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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.

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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.

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# Authority and Obedience in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr*

## Introduction

Bernhard Schlink, a German professor of law, is known for such literary accomplishments like *Vergangenheitsschuld: Beiträge zu einem deutschen Thema* (2007), *Selbs Justiz* (2006), *Die Heimkehr* (2006), *Selbs Mord* (2001), *Liebesfluchten* (2000), *Selbs Betrug* (1994), and *Die Gordische Schleife* (1988), but it was his novel *Der Vorleser* that brought him international recognition in 1995. With its movie adaptation called *The Reader* by David Hare in 2008, Schlink's *Der Vorleser* received renewed attention.

The following discussion will concentrate on *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr*, as they share several thematic aspects. For example, the novels have a male German narrator born roughly around the end of World War II with close links to a Nazi collaborator. At the heart of these novels, is Schlink's discussion about the nature of obedience to authority. In light of these shared aspects, it can be mooted that Schlink intended to address the much debated and criticised portrayal of authority and obedience in *Der Vorleser* and in his novel *Die Heimkehr*. For example, in *Der Vorleser*, Schlink's primary focus is on the destructive obedience of a former female SS guard who comes from a lower working class background and is illiterate. In *Die Heimkehr*, he transfers the theme of destructive obedience to an intellectual platform in America long after World War II. If these aspects are meant to connect both novels, then the one-sided picture of obedience to authority in *Der Vorleser* is



complemented in *Die Heimkehr*. However, personal correspondence with the author<sup>1</sup> reveals that Schlink did not intend *Die Heimkehr* as a sequel to *Der Vorleser*. He did not see the need to show that everyone is capable of obeying a “malevolent authority,” since “Intellektuelle nicht moralischer sind als Nicht-Intellektuelle - das zeigt das Dritte Reich so häufig und so deutlich, daß es nicht eigens in einem Roman gezeigt werden muß.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, this is a theme Schlink explores in his novel *Die Heimkehr*. Since Schlink’s main focus on obedience to “malevolent authority” in both novels does concentrate on either a German illiterate or on mainly American intellectuals, I believe a sequential treatment of *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* is justified in order to arrive at a more comprehensive picture about this human response to an order. To substantiate this claim, I examine how Schlink relates obedience to his fictional characters. In *Die Heimkehr*, the authority figure and protagonist de Baur<sup>3</sup> uses Stanley Milgram’s study on obedience to authority for his own purposes. Schlink therefore provides within his own plot a theoretical approach to analyse his novel. His earlier novel *Der Vorleser*, when subjected to Milgram’s theories, uncovers surprising parallels with *Die Heimkehr* even though, as Schlink stated, the novels were not meant to be connected.

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<sup>1</sup> “Milgrams Studien waren mir beim Schreiben von *Der Vorleser* bekannt, haben mich beim Schreiben aber nicht beeinflusst. Sie haben mich beim Schreiben von *Die Heimkehr* beschäftigt und werden dort auch erwähnt, aber nicht speziell bei der Schilderung der fragwürdigen Kommune. Nein, ich habe *Die Heimkehr* nicht als Fortsetzung von *Der Vorleser* geschrieben. . . .” Bernhard Schlink, e-mail interview with the author, 27 Aug. 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Schlink, e-mail interview with the author.

<sup>3</sup> According to Boernchen, “[...] folgt die historische Lebensgeschichte Johann de Bours einem historischen Vorbild: dem belgischen Literaturwissenschaftler Paul de Man. . . .” Stefan Börnchen, “Derselbe Krieg mit anderen Mitteln? De Man, Derrida und die Dekonstruktion in Bernhard Schlinks Roman *Die Heimkehr*,” *Über Gegenwartsliteratur, Interpretationen und Interventionen: Festschrift für Paul Michael Lützeler zum 65. Geburtstag: About Contemporary Literature*, ed. Mark W. Rectanus (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008) 88.

My analysis of Schlink's novels will chiefly be based on Stanley Milgram's 1960s study series on obedience to authority. As yet, Milgram's obedience study has not been used as a basis for analysing Schlink's novels, despite the continued interest in Milgram's study findings, and relevance to today's society.<sup>4</sup> Milgram's study results and conclusions, as well as a consideration of Milgram's personal authority as the authority behind the obedience study, provide a paradigm for analysing *Der Vorleser*'s protagonists Hanna Schmitz and Michael Berg, as well as *Die Heimkehr*'s protagonists John de Baur, his associates, and his students including Peter Debauer. Such an analysis will uncover the interplay of authority and obedience in Schlink's novels.

Whereas *Die Heimkehr* continues to be somewhat overlooked by literary critics, *Der Vorleser* has received enormous critical attention of both positive and negative nature.<sup>5</sup> Critics of *Der Vorleser* have particularly concentrated on Schlink's protagonist Schmitz. Johnson and Finlay criticise, for example, Schmitz's illiteracy within the context of her employment and daily activities. They argue that her illiteracy is not believable when considering the duties of a tram conductor, or SS guard, as well as the skills involved in managing her daily life, particularly her ability "to manage the mandatory registration and re-registration with the German police as scrupulously as her numerous changes of address would have necessitated. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Truth About Violence*, SBS 1, Australia, 29 Sept. 2009.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of the changing mood in the critical reception of *Der Vorleser*, refer to Stefan Neuhaus, "Die Sprache der Mode: vom Versagen der Literaturkritik," *Germanistik und Literaturkritik: Zwischenbericht zu einer wunderbaren Freundschaft*, ed. Primus-Heinz Kucher and Doris Moser (Wien: Praesens, 2007) 49-66.

<sup>6</sup> Sally Johnson, and Frank Finlay, "(Il)literacy and (Im)morality in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*," *Written Language and Literacy* 4.2 (2001): 206.

Most criticism however centres on Schlink's controversial portrayal of Schmitz as an SS guard. Schlink encountered stern criticism not only for his portrayal of an illiterate SS guard, but also for depicting this handicap as the driving force behind her voluntarily joining the SS. Ursula R. Mahlendorf, for example, asks:

Why choose an illiterate lower class ethnic German when the SS was populated by middle-class, high school graduates? Were not nine of the fifteen attendees of the Wannsee Conference holders of doctorates? "Illiteracy," as one survivor said to me "certainly wasn't the problem of the Nazis."<sup>7</sup>

A number of other critics, such as Kristina Brazaitis,<sup>8</sup> Joseph Metz,<sup>9</sup> and Cynthia Ozick<sup>10</sup> compare Schlink's fictional SS guard Schmitz to her historical counterparts, as does Patricia Goldblatt, who argues:

Hanna's illiteracy . . . imparts the notion by her example that there were many ignorant people . . . forced into positions of wrong, more accurately, evil-doing that they would have preferred to reject.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ursula R. Mahlendorf, "Traum Narrated, Read and (Mis)understood: Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*: ...irrevocably complicit in their crimes...", *Monatshefte für deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur* 95.3 (2003): 460.

<sup>8</sup> Kristina Brazaitis, "On Re-Reading *The Reader*: An Exercise in Ambiguity," *AUMLA* 95 (2001): 88.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Metz, "Truth is a Woman: Post-Holocaust Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Gender of Fascism in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *German Quarterly* 77.3 (2004): 323.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination," *Commentary* 107.3 (1999): 22 pp.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Goldblatt, "How Reading Confuses: a Response [*The Reader*]," *English Quarterly* 32.1,2 (2000): 74 pp.

However, William Collins Donahue believes that, “Hanna’s handicap functions as a pliable metaphor for a more general state of deprivation that is meant to explain why some people turn to evil.”<sup>12</sup>

The interpretation that Schmitz is a victim of her inability to read and write has been criticised not only with regard to the novel, but also its movie adaptation.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Schlink’s humanising depiction<sup>14</sup> of a former SS guard was also subject to critique.<sup>15</sup> While Schlink’s description of an SS guard appears outrageous, the

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<sup>12</sup> William Collins Donahue, “Illusions of Subtlety: Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* and the Moral Limits of Holocaust Fiction,” *German Life and Letters* 54.1 (2001): 65.

<sup>13</sup> Lynden Barber, “Caught Up in Evil,” rev. of *The Reader*, dir. Stephen Daldry, *Weekend Australian* 7-8 Feb. 2009: 21. Barber writes: “I’d argue the film’s critics have mistakenly confused its empathy for Schmitz with sympathy. Empathy requires us to call on our humanity to understand another person’s emotional state, whereas sympathy involves moral approval.” See also David Aaronovitch, “Hamas or Hannas, They’re Not Black and White: Good and Bad, Victim and Murderer, Jew or Palestinian or Nazi Sympathiser... We Can’t Afford Our Simplistic Arguments,” rev. of *The Reader*, by Bernhard Schlink, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, and *The Reader*, dir. Stephen Daldry, *Times Online* 6 Jan. 2009, 19 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/david\\_aaronovitch/article5454670.ece?>](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/david_aaronovitch/article5454670.ece?>). Aaronovitch argues: “Neither [movie nor book] invite you to think that Hanna is a good person or a victim, indeed she is rather animalistic, manipulative and lacking in imagination. And neither excuses barbarism in any way. But the story suggests that, if you didn’t know your lover was once a concentration camp guard, you wouldn’t necessarily be able to tell.”

<sup>14</sup> See also Lynn Wolff, “The Mare of Majdanek: Intersections of History and Fiction in Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*,” *IASL* 29.1 (2004): 117; and Giles Whittell, “On The Reader set with Kate Winslet,” rev. of *The Reader*, dir. Stephen Daldry, *Times Online* 6 Dec. 2008, 19 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment?article5251588.ece?>](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment?article5251588.ece?>). See further Hanns-Georg Rodek, “Der Vorleser überzeugt trotz Hochglanz-KZ,” rev. of *The Reader*, dir. Stephen Daldry, *Welt Online* 6 Feb. 2009, 19 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.welt.de/kultur/article3159478/Der-Vorleser-ueberzeugt-trotz-Hochglanz-KZ.html?>>; and Roger Ebert, “The Reader: How Your Own Secret Shame Can Create All-devouring Evil,” rev. of *The Reader*, dir. Stephen Daldry, *Homepage*, 23 Dec. 2008, 19 Feb. 2009 <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081223/Reviews/812239989?>>.

<sup>15</sup> See Donahue, *Illusions of Subtlety: Bernhard Schlink’s Der Vorleser and the Moral Limits of Holocaust Fiction* 77-8; and Stanley Corngold, “Fürsorge beim Vorlesen: Bernhard Schlink’s Novel *Der Vorleser*,” *Signaturen der Gegenwartsliteratur: Festschrift für Walther Hinderer*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999) 255. Refer also to John E. MacKinnon, “Crime, Compassion, and The Reader,” *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 14; and John E. MacKinnon, “Law and Tenderness in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*,” *Law and Literature* 16 (2004): 8.

identification of Schmitz with historical figures fails to take into account the fictionality of Schlink's novel.<sup>16</sup> However, the fictionalisation of historical atrocities inevitably provokes a comparison with factual accounts. For example, Ian Sansom is of the opinion that this novel offers "plenty of Holocaust-Kitsch."<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Adler, another critic of Schlink, brands *Der Vorleser* "Kulturpornographie."<sup>18</sup>

Reviews of *Die Heimkehr* are inevitably based on its literary predecessor *Der Vorleser*. For example, Hay recommends, among other works by Schlink, *Der Vorleser* as a "necessary pre-reading" to *Die Heimkehr*.<sup>19</sup> Boernchen<sup>20</sup> compares the two books and draws parallels between them much like the reviews by Peter Parker,<sup>21</sup> Helen Dunmore,<sup>22</sup> and John Hay.<sup>23</sup> Daniel Stacey views *Die Heimkehr* "is a direct

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<sup>16</sup> Roth refers to Raul Hilberg's comment "that historians are in the truth business," and adds: "authors of fiction are not." Jeffrey Roth, "Reading and Misreading The Reader," *Law and Literature* 16.2 (2004): 10. See also Bettina Jagow, "Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser: Differenzen der Wahrnehmung von Täter- und Opferbewußtsein," *Differenzerfahrung und Selbst: Bewußtsein und Wahrnehmung in Literatur und Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Bettina Jagow and Florian Steger (Heidelberg: Heidelberg UP, 2003) 252. Jagow argues that Schlink's novel "die interpretative Leistung historischer Fakten in der Fiktion [verweigert]."

<sup>17</sup> Ian Sansom, "Doubts about The Reader," rev. of *The Reader*, by Bernhard Schlink, *Salmagundi* 124-125 (1999/2000): 14.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Adler, "Bernhard Schlink and The Reader," rev. of *The Reader*, by Bernhard Schlink, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, *Times Online* 22 Mar. 2002, 19 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/incomingFeeds/article759692.ece>>.

<sup>19</sup> Hay also recommends reading Schlink's *Girl with Lizard* and *Selb's Betrayal* before starting with *Homecoming*. John Hay, "Post-war Germans Trace Line Between Guilt and Responsibility," rev. of *Homecoming*, by Bernhard Schlink, trans. Michael Henry Heim, *Weekend Australian* 29-30 Dec. 2007: 8.

<sup>20</sup> Börnchen, 87-104.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Parker, rev. of *Homecoming*, by Bernhard Schlink, trans. Michael Henry, *Times Online* 27 Jan. 2008, 19 Feb. 2009 <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/fiction/article3246357.ece?>](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3246357.ece?>)>.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Dunmore, "Homecoming by Bernhard Schlink," trans. Michael Henry, *Times Online* 11 Jan. 2008, 19 Feb. 2009 <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/fiction/article3171096.ece?>](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article3171096.ece?>)>.

<sup>23</sup> Hay 8-9.

riposte to those criticisms of [*Der Vorleser*]” with regard to Schmitz’s disadvantaged position, her social background and illiteracy, and her inferred victim status.<sup>24</sup>

Independent of a person’s advantaged or disadvantaged position, *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* uncover the reality of man’s divided nature<sup>25</sup> that consists in the ability to do good or evil. Two of the main protagonists, Schmitz and de Baur, are former Nazis who were directly or indirectly involved in the atrocities of World War II. They are, to some degree, examples for Schlink’s description of Nazi perpetrators who were “caring fathers and mothers, great teachers, enriching professors or beautiful lovers.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Durzak points out that the “beunruhigendsten Täter-Figuren” were those who “kenntnisreich mit den Texten der literarischen Tradition umgingen, Hausmusik betrieben, zärtliche Ehegatten und engagierte Väter waren.”<sup>27</sup> While it cannot be dismissed that some National Socialists had a sadistic bent,<sup>28</sup> generalising such a psychological condition to include all Nazis would be inaccurate.

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Stacey, “Brilliant Minds, Immoral Lives,” rev. of *Homecoming*, by Bernhard Schlink, trans. Michael Henry Heim, *Weekend Australian* 29-30 Dec. 2007: 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> This age-old psychological problem has been addressed by many literary greats of the past and present, such as: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust Der Tragödie Erster Teil* (1808); Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde* (1956); and Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Bernhard Schlink, qtd. in Julia M. Klein, “Schlink Evokes Certain Realities but Eludes Moral Certainties,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48.15 (2001): B 18.

<sup>27</sup> Manfred Durzak, “Opfer und Täter im Nationalsozialismus: Bernhard Schlinks *Der Vorleser* und Stephan Hermlins *Die Kommandeuse*,” *Literatur für Leser* 23.4 (2000): 208.

<sup>28</sup> Among them were for example SS-guards such as Ilse Koch, Hildegard Lächert, Dorothea Binz, and Hermine Braunsteiner. For information about Koch, see “Der Tod der Ilse Koch: die Kommandeuse von Buchenwald erhängte sich in ihrer Zuchhaustelle,” *Zeit Online* 1967, 24 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.zeit.de/1967/36/Der-Tod-der-Ilse-Koch?>>. (sic) In relation to Lächert, Binz, and Braunsteiner see Wolff 99, 104-05.

What must be recognised or “admitted”<sup>29</sup> though is that evildoers, according to Schlink, are nevertheless humans. In an interview with Inga Clendinnen he argues:

If the Nazis had been monsters, we would not have a problem. We would be here, and they would be out there. It is because they are not monsters that what happened is so challenging for us, and so frightening.<sup>30</sup>

Schlink realises that by demonising Nazi perpetrators, they would be pushed into what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1807) described as “otherness” in *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*.<sup>31</sup> Using “otherness” to explain atrocities wherever they occur will inevitably permit distance that hinders the investigation into man’s capability of committing horrific crimes.

Schlink’s Weidenfeld lecture series at St Anne’s College in Oxford in 2008 where he addressed problems of good and evil on a theoretical level were published as *Guilt about the Past* in 2009.<sup>32</sup> Here Schlink acknowledges that he had often been criticised for portraying a concentration camp guard “with a human face” and continues that he understands “the desire for a world where those who commit monstrous crimes are always monsters.”<sup>33</sup> Yet the tension between the expectation

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<sup>29</sup> Referring to Schlink’s novel *Der Vorleser*, Wolff argues: “Schlink reminds us that we must admit to this capacity for evil as an aspect of humanity.” Wolff 117.

<sup>30</sup> Inga Clendinnen, “Ordinary People,” rev. of *The Reader*, by Bernhard Schlink, *Australian’s Review of Books* Sep. 1998: 7. See also Bernhard Schlink, qtd. in Lothar Bluhm, “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar: Anmerkungen zu Bernhard Schlinks Roman *Der Vorleser*,” *Deutschsprachige Erzählprosa seit 1990 im europäischen Kontext: Interpretationen, Intertextualität, Rezeption*, ed. Volker Wehdeking and Anne-Marie Corbin (Trier: WVT, 2003) 159.

<sup>31</sup> Biography of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *European Graduate School: Graduate and Postgraduate Studies*, n.d., 23 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.egs.edu/media/library-of-philosophy/georg-wilhelm-friedrich-hegel/biography>>.

<sup>32</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* 127.

and reality should not be pushed aside for this would be “simplistic and misleading.”<sup>34</sup>

In his obedience study, Milgram investigated the reason for humans submitting to destructive orders, but found no evidence to suggest the existence of aggressive tendencies towards the victim. Nevertheless a majority of subjects complied with the “experimenter’s” orders to hurt another person with potentially harmful electrical shocks. Milgram’s obedience study also highlighted how effectively a person can abuse his or her authority. In this respect, E. D. Watt cautions: “Authority in all its forms is associated with, and is a constant reminder of some human limitation, weakness, or dependency.”<sup>35</sup> According to Watt, an authority figure is someone who is “always a superior of some kind, to be obeyed in some cases, in other cases to be followed, consulted, attended to, deferred to, or conformed to.”<sup>36</sup>

In Schlink’s novels, the main fictional authority figures Schmitz (*Der Vorleser*) and de Baur (*Die Heimkehr*) are obeyed by some, as well as followed and consulted by others. Schmitz’s status as SS guard is that of a subordinate- or lower-ranking authority, whereas de Baur is portrayed as “the” authority. De Baur’s associates are actors who will also be included in my discussion of authority, for they are like Schmitz subordinate authority figures. Both, Schmitz and de Baur will be shown to embody “rational authority,” as well as “charismatic authority,” which will be defined in chapter one. Schmitz’s kind of “Elternherrschaft” over Berg will be briefly discussed in chapter two.

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<sup>34</sup> Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* 128.

<sup>35</sup> E. D. Watt, *Authority* (London: Croom Helm, 1982) 7.

<sup>36</sup> Watt 7.



The first chapter of this thesis will outline Stanley Milgram's study series of obedience to authority, which will form the basis for analysing authority and obedience in Schlink's two novels. At the beginning, I will provide background information about the obedience study and then discuss authority and obedience in Milgram's study. Definitions of relevant paradigms such as "rational authority," "charismatic authority," and "deception" aid the subsequent analysis of *Der Vorleser* as well as *Die Heimkehr*.

## 1. Authority and Obedience – Stanley Milgram

*Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others. (Stanley Milgram, 1963)<sup>37</sup>*

After the Second World War, three major studies into the human behaviour in the face of conflict were conducted, “allow[ing] the individual to resolve it in a way consistent with or in opposition to moral values.”<sup>38</sup> Asch (1951, 1955, 1956) confronted individuals with “the [human] dilemma of truth versus conformity,” Latané and Darley (1968) examined “the conflict between altruism and self-interest,” and Milgram (1960-1963) investigated an individual’s “conflict between authority and conscience.”<sup>39</sup>

Stanley Milgram, “a distinguished professor of psychology,” had just received his PhD (1960) at Harvard University when he began to study the dilemma of obedience to authority, for which he would later receive international recognition.<sup>40</sup> His initial experiment<sup>41</sup> included participants, sometimes referred to as subjects, who were volunteers, drawn from various social and educational backgrounds ranging

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<sup>37</sup> Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67.4 (1963): 371.

<sup>38</sup> Stanley Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments*, ed. John Sabini and Maury Silver, 2nd ed. (United States: McGraw, 1992) 125.

<sup>39</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 125.

<sup>40</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* n. pag.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974) 15.

from unskilled workers to highly skilled workers within an age range between 20 and 50. They were categorised into the following occupational types: workers, skilled and unskilled; sales, business and white-collar; and professional<sup>42</sup> and were then given the role of the “teacher” whose behaviour Milgram wished to investigate. Apart from the “teacher,” the study also included an “experimenter” and a “learner.” A 31-year-old teacher of biology played the role of the “experimenter” and a 47-year-old accountant played the “learner,” the perceived victim, who also was an accomplice of the “experimenter.”<sup>43</sup> As claimed in the public announcement to attract participants, the study was to examine memory and learning. The more specific purpose of the experiment, the volunteers were told on arrival, was the relation between punishment and learning.<sup>44</sup> For each wrong answer given by the “learner,” the “teacher” was, as instructed by the “experimenter,” to administer electrical shocks of increasing voltage to the victim, ranging from 15 to 450 volt.

