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Assmann, M (2010). Authority and obedience in Bernhard Schlink's Der Vorleser and Die Heimkehr. University Of Tasmania. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.25959/23211602.v1>

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Authority and Obedience in Bernhard Schlink's

Der Vorleser and Die Heimkehr



by

Margit Assmann

Submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

University of Tasmania September 2010

Statements

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Abstract

In presenting the crimes of SS-guards through the medium of an illiterate woman, Schlink's novel *Der Vorleser* (1995) attracted a mainly stern critical response. The much-criticised one-sided portrayal of destructive obedience seems to be addressed by his next novel *Die Heimkehr* (2006), where submission to malevolent authority is transferred to an intellectual platform set in America in the years following World War II. Although Schlink maintains he did not intend *Die Heimkehr* as a sequel to *Der Vorleser*, there are several thematic aspects linking the two novels. Both have a male German narrator, who was born around the end of World War II and has close links with a former Nazi collaborator. At the centre of both novels is Schlink's portrayal of the nature of obedience to authority, uncovering the reality of man's divided nature that consists in both good and evil.

Destructive obedience is portrayed in both novels rather one-sidedly, either as a problem of a lack of education, or as a discussion on an intellectual level. It therefore seems justified to read *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* in chronological order to arrive at a more realistic picture of obedience to authority. In *Die Heimkehr*, Schlink's authority figure is an American University professor who uses Stanley Milgram's (1960's) study series of obedience to authority for his own questionable purposes. Schlink therefore provides within the plot itself a theoretical approach to analyse this novel. The examination of Schlink's portrayal of authority and obedience reveals that *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* when read as independent works, do not address the universal dilemma of submission

to malevolent authority. However, an analysis of Schlink's earlier novel *Der Vorleser*, based on Milgram's theories, uncovers surprising parallels with *Die Heimkehr* even though, as Schlink has stated, the novels are not connected.

This dissertation draws upon Milgram's study to uncover and examine the relationship between authority and obedience in Schlink's novels to show how atrocities come about. The study provides a paradigm for analysing the protagonists of *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* based on Milgram's obedience study, which, as yet, has not been consulted for an analysis of Schlink's novels. Read in sequence however, using Milgram's theories, *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* can be shown to complement each other and confirm that Schlink views obedience to destructive authority as a permanent and universal problem.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Eva Meidl and Dr. Billy Badger for their valuable advice, which helped me to complete this project.

I thank Professor Bernhard Schlink who kindly responded to the questions I had about his two novels that I examined in this work.

I have also very much appreciated the stimulation of seminars provided by the School of English, Journalism and European Languages.

Finally, I thank my father for his encouragement and support.

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