does this have upon the reader?
   - The author wants this story to be a microcosm for the larger macrocosm of German society at this time.
   - Sexual relationship rather than one about the person.
   - Creates a mysterious tone to draw the audience in, adds to the suspense – as the reader questions who these characters are?
   - Gives the narrator and Frau Schmitz a symbolic importance – Microcosm/Macrocosm
   - The relationship is initially based on physical attraction

4. How is a melancholic tone established in chapter 9?
   - Chapter begins with a melancholic tone reflecting upon the past. Schlink uses words such as “yearning” and “sad” to bring the melancholic tone to the fore. His reference to Michael knowing he was happy at the time, yet looking back his memories are tinged with events of the future
   - Upon looking back at his adolescence Berg comments that “I didn’t like the way I looked… But there was so much energy in me, such belief that one day I’d be handsome and clever…” p36
   - The tone is created through a narrator reflecting on his youth. Youth is traditionally considered a time of innocence. “But there was so much energy in me, such belief that one day I’d be handsome and clever…” pg. 36
   - Narrator in Chapter 9, focuses on happiness and sadness - “Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter in hindsight, because it concealed dark truths?”
   - Use of questions by the narrator – involves the reader in his thought process as he thinks about his past and how events have affected it. Eg. “Why does it make me so sad when I think back to that time?”
   - Word choice connotes melancholy “yearning”, “sad”, “painfully”
5. What comments can you make about Schlink’s use of visual imagery?
- Uses auditory imagery: “a blackbird singing”, “the saw in the yard”
- Visual imagery: “The woods were carpets of green, with yellow green, bright green… the first fruit trees were already in bloom.” p51
- Michael describes Hanna as a horse. “I think of something good, soft and warm” p69
- Reflecting back on his past he comments on Hanna’s blue dress.
- Poem on p55-56. Schlink describes people in detail, especially Hanna.
- Schlink uses description to remind us of the natural or outside world. His imagery helps to create a clear picture in our mind of the setting. Used to develop the characters.

6. Education and reading seem significant to Schmitz. What evidence exists in the text to support this assertion? (Refer to chapter 8 in the first instance)
- Hanna values education, is angry that Michael is not attending school.
- Her own work is ‘idiotic’.
- Doesn’t want his opportunities to slip away from him. Reacts violently to Michael’s news.

7. When does the difference in social class between Hanna and Michael become most clear and painful? Why does Hanna feel uncomfortable staying overnight in Michael’s house? Is Hanna angry about her lack of education? Comment on the gradual change in the relationship between Michael and Hanna.
- When Hanna stays at his home. She is amazed by what she sees. The contents of the house eg grandfather clock. Michael comes from middle class family. Father works at the university. “‘Are these books your father just read or did he write them too?’” p61
- Clear that Michael’s family has had an education and this is important to Hanna.
- Feeling of guilt about the age difference and the social class experienced by Hanna. She felt like an intruder in the house. p61
- Hanna is more frustrated than angry about her lack of formal education. She always makes Michael read to her which makes us question why she doesn’t read things for herself. Hanna will probably never have the opportunity to learn about the philosophers that Herr Berg writes about unlike Michael who will go onto University.
- Hanna’s dominance lessens as Michael no longer needs her. Hanna doesn’t choose another book for Michael to read to her.

8. Why would someone call Schlink’s description of Michael’s afternoon in chapter 16 as ‘surreal’?

Part Two


Consider the following quote by Schlink given in an interview. How does he explore this in the first four chapters of Part Two?

“Not much has been written on what it meant for my generation, the immediate postwar generation, to grow up in the shadow of the Holocaust and be entangled in the guilt of our parents’ generation.” (Schlink)

- Schlink uses Michael’s studies to show how the post-war generation of Germans felt mixed emotions at their parents’ actions during WW2. The narrator mentions that the fathers of several students in the seminar group had been ‘officers of the Wehrmacht and one as an officer of the Waffen SS’ etc (pg 90). Schlink highlights the complexity of these emotions in the figure of Michael who is willing to condemn his own father as being under a “sentence of shame” despite losing his job at the university for scheduling a controversial lecture that the Nazis didn’t agree with. He draws attention to the self-righteousness of Michael and fellow members of the post-war generation by describing how the “more horrible the events about which we read and heard, the more certain we became of our responsibility to enlighten and accuse.” (pg 91).
- However, Schlink also demonstrates the moral dilemma confronting Michael and in-turn German society at this time, when he realises that Hanna is one of the accused at the trial of the former concentration camp guards, and that he cannot simply condemn her actions without fully understanding the circumstances behind her crime. This deliberate juxtaposition between the easy condemnation that Michael and his fellow students had for their
parents’ generation, and the reality of this when those accused of horrific crimes are someone whom they love draws attention to the moral dilemma confronting the whole of German society at this time.


a) What is Hanna’s crime? Why does Schlink wait until chapter 5 to reveal these details? What impact does it have upon the reader?