Milgram’s aim was in particular to investigate the extent of an individual’s obedience to a perceived authority figure in hope of shedding some light on the question of why so many Germans participated directly and indirectly in the extermination of Jews and other people considered undesirable in the Third Reich. Milgram did not seek to excuse torture or murder, but wanted to examine the psychological mechanisms involved in a person’s obedience to a “malevolent authority” figure’s order to hurt another human being. Milgram was particularly interested to find out “how far the participant will comply with the experimenter’s

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<sup>42</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 372.

<sup>43</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 373.

<sup>44</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 373.

instruction before refusing to carry out the actions required of him.”<sup>45</sup> Before conducting his experiment, Milgram consulted and familiarised “[f]ourteen Yale seniors, all psychology majors,” with his intended study, asking them for their predictions which were, that an average of 1.2% of participants would continue to administer the highest shock of 450 volt to the “learner.”<sup>46</sup> Yet contrary to expectations, 26 out of 40 subjects or 65% of the “teachers” submitted to the “experimenter’s” demand by continuing to increase the shock voltage to the “learner” until they reached 450 volt.<sup>47</sup> Having observed the behaviour of participants under investigation, Milgram came to the conclusion that:

Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleads to be let out. This was seen time and again in our studies and has been observed in several universities where the experiment was repeated.<sup>48</sup>

However, in another variation of the experiment called “Closeness to Authority,” the “experimenter” remained out of sight and as a result the “teacher’s” obedience diminished. Milgram studied obedience to authority in many other variations of his initial experiment.<sup>49</sup> Some of these variations, relevant to my discussion, will be

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<sup>45</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 3.

<sup>46</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 375.

<sup>47</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 376.

<sup>48</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 5.

<sup>49</sup> Other variations of Milgram’s initial experiment include “Remote-Victim,” “Voice-Feedback,” “Proximity,” “Touch-Proximity,” “A New Base-Line Condition,” “Change of Personnel,” “Closeness of Authority,” “Women as Subjects,” “The Victim’s Limited contract,” “Institutional Context,” “Subject Free to Choose Shock Level,” “Learner Demands to be Shocked,” “An Ordinary Man Gives Orders,” “The Subject as a Bystander,” “Authority as Victim: an Ordinary Man Commanding,” “Two Authorities: Contradictory Commands,”

explained in greater detail under the corresponding sub-sections to authority and obedience. The forms of authority relevant to Milgram's study are rational and charismatic authority. The trust in authority, the deception and manipulation by authority, as well as the responsibility of authority will also be considered in this chapter. Obedience, its underlying forces, and its universality in terms of age, gender, and nationality for example, will also be addressed.

### **1.1. Authority – Milgram, Weber and Potts**

Milgram's study shed light on the enormous influence a perceived legitimate authority figure can have over his subordinates, even if submission means inflicting harm to another fellow human being. The results of this study series, caused Milgram to conclude:

A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority.<sup>50</sup>

Milgram acknowledged that his subjects perceived the “experimenter” as the person “in charge” and as possessing the required expert knowledge.<sup>51</sup> From their point of view, the “experimenter” was a legitimate authority.

The following discussion will centre on legal or rational-bureaucratic authority (rational authority) and charismatic authority, which are two of three legitimate types

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“Two Authorities: One as Victim,” “Two Peers Rebel,” and “A Peer Administers Shocks.” Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* viii-ix.

<sup>50</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 189.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Blass, “The Milgram Paradigm After 35 Years: Some Things We Now Know About Obedience to Authority,” *Applied Social Psychology* 29.5 (1999): 960.

of authority defined by Maximilian Weber in 1947.<sup>52</sup> Although Watt (1982)<sup>53</sup> called for a separation between authority and its “excesses and abuses,” that is between the terms legitimate authority and non-legitimate<sup>54</sup> authority, I will use Milgram’s term “malevolent authority” to describe a person in authority who abuses his or her power. Although Talcott Parson (1947) and P.M. Blau (1968) criticise Weber’s “failure to distinguish between professional and bureaucratic authority,”<sup>55</sup> Austin Cline’s argues<sup>56</sup> that both professional and bureaucratic authority “[are] dependent almost entirely upon a person’s technical skills and very little or even not at all upon holding some particular office.”<sup>57</sup>

The term charisma, according to Potts, was coined by Paul in AD 50-62, and reintroduced by Weber in 1922.<sup>58</sup> While Paul described charisma solely in the

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<sup>52</sup> Herbert C. Kelman, and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 46. See also Judith Pace, and Annette Hemmings, “Understanding Classroom Authority: Theory, Ideology, and Research on Practice,” *allacademic*, n.d., 22 Mar. 2009 <[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/1/0/0/0/pages110001-1.php](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/1/0/0/0/pages110001-1.php)>.

<sup>53</sup> Watt argued: “[To] speak of a right to command wrongdoing can make no sense. When the subjects obeyed, it was not authority that they were obeying if the man in charge of the experiment commanded wrongdoing, for then ipso facto he had exceeded his authority. Watt 23.

<sup>54</sup> Apart from Webers’ legitimate types of authority, Arthur S. Reber and Emily Reber list also a non-legitimate type of authority. “Authority Nonlegitimate,” *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 3rd ed. 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Kelman, and Hamilton 128.

<sup>56</sup> Cline argued that “[s]ome form of technical training is typically required of anyone filling an office in a system of rational authority.” Austin Cline, “Modernized, Rationalized Bonds of Office: Rational, Legal, and Professional Authority,” *About.com*, n.d., 22 Mar. 2009 <[http://atheism.about.com/od/religiousauthority/a/types\\_4.htm](http://atheism.about.com/od/religiousauthority/a/types_4.htm)>.

<sup>57</sup> Cline 1.

<sup>58</sup> John Potts, *A History of Charisma* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 23, 106.

Christian context, Weber broadened<sup>59</sup> the Christian interpretation to encompass secular ideals:

»Charisma« soll eine als außeralltäglich (ursprünglich, sowohl bei Propheten wie bei therapeutischen wie bei Rechts-Weisen wie bei Jagdführern wie bei Kriegshelden: als magisch bedingt) geltende Qualität einer Persönlichkeit heißen, um derentwillen sie als mit übernatürlichen oder übermenschlichen oder mindestens spezifisch außeralltäglichen, nicht jedem andern zugänglichen Kräften oder Eigenschaften oder als gottgesandt oder als vorbildlich und deshalb als »Führer« gewertet wird.<sup>60</sup>

Weber was also convinced that charisma, can only “geweckt und erprobt, [jedoch] nicht erlernt oder eingeprägt werden.”<sup>61</sup> Despite Weber’s definition of charisma, all attempts to pin down an exact meaning of charisma have failed and the term remains vague.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the attribution of “charisma” exclusively to “magical or sacred objects”<sup>63</sup> and extraordinary humans has become somewhat overstretched<sup>64</sup> in the

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<sup>59</sup> Potts is of the opinion that “Weber’s innovation was to propose the universality of charismatic authority: in principle, he states, ‘these phenomena are universal, even though they are often most evident in the religious realm.’” Max Weber, qtd. in Potts 118. See also Potts 119, where he argues: “By ignoring Paul’s conception of charisma as a communal blessing spread across group members, Weber has redefined the term as a specific form of domination, an individual endowment used by remarkable leaders to command authority over their followers. Furthermore while Paul’s use of the word related strictly to the close and small Christian communities of his time, Weber generalised charisma to express an ‘extraordinary quality manifest across cultures and throughout history.’”

<sup>60</sup> Textlog, § 10 Merkmale der charismatischen Herrschaft. Legitimität, Gehorsam. Max Weber, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Erster Teil, *textlog.de: Historische Texte und Wörterbücher* 29 Sept. 2004, 2 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.textlog.de/>>. Path: Suche.

<sup>61</sup> Textlog, § 12 Die Veralltäglichung des Charisma im Verwaltungsstab. See also Potts 121.

<sup>62</sup> According to Potts, “[charisma] is consistently referred to as ‘that elusive something’, the x-factor, the It-factor, the unknown factor, the I-don’t-know-what, the indefinable, the intangible, the mysterious, the indescribable, the irreducible, the enigmatic.” Potts 220.

<sup>63</sup> Potts 121.

<sup>64</sup> Charisma is, according to Potts, nowadays also attributed to “a city, a lake, a play or a body part,” as well as to a “salad dressing [and] a sandwich.” Potts 190.

twenty-first century. According to Potts, charisma in contemporary society is referred to as “unpredictable and unmeasurable,” as well as impossible to contain, eliminate, or fabricate.<sup>65</sup> Potts defines charisma as “a special innate quality that sets certain individuals apart and draws others to them.”<sup>66</sup> In spite of these views about charisma, there are critics who dismiss its very existence by arguing: “What has been mistaken for charisma has in reality been the confidence, attractiveness, boldness, oratorical skill, manipulation or exhibitionism displayed by some individuals.”<sup>67</sup> However, Weber’s term “charisma of rhetoric” clearly distinguishes between mere oratorical skills and the exceptional oratorical skills that Potts identified, for example, in Barack Obama’s (2009) US Presidential election campaign.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, there also appears to be a dangerous element of charisma exemplified by fanatical followers of cult leaders.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Potts 220. Potts believes that even today “a thread, however slender” exists between the contemporary usage of charisma, which is still very much influenced by Weber’s definition, and its Christian interpretation by Paul. He justifies his argument by pointing out that charisma is to this day considered to be “intrinsic to a person,” “thought simply to inhere in one,” “an innate quality vested in certain individuals,” and is “spoken of as a gift.” Pott 136, 216.

<sup>66</sup> Potts 2.

<sup>67</sup> Potts 220.

<sup>68</sup> Potts 213. Weber’s “charisma of rhetoric” is distinguished from mere oratorical skills by “stump speeches,” apparent in election campaigns. Max Weber, qtd. in Potts 125. See also S. N. Eisenstadt, *Max Weber: on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968) xxvii. Eisenstadt mentions the term “charismatic forms of communication.”

<sup>69</sup> Potts 216. Shils points to destructive effects of charisma, explaining: “The charismatic quality of an individual . . . lies in what is thought to be his connection with some very central feature of man’s existence and the cosmos in which he lives. . . . Centrality is constituted by its formative power in initiating, creating, governing, transforming, maintaining, or destroying what is vital in man’s life. The central power has often . . . been conceived of as God. . . .” Edward A. Shils, qtd. in Eisenstadt xxv. In addition to Shils’ view, refer to Lindholm who argues that a key example for abusing charismatic authority is Adolf Hitler who possessed an “immense capacity to inspire a mass audience” and who “was a virtuoso of ecstasy, who inspired fear, but also evoked love, by offering his followers participation in his own disintegrative, but controlled, abreactive frenzy.” Charles Lindholm,



Given the difficulty in defining charisma, it is hardly surprising that defining charismatic authority is rather problematic, as numerous competing views and assertions exist to define this term.<sup>70</sup> At the core of charismatic authority is according to Weber an “innate or personal charisma.”<sup>71</sup> He defines the distinguishing features of a charismatic leader as the followers’ trust in the leader,<sup>72</sup> their obedience resulting from his heroism or “exemplary qualities,”<sup>73</sup> his powers that are perceived by the followers as exemplary or of divine origin,<sup>74</sup> as well as the charismatic leaders’ constant requirement to maintain his followers’ belief in him, pointing to the inherent instability of charismatic authority.<sup>75</sup> Charismatic authority figures are considered to be revolutionary and often rise in times of conflict.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, a routinisation of charisma, which is a merging of charismatic authority with traditional or rational authority, appears<sup>77</sup> to be the inevitable fate of a charismatic leader.<sup>78</sup>

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“Charisma,” *U of Boston*, 2002, 18 Oct. 2009  
 <<http://www.bu.edu/uni/faculty/profiles/charisma.pdf>> 110, 118.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Conger and Kanungo define a charismatic authority figure or leader as someone who has the ability to “elicit trust in others, [who is] willing to take personal risks, and [is] sensitive to others’ needs.” Weiten adds: “Charismatic leaders are able to get followers to suspend disbelief and to accept challenges they would ordinarily reject.” J. Conger, and R. N. Kanungo, qtd. in Wayne Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001) A24. Pace and Hemmings argue that “[c]harismatic teachers gain students’ assent due to their unflagging energy, commitment, special talents, and magnetic personality.” Pace and Hemmings 110001-2.

<sup>71</sup> Potts 121.

<sup>72</sup> Textlog, § 10 Merkmale der charismatischen Herrschaft.

<sup>73</sup> Potts 118.

<sup>74</sup> Potts 119.

<sup>75</sup> Textlog, § 10 Merkmale der charismatischen Herrschaft.

<sup>76</sup> Textlog, § 10 Merkmale der charismatischen Herrschaft.

<sup>77</sup> Weber does not discount the possibility that a leader’s charisma “triumphs over an organization” like for example a political party, this occasion is very rare. Weber, qtd. in Potts 124-25.

<sup>78</sup> See Potts 124.

The working definitions for discussing rational and charismatic authority will be provided under the following sections to authority.

### *1.1.1. Rational Authority*

For the purpose of this thesis, rational authority is defined as expert knowledge to perform a certain task or job. These abilities legitimise power over others who do not possess his kind of expertise. Examining the rational authority in Milgram's behavioural study of obedience to authority, a chain of command and execution becomes visible. Milgram, the expert behind the study, keeps in the background and observes the events unfolding. The "experimenter," familiarised by Milgram with the experimental procedures and the task, then trains the volunteer who is to be the "teacher" to read word pairs to the "learner" and to operate the shock generator according to his instructions.<sup>79</sup> Since the "teacher" was also trained how to respond to the "learner's" responses, both the "experimenter" and the "teacher" hold rational authority during the experiment based on their received training. The study also shows how these different ranking authorities work hand in hand. The "experimenter" can be seen as transmitting the orders of Milgram, the highest ranking authority, to the "teacher," the lowest ranking authority, who in turn executes the commands he perceives as originating from the "experimenter," the actual intermediate authority. The structure of command and execution in the obedience study thus demonstrates how evil elements can integrate other people in their destructive agenda. Milgram commented about the methods used to make large-scale atrocities happen:

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<sup>79</sup> Refer to "Shock instructions" and "Preliminary and regular run" under the "Procedure" section. Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 373-74.

Any competent manager of a destructive bureaucratic system can arrange his personnel so that only the most callous and obtuse are directly involved in violence. The greater part of the personnel can consist of men and women who, by virtue of their distance from the actual act of brutality, will feel little strain in their performance of supportive functions. They will feel doubly absolved from responsibility. First, legitimate authority has given full warrant for their actions. Second, they have not themselves committed brutal physical acts.<sup>80</sup>

An historical example for a “competent manager of a destructive bureaucratic system” is Adolf Hitler, who arranged his government in a way that made it difficult for officials to oversee and control.<sup>81</sup> Hitler also kept his distance from the Nazi party in order to avoid being drawn into the party’s “perceived corruption and incompetence,” thereby increasing his charismatic status as leader.<sup>82</sup>

### *1.1.2. Charisma/Charismatic Authority*

Charismatic authority is defined as an individual’s power based on his innate extraordinary qualities or abilities, which enable him to influence or manipulate those sensitive to his charisma in a positive or negative way.

Milgram’s investigations did not explicitly examine obedience to a charismatic experimental authority. Since his obedience was triggered by the events of World War II whose engineer Adolf Hitler is considered a charismatic authority, it is surprising that Milgram has neglected this aspect in his obedience experiments. Nevertheless, in his experimental variations called “Change in Personnel,” and “Two

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<sup>80</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 122.

<sup>81</sup> Lindholm 125.

<sup>82</sup> Lindholm 125.

Authorities: Contradictory Commands” Milgram studied the impact of personal characteristics on the rate of obedience derived from subjects.

In “Change in Personnel” the influence of the personal characteristics of both “experimenter” and the “learner” on the subject (“teacher”) was under consideration. Of particular interest to Milgram was the “teacher’s” obedience or disobedience when confronted with the dominating or “impressive personality” of the “experimenter.”<sup>83</sup> In one part of the experiment, the “experimenter” displayed such features as “dry, hard, [and] technical” compared to the “learner” or victim who was “soft, avuncular, and innocuous.”<sup>84</sup> These personal characteristics were somewhat reversed in the second experiment, in which the “experimenter” looked “rather soft and unaggressive” and the “learner” had “a hard bony face and prognathic jaw, [and] looked as if he would do well in a scrap.”<sup>85</sup> Milgram found that the personal features of both “experimenter” and “learner” did not influence the degree of obedience.<sup>86</sup> It is possible however that the status of the “experimenter” as the person in charge had an “overriding” effect on the influence of personal characteristics on the obedience of the “teacher.” Milgram himself observed that priority was assigned to the “experimenter” in another experimental variation called “Authority as Victim: An Ordinary Man Commanding.”<sup>87</sup> Therefore a different variation of Milgram’s study appears much more suitable for examining the impact of a charismatic authority figure on the “teacher’s” rate of obedience, namely “Two Authorities: Contradictory

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<sup>83</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 58.

<sup>84</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 58.

<sup>85</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 58-59.

<sup>86</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 59.

<sup>87</sup> For more information refer to Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 101-103.

Commands.” In this experiment, in which the subjects were confronted with two “experimenters” of equal status, but one appearing slightly softer in manner, 18 of the 20 “teachers” were unable to continue after contradictory orders were given at the 150-volt level.<sup>88</sup> Milgram concluded: “It is clear that the disagreement between the authorities completely paralysed action.”<sup>89</sup> He also observed:

Some subjects attempted repeatedly to reconstruct a meaningful hierarchy. The efforts took the form of trying to ascertain which of the two experimenters was the higher authority. There is a certain discomfort in not knowing who the boss is and subjects sometimes frantically sought to determine this.<sup>90</sup>

Since Milgram himself pointed to the “slight” difference in manners of the one “experimenter” his mere personal characteristics are unlikely to have elevated his authority status over that of the other “experimenter.” Distinguishing both “experimenters” by including an “experimenter” who possesses charisma contrasting the other “experimenter’s” mere persona may have erased the “teacher’s” difficulties in ascertaining who of the two “experimenters” has the higher authority.

Charismatic authority is an important aspect for my discussion of authority and obedience especially in Schlink’s novel *Die Heimkehr*. Independent of the type of authority -- rational or charismatic, or a combination of the two -- there is the question of trust ascribed to a person in power.

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<sup>88</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 105, 107.

<sup>89</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 107.

<sup>90</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 107.

#### 1.1.1.1. Authority and Trust

Trust is a key element in the discussion of authority because trust can be abused by authority, but also between authorities. In terms of Milgram's study, trust is not only an issue in terms of where the experiment was conducted and who was in charge of the experiment as a whole (Milgram), but also with regard to the "experimenter" and the "teacher."

The public announcement for the experiment, placed in the New Haven newspaper informed potential volunteers to contact Professor Stanley Milgram of the Department of Psychology at Yale University. The title of the contact person stands for professional expertise and the venue is famous for academic excellence and prestige. Both contact person and institution gave the experiment an air of legitimacy and would have evoked trust in potential participants.<sup>91</sup> Milgram believed in the impact of institutional support for an experimenter, providing his study with the legitimacy needed to derive trust and obedience from participants, yet he found no such evidence when comparing his initial experiment at New Haven with the one at Bridgeport. The Bridgeport experiment was conducted in an office building "by an unimpressive firm lacking any credentials."<sup>92</sup> Obedience derived there was not significantly lower than at New Haven.<sup>93</sup> However, trust became an issue for some at Bridgeport. Milgram revealed one participant's doubts:

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<sup>91</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 372, 377.

<sup>92</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 70.

<sup>93</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 69

Should I quit this damn test? Maybe [the learner] passed out? What dopes we were not to check up on this deal. How do we know that these guys are legit? No furniture, bare walls, no telephone. . . . How do I know that Mr. Williams [the experimenter] is telling the truth?<sup>94</sup>

Milgram did not state, whether this participant continued to obey the “experimenter” to the end, but he expressed the possibility “that beyond a certain point obedience would disappear completely.”<sup>95</sup>

As the designer of the experiments, Milgram was criticised for compromising the “teacher’s” trust in authority, when allowing him to believe he was delivering harmful electrical shocks to the “learner.” Milgram (1963) explained in the procedure section of his *Behavioral Study of Obedience* the extensive efforts involved in making the shock generator look genuine. Apart from the appearance of the generator, a sample shock is applied to the naïve subject before he is placed in the role of the “teacher.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, the “learner” voices his protests as the shocks increase in intensity, which allows the “teacher” to believe that the generator is functioning.<sup>97</sup> The exploitation of the subject’s trust in the experimental authority was scrutinised by Diana Baumrind who argued:

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<sup>94</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 69.

<sup>95</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 70.

<sup>96</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 373.

<sup>97</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 375.

By volunteering, the subject agrees implicitly to assume a posture of trust and obedience. While the experimental conditions leave him exposed, the subject has the right to assume that his security and self-esteem will be protected.<sup>98</sup>

The “emotional disturbances” Milgram’s “teachers” experienced, such as “sweat[ing], trembl[ing], stutter[ing], bit[ing] their lips, groan[ing], and dig[ging] their fingernails into their flesh,”<sup>99</sup> are, according to Baumrind, “harmful” in that its consequences could lead to “an alteration in the subject’s self-image or ability to trust adult authorities in the future.”<sup>100</sup> Subjects’ emotional reactions show that they trusted the experimenter in actually hurting the victim. Furthermore, Milgram found that during the task to deliver electrical shocks to the “learner,” many participants in the role of the “teacher” “entrust the broader tasks of setting goals and assessing morality to the experimental authority they are serving.”<sup>101</sup> This prerequisite for a continuance of obedience to authority will be discussed in greater detail under section 1.2.1. *Forces that Underlie Obedience to Authority* of this chapter. Milgram’s findings highlight the trust of a lower-ranking authority in a higher-ranking authority figure.

The issue of trust between these two types of authority has been further analysed by Milgram’s experiment “Closeness to Authority,” which will be addressed below. In this experimental variation, the “teacher” abuses the trust the “experimenter” has assigned to him.

