Authority and Obedience in Bernhard Schlink’s

Der Vorleser and Die Heimkehr

by

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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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