- Schlink reveals Hanna’s crime in Chapter 5, Part 2 - Hanna was a concentration camp guard, who along with others, refused to unlock the door of a church that was on fire, in which women and children were imprisoned.
- Schlink deliberately avoids revealing Hanna’s crime any earlier to the reader, as he wants his audience to understand the narrator’s initial attraction and feelings for Hanna. If he had revealed Hanna’s crime much earlier in the novel, it is likely the reader would not feel as sympathetic for her. By waiting to Part 2, Schlink enables us to understand Michael’s mixed emotions at realising Hanna is one of the accused in this trial he is studying. It also enables him to highlight the ease with which the post-war generation were quick to condemn the actions of the Nazi generation, but in reality it was much more complicated when these people were your parents or in Hanna’s case, a former lover.
- Schlink’s revelation about Hanna helps the reader understand the moral dilemma confronting Germans of Michael’s post-war generation. He uses the microcosm of Hanna and Michael’s relationship, and the latter trial to symbolise the larger macrocosm of German society at this time and the troubling events it faced.

b) The events leading up to the bombing of the village are slowly revealed until Schlink describes the horrifying image of “women [who] did not suffocate, but burned to death in the brilliant roar of the flames.” p121. Make a chronological list of events. How are we meant to react to this information?

i. Five accused women were guards in a small satellite camp near Auschwitz (famous concentration camp)
ii. In early 1944, transferred to Auschwitz to replace guards recently killed or injured in a factory explosion.
iii. One minor indictment dealt with the guards’ treatment of prisoners at Auschwitz.
iv. Guards with prisoners set-off on a westward march. Most of the commanding officers have been killed after a bombing raid or have disappeared.
v. First main charge – camp selection process ie. Those who could not work were sent back to Auschwitz to be murdered.
vi. Second, more important charge – the troops and guards locked “several hundred women” in a village church while on a march and there a bombing raid. One bomb fell on the church steeple causing a fire that killed the trapped women to death in the most horrific way - of “women [who] did not suffocate, but burned to death in the brilliant roar of the flames.” p121.

- As Schlink chronologically reveals this information the reader becomes more and more uneasy, as they realise Hanna’s crime is part of the larger horror that is the holocaust. The slow chronological description of the events leading up to the burning of the church, help increase the reader’s suspense and unease.

11. Read chapters 10-12.

a) Hanna’s secret is revealed in chapter 10. Go back through the text and list the clues that Schlink has provided. Hint: p33, p40, p48, p52, p61, p94, p96, p107, p115, p128. Does the English translation of the title really explain the significance of Hanna’s situation? Or do we need to understand German? (Refer above)

- Pg 33 - Hanna’s anger at Michael at his resignation to being kept down a grade at school due to his illness, and realisation that he has been missing school to be with her.
- Pg 40 - Hanna’s desire for Michael to read books aloud to her.
- Pg. 48 - Michael mentions how twice he wrote Hanna letters, but that she never acknowledged them.
- Pg. 52 - Michael and Hanna go on a cycling holiday. Michael leaves a note for Hanna that he is going out to get breakfast. When he returns she is really angry as Hanna thought he had left her. Michael is in charge of choosing the route for their holiday through reading the maps, as well as organising the accommodation and filling in their details at the hotels.
- Pg 61 - Hanna asking Michael to read to her from his father’s books and asking him whether he will write something like that as well. Schlink describes how she appears “tired”.
- Pg 94 - Hanna joining the SS, despite Siemens offering her a promotion to a foreman position.
- Pg. 96 - Hanna ignored all court summons and letters regarding the accusations against her and trial.
- Pg 107 - Hanna did not register any objections to the charges prior to the trial, and is only now doing this while the case is being tried.
- Pg. 115 - The Jewish girls who were Hanna’s favourites, and whom she took to her quarters during the evening in the concentration camp. The prisoners were not allowed to tell the others what they did for Hanna.
- Pg. 128 - Hanna’s refusal to give an example of her handwriting, as she is accused of signing a report about the prisoners who died in the church fire. Rather than give an example of her handwriting, Hanna takes responsibility for signing the report.
- In translation, the German title of The Reader loses some of its symbolic importance in relation to Hanna’s situation. In German, the title means someone who reads aloud, however, this is not clear from the English translation.

b) What dilemma does Michael face in chapter 11? What decision does he make? What would you do? What is Herr Berg’s advice to Michael?