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<sup>98</sup> Diana Baumrind, “Some Thoughts on Ethics of Research: After Reading Milgram’s Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *American Psychologist* 19.6 (1964): 421.

<sup>99</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 375.

<sup>100</sup> Baumrind 422.

<sup>101</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 7.



### 1.1.1.2. Authority and Deception

Another key element in the discussion of authority is deception, which is defined as an act of lying or misleading to conceal the truth.<sup>102</sup> Authorities independent of their type or rank can employ deception. This section particularly discusses the deception used by the “teacher,” the lowest-ranking authority, and that of Milgram, the highest-ranking authority. Milgram’s “Closeness to Authority” revealed that the “teacher” misled the “experimenter” who had left the laboratory, but was in contact with the “teacher” over the phone. Secret monitoring of the subjects in the role of the “teacher” revealed a significant decrease in the rate of their obedience to the “experimenter.” Milgram’s surveillance revealed:

[S]ome subjects specifically assured the experimenter that they were raising the shock level according to instruction, while, in reality, they repeatedly used the lowest shock on the board.<sup>103</sup>

The deception employed by the “teacher” shows a sharp contrast to his behaviour compared to when the “experimenter” was still in the same room. The “teacher’s” different reaction reveals he is indisposed to cruelty against another human being. Milgram explained the behaviour of the “teacher” during the telephone conversation, by saying that he would rather deceive the “experimenter” “than to precipitate an open break with authority.”<sup>104</sup> The findings of this experimental variation demonstrate that an authority of lower rank is capable of deceiving a higher-ranking authority.

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<sup>102</sup> See Weiten 62, 670. “Deception,” def. 1, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 3rd ed. 2001.

<sup>103</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 62.

<sup>104</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 62.

Apart from the deception used by the “teacher,” Milgram’s study was based on deception too. For example, the purpose of the study in the public announcement was incorrect, the draw that decided the participants’ role of either “teacher” or “learner” was not genuine, the person under investigation was the “teacher” not the “learner,” and as mentioned earlier, the “learner” never received any shocks.<sup>105</sup> Watt criticised Milgram for lying to participants and thereby exceeding his experimental authority. In *Authority* (1982), Watt applied Milgram’s comment<sup>106</sup> about the obedient behaviour of the “teacher,” to Milgram himself, and argued:

[Milgram] had no doubt learned from childhood that it is a fundamental breach of moral conduct to tell lies, or to instruct subordinates to perform cruel acts, and yet he had told lies to them about the nature of the experiment in which they were participating, and issued the very instructions which he later condemned them for obeying.<sup>107</sup>

Answering his critics, Milgram dismissed the usage of the term deception in relation to his study:

It is true that technical illusions were used in the experiment. I would not call them deceptions, because that already implies some base motivation. After all, the major illusion used was that the person did not receive the shocks.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 373.

<sup>106</sup> For details refer to Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 376.

<sup>107</sup> Watt 22-23.

<sup>108</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 132.

“Technical illusion” is an euphemism for Milgram’s experimental “deception,” as illusion is interpreted as a “mistaken perception.”<sup>109</sup> While deception can be used to manipulate,<sup>110</sup> manipulation does not necessarily depend on the use of deception.<sup>111</sup>

#### *1.1.1.3. Authority and Manipulation*

Manipulation is defined as an act of influencing or directing a person’s perception. An understanding of manipulation is of significance when analysing authority. Apart from calling the use of deception a “technical illusion,” to influence people’s perception of his study methods, Milgram also pointed to the “central fact that subjects find the device acceptable,” emphasising the exclusive right to evaluate the ethical aspects of his experiments to “[t]he participant . . . [who] must be the ultimate source of judgement in these matters.”<sup>112</sup>

In defence of Milgram’s research methods is their aim of shedding light into the human dilemma of obedience, a psychological matter that led to devastating consequences during World War II. Milgram himself justified the use of “illusion” by pointing to the study’s “benign purpose.”<sup>113</sup> Some researchers, authorities in their own respective fields, “argued that the brief distress experienced by [Milgram’s] subjects was a small price to pay for the insights that emerged from his obedience

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<sup>109</sup> “Illusion,” *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 3rd ed. 2001.

<sup>110</sup> An example of deception being used to manipulate a person’s level of anxiety in psychological experiments is Stanley Schachter’s study, which was conducted to find out whether “misery love company.” See Weiten 42-4.

<sup>111</sup> Zoe Li, “Muse Magazine’s Perry Lam: Art is Manipulation,” *CNNGo* 4 Mar. 2010, 4 Mar. 2010 <<http://www.cnngo.com/hong-kong/play/manipulation-art-441761>>.

<sup>112</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 127.

<sup>113</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 132.

studies.”<sup>114</sup> This argument in favour of Milgram’s study series shows how some authority figures are willing to compromise their responsibility for the subjects under investigation for the sake of scientific advancement.

Nonetheless, discussions of the pro and cons<sup>115</sup> of Milgram’s obedience study “helped,” according to Weiten, “to stimulate stricter ethical standards for research.”<sup>116</sup> Kelman in particular argued that “the experimenter relationship . . . is a real interhuman relationship, in which we have responsibility toward the subject as another human being whose dignity we must preserve.”<sup>117</sup>

#### *1.1.1.4. Authority and Responsibility*

Responsibility taken by or assigned to a person in power is yet another vital point in the discussion of authority figures of differing types or ranks. The question of responsibility within a hierarchy of authority was found to be a fundamental aspect of their cooperation. For example, one “teacher” did not want to be responsible for harming the “learner,” but as soon as the “experimenter” assured him of his, the experimenter’s sole responsibility for whatever may happen in the experiment, the “teacher” continued with the experimental procedures.<sup>118</sup> This incident shows, how a lower-ranking or subordinate authority figure like the “teacher” in Milgram’s study can be persuaded to hurt another person, when he believes himself relieved from any

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<sup>114</sup> Weiten 683.

<sup>115</sup> See Baumrind 422-23; and Herbert D. Kelman, “Human Use of Human Subjects: The Problem of Deception in Social Psychological Experiments,” *Psychological Bulletin* 67.1 (1967): 6, 4.

<sup>116</sup> Weiten 683.

<sup>117</sup> Kelman 5.

<sup>118</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 74, 76.

responsibility, which the respective superior authority, such the “experimenter,” claims to be his. Many people who submit to authority “view [themselves] as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes, and therefore no longer regard [themselves] responsible for [their] actions.”<sup>119</sup> Milgram observed this attitude in his “teacher” after the experiment:

In postexperimental interviews, when subjects were asked why they had gone on, a typical reply was: “I wouldn’t have done it myself. I was just doing what I was told.”<sup>120</sup>

Milgram concluded that the attitude of the “teacher” resembled that of Nazi Officers before the Nuremberg trial who defended their actions as “just doing [their] duty.”<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, responsibility for a “subsidiary act,” such as an action leading to the delivery of shocks to the “learner,” was considered by the subject who read the word pairs to the “learner” to be that of the person who actually pulled the switch.<sup>122</sup>

Milgram reasoned:

It is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of action. Even Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but to participate in mass murder he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers.<sup>123</sup>

While in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Hannah Ahrendt argued “. . . that [Eichmann] came closer to being an uninspired bureaucrat who simply sat at his desk

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<sup>119</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* xii.

<sup>120</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 8.

<sup>121</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 8.

<sup>122</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 10-11.

<sup>123</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 11.

and did his job,”<sup>124</sup> Milgram concluded: “[t]his is perhaps the most fundamental lesson of [my] study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs. . . .”<sup>125</sup> The mindset of the obedient person, the person who ‘just does his job,’ will be discussed under *1.2.1. Forces that Underlie Obedience to Authority*.

## 1.2. Obedience

Authority is closely linked with obedience, which according to Weiten, is “[a] form of compliance that occurs when people follow direct commands, usually from someone in a position of authority.”<sup>126</sup> Milgram himself defined obedience as “the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose.”<sup>127</sup> He states:

Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many persons obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct.<sup>128</sup>

Apart from the atrocities committed during World War II under command, Milgram acknowledged that obedience has two sides, pointing out: “Obedience may be ennobling and educative and refer to acts of charity and kindness, as well as to destruction.”<sup>129</sup> Reflecting on Milgram’s obedience study, Weiten says:

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<sup>124</sup> Qtd. in Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 5.

<sup>125</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

<sup>126</sup> Weiten 680.

<sup>127</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 371.

<sup>128</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 371.

<sup>129</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 371.

If you are like most people, you're probably confident that you wouldn't follow an experimenter's demands to inflict harm on a helpless victim. But the empirical findings indicate that you're probably wrong.<sup>130</sup>

Milgram presented two questions to an audience he had familiarised with the study, but left in the dark about its results.<sup>131</sup> The first question was to inquire how these psychiatrists, college students, and middle class adults of differing occupations expected themselves to behave in the *Behavioural Study of Obedience to Authority*. Because of the potential bias<sup>132</sup> in answering a question about their own behaviour, Milgram also asked participants to predict how "other people would perform" in the role of the "teacher."<sup>133</sup> Respondents to the first question believed they would refuse to obey the experimenter "at some point in the command series."<sup>134</sup> Respondents to the second question (psychiatrists, graduate students and faculty in the behavioural sciences, college sophomores, and middle-class adults) were confident that "virtually all subjects will [disobey] the experimenter; only a pathological fringe, not exceeding one or two per cent, was expected to proceed to the end of the shockboard."<sup>135</sup>

Milgram believed that these predictions stemmed from being convinced that moral values are upheld, unless force is applied.<sup>136</sup> He further argued that the respondents were "focus[sing] on the character of the autonomous individual rather

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<sup>130</sup> Weiten 682.

<sup>131</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 30-31.

<sup>132</sup> Milgram is of the opinion that people would judge their own behaviour in a more favourable light, when it comes to obeying a "malevolent authority" by hurting another person. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 30.

<sup>133</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 30.

<sup>134</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 28.

<sup>135</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 31.

<sup>136</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 31.

than on the situation [they find themselves in].<sup>137</sup> In reply to those who criticised the subject or “teacher” for obeying destructive orders by the “experimenter” in his obedience study, Milgram pointed out:

Sitting back in one’s armchair, it is easy to condemn the actions of the obedient subjects. But those who condemn the subjects measure them against the standard of their own ability to formulate high-minded moral prescriptions. That is hardly a fair standard. Many of the subjects, at the level of stated opinion, feel quite as strongly as any of us about the moral requirement of refraining from action against a helpless victim.<sup>138</sup>

Milgram observed many other factors that could explain the obedience of the “teacher” in his study.

#### *1.2.1. Forces underlying Obedience to Authority*

The forces that impinge on a person and trigger his submission are important elements in the discussion of obedience especially to a “malevolent authority” figure. Obedience can be either a voluntary or an involuntary response to an order given by an authority figure. Milgram states:

To the degree that an attitude of willingness and the absence of compulsion is present, obedience is colored by a cooperative mood; to the degree that the threat of force or punishment against the person is intimated, obedience is compelled by fear.<sup>139</sup>

Obedience in Milgram’s experiments was derived without the exercise or threat of force. Participation was voluntary and any force at work, according to Milgram, was

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<sup>137</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 31.

<sup>138</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

<sup>139</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* xii-xiii.



the perceived authority the subject attributed to the experimenter.<sup>140</sup> In that sense, the obedience of the “teacher” was “colored by a cooperative mood.”

Aggressiveness or sadism, according to Milgram, is thought to underlie obedience to destructive orders.<sup>141</sup> The forces Milgram identified as responsible for a person’s obedience to authority are: individual motives, a shift in moral values, as well as proximity to both victim and authority.

The people in the role of the “teacher” who applied the highest possible shock level to the “learner” or victim were and are often perceived as being monsters, or belong to “the sadistic fringe of society.”<sup>142</sup> Milgram disputed such claims about his subjects, whom he did not find to display any aggressive tendencies in the “Subject Free to Choose Shock Level” variation of his obedience study. He in particular pointed out that his subjects “[knew] in general terms what ought to be done and can state their values when the occasion arises,” and argued, “[t]his has little if anything to do with their actual behavior under the pressure of circumstances.”<sup>143</sup> Milgram is of the opinion that moral values make up only a small proportion of “forces” that influence a person’s behaviour.<sup>144</sup>

Individual motives, as well as a shift in moral values that is task-orientated (technical routines) is exemplified by the striking difference in the moral values of soldiers and civilians, are other forces that determine a person’s obedience to authority. Milgram found these two forces to “recur” in history pointing to the My

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<sup>140</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* xiii.

<sup>141</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 5-6, 72.

<sup>142</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 5.

<sup>143</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

<sup>144</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

Lai massacre, the Eichmann trial, and the trial of the commandant Wirz at Andersonville:

Obedience does not take the form of a dramatic confrontation of opposed wills or philosophies but is embedded in a larger atmosphere where social relationships, career aspirations, and technical routines set the dominant tone.<sup>145</sup>

The particular forces that caused the “teacher” in Milgram’s study to continue obeying the “experimenter” are “binding factors” such as politeness by the subject, his promise to aid scientific advancement, and “the awkwardness of withdrawal.”<sup>146</sup> When obeying the “experimenter” by hurting the “learner,” Milgram observed that in many cases the person or subject in the role of the “teacher” experienced great distress.<sup>147</sup> The potential self-destructiveness of the “teacher’s” obedience is demonstrated by the fact that the “experimenter” had to terminate an experiment, in which one of three subjects’ displayed “full-blown, uncontrollable seizure[s]” and became “violently convulsive.”<sup>148</sup> The extreme tensions among his subjects convinced Milgram that there were two “competing” and “conflicting” demands the “teacher” was facing – not to harm another person, and obeying authority.<sup>149</sup> In order to reduce these tensions, the obedient “teacher” became task orientated or absorbed by the technical routines of the experiment.<sup>150</sup> Milgram observed that

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<sup>145</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 187.

<sup>146</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 7.

<sup>147</sup> For a list of emotional disturbances experienced by some “teachers” refer to page 25 of this chapter.

<sup>148</sup> Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 375.

<sup>149</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 149-50. See also Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 378.

<sup>150</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 7.

[subjects] become immersed in the procedures, reading the word pairs with exquisite articulation and pressing the switches with great care. They want to put on a competent performance, but they show an accompanying narrowing of moral concern.<sup>151</sup>

Putting his experimental insights into perspective, Milgram refers to a real life situation, where a soldier's

moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the expectations that the authority has of him. In wartime, [he] does not ask whether it is good or bad to bomb a hamlet; he does not experience shame or guilt in the destruction of a village: rather he feels pride or shame, depending on how well he has performed the mission assigned to him.<sup>152</sup>

Milgram, who commented on the issue of obedience during the Vietnam War and the breach of social moral norms, pointed to the military training camps being “spatially segregated from the larger community to assure the absence of competing authorities.”<sup>153</sup> This seclusion from society is necessary to ensure obedience to orders that violate social moral norms, which is achieved by redefining moral values to fit military purpose.<sup>154</sup>

Serving in the army or being subjected to intensive propaganda are also influencing social moral norms,<sup>155</sup> as moral values are adjusted to serve the relevant political purpose. Milgram explained how these pressures influence a person's

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<sup>151</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 7.

<sup>152</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 8.

<sup>153</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 181.

<sup>154</sup> Milgram describes the aims of American military training in relation to the Vietnam War. In preparation for battle, the military stressed the danger to their country posed by the Vietnamese enemy, who is additionally devaluated in the eyes of the American soldier. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 181.

<sup>155</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

obedience to destructive commands: “A few changes in newspaper headlines, a call from the draft board, orders from a man with epaulets, and men are led to kill with little difficulty.”<sup>156</sup> Milgram also provided two historical examples where propaganda was used to justify the large-scale destruction of human life. Referring to Nazi Germany, Milgram said that “Anti-Jewish propaganda” made the destruction of human life “acceptable” in World War II; and in regard to the Vietnam War he stated that killing one’s enemy (children, women, men) was seen as a “noble cause” by American soldiers.<sup>157</sup> In his experiment, Milgram argued that hurting the “learner” becomes now perceived by most of the “teachers” as justifiable in “the pursuit of scientific truth.”<sup>158</sup>

Another impinging force Milgram identified is “proximity.” He examined the effect of closeness to both the “experimenter” and the “learner” on the obedience of the “teacher,” observing a “sharp” decrease in the “teacher’s” submission to authority, when the “experimenter” had left the laboratory.<sup>159</sup> Before examining the impact of the presence of the authority, Milgram investigated the impact of the closeness of the “learner” on the “teacher’s” obedience to authority.<sup>160</sup> The categories under observation were “Remote Feedback,” “Voice Feedback,” “Proximity,” and “Touch Proximity.” In the “Remote Feedback” category, the “learner” was in another room and except for pounding on the wall at 300 volts could neither be heard nor seen by the “teacher.” Vocal protest by the “learner” was introduced in the “Voice

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<sup>156</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 7.

<sup>157</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 9.

<sup>158</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 9.

<sup>159</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 145.

<sup>160</sup> For details refer to Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 141-145.

Feedback” category, where the victim was heard but not seen. In the “Proximity” category, which was similar to the second category or condition, the “learner” was in the same room as the “teacher,” while in the “Touch Proximity” condition, the “learner” faced the “teacher.” It was found that the closer the “learner” was both visually and audibly to the “teacher” under investigation, the lesser the mean maximum shock administered became.<sup>161</sup> In yet another variation,<sup>162</sup> the subject under investigation was not required to execute the electrical shocks, but only to read the word-pairs to the “learner.” The “teacher” performed a subsidiary act, which led to the “learner” being shocked by someone else, if his answers were wrong. The “teacher” only collaborated in hurting the “learner.” Milgram found that the rate of obedience was high. Kilham and Mann (1974) *Level of Destructive Obedience as a Function of Transmitter and Executant Roles in the Milgram Obedience Paradigm* extended Milgrams’ study variation and, in contrast to Milgram, also put females in the position of the “learner.” Investigating what impact the proximity to the actual destructive act would have on a person’s obedience, Kilham and Mann hypothesised that the subject in that “transmitter” role who for example “chooses the targets, relays or transmits the order” or “in the literal sense transports victims from the ghetto to the concentration camp” will be more obedient to the “experimenter’s” destructive orders than the subject in the “executant” role who for example “pulls the switch, fires the rifle, drops the bomb.”<sup>163</sup> They based their hypothesis on the assumption that the further the participant is removed from the actual extermination act, the less

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<sup>161</sup> Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* 142.

<sup>162</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 10-11.

<sup>163</sup> Kilham, and Mann 696-97.

responsible he or she feels “for its consequences.”<sup>164</sup> Kilham and Mann’s hypothesis was supported, as the subjects in the “transmitter” role, who were in the experiment “required to communicate an order to hurt another, [proved to be more obedient] than [the subjects in the “executant” role] when they were ordered to carry out that order.”<sup>165</sup>

### *1.2.2. The Universality of Obedience to Authority*

A further vital aspect in the discussion of obedience is that the readiness to obey authority has not changed over the years, as a study by Thomas Blass (1999) confirmed. In his analysis of experiments about obedience to authority that were conducted subsequent to Milgram’s initial experiment, Blass also found that “with one exception, in all studies permitting a comparison between male and female subjects, no gender differences in obedience [were evident].”<sup>166</sup> He also noticed that the “rates of obedience show no systematic change over time.”<sup>167</sup> Jerry M. Burger<sup>168</sup> (2009) attempted fairly recently to replicate Milgram’s study, painstakingly ensuring the welfare of his subjects. Acknowledging the limitations<sup>169</sup> of such replication, Burger concluded:

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<sup>164</sup> Kilham, and Mann 696.

<sup>165</sup> Kilham, and Mann 696.

<sup>166</sup> Blass 972.

<sup>167</sup> Blass’ method of inquiry were: “Two correlational analyses between year of publication and obedience outcome [which] showed no relationship whatsoever between the year in which a study was conducted and the level of obedience.” Blass 972.

<sup>168</sup> Jerry M. Burger, “Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?” *American Psychologist* 64.1 (2009): 1-11, *American Psychologist Association*, 2009, 14 May 2009 <<http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/amp641-1.pdf>>.

<sup>169</sup> Burger 10.

[My] partial replication of Milgram's procedure suggests that average Americans react to this laboratory situation today much the way they did 45 years ago. Although change in societal attitudes can affect behavior, my findings indicate that the same situational factors that affected obedience in Milgram's participants still operate today.<sup>170</sup>

The seemingly unchanging rate in subjects' readiness to obey an "abusive" authority figure seems to be reflected in the reoccurrence of atrocities after World War II.

Examples of cruelty committed under the command of an authority can be found in the wars in Vietnam, Korea, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Sudan, Kenya, and Iraq.<sup>171</sup>

Obedience to "malevolent authorities," as they occur around the world, is not only universal but as Milgram described a "dilemma."<sup>172</sup> Studies indicate that obedience to destructive orders is both an age-old and ongoing problem that occurs among humans irrespective of their age, gender<sup>173</sup>, level of education, social class, nationality, or the prevailing political system. However, individual differences do exist among people, and between countries. For example, in Milgram's *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 14 out of 40 subjects, that is 35% of "teachers," disobeyed authority.<sup>174</sup> Replications of his obedience studies conducted in countries such as Italy, South Africa, West

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<sup>170</sup> Burger 9.

<sup>171</sup> A fairly recent example for obeying authority in the Iraq War, which started in March 2003 appears to be Lynndie England, a female American soldier and guard, who had been convicted in relation to the torture scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. After her release she stated in an interview with Stern that she and the other soldiers or guards involved in the abuse of prisoners were obeying orders from above. Lynndie England, "Die Frau aus dem Folter-Gefängnis Abu Ghraib," *Stern* 19 Mar. 2008: 34, 36.

<sup>172</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* xi.

<sup>173</sup> For further information see Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 62-63. In contrast to Milgram's findings, see Kilham and Mann 696. In their study, gender differences in the obedience to authority were observed. However, other replications of Milgram's experimental paradigm comparing male and female obedience showed no gender differences. See Blass 968.

<sup>174</sup> Refer to Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience* 376.

Germany, Australia, Jordan, Spain, and Austria have shown that while obedience occurred in each of these countries, rates differed and were in some cases found to be higher than in the United States.<sup>175</sup> Weiten cautions, that experiments based on Milgram's obedience studies not only differed somewhat in "experimental procedures," but also were mostly restricted to "industrialized countries similar to the United States."<sup>176</sup> Nevertheless, Milgram pointed out that atrocities happen independent of political system<sup>177</sup> and described some of the atrocities that occurred under democratically elected governments of America:

The importation and enslavement of millions of black people, the destruction of the American Indian population, the internment of Japanese Americans, the use of napalm against civilians in Vietnam, [are] all harsh policies that originated in the authority of a democratic nation. . . .<sup>178</sup>

While Milgram also considered the atrocities that occurred throughout the history of the United States of America, Bernhard Schlink's novel *Der Vorleser* revisits the atrocities committed under the democratically elected<sup>179</sup> authority of the Hitler regime in Germany and *Die Heimkehr* portrays the continuance of destructive obedience in America.

The following chapters will examine Schlink's novels *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* in relation to some of the issues raised in Milgram's obedience study.

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<sup>175</sup> Referring to Smith & Bond (1994), Weiten draws attention to the fact that "[obedience] rates of over 80% have been reported for samples from Italy, Germany, Austria, Spain, and Holland." Weiten 683.

<sup>176</sup> Weiten 683.

<sup>177</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 179.

<sup>178</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 179.

<sup>179</sup> Martin F. Nolan, "Love, Horror, and Mercy," *Boston Globe* [Boston, Mass.] 5. Apr. 1999, City ed.: A 17.



Authority and obedience in both of Schlink's novels will be discussed in the same order, as it was in this chapter on Milgram.

## 2. Authority and Obedience in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*<sup>180</sup>

From the outset, Schlink highlights the problem of authority and obedience in *Der Vorleser* by his portrayal of a former SS guard's post-war relationship with Michael Berg, the narrator of the novel. Schlink's more intense focus on obedience to authority in the context of Nazi Germany builds on that relationship and is revealed later in the novel. His fictional authority figure and perpetrator is Hanna Schmitz, who, as former SS-guard, committed crimes against humanity during World War II. Working at a labour camp, Schmitz takes part in the selection of prisoners to be exterminated in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. She also participates in one of the death marches, after concentration camps on occupied territories are closed down at the German army's retreat from occupied land. On this death march, Schmitz fails to save the life of female Jewish prisoners locked up in a church, which catches fire during a bombing raid. Years later, the post-war German court, where she stands trial for committing war crimes, sentences Schmitz to life in prison.

When analysed on the basis of Milgram's study of obedience to authority, Schmitz displays all the symptoms his study uncovered. Not only does the type of authority she holds change depending on circumstances, but also the justifications she uses for her destructive actions conform to those defences of some of the "teachers" in Milgram's study. Although Schmitz's role as SS guard cannot be equated with that of the "teachers" in Milgram's experiments, since she is not a participant of a

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<sup>180</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1995). Page numbers refer to this edition.

psychological study, a comparison with the “teachers” can nonetheless explain her actions and attitudes.

### 2.1. Authority in *Der Vorleser*

Schmitz’s authority over Berg is that of a parent’s over his or her child,<sup>181</sup> a kind of “Elternherrschaft.”<sup>182</sup> Although she is not Berg’s parent, but rather his lover, Schmitz is nevertheless old enough to be his mother (41). She also behaves like a concerned mother in her criticism of Berg’s lack of interest in school (36). He reads to her<sup>183</sup> as if doing his homework by reading books that are on the school’s curriculum (43). However, Schmitz’s attempts to uphold her power over Berg reveal a highly authoritarian character. For example, she punishes him severely for failing to obey her, although he was unaware of the requirement not to leave without asking for her permission (54-55).

Schmitz can also be classified as a rational authority despite coming from a lower-working class environment and being illiterate. Her inability to read and write does not prevent her from acquiring a position as a factory worker at Siemens, as an SS-guard, or as a tram conductor after World War II. In each of these positions, Schmitz has rational authority, as she is trained and has the expert knowledge

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<sup>181</sup> Several critics have commented on Schmitz and Berg’s relationship as being that of a mother and son or a parent and child. See for example Stephen Brockmann, “Virgin Father and Prodigal Son,” *Philosophy And Literature* 27 (2003): 341-362; Donahue, *Illusions of Subtlety: Bernhard Schlink’s Der Vorleser and the Moral Limits of Holocaust Fiction* 63; Klein B 18; Mahlendorf 464; and Roth 7-8.

<sup>182</sup> “Elternherrschaft,” Textlog, § 1. Definition der Herrschaft. Legitimität, Gehorsam.

<sup>183</sup> Franklin argues: “And of course there is the motif of reading aloud, typically an activity in which parents engage with their children. . . .” Ruth Franklin, “Immortality Play,” rev. of *Flights of Love*, by Bernhard Schlink, *Powell’s Books*, n.d., 4 Oct. 2007 <[http://www.powells.com/review/2001\\_12\\_27.html](http://www.powells.com/review/2001_12_27.html)>. 2.

required for performing her job tasks. She certainly was not in charge, but had to obey higher-ranking authority. Schmitz's authority can therefore be compared to that of "teachers" in Milgram's obedience study, as she is also a subordinate authority figure. Her obedience becomes destructive once she works for the SS. After Schmitz is imprisoned for her crimes, she becomes a charismatic authority figure for her fellow female inmates.

### *2.1.1. Rational Authority*

Because of Schmitz's diligence, the level of her rational authority based on her training as factory worker would have increased at Siemens had she not, as portrayed by Schlink, chosen to turn down her promotion in order to conceal her illiteracy. Instead she resigned, joined the SS and became a link in the destructive chain of Nazi authority. In order to understand Schmitz's level of authority and her new work environment, we need to understand the SS<sup>184</sup> as a political organisation, information that is sparse in Schlink's novel. In *The Mare of Majdanek*, Lynn Wolff provides the following historical insight into the chain of command within the SS:

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<sup>184</sup> "[Die SS – ] als Abk[ürzung] für Schutzstaffel, [wurde] 1925 von Himmler als Hitlers schwarzuniformierte Leibgarde [gegründet]. Aus dieser Allg[emeinen] SS entwickelten sich die SS-Totenkopfverbände, die zur brutalen Niederhaltung aller politischer Gegner u[nd] zu ihrer Ausrottung in den Konzentrationslagern eingesetzt wurden. . . ." "SS," *Kleines Lexikon*, 3rd ed. 1961.

Men occupied the top positions in the concentration camp hierarchy, however this is not to say that female guards could not exercise significant power within the camp structure. All concentration camps had an »SS-Kommandant« (SS camp commander), who oversaw the operation of the camp, and the »Oberaufseherin« (chief female overseer) carried out the orders of either the »SS-Kommandant« or the »SS-Schutzhaftlagerführer«. Subordinate to the »Oberaufseherin« were the »SS-Aufseherinnen« (female guards).<sup>185</sup>

From Wolff's account, it can be concluded, that Schmitz's rational authority as an SS guard depended on the people above her. Just as the "teachers" in Milgram's obedience study were at the bottom of chain of authority, Schmitz belonged to the lowest level of authority within the SS. The title of her position, SS guard, does suggest that Schmitz was a member of the SS and belonged to the "SS-Gefolge."<sup>186</sup>

Henry Friedlander and Earlean McCarrick comment on the status of female SS guard:

Dressed in SS uniforms without rank, these female guards . . . served in the SS only as contractual workers; the elitist military structure of Himmler's troops did not permit regular female members.<sup>187</sup>

Notwithstanding their low status, these female SS guards were incorporated in the destructive bureaucratic system of the Nazi regime. By executing the demands of higher-ranking SS officials, female SS guards became collaborators in the crimes against humanity. In *Der Vorleser*, Schlink illustrates Schmitz's collaboration with

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<sup>185</sup> Whether the SS authority trained their camp guards to behave brutally towards the prisoners can, according to Wolff, not be confirmed. Wolff 96.

<sup>186</sup> Wolff 90.

<sup>187</sup> Henry Friedlander, and Earlean McCarrick, qtd. in Wolff 90.

the Nazis through her work-routine as SS guard. According to Wolff, one of the duties of SS guards included:

Maintaining order among the prisoners during selections – the process that determined whether prisoners continued working or were sent to the gas chambers – was one of the main responsibilities of the female guards and is also a crucial point in the discussion of women’s participation in the Holocaust.<sup>188</sup>

This insight into the structure of the SS, how orders were transferred from highest to lowest level of authority, and the destructive nature of duties of SS guards illustrate what Milgram argued in relation to atrocities occurring on a large scale: “[There] is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one man decides to carry out the evil act and is confronted with its consequences.”<sup>189</sup> Schlink’s fictional character Schmitz is just one link in the chain of “evil” actions by the SS. Her rational authority is limited, and her charismatic authority is only revealed much later in the novel after being convicted for war crimes by a post-war German court.

### *2.1.2. Charisma/Charismatic Authority*

Weber’s description of charisma as being something “außeralltäglich[es]” enables the identification of the charismatic authority figures in both of Schlink’s novels. “Außeralltäglich,” is a term that has no direct equivalent into English, but corresponds to the German word “außergewöhnlich,” which means “extraordinary” or “exceptional” in English. The words Schlink employed, and which point to Schmitz’s charisma, are “besonders” and “beeindruckend,” and come close in

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<sup>188</sup> Wolff 97.

<sup>189</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 11.

meaning to “extraordinary.” However, there are other indicators for the existence of Schmitz’s charisma. For example, the emergence of her charisma later in life is supported by Weber’s theory that charisma is innate in a person and can lie dormant for many years. Schmitz’s aloof stance from the fellow inmates, who nevertheless recognise, respect and approach her, further points to her charisma.

When Berg meets the prison governor on the day Schmitz is to be released from prison, only to find out that she hanged herself, he is told about his former lover’s life. The governor tells him that Schmitz: “bei [ihren Mitgefangenen] . . . besonderes Ansehen [genoß]” (196). Schlink’s word “besonderes” implies that Schmitz had more than just esteem, namely extraordinary esteem, which indicates the existence of a charismatic quality. The governor’s additional explanation: “Mehr noch, sie hatte Autorität” (196), infers Schmitz’s charismatic authority. Schmitz’s charismatic qualities are further expressed by the word “beeindruckt.” However, this description of the inmates’ reaction to Schmitz’s charisma is also used by Schlink to mark the end of her charismatic authority. The prison governor tells Berg about the decline of Schmitz’s perceived charismatic authority:

Sie hatte immer auf sich gehalten, war bei ihrer kräftigen Gestalt doch schlank und von peinlicher, gepflegter Sauberkeit. Jetzt fing sie an, viel zu essen, sich selten zu waschen, sie wurde dick und roch. . . . Sie hat ihren Ort neu definiert, in einer Weise, die für sie gestimmt, aber die anderen Frauen nicht mehr beeindruckt hat. (197)

Schmitz’s failure to continue demonstrating her charismatic powers and the consequent loss of her authority status illustrate the instability of charismatic authority as outlined by Potts:

. . . the charismatic leader ‘as such’ is obeyed, as a result of his heroism or ‘exemplary qualities’. Charismatic authority will continue for as long as that leader can repeatedly demonstrate charismatic powers, so that his followers maintain their belief in his charisma.<sup>190</sup>

Schmitz’s loss of her charismatic authority, as portrayed by Schlink, is not the result of an inability to maintain her followers’ belief in her charisma, but rather her disinterest in retaining her status (197).

In Schlink’s narration it is unclear as to what exactly led to Schmitz’s perceived charismatic authority among the other prisoners. The only indication is her one person sit-in-strike, which was motivated by Schmitz’s opposition to a proposed funding cut to the prison library (193). Her ability to successfully prevent the funding cut is extraordinary, and this has perhaps led the inmates to perceive Schmitz as a charismatic authority figure. Schlink’s illustration of Schmitz’s influence or power over her fellow inmates is disturbing, considering that she is respected despite her involvement with the SS’s contempt for human beings.

Schmitz’s charisma is not obvious in her role as an SS guard and she appears to be Schlink’s example for Weber’s theory that charisma can lie dormant in a person until it is “geweckt.” Since Schmitz’s former employment as an SS guard links her, though on a fictional level, with Nazi Germany, a comparison to Hitler’s charismatic authority seems justified. Adolf Hitler, whose charisma and destructive mindset proved to be a devastating combination, is one historical example for Weber’s theory that charisma lies dormant until being “geweckt.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Potts 118.

<sup>191</sup> Lindholm 119-23.



Furthermore, Hitler increased, according to Lindholm, his authority by his “aloof stance.”<sup>192</sup> In *Der Vorleser*, Schmitz also keeps her distance or aloofness<sup>193</sup> from the others (196). Nothing much is said about the effect of Schmitz’s aloofness on the enhancement of her perceived charismatic authority. However, despite maintaining her distance, Schmitz’s charisma draws her inmates into her sphere of influence.<sup>194</sup> They approach her when problems arise, seeking her guidance (196). In such situations she was asked for advice (196), which points to another aspect of charismatic leadership, namely the existence of trust.<sup>195</sup> Schmitz’s charismatic authority is further underlined by her power of decision-making and the response of her fellow inmates “wenn sie bei einem Streit dazwischenging, wurde akzeptiert, was sie entschied” (196). Being obeyed is one decisive element of charismatic authority that sets this type of authority apart from rational authority.<sup>196</sup>

Schlink’s portrayal of Schmitz’s authority in prison provides a link between her life as SS-guard in Nazi Germany and her life in post-war Germany. The prisoners in the labour camp obeyed Schmitz the SS-guard, and her fellow inmates obeyed Schmitz after the war in a West German prison. While the form of Schmitz’s authority changes after the war, her influence over other women does not alter. Furthermore, there is also a continuance of Schmitz’s “malevolent authority” after World War II,<sup>197</sup> shown by her treatment of Berg. Schmitz’s abuse of her authority

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<sup>192</sup> Lindholm 125.

<sup>193</sup> Aloofness is seen by Oakes as a feature of charismatic authority figures. Len Oakes, qtd. in Potts 134.

<sup>194</sup> Refer to Potts’ contemporary meaning of charisma. Potts 2.

<sup>195</sup> See Potts 118.

<sup>196</sup> See Potts 118.

<sup>197</sup> Boernchen 102.

over the prisoners at the labour camp, and her maltreatment of Berg indicate that she is likely to have abused her charismatic authority had the time and circumstances been different.

#### *2.1.1.1. Authority and Trust*

In relation to Schlink's discussion of authority and trust, the following aspects of Milgram's investigations are relevant to Schmitz's fellow inmates, Schmitz herself, and the SS: trust in authority, and trust between authorities.

While Schmitz's fellow inmates put trust in her charismatic authority, Schmitz's own trust in authority appears to have been abused by the SS. In her statement before court, Schmitz explains how she became an SS guard: "... die SS habe bei Siemens, aber auch in anderen Betrieben Frauen für den Einsatz im Wachdienst geworben, dafür habe [ich mich] gemeldet und dafür sei [ich] eingestellt worden, ... ." (92). Schmitz's description of the recruitment process suggests that she was ignorant of applying for the position of concentration camp guard. This assumption is reasonable, if the account of Margarete Buber-Neumann (a Ravensbrück survivor) is taken into consideration. She states about the recruitment of SS guards:

Zu diesem Zweck unternahm der Schutzhaftlagerführer Bräunling regelrechte Werbereisen. . . . Man rief ihm die Arbeiterinnen zusammen, und er machte ihnen mit beredten Worten klar, dass für ein Umerziehungslager geeignete Kräfte gesucht würden, die dort lediglich Aufsichtsarbeit zu leisten hätten. Er schilderte in leuchtenden Farben die entzückenden Wohngelegenheiten, die vorzügliche Ernährung, die abwechslungsreiche Geselligkeit und vor allem die hohe Entlohnung, die sie dort erwarte. Das Wort >Konzentrationslager< gebrauchte er natürlich nicht.<sup>198</sup>

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Schlink does not include the word “concentration camp” in Schmitz’s statement regarding her job title. If Schlink’s omission was indeed intentional, the assumption that he wanted to portray Schmitz’s ignorance of her future work place, thereby illustrating the abuse of her trust in the SS authorities, is justified.

Schmitz’s fulfilment<sup>199</sup> of her duties as SS-guard makes it clear that she, like the obedient “teachers” in Milgram’s study, “entrusted” the broader task of setting goals and assessing morality to the higher-ranking authority, which in Schmitz’s case was the SS authority she served. This argument is supported in the post-war trial, when Schmitz is asked in relation to the selection process if she was ignorant of the fate that awaited those prisoners. She denies this, saying: “. . . die neuen kamen, und die alten mußten Platz machen für die neuen” (106). Schmitz’s answer and her

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<sup>198</sup> Margarete Buber-Neumann, qtd. in Manfred Heigenmoser, *Bernhard Schlinks: Der Vorleser* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005) 45.

<sup>199</sup> Schlink, *Der Vorleser* 106.

indifference to the prisoners' fate imply that the selection process represented for her what Helmut Schmitz<sup>200</sup> described as "Verfahrensproblem."

Apart from the trust in authority, the trust between authorities was a further focus in Milgram's obedience study and results showed that the "experimenter" could not trust the "teachers." In *Der Vorleser*, the SS could also not rely on Schmitz's authority as dutiful SS guard. During her trial it is revealed that Schmitz had favourites among the female prisoners. One of the two survivors, a mother and her daughter, of the church fire testifies:

Ja, sie hatte Lieblinge, immer eine von den jungen, schwachen und zarten, und die nahm sie unter ihren Schutz und sorgte, daß sie nicht arbeiten mußten . . . und abends holte sie sie zu sich. (112)

The surviving daughter also reveals that the selected girls were required to read aloud to Schmitz. Her favourable treatment of these prisoners and the fact that they did not have to work could hardly have been in the interest of the SS authorities. Prisoners were to be exploited for their labour. Schmitz clearly abused the trust of her superiors by her intervention in the administrative routine at the labour camp. Buber-Neumann provides an insight into the camp routine of SS guards:

Natürlich unterstrich man gebührend die Wichtigkeit ihres neuen Amtes, sparte nicht mit Strafandrohungen, wenn die Dienstvorschriften nicht eingehalten würden, und drohte vor allem mit Strafen für jeden privaten Kontakt mit diesem Abschaum der Menschheit, den Konzentrationslagerhäftlingen.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Schmitz, *Malen nach Zahlen? Bernhard Schlinks Der Vorleser und die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* 309.

<sup>201</sup> Buber-Neumann, qtd. in Wolff 96.

Schmitz's timely compliance with her duty to select females considered as unfit for work at the end of each month cannot be adequately ascertained. However, her private contact with the prisoners is in breach of the employment regulations.

Schmitz's activities could not have remained unnoticed by her superiors. During the court proceedings, it comes to light that even Schmitz's co-accused SS guards knew about her private contact with the female prisoners. Schmitz herself believes that she was "nicht die einzige" among the guards, who had a private arrangement with the prisoners. If indeed there was widespread private contact between female SS guards and prisoners, and the higher-ranking SS authority at the labour camp was unaware of these activities, then their trust would have been abused. Had they been aware of the arrangements between SS guards and prisoners and closed their eyes to these activities, then they would have breached the trust of the SS's high command. But Schlink leaves his readers in doubt if Schmitz's superiors knew of these private arrangements between SS-guards and prisoners.

While the abuse of trust in authority as illustrated by Schlink cannot be generalised, Milgram's study justifies caution in indiscriminately trusting a perceived authority figure.

#### *2.1.1.2. Authority and Deception*

Milgram's study showed that an authority figure's recourse to deception is not dependent on their rank. In *Der Vorleser*, Schlink illustrates the occurrence of deception within the bureaucratic system of the SS. While it cannot be established whether Schmitz's superiors deceived the SS's high command by tolerating the

private contact between SS guards and prisoners, Schmitz's use of deception when working for the SS is obvious in Schlink's portrayal.

Schmitz's use of deception as an authority figure is exposed during the trial when it is revealed that the female prisoners required to read aloud to Schmitz, were sent by her to Auschwitz' gas chambers (112). Mislead by Schmitz's favouritism, which included not being required to work, as well as being "besser unter[gebracht] und versorgt und verköstigt," these girls had reason to hope for surviving the camp (112). Sending them to the gas chamber, even though they had enjoyed favouritism infers that Schmitz not only wanted to keep her secret of being illiterate safe, but also to hide her private contact with the prisoners from her superiors. Schmitz's deception of her superiors is underlined by her demand that the girls remain silent about their arrangement. Through Schmitz, Schlink shows us an example of a lower-ranking authority capable of deceiving a higher-ranking authority, an act that Milgram had observed in his obedience study.

Milgram's obedience study also demonstrated deception employed by a higher-ranking authority, and there is also evidence of this deception in *Der Vorleser*. The day the labour camp was abandoned and the prisoners were forced to start a so-called "death march," the camp's commander disappeared. Some time later, a bombing raid occurred that lead to fatalities among the SS, and incinerated the church in which the prisoners were locked up for the night. All SS authority began to dissolve, except for Schmitz, who along with some of her fellow SS guards, were put in charge of the female prisoners. Before court, she recalls the fatal night:

Einige von uns waren tot, und die anderen haben sich  
davongemacht. Sie haben gesagt, daß sie die Verwundeten ins  
Lazarett schaffen und wiederkommen, aber sie wußten, daß sie  
nicht wiederkommen, und wir haben es auch gewußt. (121)

The abandoned SS guards including Schmitz found themselves being deceived not only by their fellow guards, but also by their superiors. Authorities of all levels engaged in deceiving each other.