- Michael’s dilemma is whether to reveal that Hannah is illiterate, a fact that she finds so shameful she would rather admit culpability for writing the report about the death of the prisoners in the church fire then have her illiteracy revealed to the court. He describes Hanna’s predicament as her not being “willing to earn victory at the price of exposure as an illiterate” (pg 137).
- Herr Berg’s advice as a professor of philosophy to his son, is that despite Michael’s belief that it would be best for him to reveal Hanna’s illiteracy to the court, he should not do this. This is because the right of an individual to determine what is good for them, hence maintaining their personal dignity and freedom, even if others doesn’t agree. (see pg 141)

12. Read chapters 13-17.

The anonymous truck driver in chapter 14 is used by Schlink to voice the desires of most humans to “…understand why people can do such terrible things?” p149.

a) (c) What do we know about the events taking place in Nazi Germany? How do we know this information? Can it make us truly understand the events and the motivation of others or the suffering that took place?

- In contemporary society, the horrific events that took place in Nazi Germany are recounted in history classes, text books, portrayed in museums, and featured in films and books. This information often derives from the oral or written testimonies of survivors. We will always see these events through the prism of historical distance and hindsight, making it hard for us to truly empathize with the people who lived through this time as we have never had these experiences. We might understand these events and consequences in a historical sense, but struggle to understand in terms of the physical reality.

b) (d) How does Michael reconcile himself to the events revealed in the trial?

- Dilemma confronting Michael: “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.” (Pg 156)
- Michael attempts to explain to the judge, Hanna’s secret, but is unable to reveal his secret. This failed action finally allows Michael to reconcile himself with Hanna’s desire to hide her illiteracy, even if it costs her a substantial jail term. He describes this gradual feeling of resignation as being a “numbness…settling over the emotions and thoughts of the past few weeks.” (pg 159)

13. Read chapters 1-6.

Why didn’t Michael feel as if he “… was part of [his] generation”p169?

- Michael does not feel part of his post-war generation, as unlike his peers he is unable to separate his memory of his love for Hanna and condemnation of her crimes. He describes his peers as those “who had dissociated themselves from their parents and thus an entire generation of perpetrators, voyeurs and the wilfully blind, accommodators and accepters, thereby overcoming not only their shame, but at least their suffering because of their shame.” (pg 169). He cannot understand how his peers can be full of “swaggering self-righteousness” (pg 169) about the crimes of the Nazis but still love and care for their parents and elders.

14. How does Hanna continue to influence Michael into his adult years? What decisions does he make as a result of this influence?
Michael struggles to maintain relationships with women. His first marriage ends up in divorce, as he is unable to stop comparing his wife, Gertrud, to Hanna.

Michael pursues a career in legal history, as it helps him escape from his present challenges such as his feelings for Hanna. He describes it as being ‘gratifying it was to plunge into into different stretches of the past that were not so urgently connected to the present.’ Pg 179

15. Read chapters 7-12
Do Hanna’s actions in prison atone for her wartime crimes? How does Schlink use the character of Hanna to represent Hitler’s generation? What comments is he making about the collective guilt of that generation?

- Once Hanna learns to read in prison she carefully sources texts about the concentration camps, including survivor accounts by Eli Wiesel and Primo Levi. After her suicide, Michael is given a letter instructing him to give what’s left of Hanna’s money to one of the surviving victims of the church fire.
- Schlink uses the figure of Hanna to symbolise Hitler’s generation, especially her illiteracy, as though all participants in Nazi Germany did not fully understand (able to read) the consequences of their actions. And how now in later life, they struggle to come to terms with these actions and how the rest of the world including the survivors perceives them.

16. Why is the sense of smell so important in this story? What is it about Hanna that so strongly provokes the Michael’s desire as a teenager? Why does Schlink revisit this idea in the closing chapters of his novel?

- The sense of smell is significant in the novel as Schlink uses it to demonstrate how much Hanna has changed by the end of the novel. When Michael sits next to her in jail he describes how she smelled like “an old woman”. A smell that he recognizes from “grandmothers and elderly aunts, and which hangs in the rooms of old person’s homes like a curse” (pg 195). This is a direct contrast to his memories of his desire for Hanna where he had “particularly loved her smell…She always smelled fresh…Under these fresh smells was another heavy, dark, sharp smell” which he would “sniff like a curious animal”. Pg. 194.

17. Do you agree with the judgment of the concentration camp survivor to whom Michael delivers Hanna’s money at the end of the novel? Why does she accept the tea tin, but not the money? Who knew Hanna better—Michael or this woman? Has Michael been deluded by his love? Is he another of Hanna’s victims?

- The concentration camp survivor refuses Hanna’s money as she does not wish to grant “Frau Schmitz her absolution” (pg 210). Instead she takes the tea tin that is similar to one she had as a child for keeping special mementoes that was lost during the war. Both Michael and the concentration camp survivor know Hanna but in different ways – Michael remembers Hanna as his lover, while the concentration camp survivor remembers her as being incredibly “brutal”. She also sees Michael as being another of Hanna’s victims.