### 2.1.1.3. Authority and Manipulation

The use of manipulation by authority occurs and reoccurs at many levels of society, even in science.<sup>202</sup> For example, Milgram employed the term “technical illusion” in order to deflect from the “deception” used in his obedience study. During World War II, the Nazis manipulated people’s perception of death or concentration camps by using euphemistic terms, such as labour camps or “Umerziehungslager.”<sup>203</sup> In *Der Vorleser*, Schmitz worked in a so-called “labour camp,” which was in fact a satellite camp of Auschwitz concentration camp, where female prisoners were required to work until they either died of the harsh labour and living conditions or were sent to the gas chamber when they became too weak or sick to continue their work.

A further parallel between Schlink’s novel and Milgram’s obedience study is the manipulation of peoples’ perception of controversial actions. While Milgram

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<sup>202</sup> Manipulation is used in psychological experiments. See Weiten 42-5.

<sup>203</sup> “Am Lagertor ließ die SS den Spruch ‘Arbeit macht frei’ anbringen. In diesem Spruch spiegelt sich die verharmlosende NS-Propaganda wieder, die die Konzentrationslager nach außen hin als “Arbeits- und Umerziehungslager” darstellen wollte.” *KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau*, ed. Gabriele Hammermann, Stiftung Bayerische Gedenkstätten, 6 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.kz-gedenkstaettedachau.de/gedenkstaette/station02.html>>.

argued that only the participants of his experiments can make a valid judgement of his study methods as they were directly affected by his deception, Schmitz tries to influence Berg's attention to the post-war German court's judgement of her crimes as SS guard in *Der Vorleser* by telling him that only the people involved in the suffering possess the insight needed to adequately judge her:

Ich hatte immer das Gefühl, daß mich ohnehin keiner versteht, daß keiner weiß, wer ich bin und was mich hierzu und dazu gebracht hat. Und weißt du, wenn keiner dich versteht, dann kann auch keiner Rechenschaft von dir fordern. Auch das Gericht konnte nicht Rechenschaft von mir fordern. Aber die Toten können es. Sie verstehen. (187)

Schmitz's argument is convincing, since these women were those directly affected by the deadly force of the SS and Hanna's destructive obedience as SS guard. Her answer points to a moral awareness, but is really aimed to hide her indifference towards her victims. While she grants the dead victims the right to judge her, she denies this same right to the survivor of the terrifying ordeal of the camp. For example, the survivor who appeared as a witness in Schmitz's trial is a representative for the many other female prisoners who suffered and died at the hands of the SS. Her statement was part of the verdict against Schmitz and the other SS guards, and yet Schmitz rejected the court's decision. Berg, who later recalls this conversation with Schmitz, forms the following opinion:

[Ich] fand es billig und einfach, wie sie sich aus ihrer Schuld gestohlen hatte. Nur die Toten Rechenschaft fordern zu lassen, Schuld und Sühne auf schlechten Schlaf und schlimme Träume [zu] reduzieren – wo blieben da die Lebenden? (190)



If Schmitz does not accept being held accountable by the “living” victims then how can she pretend being held accountable by the dead? Her argument is just a deflection from the fact that she views herself as a victim of the Nazi regime, which she had to submit to, and of the court who had no right to judge her, because they could not understand her actions. Whether the question of not being understood refers to Schmitz’s submission to the SS, or to her shame of being illiterate is a question Schlink leaves open.

Surprising for the reader of Schlink’s novel is that Schmitz does not deny being the writer of a SS report about the night of the church fire, which led to the death of the prisoners, because she was determined to hide her illiteracy. Her manipulation however aids the other defence lawyers in their pursuit to achieve the best outcome for their clients, even if that means manipulating the course of justice. Christian Lucas, a German lawyer, discusses in *Besser Ohne Gewissen: Überlegungen zur Strafverteidigung* the moral dilemmas facing a lawyer for the defence. He writes:

Auch und gerade wenn der Angeklagte die Tat seinem Verteidiger gegenüber eingeräumt hat (was in der Praxis nicht die Regel ist), ist es dessen Pflicht, den Angeklagten weiterhin nach Kräften zu verteidigen und wenn möglich auf einen Freispruch hinzuwirken.<sup>204</sup>

In the end, Schmitz is not only incriminated, she is also the only former SS guard to receive a life sentence. Schmitz’s admission to being the author of a SS document, not only confers authority and power to her, but also responsibility. Through Schmitz,

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<sup>204</sup> Christian Lucas, “Besser ohne Gewissen: Überlegungen zur Strafverteidigung,” *Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität Münster*, n.d., 22 Jan. 2010 <[http://www.wiwi.unimuenster.de/ifg/toplinks/newsletter/.../Newsletter\\_2\\_2007.pdf](http://www.wiwi.unimuenster.de/ifg/toplinks/newsletter/.../Newsletter_2_2007.pdf)> 29.

and the defence lawyers of her co-accused SS guards, Schlink's novel shows that manipulation is restricted neither to rank nor type of authority.

#### *2.1.1.4. Authority and Responsibility*

A perpetrator's destructive obedience can result from higher-ranking authority assuming responsibility, from seeing his actions only in terms of having followed orders by authority, or from having committed a subsidiary act in the destruction of human life. These findings by Milgram have relevance to this discussion about *Der Vorleser*.

Schmitz's statement before the post-war German court does not indicate that her SS superiors claimed full responsibility for whatever happens to the prisoners as a result of their orders being followed. Rather, Schlink's depiction of SS hierarchy dissolving down to the lowest level of authority when the German army's defeat is near illustrates their attempt to avoid being held responsible. Schmitz, who took part in the genocide caused by the SS, does not feel responsible<sup>205</sup> for her actions, since she acted on the orders of higher-ranking SS authorities (187), just as Milgram's subjects or "teachers" defended their actions by stating that they only did what they were ordered to do. However, as Goldblatt points out: "Hanna chose the army as her job; she chose to implement and to follow orders."<sup>206</sup>

Schmitz's suicide the night before her release from prison and her decision to leave her savings to one of the survivors of the church fire lead Berg to believe she

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<sup>205</sup> The lack of responsibility felt by a person committing a subsidiary act or being in a transmitter role is detailed under 2.2.1 *Forces underlying Obedience to Authority*.

<sup>206</sup> Goldblatt 74.

has finally accepted responsibility for her actions as SS guard. While he interprets her self-imposed isolation in prison and her suicide as “auferlegte Sühne” (201), the beneficiary of Schmitz’s testament has her doubts about this former SS guard’s sudden moral insight. On learning about Schmitz’s seduction of Berg as a minor, she asks him: “Hatten Sie, wenn Sie in den letzten Jahren mit ihr Kontakt hatten, jemals das Gefühl, daß [Schmitz] wußte, was sie Ihnen angetan hat?” (202) Berg evades her question by answering: “Jedenfalls wußte sie, was sie anderen im Lager und auf dem Marsch angetan hat” (202). Berg’s evasion of directly answering the survivor’s question indicates his reluctance to admit Schmitz’s rejection of accepting responsibility for ruining his life, since this revelation would also show Schmitz’s unchanged attitude towards the prisoners who suffered at her hands (190). Brazaitis argues: “It is difficult to find much evidence for what some see as Schmitz’s ‘moral transformation’ . . .” (89). Johnson and Finlay however emphasise on Schlink’s comment “that he wanted to depict Hanna as having paid for her crimes,” and argue for her “suicide as an act of atonement” (209-10). And yet, they also point out that readers are to speculate about the fact that at least one of the “two of the Jewish writers whose works [Schmitz] reads [after becoming literate] committed suicide” (209) making her motivation to take her life questionable.<sup>207</sup>

Schlink’s portrayal of Schmitz as an authority who cannot be trusted, and who is deceptive, as well as manipulative supports an argument for her unremorseful attitude in light of her crimes and thus her rejection of responsibility. In her subordinate authority as SS guard, Schmitz’s obedience is destructive.

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<sup>207</sup> Johnson, and Finlay 210.

## 2.2. Obedience in *Der Vorleser*

Milgram's initial study of obedience to authority, as well as subsequent studies based on his experimental paradigm emphasise caution in being confident not to follow destructive orders by a "malevolent authority" figure. This view is also reflected in *Der Vorleser* through Schmitz's question to the judge. When the judge criticises her participation in the selection of prisoners for extermination at Auschwitz, she asks: "Was hätten Sie denn gemacht" (107).

Responding to Schlink's novel, Tanja Dueckers refers to obedience in the Third Reich, arguing: "Keineswegs stand auf Befehlsverweigerung der Tod – schon gar nicht in den ersten Kriegsjahren."<sup>208</sup> Yet the rate of obedience was high in Nazi Germany, just as in Milgram's study, despite the absence of a threat of force.

The condemnation of perpetrators was an issue Milgram discussed with regard to the participants who obeyed destructive orders in his study.<sup>209</sup> Schlink illustrates the problem of both understanding and condemning a person's evil deeds through his protagonist Berg:

Ich wollte Hannas Verbrechen zugleich verstehen und verurteilen.  
Aber es war dafür zu furchtbar. Wenn ich versuchte, es zu  
verstehen, hatte ich das Gefühl, es nicht mehr so zu verurteilen,  
wie es eigentlich verurteilt gehörte. Wenn ich es so verurteilte, wie  
es verurteilt gehörte, blieb kein Raum für Verstehen. (151)

Milgram's study, as mentioned before, was not meant to excuse people of their atrocities. His study raises awareness of the forces underlying a person's submission

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<sup>208</sup> Tanja Dueckers, "Der Schrecken nimmt nicht ab, sondern wächst," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2002, *Homepage*, n.d., 11 May 2007 <<http://www.tanjadueckers.de/werk/essays/schrecken.htm>>.

<sup>209</sup> For details refer to 1.2. *Obedience*.

to destructive orders. While an understanding of these underlying forces can influence a person's viewpoint about a perpetrator,<sup>210</sup> it helps to identify the motives behind destructive obedience and the possible involvement of other evil elements/authorities.

### *2.2.1. Forces underlying Obedience to Authority*

Before considering the underlying factors for Schmitz and Berg's destructive obedience it must be noted that Schmitz's obedience results from a "cooperative mood,"<sup>211</sup> whereas Berg's submission is compelled by fear.

At the beginning of Schmitz's trial for war crimes, it is revealed that she was not obliged to become an SS guard (91). Wolff explains how women came to work for the SS:

The majority of women were obliged to serve in the camps either by way of transfer from their present employment or by conscription, while only a very small number of women voluntarily applied for the position, and others were sent to the camps by employment offices.<sup>212</sup>

Schlink fictional protagonist belongs to the "very small number of women" who voluntarily joined the SS (91). The reason for Schmitz joining the SS, which is her fear of exposure as illiterate through an offer of promotion by Siemens, is unconvincing. Metz, for example, argues: "Hanna's illiteracy could not have

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<sup>210</sup> Understanding, Schlink argues, "[includes] putting yourself in someone else's place, putting yourself into someone else's thoughts and someone else's feelings and seeing the world through that person's eyes. How then could you condemn the other, how could you not forgive, if you empathise with them on that level?" Schlink, *Guilt About the Past* 82-3.

<sup>211</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* xii-xiii.

<sup>212</sup> Wolff 92.

remained unnoticed throughout the entire process of her application to and work for the SS.”<sup>213</sup> Johnson and Finlay also contemplate on Schmitz’s reason for leaving Siemens in favour of the SS, writing: “. . . we are left to wonder in what ways joining the SS would have guaranteed that her secret would be any safer than in her previous job at Siemens.”<sup>214</sup>

Schmitz’s continuance in working for the SS underpins her “cooperative mood.” While she might have been initially ignorant of the nature of her work, she could have resigned after being informed of the duties involved in guarding prisoners. Buchmann, noted: “Es gab unter diesen SS-Frauen ein paar, die ihren Dienst wieder aufgaben, weil sie die Unmenschlichkeiten der SS nicht mitmachen wollten. . . .”<sup>215</sup> Schmitz’s cooperation with the SS is further highlighted by her lack of fear for disobeying authority. When the judge asks Schmitz about the night of the church fire: “Hatten Sie Angst, daß man Sie im Fall der Flucht [von Gefangenen] verhaften, verurteilen, erschießen würde,” Schmitz is more concerned with her duties as guard, despite being abandoned by the SS authorities (122). Her admission in court that she joined the SS voluntary confirms Schmitz’s cooperation with the SS.

The forces that impinged on Schmitz and led to her destructive obedience are: aggression, individual motives such as career advancement, a moral shift or adjustment in setting priorities that may also have been the result of Nazi propaganda, as well as proximity - the closeness to the victim, the destructive act, and SS authority.

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<sup>213</sup> Metz 10.

<sup>214</sup> Johnson, and Finlay 206.

<sup>215</sup> Buchmann, qtd. in Wolff 100.

Schmitz's personality as SS guard is according to Brazaitis vague, as "[h]er characterisation, dominant throughout the book and with occasional touches of sadism and barbarity, is never laboured."<sup>216</sup> However, Schlink links Berg with the female prisoners at the labour camp through the medium of reading. Like them, Berg was required of reading aloud to Schmitz. Her aggressiveness towards Berg is therefore indicative of her character as SS guard. Schmitz extorts Berg in order to have her way, and in one incident hits him with a leather belt (50, 54). While Reinhard Wilczek<sup>217</sup> refers to Berg and Schmitz's "teilweise rabiante Beziehungskrisen," Corngold interprets her violent act as follows: "Hanna's smacking Berg in the face with a leather belt has an SS sadistic brutality about it. . . ."<sup>218</sup> Chloe Paver argues that "[Hanna's] bouts of aggression and imperiousness towards Berg, are clearly meant to echo her behaviour in the camp. . . ."<sup>219</sup>

Schmitz's move to become a guard and to submit to SS authority is the result of individual motives, such as career aspirations. Her illiteracy can explain why she submitted to the SS, as her new employment changes her disadvantaged position in terms of power and income. Chloe Paver, for example, maintains that a key reason for

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<sup>216</sup> Brazaitis 89.

<sup>217</sup> Reinhard Wilczek, "Der Kriminalroman als Schauplatz rechtsphilosophischer Vergangenheitsdiskurse: Bernhard Schlinks literarisches Werk und die Tradition des deutschen Professorenromans," *Kopf-Kino – Gegenwartsliteratur und Medien: Festschrift für Volker Wehdeking zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Lothar Bluhm and Christine Schmitt (Trier: WVT, 2006) 35.

<sup>218</sup> Stanley Corngold, *Fürsorge beim Vorlesen: Bernhard Schlink's Novel Der Vorleser* 251. See also Richard H. Weisberg, "A Sympathy That Does Not Condone: Notes in Summation on Schlink's *The Reader*," *Law and Literature* 16 (2004): 230. Weisberg writes: "When we first learn of her brutishness [when Hanna hits Michael with the belt], dissociated from her Nazi past, we must assimilate the horrible show of violence into our gradual awareness of Hanna's character."

<sup>219</sup> Chloe Paver, "Generation and Nation: Peter Schneider's *Vati* and Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *Refractions of the Third Reich in German and Austrian Fiction and Film*, ed. Cloe Paver (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 29-51.

becoming an SS guard was that “power in the SS made up for powerlessness in regular society. . . .”<sup>220</sup> Bill Niven argues that “[i]n the external world, readers have the advantage over Schmitz. In the camps, she can put the skills of these readers at her service, exploiting their ability as a token for her power.”<sup>221</sup> However, there may be another motive closely linked to her illiteracy, which accounts for Schmitz’s decision to join the SS, namely career aspirations. Wolff states that “[i]n general, a woman working as a concentration camp guard would earn considerably higher wages than if she were employed as a factory worker for example.”<sup>222</sup> Schmitz was conscious of her disadvantaged position on the labour market due to her inability to read and write. Schmitz’s awareness of the interplay of good education and financial independency is reflected by her reaction to Berg’s truancy. When he tells her that he would need to work “wie blöd” in order to successfully complete the year, she mimics her work as a tram conductor and replies: “Blöd? Du weißt nicht, was blöd ist” (36). Rotschild does not rule out that Schmitz’s answer is “die korrekte Interpretation eines Untertons, der Michael Berg selbst nicht bewusst war . . .” especially since she is “unterprivilegiert [und muss] eine unqualifizierte Arbeit verrichten.”<sup>223</sup> Yet, even in what Niven describes as “external world” Schmitz takes the opportunity to “exploit” Berg’s ability to read. Berg remembers: “[Als] ich am nächsten Tag kam und sie küssen wollte, entzog sie sich” and demanded “[z]uerst

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<sup>220</sup> Paver 41.

<sup>221</sup> Bill Niven, “Intertextual References in Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*,” *Denkbilder ... Festschrift für Eoin Bourke*, ed. Hermann Rasche und Christine Schönfeld (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004) 280.

<sup>222</sup> Wolff 92.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas Rothschild, “Unschuldig oder schuldig? Bernhard Schlinks Hanna Schmitz und Ödön von Horváth’s Gladek,” *Täter als Opfer? Deutschsprachige Literatur zu Krieg und Vertreibung im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Stefan Hermes and Amir Muhić (Hamburg: Kovač, 2007) 119-120.



mußt du mir vorlesen” (43). With her sexual power over Berg, Schmitz forces him into obedience. He submits to the older and experienced woman, despite realising that his obedience is destructive to himself:

Wenn sie drohte, habe ich sofort bedingungslos kapituliert. . . . Ich habe Fehler zugegeben, die ich nicht begangen hatte, Absichten eingestanden, die ich nie gehegt hatte. Wenn sie kalt und hart wurde, bettelte ich darum, daß sie mir wieder gut ist, mir verzeiht, mich liebt. (50)

Schlink’s portrayal of Berg’s submission to Schmitz’s authoritarian regime infers not only his powerlessness, but also his compromise of self-respect (71). Her impact on Berg leads to his inability to form a meaningful relationship later in life (202).

Although Schlink seems less concerned with Berg’s destructive obedience to Schmitz than with Schmitz’s destructive obedience to the SS, Berg’s submission resembles that of de Baur’s students in *Die Heimkehr*. His role, unlike that of the students, cannot be equated with that of the “teachers” in Milgram’s study. Berg is, for example, neither part of an experiment nor is his behaviour under observation. He is also not a subordinate authority. However, Berg’s obedience is potentially self-destructive, just as that of de Baur’s students, and the submission of the “teachers” in Milgram’s experiments.

Another force that underlies Schmitz’s obedience as SS guard is a shift in moral concern. Schlink does not reveal whether this shift that led to Schmitz’s destructive obedience was achieved through Nazi propaganda. The only hint to propaganda affecting Schmitz is her uniform-style clothing on the day the verdict is announced by the court (157). Berg is not the only person who believes that she is wearing a uniform of SS guards. Schmitz’s dress seems to infer her identification with the SS

and their ideology, but the evidence is not conclusive. What can be established, however, is that Schmitz's main priority as SS guard was the fulfilment of her duty, evident in the selection of prisoners and later during the death march. At the trial Schmitz reflects about the selections:

. . . die Aufseherinnen [hätten sich] verständigt, aus ihren sechs gleich großen Zuständigkeitsbereichen gleich große Gefangenenzahlen zu melden . . . [und] daß die Zahlen aber bei niedrigem Krankenstand im einen und hohem im anderen Zuständigkeitsbereich divergieren konnten und daß alle diensthabenden Aufseherinnen letztlich gemeinsam beurteilten, wer [nach Auschwitz] zurückgeschickt werden sollte. (106).

Schmitz's detailed description of the selection of prisoners to be exterminated in Auschwitz shows, what Milgram identified as "technical routines" in which a person becomes so absorbed in the assigned task that a moral concern for the victim vanishes. In Schmitz's case her duties as SS guard included maintaining prisoner numbers at the labour camp. Her task-driven attitude is further illustrated on the death march, in particular at the night of the church fire. When the judge asks Schmitz, why she did not release the prisoners from the burning church, she answers:

Wir hätten sie doch nicht einfach fliehen lassen können! Wir waren doch dafür verantwortlich... Ich meine, wir hatten sie doch die ganze Zeit bewacht, im Lager und im Zug, das war doch der Sinn, daß wir sie bewachen und daß sie nicht fliehen. Darum haben wir nicht gewußt was wir machen sollen. (122)

Berg, who followed the court proceedings is inclined to interpret this indecision to act and save the women in the church as "einen Konflikt zwischen zwei Pflichten, die beide unseren Einsatz verdienen" (123), which suggests that Schmitz has experienced

a conflict between her moral obligation to the prisoners and her obligation to the SS. Such tensions, Milgram found, were reduced by means of a shift away from moral obligations for the victim to a concern for a satisfactory task performance. Schmitz's concern for performing well as a guard dominates her decision to keep the church doors closed rather than releasing the women inside. Schmitz tells the court that she and the other guards had no idea of how to continue the march:

Wie hätten wir die vielen Frauen bewachen sollen? So ein Zug streckt sich lange hin, auch wenn man ihn zusammenhält, und so eine lange Strecke zu bewachen, braucht man viel mehr als uns paar (sic). (122)

The order was given to prevent escape attempts under the cover of the fire (120). Schmitz and the other guards had been provided with weapons to do just that. In order to perform their assigned task to the satisfaction of the SS, the doors to the church had to be kept locked. Thus, Hanna maintained a distance from the victims, a factor, which Milgram identified as impacting on a person's obedience, whereby the rate of destructive obedience increased the further the perpetrator is visually and audibly removed from the victim.

In *Der Vorleser*, Schmitz did not see but only heard the women in the church. She claims to have been distressed by the prisoners' desperate screams, but did nothing to save them (122). A further aspect of Milgram's proximity experiment goes some way to explaining the inaction of Schmitz and the other guards, namely murdering the prisoners as a "subsidiary act." Schmitz and her fellow SS guards may

not have felt directly involved in the killing of the prisoners in the church.<sup>224</sup> While the guards were responsible for locking the prisoners in the church overnight, they could bear no responsibility for the bombing of the church, which caught fire as a result of an allied forces' bombing raid.<sup>225</sup> Milgram found in his experiments that the "teachers" indirectly involved in inflicting harm to another person assigned responsibility to the "teachers" directly involved in harming that person. Milgram's finding would account for the high rate in obedience found in a person being in a "transmitter" rather than "executioner" role, as Kilham and Mann observed in their obedience study. The "transmitter" role is not applicable to Hanna's behaviour during the church fire, but to her selection of prisoners for extermination. While the selections are linked to the final act of destroying human life in the gas chamber, Schmitz and the other guards were in the position of a "transmitter." They chose the prisoners who were sent back to Auschwitz, an action that Milgram would consider a "subsidiary act," but again did not perform the actual act of killing them.

While Schmitz's participation in the selections is also explainable by being under the watchful eye of her superiors, her behaviour during the church fire is not. Milgram's "Closeness to authority" experiment showed that obedience to destructive orders dropped significantly once authority was absent from the laboratory, but in contact over the phone. In *Der Vorleser*, Schmitz and the other guards kept to their

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<sup>224</sup> Alison writes: ". . . : Hanna's crime ultimately was one of omission; the fire itself was caused by the Allies. . . . Both narrator and donnée thus urge sympathy and exculpation for Hanna while subtly countermanding sympathy for the victim, and even holding the Allies responsible for the crime." Jane Alison, "The Third Victim in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*," *Germanic Review* 81.2 (Spring 2006): 171.

<sup>225</sup> Niven argues that *Der Vorleser* falls into the new trend of "[presenting] perpetrators as victims" and states that the fate of the prisoners in the burning church was, apart from the inaction of Schmitz and the other guards, as well as the Polish villagers, decided by the Allies and their bombing raid. Niven 277.

orders in spite of their superiors' absence, and their improbable return. The guards' possible fear of becoming overpowered by the prisoners upon release is ruled out by Schmitz and can therefore not have impinged on their continued obedience to the SS. Milgram's study cannot fully explain why especially Schmitz was still concerned with the fulfilment of her duties as SS guard despite the fact that SS authority had dissolved.

### 2.2.2. *The Universality of Obedience to Authority*

Obedience was found to be an ongoing universal response, independent of a person's age, gender, level of education, social class, nationality, and the prevailing political system. Since Schlink's main focus rests on Schmitz's destructive obedience as SS guard during World War II, his portrayal of submission to authority appears to be one-sided rather than universal. At the age of 21, Schmitz, an illiterate German woman from a lower social class joins the SS and commits atrocities during the last stages of Hitler's Third Reich. Clearly, Schmitz's portrayal is one-sided, particularly in light of the variety of women who actually worked for the SS. Wolff, a critic of Schlink's *Der Vorleser*, quotes Suzanne Legrand, a witness:

Diese Aufsichtsschülerinnen waren gewöhnlich Deutsche; aber es gab auch zahlreiche Frauen aus annektierten Ländern: Rumänien, Holland, Griechenland, Tschechoslowakei.<sup>226</sup>

When it comes to their social and educational background, Wolff refers to Tillion who emphasises the diversity of women working for the SS:

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<sup>226</sup> Wolff 94.

I encountered, among others, streetcar ticket takers, factory workers, opera singers, registered nurses, hairdressers, peasants, young middleclass women who had never worked before, retired teachers, circus riders, former prison guards, officers' widows etc.<sup>227</sup>

It is this background information about SS guards that is lacking in *Der Vorleser*.

There is also no conclusive information about the other SS guards who with Schmitz stand trial for war crimes, except for their literacy. Schlink's portrayal of destructive obedience seems indeed one-sided. However, Berg's destructive obedience gives Schlink's novel the universality of this human dilemma that Milgram's study and subsequent studies have found to exist. He is a fifteen-year-old male, educated, comes from an intellectual background, and lives in the democracy of post-war Germany.

With regard to the ongoing existence of "malevolent authority," Schlink provides an extensive picture, which is highlighted by Schmitz's continued aggressive authority even after the war, and by members of the judiciary at Schmitz's trial. Berg observes Schmitz's "Pflichtverteidiger" (106): "Er war der einzige junge Verteidiger, die anderen waren alt, einige, wie sich bald zeigte, alte Nazis." Even the judge should have noticed the behaviour of some of these defence lawyers, who are remembered by Berg for their "nationalsozialistischen Tiraden," (92) unless he himself was a former Nazi. Schlink illustrates the judge's sympathy with the Nazis linguistically with the German words "Tagwerk" and "zufrieden." The judge is described as "entspannt, ein Mann, der sein Tagwerk vollbracht hat und damit zufrieden ist" (154). These words are echoed in the description of an officer who

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<sup>227</sup> Wolff 94.

oversaw the “Erschießung von Juden in Rußland” (146). This officer is perceived as having “. . . etwas Zufriedenes, sogar Vergnügtes im Gesicht, vielleicht weil immerhin das Tagwerk geschieht und bald Feierabend ist” (146-47).<sup>228</sup> Berg acknowledges that during the post-war years, many former Nazis could pursue a career in high office in the Federal Republic of Germany, where “. . . so viele Nazis bei den Gerichten, in der Verwaltung und an den Universitäten Karriere gemacht hatten. . .” (161). Schlink’s fictional Germany is a reflection of the post-war Federal Republic, where:

[b]is zur Gründung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland die übergroße Mehrheit der alten NS-Juristen wieder im Amt [war], so dass die westdeutsche Justiz der Adenauerzeit überwiegend aus ehemaligen NS-Richtern und NS-Staatsanwälten bestand.<sup>229</sup>

The reemployment of former Nazis into the judiciary system of post-war Germany shows that trust and obedience to an authority appointed even by a democratic government can prove to be unwarranted, for “[t]he dilemma posed by the conflict between conscience and authority inheres” as Milgram argues, “in the very nature of society and would be with us even if Nazi Germany had never existed.”<sup>230</sup>

If one is not distracted by Schlink’s primary focus on Schmitz, there is less discrepancy in the universality of destructive obedience in *Der Vorleser* than meets the eye. However, even if Berg’s submission is considered, authority and obedience

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<sup>228</sup> Heigenmoser is one critic who sees a comparison between the SS-officer and the judge in Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*. Heigenmoser 77.

<sup>229</sup> Heigenmoser 37.

<sup>230</sup> Milgram pointed out: “In democracies, men are placed in office through popular elections. Yet, once installed, they are no less in authority than those who get there by other means. And, as we have seen repeatedly, the demands of democratically installed authority may also come into conflict with conscience.” Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 179.

centres on Germans only and is therefore not portrayed as independent of nationality, as studies based on Milgram's experimental paradigm suggest. Therefore, I argue that *Der Vorleser* must be read in conjunction with *Die Heimkehr*, which emphasises not only the obedience of a German but also of Americans.



### 3. Authority and Obedience in Bernhard Schlink's *Die Heimkehr*<sup>231</sup>

*The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson:  
often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of  
situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will  
act. (Stanley Milgram, 1974)<sup>232</sup>*

Milgram also noted that authority is as much a part of a democracy as of a dictatorship or other authoritarian systems.<sup>233</sup> Yet, living in a democracy does not imply immunity from sources of “malevolent authority.” It is this concern with authority and obedience that Schlink takes up as an ongoing topic in his novel *Die Heimkehr*. In contrast to *Der Vorleser*, however, he integrates Stanley Milgram's obedience study into the plot of *Die Heimkehr*. In the latter part of this novel, Schlink's protagonist de Baur, a university professor in America, invokes Milgram during an informal discussion about obedience. De Baur then sets up an experiment, closely resembling those of Milgram. This allows Schlink to engage with the same ethical problems analysed in Milgram's study, and to re-examine a dilemma that is universally valid. So closely does Schlink stick to the experimental formula set out by Milgram, that his terminology can be applied to Schlink's fictional characters.

As the plot unfolds in *Die Heimkehr*, de Baur takes on the role of the distant higher authority in charge of an unofficial winter seminar, which turns out to be an experiment. He employs actors to carry out the experiment. During their involvement

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<sup>231</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* (Zürich: Diogenes, 2006). Page numbers refer to this edition.

<sup>232</sup> *StanleyMilgram.com*, ed. Thomas Blass, 21 Nov. 2007, 19 June 2010  
<<http://www.stanleymilgram.com/quotes.php>>.

<sup>233</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 179.

in the experiment, which de Baur terms a “seminar,” the actors correspond to the role of the “experimenter” in Milgram’s study. However, in contrast to Milgram’s “experimenter” whose role was restricted to giving orders to the “teachers,” de Baur’s actors not only give orders but also act aggressively towards the “teachers” when disobeyed.

De Baur’s “seminar” is held in the mountainous region of the Adirondacks, north of New York. The isolated venue becomes a trap for the participating students who are then terrorised by de Baur’s actors. In Schlink’s fictional experiment, de Baur’s students correspond to the role of the “teachers” in Milgram’s study insofar, as they are under close observation, and as their obedience holds potentially self-destructive consequences. However, de Baur’s students are neither subordinate authority figures nor ordered to hurt another person, unlike the “teachers” in Milgram’s study.

The questions Schlink raises in his novel are: How will the students behave under extreme stress? Will they show unity, revolt, submit or turn on each other, when confronted by a source of “malevolent authority?”

### **3.1. Authority in *Die Heimkehr***

*Die Heimkehr*’s protagonist and authority figure Johann Debauer stands in contrast to Hanna Schmitz of *Der Vorleser*. Unlike Schmitz, he is highly educated and from an upper-class social background. In America he uses the pseudonym John de Baur, and the names of Volker Vonlanden and Walter Scholler in other geographical settings. To avoid confusion, I will only use the name of de Baur, when

referring to this literary figure. To simplify the distinction between de Baur and his son, I will address Peter Debauer by his Christian name.

De Baur is, like Schmitz, connected to the events of World War II. He is, according to Dunmore, “a nightmarishly chameleon figure, whose multiple identities – Nazi polemicist, charismatic commune leader, internationally renowned US law professor – are united by a cold thread that makes ruthlessness an ethical principle.”<sup>234</sup> Defined thus, Schlink has portrayed de Baur with characteristics that make him a rational and charismatic authority figure.

### *3.1.1. Rational Authority*

De Baur’s rational authority is indicated by his ability and the expert knowledge required to perform in such roles as that of wartime correspondent, commune leader, and university professor.

Like Schmitz, de Baur was involved in the chain of Nazi destruction and could be viewed as a subordinate rational authority. However, there is a significant difference between Schmitz and de Baur, which makes him an authority rather than a subordinate authority. Schmitz submits to SS authority due to her illiteracy, and is portrayed by Schlink as choosing the SS as a way out. De Baur on the other hand is presented by Schlink as seeking out Nazi authority, not to submit to them, but to exploit them.<sup>235</sup> This attitude to use others for his own purposes was formed some

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<sup>234</sup> Dunmore 1.

<sup>235</sup> A former classmate reveals de Baur’s endeavour to find someone whom he can profit from: “Er probierte seinen Gegenüber aus, eine ernste Sache, die manche wohl nicht ernst nehmen, er aber mit vollem Einsatz betrieb. Und wenn’s nichts war, dann war’s nichts.” Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 250.

time before de Baur worked as a propagandist. In his mid-teens, de Baur wrote an essay about a “Hochstapler.” In this essay he provides a manual for becoming a “Hochstapler” (319-20). De Baur adopts some of the instructions for himself,<sup>236</sup> such as: “Setze ein, was du hast,” and: “Gestalte deine Rolle so, daß du deine Interessen nicht verstecken muß, sondern verfolgen kannst” (319). Later, de Baur uses these instructions when working as a wartime correspondent: a role that suits him well. Schlink portrays de Baur as an egoist, who “das totale Engagement nur noch für die eigene Person such[t] und wag[t]” (251). Goebbels’s “totale[r] Krieg” is the answer to de Baur’s search for his “totales Engagement” (252). In his role as a “Kriegsberichterstatter,” de Baur publishes two articles in “Das Reich,” a newspaper under the control of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (176). Writing for Goebbels infers that de Baur was among high-ranking Nazi-officials (176), such as Karl Hanke, whom Hitler appointed “Reichsführer der SS” (155-56). Hanke, a “Schützling”<sup>237</sup> of Goebbels, is likely to have befriended de Baur.<sup>238</sup> Through de Baur’s propaganda writings, Schlink emphasises his protagonist’s passion for twisting facts and distorting views. For example, in “Die Schlacht,” his article about the battle for Leningrad, de Baur redefines moral values by adjusting the meaning of chivalry<sup>239</sup> to the suit military purpose of the Nazis. He emphasises the just cause of

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<sup>236</sup> Peter, the narrator of Schlink’s novel, identifies his father with a “Hochstapler” once he discovers de Baur past and present activities. Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 322.

<sup>237</sup> See Klaus Wiegrefe, “Der charmante Verbrecher,” *Spiegel Online* 2 Feb. 2005, 22 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40254102.html>> 2.

<sup>238</sup> Schlink writes: “Im Winter 1941/1942 war [de Baur] unter Hankses Fittiche geraten, durch ihn als Kriegsberichterstatter eingesetzt oder gefördert worden.” Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 182.

<sup>239</sup> Schlink writes: “Bedeute Ritterlichkeit nach gängigem Verständnis nicht Rücksicht des Starken auf die Schwachen, auf Frauen, Kinder und Alte?” Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 178-79.

the German soldiers' fight using his theory of the "iron rule,"<sup>240</sup> as a justification for murder: "[Der] Krieg verlange die Gleichheit der Schwachen, sie in ihrer gleichen Fähigkeit und ihrem gleichen Bedürfnis zu töten zu sehen und zu behandeln" (179). De Baur points out: ". . . daß Alte und Kinder [den Partisanen] helfen und weder zu alt noch zu jung sind, ein Gewehr abzufeuern, eine Granate zu werfen, eine Miene zu legen" (179). Throughout life, de Baur's continues to employ his "iron rule" to justify his evil doings.

Boernchen argues, that de Baur's destructive path continues after the fall of Hitler's Third Reich.<sup>241</sup> De Baur's rational authority enables him to lead and manage a utopian commune he established in America in the 1970s. The commune can be compared to Nazi Germany in miniature form. De Baur arranges his administration, much as Hitler did with his government.<sup>242</sup> He organises staff members and orders them to impose his ever-changing rules on the members of the commune. One staff member recalls: "Nichts stimmte, nichts hatte Bestand, auf nichts war Verlaß" (359). He also mentions: "Ich war beim Stab, und sogar da war's manchmal zuviel" (359). The staff members' activities foreshadow the actions of the actors in de Baur's unofficial "seminar" later in the novel.

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<sup>240</sup> De Baur's "Eiserne Regel," Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 166. The "iron rule," according to his son Peter, is "[d]ie Bereitschaft sich dem Bösen auszusetzen, als Rechtfertigung dafür, das Böse einzusetzen. . . ." Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 261.

<sup>241</sup> "So gesehen ist die Heimkehr auch eine Rekonstruktion der Dekonstruktion. Als solche aber . . . stilisiert Schlinks Roman die Dekonstruktion zur Fortsetzung nationalsozialistischer Propaganda mit anderen Mitteln." Boernchen 89.

<sup>242</sup> In regard to Hitler's restructuring of the government, Lindholm points out, that members felt "[i]ncapable of following routine, . . . dependent completely on Hitler's changeable inclinations, the bureaucracy was in the process of gradually being reduced to utter shapelessness." Hitler also aimed to eradicate individuality to become the collective. Lindholm 125.

The malevolent aspect of de Baur's rational authority as commune leader can be identified, when considering the living conditions at the commune regulated by the rules. There is no privacy when eating, sleeping, making love, or going to the toilet (359) because the commune members are under constant observation by de Baur and his staff. De Baur decides:

Wann aufgestanden wird, in welcher Reihenfolge das Frühstück  
ausgegeben wird, wer Frühstück macht und wer danach Geschirr  
und Besteck abwäscht und aufräumt, wer für welche Arbeit  
eingeteilt wird und wer frei hat, wer mit wem Liebe machen darf –  
für alles gab es Regeln. (359-60)

The inhumane rules force the individual into the collective, or to leave the commune, if unwilling to obey (359). The living arrangements and rules are so cruel that one of its members eventually suffers a breakdown, which finally prompts the closure of the facility (360). The failed commune behind him, de Baur finds employment at Columbia University. His expert knowledge and ability to adapt to his new position within the political science department, despite being trained as a lawyer, mark his rational authority as university professor. The ease with which an ex-Nazi becomes integrated into a democratic country like the United States of America, many years after World War II, shows the fragility of democratic institutions and highlights the importance of vigilant scrutiny of ethics in such institutions. Schlink uses this fictional scenario to emphasise his concern, a concern that he also addresses in *Guilt about the Past*:

What the past likewise so glaringly shows is the helplessness of individual morality in the absence of institutions in which citizens are recognised and matter, institutions that they can impact by their appeals and which they can depend on to respond and support. . . . The lessons of the past pertain not just to individual morality, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to societal and state institutions in which individual morality must be preserved if it is to have the power to resist in the crucial moment.<sup>243</sup>

The preservation of individual morality within an institution, such as the Columbia University in *Die Heimkehr* is undermined by the very existence of a professor like de Baur. His lecture topics and his so-called seminar reflect his lack of morality. For example, discussing the relationship between good and evil in one of his lectures, de Baur poses the question of “[d]as Gute am Bösen” (305). Despite his ability to actively engage his students in his discussions, de Baur’s question leaves them at a loss, especially when his example for employing evil “in den Dienst des Guten” is “Armut und Elend ermöglichen Fortschritt und Kultur” (305). De Baur’s argument is highly controversial and further underscores the questionable character of this university professor. His example implies that the progress of one group depends on the suffering of the other, which is illustrated by him as a necessary evil of human existence.

De Baur continues his discussion, saying: “Wir müssen entscheiden, ob das Böse das Gute überwältigen darf oder in den Dienst des Guten gestellt werden muß” (305-06). Whether this decision has anything to do with ethics, considering de Baur’s above-mentioned example, is open to interpretation. De Baur’s example of employing evil to do good blurs the distinction between good and evil, morality and immorality,

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<sup>243</sup> Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* 32-33.

just as his comment to his students: “Wir müssen entscheiden, was das Gute und das Böse ist – wer sonst.” De Baur is a rational authority figure who discourages rather than encourages his students to work towards institutions that are morally stable. Schlink leaves open the question of whether de Baur’s argumentation of good and evil affects the individual morality of his students. The strength of their morality however is challenged in the so-called seminar.

Each year, while employed at the university, de Baur organises and conducts a “seminar” during the winter semester break, in which he forces his students to face their inner demons with the assistance of actors, while he himself remains in the background (360). Peter, who hides his real identity from his father by using a pseudonym (287), participates in one of these “seminars” and is appalled by the rough treatment he and the students are subjected to. Later, he recollects passages from de Baur’s book and lecture:

Daß wir alles nur verdrängt hätten: die Freude am Bösen, die Lust  
des Hassens, Kämpfens und Tötens, die Lust an den düsteren  
Ritualen des Faschismus und Kommunismus. . . . (356)

Peter believes that the “seminar” was influenced by the theme of evil. Exposing his students to evil treatment without their consent highlights de Baur’s rational, yet malevolent authority as university professor.

Apart from being a rational authority figure, de Baur’s also holds charismatic authority. It is in particular his charisma of rhetoric that enhances his rational authority as University professor.



### 3.1.2. *Charisma/Charismatic Authority*

De Baur's charisma is evident from the extraordinary abilities with which Schlink endows him. His "charisma of rhetoric," enables him to influence or manipulate people with ease in a positive-, as well as negative way. "Charisma of rhetoric" is, according to Potts, often "evident" in election campaigns,<sup>244</sup> but Schlink transfers the "purely emotional" reaction to this form of charisma to de Baur academic-, as well as private sphere. De Baur's "charisma of rhetoric" is a determining factor for his Tuesday seminars being regarded as "legendary" (259). Schlink's choice of words points to de Baur's extraordinary communication skills that allow him to draw others into his discussions, demanding and receiving their complete attention, an ability not possessed by everyone. Peter who attends de Baur's lectures concedes:

Ich hätte ihn lieber schlecht gefunden: wenn schon ein guter Redner, dann seicht, wenn schon tief, dann eitel, wenn schon begeisternd, dann ein Strohfeuer. Aber er weckte eine wirkliche Leidenschaft in den Studenten und brachte sie dazu, in Vorbereitung auf die Vorlesung lange Texte mit, wie ihre Fragen und Antworten zeigten, Verstand zu lesen. Er redete klar, anschaulich, eindringlich. . . . (293)

De Baur's "charisma of rhetoric" complements his rational authority as University professor. Through his ability to influence his students by inspiring them and evoking their enthusiasm for political science, his role as an educator also has positive aspects.

De Baur's accent further enhances his extraordinary communication skills. A former female friend of de Baur remembers the effect of his accent:

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<sup>244</sup> Potts 125.

Es war der Hauch eines Akzents, nicht mehr, und doch der Gruß  
aus einer heilen Welt, einer Welt des Walzers, der Bälle, der  
Kaffeehäuser, der steinernen Treppen, die von einer Straße zur  
andern führen, wie in Paris... (219)

The extraordinary effect his accent has on her becomes evident in the dreamlike state she finds herself in when listening to him. If only momentarily, de Baur is able to direct her attention away from the terrors caused by the war, a positive aspect of his charisma. Peter also perceives the manipulative potential of his father's accent when he meets him for the first time:

Der leichte Akzent machte die Sprache nicht hölzern, wie ich es  
von anderen Amerikanern deutscher Herkunft kannte und bei mir  
selbst hörte, sondern weich, einschmeichelnd, verlockend. (287)

Peter recalls a conversation he had with a former classmate of his father, who felt enticed by de Baur's charismatic communication skills (287, 250). This former classmate tells Peter that he found de Baur "unendlich charmant," (250) yet wonders at the same time, if this description of Peter's father is entirely accurate:

Vielleicht ist Charme auch nicht das richtige Wort für seine  
Fähigkeit, seinem Gesprächspartner das Gefühl zu geben, er sei  
wichtig, er sei besonders, er genieße das Privileg völliger  
Aufmerksamkeit und Anteilnahme. Das schuf eine Atmosphäre des  
Vertrauens, der Intimität, die ungeheuer verführerisch war. . . . (250)

The classmate's difficulty in describing de Baur's extraordinary quality underlines the "elusive, indefinable character of charisma."<sup>245</sup> Using his "charisma of rhetoric," de Baur creates an atmosphere, which his former classmate finds extraordinary seductive. With ease, de Baur gains his trust through manipulation. At the beginning

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<sup>245</sup> Potts 220-21.

of their conversation, de Baur pretends to be interested in the classmate by paying him attention and demanding his full attention in return (250). He then turns their conversation to his preferred topic, his interest in politics, and influences him in such a way that this classmate, “der nüchternste, kalkulierendste Mensch . . . Sehnsucht nach dem totalen Engagement, nach einem Leben des rückhaltlosen Einsatzes und Wagnisses [bekommt]” (251). The extent of de Baur’s manipulation derived from his “charisma of rhetoric” is shown in the classmate’s unconditional trust in de Baur. He tells Peter: “[Dein Vater] redete mit glühender Leidenschaft von dem, was vor zehn Jahren war, ich weiß nicht, wie weit in der Wirklichkeit und wie weit in seiner Phantasie, und steckte mich an” (251). De Baur’s successful manipulation is confirmed by this former classmate’s conceding to Peter: “[D]ein Vater hat mich verführt. . . ” (250).

The negative impact of de Baur’s charisma is shown in his role as leader of a commune. Apart from his rational authority as commune leader, de Baur is also a charismatic leader for those members unable to withstand his holding power over them. They do not have the strength to leave the commune. While the rules de Baur imposes on the commune members are extremely dehumanising and violate human dignity, half of the people who join the commune stay even beyond the point where it becomes psychologically dangerous for them (360-61). When Peter asks about the members’ reaction to de Baur after one of them suffers a breakdown, the former staff member replies: “Gehaßt? Nein, die, die geblieben sind, haben ihn verehrt” (361). Despite his destructive regime, de Baur had the extraordinary ability to achieve the commune members’ submission something that is only explainable by the manipulative effects of his charisma. Even the breakdown of a member does not

enable the others to see through de Baur. Schlink depicts de Baur as a charismatic authority figure whose influence over the commune members is similar to that of a cult leader.<sup>246</sup>

De Baur is a malevolent charismatic and rational authority figure who uses and abuses his power. He manipulates others with ease, but in a way that ensures he does not succumb to his power. He enjoys power, but is too intelligent to fall victim of his own success.<sup>247</sup> Considering de Baur's ability to adapt to environmental or situational changes easily, caution would have been required by those who knew him, in particular when he acted "bescheiden, aufrichtig und freundlich" (372). Being modest, sincere and friendly elicits trust, which de Baur does not deserve.

#### *3.1.1.1. Authority and Trust*

De Baur's history of abuse of trust tarnishes his character as authority figure. He abused the trust not only of those around him, but also of relatives, like his parents (277). He frequently used pseudonyms to conceal his real identity (216-17) and at one time pretended to be a Jew (218). Once in America, he continues to abuse people's trust, this time under his new identity as John de Baur. Schlink's description of the trust the commune members put in de Baur points to them being blinded by his charisma, since they continue to accept him, even though his rules are destructive (360-61). Trust in authority and the abuse of trust by authority is described in detail

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<sup>246</sup> Jim Jones is an extreme example of a considered dangerous charismatic cult leader. Potts 200. The blind obedience of Jones' followers led to a mass suicide he had ordered. Weiten 678.

<sup>247</sup> In one of his lectures, de Baur tells his students that "von der Macht zu kosten, aber sich selbst so binden, daß man ihr nicht erliegt" is the essence of handling one's power. Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 305.

with regard to de Baur's unofficial winter "seminar." De Baur, a professor and therefore in a position of respect that commands trust, conducts a "seminar," the aim and purpose of which the participating students are ignorant, just as Milgram's "teachers" were unaware of the real reason for the experiment.

De Baur's abuse of his students' trust becomes apparent at their arrival in the Adirondacks (297). He entraps them in an old hotel, the venue of the "seminar," that has been badly organised for a weeklong stay, and to which he himself does not show up. The students' unpreparedness and lack of a contingency plan show their complete trust in de Baur as organiser of the "seminar." The fact that none of the students has taken a phone to this remote location, although cell phones were widely available and in use at that time, illustrates their blind trust in their professor. Still unaware of their trust being abused by de Baur, the students are about to experience the "truth" about their nature, which "sich erst im Angesicht des Bösen und im Augenblick der Krise [offenbart]" (306).

The actors, who assist de Baur's plan, mistreat the students both psychologically and physically, which suggests that they, to use Milgram's term, "entrusted" the responsibility for any unexpected consequences of their assigned task to de Baur. While Milgram observed this mindset in the "teachers" of his study, his subjects were nonetheless subordinate authority figure just as his "experimenter" when compared to Milgram as the scientific investigator behind the obedience experiments. De Baur's "experimenters" can therefore be compared to Milgram's "teacher," since they are subordinate authorities to de Baur.

Schlink does not elaborate on the abuse of trust between the authority of de Baur and the subordinate authority of the actors, but emphasises their cooperation.

They work together and the actors are aware of being monitored, since de Baur spies on his students, so that he can direct the actors at will. Their cooperation with de Baur was a hundred percent, unlike Schmitz's cooperation with the SS evident from her forbidden private contact with prisoners.

### 3.1.1.2. *Authority and Deception*

Since there is no abuse of trust between de Baur and his actors, there is also no deception. These different-ranking authorities cooperate in creating a deceptive environment for the students in *Die Heimkehr*, just as Milgram and his "experimenter" did in the obedience study.

De Baur's deception of the students begins already with the "Koordinationstreffen" for his upcoming "seminar." During this meeting, he allocates certain tasks to each of his students to prepare for the "seminar," ensuring that the event looks like it has something to do with their studies. The success of de Baur's deception is indicated by Peter's willingness to present a book at the "seminar," and Jane's effort to complete her task in time for the "seminar" (323, 328). While they prepare for the "seminar," unbeknown to them life-threatening circumstances await them.

The "seminar" takes place in January. At this time of year, temperatures can reach up to 30 degrees below zero at night, barely rising above zero during the day. However, wind chills in the morning can make around zero temperatures, and feel like 21 to 29 degrees below zero.<sup>248</sup> De Baur provides his students with inadequate

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<sup>248</sup> Adirondack.net: weather, 2009, 14 Jan. 2009 <[http:// www.adirondack.net/weather/](http://www.adirondack.net/weather/)>.

board and lodgings on purpose thereby deceiving them in their expectations. The hotel is cold: There is no heating except for an old fireplace with the only source of firewood outside (333), and there are not enough blankets to make everyone feel comfortably warm (335). The available food supplies are inadequate for twelve people even for one evening (335). The only phone at the hotel is out of order (333) and there is neither transport, nor any form of civilisation nearby. The roads during this time of year are either impassable, or difficult to recognise in the falling snow (345). The students' inadequate clothing, a further result of de Baur's deception, prevents them from leaving the hotel to seek help. De Baur has ensured that there is no escape from the hotel unless done so under life-threatening circumstances.

The deception continues, with the seemingly coincidental arrival of four men. These hired actors claim to be a father, a son and his two cousins, and state that they have served in the army. While they behave aggressively towards the male and female students, the actors have no intention of seriously harming any of them, a fact the students do not know.

Deceiving his students even further, de Baur plants some of his belongings into the Jeep of the actors to make the students imagine their professor has fallen victim to their tormentors (348-49). De Baur's unofficial winter "seminar" is full of deception in order to create a feeling of unease and insecurity. Milgram's obedience study was also deceptive, but for different reasons, as explained in chapter one.

Schlink never reveals the real purpose or nature of the "seminar" thereby further highlighting de Baur's deceptiveness. At first Peter believes the "seminar" to be an experiment just as he thought de Baur's commune was (354). Later he dismisses his view:

Das Seminar sollte uns lehren, dem Bösen ins Auge zu sehen, dem Bösen in den anderen und in uns selbst. Alle kamen in der einen Woche dran, alle sollten erfahren, daß sie ihre guten Prinzipien verleugnen, verraten, verkaufen und mit Entschiedenheit böse handeln. (356)

The deceptive nature of the “seminar” is made obvious by Schlink when Peter wonders:

Ging es darum, aus den Teilnehmern der Seminare eine Gemeinschaft derer zu schmieden, die dem Bösen ins Auge gesehen hatten und nun bereit waren, sich seiner entschlossen zu bedienen? (356)

Since the extreme conditions provoke a response to evil in the students, the “seminar” could be seen as a practical application of de Baur’s theory of good and evil. A connection of the “seminar” to the university is however deceptive, as it is neither part of the curriculum, nor funded by Columbia University (297). While Schlink does not imply deceptiveness by Columbia University, deception employed by an authority from a reputable institution such as the university is evident in Milgram’s study series of obedience to authority. Even though deception was employed for scientific advancement, Milgram nevertheless hoodwinked the participants of his study.

### *3.1.1.3. Authority and Manipulation*

As a precaution to silence possible future criticism of his unofficial winter “seminar,” Schlink’s protagonist directs attention away from the unethical aspects of his experiment. First de Baur calls his experiment a “seminar,” a term which lends his



activities a more legitimate pedagogical purpose. Then, before conducting his experiment, he justifies the use of unethical methods for a good purpose such as scientific advancement during an informal evening at his home. None of the invited students object to de Baur's justification of controversial studies like Milgram's obedience study, except for Peter who argues: "Etwas Schlechtes wird nicht dadurch gut, daß man eine Lehre daraus zieht" (301). Rather than supporting Peter's argument, the students enjoy the clash of arguments between their professor and Peter (301-02). Their inaction however could be interpreted by de Baur as a confirmation of his views, and used by him as a form of consent for subjecting them to deception, even to psychological and physical terror if it aided scientific advancement or another good cause.

As mentioned before, the purpose of de Baur's experiment is questionable, and it is not clear, if an interest group supports it. One of the actors tells Peter that a "Stiftung" financed the commune and says about the "seminar:" "Ich weiß auch nicht, ob es heute noch die ist, die damals schon gezahlt hat" (360). Some students link the "seminar" with de Baur's connections in Washington. Peter listens to a conversation of three of de Baur's students who are confident that "[w]er [am Seminar] teilgenommen hatte, gehörte zu den echten Schülern de Baur's und konnte hoffen, über deren informelles Netzwerk in Washington gefördert zu werden" (328). The possibility that the "seminar" is politically motivated cannot be ruled out. De Baur's interest in politics, and the fact that the students he invites are those who attend his political science lectures make a political purpose behind the unofficial winter "seminar" quite plausible especially since Schlink emphasises the "seminar's" political purpose through Peter:

Wie verhalten sich Studenten, künftige Politiker, Richter,  
Geschäftsleute und andere Verantwortungsträger unter extremen  
Bedingungen? Wie solidarisch, wie egoistisch? Wie prinzipienfest,  
wie kollaborationsbereit? Was braucht es, daß sie einander  
verraten, daß sie sich gegeneinander wenden? Bei wieviel Kälte,  
Hunger, Druck, Angst ist der Lack der Zivilisation ab? (354-55)

Whatever the students' perception of the "seminar's" purpose, de Baur could manipulate their view. De Baur could argue, for example, that his aim was to test and strengthen the character of these students, people of future influence, to resist "malevolent authority," when in fact his intention was the manipulation of these future leaders of American society for political purpose. This might explain the secrecy to which the students are sworn (310). A student tells Peter:

Seit Jahren macht er in jedem Januar ein einwöchiges Seminar . . . .  
Ich weiß nicht, was dort passiert. Die Studenten, die dort waren,  
machen ein Geheimnis darum, und de Baur macht's auch. (297)

Their secrecy is maintained, as once in a position of responsibility, none of these students would welcome the exposure of the fact that they succumbed to "malevolent authority," leading them to betray each other. Their fear of exposure can further be used to manipulate these future leaders of society to obey "malevolent authority" later in life. De Baur is a master of manipulation who loves power. Schlink provides his readers with de Baur's history of manipulation, which began with propaganda writings for the Nazis, and continued with his writings after World War II. Peter summarises his own understanding of his father's texts:

. . . [er] jonglierte hier mit der Wirklichkeit und ihrer Darstellung, mit den Rollen von Autor, Leser, Täter, Opfer und Zeitgenosse, mit Verantwortung. Ich konnte mir auch die Artikel vorstellen, . . . auf der Linie, die der Major von der sowjetischen Militäradministration vorgab, aber in eigenem Stil, mal preisend, was geschmäht gehörte, mal schmähend, was Lob verdiente, und gelegentlich die Macht, der er diente, zum ethischen Prinzip verklärend” (272-73).

When his past activities are exposed in his adopted homeland America, de Baur, a genius in the art of manipulation, employs all his personal strength, his expert knowledge and charisma to manipulate his audience. In a radio interview, he channels an attack on his integrity into a homage for America thus successfully diffusing his guilt. The ease with which de Baur manipulates his critics is reflected by Peter:

. . . [er war] souverän und charmant, über seine jugendliche Abenteuerlust und Verführbarkeit zugleich betroffen und amüsiert, verständnisvoll, was die Medien anging, stolz auf das, was er in Amerika geleistet hatte, und auf Amerika, das es ihn hatte leisten lassen, so bescheiden, aufrichtig und freundlich, daß er danach nicht mehr einfach niedergemacht werden konnte. (372)

In this interview, de Baur points to his hunger for adventure as a symptom of youth thereby referring to his “Unmündigkeit”<sup>249</sup> in order to excuse his writings for the Nazi regime as a kind of youthful prank. It is almost as if he is saying that his past mistakes are a necessary part of growing up, a learning experience.

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<sup>249</sup> Donahue refers to Berg’s comment that “. . . Analphabetismus ist Unmündigkeit,” and concludes, “as we well know ‘Unmündigkeit’ is the juridical condition par excellence for evading full responsibility and punishment.” William Collins Donahue, “Revising ’68: Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*, Peter Schneider’s *Vati*, and the Question of History,” *Journal of Germanic Studies* 40.3 (September 2004): 302. See also Donahue 298, in relation to Hermine Braunsteiner-Ryan, a former SS-guard who refers to her “tender age” in her defence statement.

During a conference, organised by de Baur's friends to discuss de Baur's intellectual integrity and his war texts, a French colleague comes dangerously close to the truth of de Baur's wartime involvement (373). However, de Baur deconstructs his war texts in a way, "daß man sie ihm nicht vorwerfen noch auch ihm vorwerfen konnte, er verweigere für sie die Verantwortung" (373). He also triumphs in another attack on his character and work, when an author confronts him with accusations of a "modernen intellektuellen Faschismus" (373). The conference ends in de Baur's favour, and Peter's comment, "[i]ch halte es für möglich, daß er den Rummel nicht nur überstanden, sondern genossen hat," highlights de Baur's extraordinary manipulation skills (373).

De Baur employed techniques of manipulation throughout his life, whether in his propaganda texts, his writings for the Soviet military administration, his Deconstructionist Legal Theory, or in his defence of his past. Overall, de Baur is an authority figure who skilfully covers up the questionable aspects of his life and work. According to Schlink: "It's much easier for an intellectual to come up with a legend to delude others, or themselves."<sup>250</sup> This method of defying one's critics was also evident in Milgram's reaction to the ethical shortcomings of his obedience study, confirming that intellectuals have the capacity to work their way around their responsibility.

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<sup>250</sup> Schlink, qtd. in Dinitia Smith, "German's Novel of Nazi Era Becomes a U.S. Best Seller," *New York Times on the Web* [East Coast] 30 Mar. 1999, late ed.: E 1.

#### 3.1.1.4. Authority and Responsibility

Responsibility claimed by the higher-ranking authority, the “experimenter,” was one method used to maintain the “teachers’” obedience to continue hurting the “learner” with electrical shocks in Milgram’s obedience study. In *Die Heimkehr*, de Baur, the person behind the experiment, would have been the higher-ranking authority to claim responsibility in order to maintain his actors’ cooperation, since their role as “experimenters” included the employment of psychological and physical terror against the students or “teachers.” However, de Baur neither needed to claim responsibility to maintain his actors’ willingness to work as his “experimenters,” nor was he ever prepared to take responsibility for his experiment. As a scientific investigator, de Baur would have been subject to ethical guidelines for research imposed by such organisations as the American Psychological Association to ensure the welfare of the people participating in a study.<sup>251</sup> However, as an organiser of a “seminar,” it is more difficult to hold de Baur responsible for his concealed actual role as scientific investigator.

Another hint to his unwillingness to take responsibility is his warning to his students before the “seminar” commences. In one of his final lectures of the year he says:

Seien Sie mißtrauisch! Trauen Sie weder dem nächsten Jahrzehnt  
noch dem nächsten Jahrhundert! Trauen Sie weder dem Guten  
noch dem Normalen! Die Wahrheit offenbart sich erst im  
Angesicht des Bösen und im Augenblick der Krise. (306)

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<sup>251</sup> Weiten 64.

Since de Baur links his teachings at the university to his unofficial winter “seminar,” he can reasonably argue that he has expected his students to pay attention to him and to heed his warning. It would have been humiliating for the participants of this “seminar,” to be taught through terror a lesson for and about life, only because they disregarded their professor’s word of caution. It must be noted though, that de Baur’s “Koordinationstreffen” for the upcoming “seminar” might have removed any suspicions about the event. The words of caution were nothing more than an insurance policy by the cunning de Baur in case he would be held liable in the future.

A further aspect of Milgram’s study, the scrutiny of responsibility ascribed to the person in charge or with the highest-ranking authority, can also be observed in the novel. This aspect does not refer to the actors, but de Baur himself. Just as Schmitz points to authority figures above her in order to alleviate her of responsibility in *Der Vorleser*,<sup>252</sup> so too does de Baur brush aside his responsibility for his propaganda texts during the war in *Die Heimkehr*. As mentioned before, he invokes his immaturity at that time in order to deflect from his responsibility to that of the Nazi regime (372). Negating the responsibility for one’s own action in favour of subordination is a psychological mechanism Milgram had observed in his study. However, in *Die Heimkehr*, Schlink underlines de Baur’s responsibility by allowing his protagonist to integrate personal interests into his propaganda texts, which shows de Baur’s independence and passion (164-66). His involvement in destructive behaviour during the Nazi era appears however not to be restricted to merely writing propaganda and war reports. A number of aspects of Schlink’s portrayal of de Baur

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<sup>252</sup> Schmitz in conversation with Berg. Schlink, *Der Vorleser* 187.

suggest that he has been with the SS, an organization directly involved and responsible for mass murder. Firstly, there is de Baur's connection with "SS-Reichsführer" Hanke.<sup>253</sup> Secondly, de Baur has information that would have been restricted to SS-officials:

Er kannte die richtigen Namen und die richtigen Gesichter, . . . die Namen und die Gesichter der Genossen in Auschwitz, die die Nazis noch in letzter Minute ermordet haben. (218)

Furthermore, de Baur wants Peter's mother to write to his parents and declare him for dead (277). And finally there is Peter's mother's comment about de Baur's endeavour to leave the country: "Er, sagte, er sei in Gefahr, dürfe nicht gefaßt werden, müsse sich verstecken, wolle auswandern" (277). Although Peter's mother did not quite believe that he was in danger, she admits: "Allerdings trug er, als er zu mir kam, Reste einer Uniform" (277). De Baur's connections with Hanke, his knowledge about the Jews murdered in Auschwitz, his hiding,<sup>254</sup> and his urge to leave the country, suggest that the uniform he was wearing was that of the SS. However, Schlink provides only hints to what de Baur might have done, providing no clear information to his readers about his protagonist's level of responsibility for war crimes committed during World War II.

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<sup>253</sup> Discussed is Hanke's relationship to Speer, and Speer's comment about a conversation he had with Hanke. Wiegrefe writes: "Nach seiner Entlassung erklärte [Speer], sein alter Spezi Karl Hanke sei einmal erregt zu ihm gekommen und habe ihn gewarnt 'nie zur Besichtigung eines Konzentrationslagers in Oberschlesien' zu gehen – gemeint war Auschwitz.'" "Der Henker von Breslau – Schlesiens Gauleiter Karl Hanke," *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, 2 Mai 2006, 22 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.mdr.de/doku/2225420.html>>. See also Wiegrefe 2, 5.

<sup>254</sup> Schlink does not make clear whom de Baur is hiding from. Considering his connection with Hanke suggests that he is hiding from Nazi persecutors. Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 277.

Later in life de Baur develops the “Deconstructionist Legal Theory” to rid himself of his responsibility for previous and future actions. Peter understands his father’s theory as follows:

Wenn es bei Texten nicht darum geht, was der Autor gemeint hat, sondern was der Leser liest, ist für den Text nicht der Autor verantwortlich, sondern der Leser. Wenn die Wirklichkeit nicht die Welt da draußen ist, sondern der Text, den wir über sie schreiben und lesen, sind nicht die wirklichen Mörder verantwortlich, auch nicht die Opfer, die nicht mehr sind, wohl aber die Zeitgenossen, die den Mord beklagen und bestrafen. (272)

De Baur’s theory shifts the responsibility from the author and onto the reader and his polemic reveals the shady side of his character. Peter looks at de Baur’s life with mixed feelings:<sup>255</sup> “Nein, ich mochte meinen Vater nicht und nicht seine Theorie, die ihn von jeder Verantwortung lossprach: von der Verantwortung für das, was er geschrieben, und für das, was er getan hatte” (273).

Schlink does not let his readers know to what extent de Baur is held responsible for his activities in Nazi Germany and later in the United States. For example, he does not reveal whether de Baur retained his position at the Columbia University after his exposure as a wartime correspondent. Schlink does, however, show his protagonist’s ability to publish after his wartime activities have been made public. It seems that de Baur has been able to avoid at least some responsibility, since he still manages to publish. Peter recalls:

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<sup>255</sup> Peter says: “Zugleich faszinierte mich, wie er durchs Leben gegangen war, sich auf das, was war, immer eingelassen, sich ihm aber auch immer wieder entzogen und am Ende noch eine Theorie entwickelt hatte, die diesen Weg durchs Leben rechtfertigte. . . .” Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 273.



. . . ich bin seinem Namen erst wieder um die Jahrtausendwende begegnet, zu der er einen beachteten, ahnungsvollen, unheilkundenden Aufsatz geschrieben hat. Nach dem 11. September 2001 hat er eine Theorie des Terrorismus entwickelt – ich sah das Buch angezeigt und besprochen. . . . (373-74)

The reception of de Baur's book on terrorism as well as his appearance on television on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday show that his popularity remains undiminished even in old age (374). The attention he received confirms that he is still a respected authority figure. Many ex-Nazis were able to establish a successful career in the post-war years. In *Guilt about the Past*, Schlink recalls a professor with a Nazi past, who succeeded in building a career in post-war Germany.<sup>256</sup> De Baur's continued success, as portrayed by Schlink, is therefore quite plausible.

Schlink's *Die Heimkehr* is centred on an intelligent rational, and charismatic, yet "malevolent authority" figure who cannot be trusted, that is deceptive and manipulative and though conscious of his responsibility, rejects taking responsibility.

### 3.2. Obedience in *Die Heimkehr*

In Milgram's study, the focus of a person's willingness or reluctance to obey destructive orders from higher-ranking authority rested on the "teachers." While Schlink's focus of obedience to "malevolent authority" rests on de Baur's students or "teachers," he also describes the obedience of de Baur's actors or "experimenters," as well as that of the commune members.

De Baur invites his students to his home and carefully selects suitable candidates for the unofficial winter "seminar." Some of these students are critical of

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<sup>256</sup> Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* 130.

Milgram's behavioural study of obedience. After watching a black comedy, partly based on Milgram's experiment, the students enter into a heated discussion about the ethics and findings of the study. While one student is appalled by the behaviour of the participants or "teachers" who shocked the "learner," concluding that Hannah Arendt was right, "[d]aß das Böse banal ist, daß normale Menschen zu allen Furchtbarkeiten bereit sind," another dismisses the high rate of destructive obedience and condemns those who obey destructive orders as sadists. Yet another student is of the opinion that "[n]iemand nur aus Gehorsam grausam [ist]" (300). According to Milgram,<sup>257</sup> people generally are unaware of the forces "impinging" on a person's obedience and condemn those who submit to "malevolent authority" too easily. De Baur's students certainly lack such an insight into the human psyche, believing they would not succumb to "malevolent authority," since they are neither sadistic nor aggressive.

### 3.2.1. *Forces underlying Obedience to Authority*

The forces that influence a person's obedience to authority<sup>258</sup> in *Die Heimkehr* are aggression, individual motives, a moral shift that is task orientated, proximity to victim and authority, as well as fear. Schlink's emphasis on submission to authority during the unofficial winter "seminar" is obvious. The actors or "experimenters" who assist de Baur with the "seminar" cooperate with this "malevolent authority" figure, just as Schmitz, who can be compared to the Milgram's "teachers," voluntarily obeys

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<sup>257</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 6.

<sup>258</sup> The force that is thought to underlie destructive obedience is aggression, even though Milgram did not observe aggressive tendencies towards the "learner" among the forces that influenced the "teacher's" destructive obedience in his study. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* 5-6.

SS authority in *Der Vorleser*. The students or “teachers” who submit to de Baur’s actors are forced to do so, just like Berg involuntarily obeys Schmitz as Schlink’s novel suggests.

The submission of the actors or “experimenters” was not motivated by aggressive tendencies towards the students in *Die Heimkehr* (358). This characteristic was also not observed in the “teachers”’ destructive obedience in Milgram’s study. As mentioned before, a comparison of de Baur’s actors/“experimenters” with Milgram’s “teachers” is justified. Although the roles they play are different, de Baur’s “experimenters,” just as Milgram’s “teachers” are not only subordinate authorities, but also the lowest-ranking authorities in their respective environments (Schlink’s novel, and Milgram’s obedience study).

The individual motive that leads to one actor’s cooperation is his friendship with de Baur, a factor underlying obedience that Milgram described as social relationship. Another motive that is also likely to have influenced the actors is financial hardship. Furthermore, their employment with de Baur gives them a chance to practice and further their skills, an opportunity that is limited, since actors in general face high unemployment and social uncertainty.<sup>259</sup> De Baur has chosen his associates with care, so that he does not need to adjust their moral views for

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<sup>259</sup> “90% aller Schauspieler arbeiten jenseits des versprochenen Starhums, leben die Schauspielarbeit nur selten, erleiden Arbeitslosigkeit, jobben in anderen Berufen . . . etc. Nur ein Zehntel der Schauspieler . . . in den USA arbeiten regelmäßig in ihrem Beruf.” *Movie – College*, Allary Film, TV & Media, 1999-2008, 23 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.movie-college.de/filmschule/schauspiel/traumberuf.htm>>.

completing a task, which clearly violates ethical standards. They are actors and see their cooperation<sup>260</sup> with de Baur purely from an acting point of view:

Einmal haben wir eine Bande gespielt, die sich vor der Polizei versteckt. . . . Es hat Spaß gemacht, aber einer von uns hat's übertrieben und war nicht mehr echt, sondern Film. (358)

As actors they automatically adjust to the role they play and become task-oriented, a state of mind that is adopted by the “teachers” in Milgram’s study in order to deal with an assigned task involving, as they believe, serious harm to another person thereby breaching social moral norms. The actors were not ordered to cause serious harm to the students, but merely to frighten them. Therefore, the actor’s obedience to de Baur is neither influenced by their closeness or proximity to the students nor dependent on their role as transmitter or executioner. The closeness to de Baur does also not influence the actors’ submission, as they cooperate with him to enforce the students’ obedience through fear.

The involuntary obedience of de Baur’s students results from fear, achieved by a lack of life’s basic needs such as food, as well as by psychological, and physical aggression. De Baur rouses fear in his students even before his actors arrive. Growing hunger and the possibility of starving to death (337), make the students realise: “Wenn heute keiner kommt, müssen wir morgen früh los” (338). When they decide that only a few students should leave the hotel, supplied with the best and warmest clothing available, there is opposition: “Aber wenn sie nicht ankommen und ich später auch noch los muß” (338). The students are in a difficult situation, as the

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<sup>260</sup> The cooperation of one actor seems limited: “Als es die Kameras noch nicht gab, haben wir mehr improvisiert. [De Baur] Traum ist, daß wir ihn nicht nur ab und zu anrufen, sondern daß jeder von uns einen kleinen Empfänger im Ohr hat und er uns genau dirigieren kann. Ohne mich – ich bin Schauspieler, kein Roboter. Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 358-59.

weather conditions are dangerous for those who attempt to get help as well as for those who rely on them. With the insoluble problem of food shortage, de Baur has set a prerequisite for the students' involuntary submission to his "malevolent authority" figures. His actors, who arrive the next day at the old hotel, look aggressive. Peter remarks about their first encounter with these men the night before at a restaurant:

Vier Männer stiegen aus, eingemummt in armeegrüne Jacken und Camouflagehosen, mit dunklen Strickmützen auf dem Kopf und wadenhohen, geschnürten Stiefeln an den Füßen. (329-30)

The actors are well equipped and can therefore take advantage of the students' hunger. Using their ample food supplies, the actors extort obedience from the students, while at the same time humiliating and degrading them. Peter recalls:

Sie waren laut und grob, und ich glaube, die anderen waren ebenso wie ich hin- und hergerissen zwischen dem Gefühl, die Situation sei entwürdigend und wir dürften sie uns nicht gefallen lassen, und dem Wunsch, keinen Ärger zu kriegen und das Ganze rasch hinter uns zu bringen. (340)

Schlink illustrates how a person deprived of the basics of life, such as food, can be forced into submission. The students' desperation is highlighted by the comment of one student: "Wir müssen sie dazu bringen, wieder ihr Essen mit uns zu teilen" (347). This remark shows not only the students' constant fear of being denied food, but also their complete dependence on de Baur's actors. At the hands of these subordinate and "malevolent authority" figures, who not only abuse their advantage but also carry weapons to defend their position of power, Peter feels "ausgeliefert, wehr- und hilflos" (341) expressing the fear or "Ohnmacht" a student has experienced (345). The students' desperation is further emphasised by their reaction to the discovery of

de Baur's belongings in the actors' jeep. Believing their professor has fallen victim to their aggressors, they decide to leave the hotel despite the dangers involved in a 30 mile walk through rough and unfamiliar territory in the middle of winter (349, 343).

Within less than twenty-four hours de Baur's students learn how easily a person can be coerced into submission to "malevolent authority." The students' obedience, just like the submission of the "teachers" in Milgram's study, does not result in hurting another person, but in hurting themselves. Schlink expresses the students' endurance of degradation by the actors through Peter. Forced to make an apology for some students' conspiracy against their tormentors, he recalls a childhood memory where his mother had also forced him to apologise for something he had not done:

Daß ich dem Frieden mit meiner Mutter meine Würde geopfert  
hatte, daß alle Rituale der Selbstkritik mit falschen  
Anschuldigungen und falschen Entschuldigungen auf dieses Opfer  
der Würde zielen . . . verstand ich erst später. (350)

Out of fear of again being psychologically- and physically terrorised (346), Peter breaks his resolution and yields to "malevolent authority" (351, 354). Like Michael in *Der Vorleser*, Peter is forced to sacrifice his dignity, and hence his self-respect (350). However, it is his and the others' fear that disgusts Peter. He loses his respect not only for himself but also for the students who share the same fate. De Baur forced them to experience fear and to deal with it. Denied privacy, their fear and their reaction to this stress are exposed. Peter summarises this experience:

. . . ich ertrug die anderen nicht mehr, nicht ihre Gesichter, was sie  
redeten, wie sie sich bewegten, ihre Angst. Was wir erlebten,  
schweißte uns nicht zusammen, sondern entfernte uns  
voneinander. (353)

Driving them apart is one method de Baur employs to maintain his students' obedience to "malevolent authority." The actors' played aggressiveness evokes fear with the aim to dissolve the unity among the students. When offered a way out by the actors, one of the students sides with them (339-40). Three others try to steal the actors' Jeep to escape, willing to leave the other students behind (344). The initial betrayals among the students aid de Baur in dissolving what is left of their unity. He spies on them through cameras installed in each room, informs his actors of the student's plot against them, and when the actors expose them, the students ask themselves: "Wer hatte den vieren von Pamelas Vorschlägen erzählt? Wem war zu trauen?" (351). Their disunity aids "malevolent authority" to control them.

Another method used to maintain obedience to authority is to provoke disobedience only to crush it to deter resistance. One male student confronts the actors, after being provoked by them (340). His outburst is met with immediate physical violence:

Als er drei Schritte gemacht hatte, streckte [einer der vier Männer] das Bein vor. Er fiel einem Vetter vor die Füße, der sich vorbeugte, mit der Rechten Mikes Haar packte, den Kopf anhob und das Gesicht in den Teller preßte, den er in der Linken hielt. Dazu lachte er, und seine Kumpane lachten . . . lauter. (340-41)

When a female student wants to leave the room in silent protest to such behaviour, she is hindered by the threat of an actor. Later on, when this female student voices her protest to another order by de Baur's actors, their reaction becomes physical: "[Einer von ihnen] packte Katherine, eine kleine, dünne Frau, vorne am Pullover, machte die Tür auf und warf sie in den Schnee" (345). Peter, who fails to respond to an order is also intimidated: "Als ich nicht sofort antwortete, stieß er mich zurück, ich fühlte die

Wand in meinem Rücken. Er stellte sich so dicht vor mich, daß ich seinen Atem roch. Ich hatte Angst” (346). The female student who conspired against the actors is then ordered into another room and is frightened by the actors to an extent that makes her scream (352).

The similarity of de Baur’s actors to Nazi thugs is obvious.<sup>261</sup> While such a comparison might seem unreasonable in a contemporary USA setting, Schlink connects this unofficial winter “seminar” with German history. It is on the anniversary of the reunification of Germany when de Baur selects a number of students for his upcoming “seminar.” During that evening at de Baur’s home, Milgram’s study and its ethical dilemmas are discussed and defended by de Baur with his “iron rule”, which he already had used in his writings for the Nazis. As mentioned before, this unofficial winter “seminar” is based on Milgram’s experiments, which were motivated by the atrocities of Nazi Germany. The link between the Third Reich and America of the 1990s in the novel is arguably the authority figure of the American professor de Baur. His Nazi past connects him with the Third Reich and in particular the atrocities that were the basis of the original intent of Milgram’s study.

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<sup>261</sup> Unemployment is a likely factor for the actors to cooperate with “malevolent authority” in *Die Heimkehr*, just as unemployment drove the students of the Weimar Republic into the arms of the Nazis. Craig writes: “The world depression was doubtless the most important of the forces that turned German students to the NSDStB, for it threatened a social group that was accustomed to think of itself as the elite of the future with unemployment and loss of status.” The Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Studenten Bund, established in 1926, consisted of students who were incited by the Nazis “. . . to save Germany by striking out at its enemies, not with words, but with fists and clubs and knives,” especially targeting ‘the Communists, the Socialists, the supporters of the Young Plan, the followers of the Centre Party’s leader Heinrich Brüning and, above all, the Jews.’” Craig further notes: “The response to this siren call was as remarkable as the brutality of the Nazi-mobilized students was frightening.” Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans* (London: Penguin, 1991) 183.



De Baur's activities in the second half of the twentieth century reflect the factual continuance of "malevolent authority" in the present.

### 3.2.2. *The Universality of Obedience to Authority*

In *Die Heimkehr*, voluntary and involuntary obedience to authority centres on intellectuals of different fields of education. Schlink's obedient people are de Baur's actors or "experimenters," and his students or "teachers." Among the students are "eine Ärztin, eine Psychoanalytikerin, eine Professorin für Französisch, und ein ehemaliger Angehöriger der Marines," as well as a former business owner (294). Schlink's presents obedience to "malevolent authority" as an ongoing dilemma. His novel also shows the universality of obedience in terms of a person's age, gender, social class, and nationality. De Baur's actors and students are of varying ages. While the actors are all males, the students included both males and females. Their differing social backgrounds are illustrated by Schlink through Peter and a student of de Baur's. Peter grew up in a working-class household (57-58), while one of the female students had a privileged background (328). In contrast to *Der Vorleser*, Schlink's *Die Heimkehr* illustrates the destructive obedience of people living in the functioning democracy of America. The students' and actors' level of education in *Die Heimkehr* is high, whereas Schmitz is illiterate and an example for obedience by an uneducated woman in *Der Vorleser*. Since destructive obedience occurs independent of a person's level of education, this universal aspect does not apply to *Die Heimkehr* and is one of the reasons why *Der Vorleser* complements this novel. There is no information about the educational background of the obedient commune members

that could counterbalance the lack of universality in *Die Heimkehr*. However, Schlink's illustration of destructive obedience<sup>262</sup> at the commune in the 1970s, and during the unofficial winter "seminars" held approximately from mid 1980s to the early 1990s shows the problem of obedience to "malevolent authority" continues to be a dilemma. Individual differences in the reaction of ill treatment are shown by some commune members being expelled after confronting "malevolent authority" (360). At the unofficial winter "seminar," one male and one female student confront authority, illustrating the non-existent gender barriers of people confronting authority; this is just as Milgram had observed in his study.

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<sup>262</sup> For the timeframes of de Baur's commune and the unofficial winter seminars see Schlink, *Die Heimkehr* 294, 297, 303.

## Conclusion

Bernhard Schlink's novels *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* illustrate how the interplay between "malevolent authority" and its subordinates can lead to destructive obedience and result in large-scale atrocities. A necessity for the implementation of destructive plans is the integration of people into a bureaucratic chain or a system of authority. "Malevolent authority" figures use deception and manipulation in order to lure people into voluntary submission, and force is applied to those unwilling to obey. Schlink portrays voluntary and involuntary obedience to authority in his novels, and highlights those forces, which Stanley Milgram also found to impinge on a person and determine his/her obedience or disobedience. By incorporating Milgram's 1960s obedience study into the plot of *Die Heimkehr*, Schlink points to the forces that Milgram found to have an effect on a person. These forces include individual motives like career advancement or social relationships; a shift in moral values that is task-orientated; as well as proximity to victim and authority. Schlink also adds aggression as a possible explanation for destructive obedience.

Schlink's criticism is directed towards the assumption that those who commit murder on command are monsters, a viewpoint also dismissed by Milgram's study. Milgram could not identify aggressive tendencies in subjects who submitted to orders to hurt another person with electrical shocks. Schlink, like Milgram, realises that equating the perpetrators who committed horrific crimes to "monsters," ignores rather than fights "malevolent authority" and destructive obedience. It is necessary to address the problem with authority and obedience as a universal human dilemma, much as we would like to distance ourselves from those who hurt or kill another human

being on command. The person in authority is just as capable of causing destruction as the person who obeys his orders and hence authority figures should never be trusted blindly. Furthermore, an understanding of the forces that influence a person provides insight into the individual motives behind the submission to destructive orders, and also fosters recognition of the economical, as well as political factors that can steer a vast number people into submission. With his novels, Schlink works towards such an understanding by exposing the interplay between authority and subordinates who are both responsible for destruction. The only way to prevent “malevolent authority” from building a destructive bureaucracy is for people to influence institutions and to hold them accountable, an insight that Schlink addressed in *Guilt about the Past*.

Schlink’s ongoing concern with “malevolent authority” and destructive obedience as portrayed in both *Der Vorleser* and *Die Heimkehr* is universal, as humans of the past, present and future were, are, and will sometimes be subjected to authority figures who abuse their power, and enforce obedience where it is not voluntary given. The outcome of such obedience can be destructive to others as well as to the person who obeys. The problem with obedience is not bound to a person’s age, gender, level of education, or social class. It is a human dilemma, as Milgram described it, which occurs and reoccurs around the world, independent of the political system in place.

In *Der Vorleser*, Schlink illustrates authority and obedience of German nationals during and after World War II through his protagonists Hanna Schmitz, an illiterate lower working-class woman, and Michael Berg, a boy with an intellectual family background. The obedience of both is destructive but their motives for

submitting to authority differ as much as the environment they find themselves in, and hence show Schlink's awareness that destructive obedience can penetrate all levels of society.

Schmitz's destructive obedience as a 21-year-old SS guard and subordinate rational authority is shown in the context of World War II and the mass-destruction of Jews in concentration camps or so-called labour camps. The continuance of "malevolent authority" and destructive obedience is reflected through Schmitz's affair with Berg after the war. Berg, after being seduced at the age of 15 by the now 36-year-old Schmitz, submits to her authority, which destroys his ability to form a meaningful relationship with a woman later in life. While Berg's involuntary obedience to Schmitz was due to his sexual dependency on her, Schmitz is likely to have been driven into the arms of the SS by limited employment opportunities for illiterates, and by a guard's better pay and status because of her power over prisoners. Schmitz also has aggressive tendencies towards her charges. Individual motives such as career aspirations, and fear are some of the forces that motivate Schlink's protagonists in *Der Vorleser* and lead to obedience. Authority in *Der Vorleser* is given a human face through Schmitz, because her authority also has a benevolent side. As perceived charismatic authority Schmitz is well respected by her fellow inmates, after being sentenced to life in prison for her crimes as an SS guard. Schlink's illustration of "malevolent authority" and destructive obedience, which is restricted to Germans in *Der Vorleser*, is extended in *Die Heimkehr*.

The ongoing and age-old dilemma of obedience to "malevolent authority" independent of geographical setting is a theme in this novel. Schlink describes the submission of intellectuals to a rational and charismatic authority figure called de

Baur in America. De Baur's leadership of a utopian commune in the 1970s, and the nature of his unofficial winter seminars in the 1990s are illustrative of the continuance of "malevolent authority" after World War II. Voluntary and involuntary obedience to de Baur is harmful for those who do not belong to his staff. Among the reasons for submission in this novel are again individual motives such as upholding social relationships, financial hardship, and fear.

The universality of the existence of "malevolent authority" and destructive obedience in each novel can be overlooked as a result of Schlink's main focus on Schmitz in *Der Vorleser*, and de Baur and his students in *Die Heimkehr*. The other protagonists Berg, and de Baur's associates or actors, balance the perceived one-sided portrayal in each novel, which was particularly criticised with regard to Schlink's depiction of the illiterate and former SS guard Schmitz. Since obedience to "malevolent authority" occurs independent of level of education, and of nationality, there remains an imbalance in each novel. Therefore, if Schlink's novels are read in sequence, the author's point about obedience is not misunderstood. Schlink neither excuses Schmitz, nor does he favour Milgram's study methods. An illiterate person, like Schmitz, can be misused in the same way as an intellectual idea, such as Milgram's study by de Baur.

To identify and analyse the interplay of authority and subordinates in destructive situations, Schlink has provided an analytical tool in form of Milgram's obedience study within the plot of *Die Heimkehr*. Milgram's study proved to be a useful tool for identifying and analysing Schlink's complex portrayal of authority and obedience in both novels, even though Milgram did not focus on obedience to charismatic authority.

Schlink's novels highlight the reasons for the abuse of authority in the absence of humane and ethical societal structures that would at least limit, if not prevent, such abuses. A weak ethical framework, one that can be easily corrupted, enables the triumph of mankind's evil side. The relevance of Schlink's novels is reflected by the reoccurrence of the most horrific example for authority abusing its power: genocide.

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