Feelings Of Detachment From The World In The Reader

The Reader (Schlink, 1995) is a novel challenging the stereotypical views of saints and sinners through the themes of emotional distance and one-sided love. It is a story of love and secrets, horror and compassion, unfolding against the haunted landscape of postwar Germany. Throughout the text, the theme of indifference and emotional distance is recurring. Distance is shown between Michael and his family, Michael and potential love interests, Hanna and Michael, and Hanna and the world. This distance/isolation is what ultimately leads to Hanna's downfall when she refuses to set her pride aside and admit that she is illiterate before the courts. Had she not kept so many secrets and so much of her life a mystery, she may have lived a warmer, happier life by letting people in. If she had let people in, she and Michael would have been closer and the relationship would not be as one-sided as it ultimately was.

In The Reader (Schlink, 1995), the distance surrounding the characters was caused by the secrets they kept from those around them. When Michael is hiding his relationship from his family and friends, he begins to drift apart from them. For example, after returning home from sleeping with Hanna for the first time and lying about his whereabouts, Michael states:

"I felt as if we were sitting all together for the last time around the round table ... as if we would never talk to each other so intimately again. I felt as if I were saying goodbye. I was still there and already gone. I was homesick for my mother and father and my brother and sisters, and I longed to be with the woman." (Schlink, 1998:29).

foreshadowing his emotional absence throughout the novel. Even when he is at the pool, Michael doesn't realise that not only has his relationship distanced him from friends and family, but also from himself and he no longer wants to enjoy his carefree years of childhood.

"At the swimming pool, the shrieks of playing, splashing children reached me as if from far, far away. I moved through the world as if it had nothing to do with me nor I with it. I dived into the milky, chlorinated water and felt no compulsion to surface again. I lay near the others, listening to them, and found what they said silly and pointless"- Chapter Seven. (Schlink, 1998:79).

After Hanna leaves him, Michael tries to hide and repress his emotions, wavering between "callousness and extreme sensitivity."(Chapter 1 Last Line)(Schlink, 1998:87).

Even years after the affair is over, Michael struggles to form successful relationships with others because of his unwillingness to confront his past with Hanna and spends a considerable amount of energy repressing his emotions for her.

Hanna is emotionally absent for almost the entirety of the book, and though she is physically intimate with Michael, her unwillingness to share her past or her illiteracy causes her to be emotionally absent and not only does she distance herself from Michael, but she also distances herself. When Michael asks about her life, she is evasive-

"as if she rummaged around in a dusty chest to get the answers…as if it were not her life but somebody else's, someone she didn't know well and who wasn't important to her." (Schlink,

1998:37).

Hanna’s disconnection to herself is perhaps a consequence of the exhaustion of maintaining her secret. When Michael, as an older man, researches illiteracy, he discovers “how much energy it takes to conceal one’s inability to read and write, energy lost to actual living.”(Schlink, 1998:186).

Like Hanna, whose secrecy is partly responsible for her distance.

Whereas Hanna’s emotional distance stems from her inability to read, Michael’s stems from his relationship with Hanna which is arguably one-sided. The relationship he formed when he was fifteen, continues to haunt him and to impact his everyday life. Even at the end when Michael visits Hanna in jail he is hurt and unsure if he should let her into his life once more. The fact that he still cares so much about her shows how strong his love for her once was-

“I sat next to Hanna and smelled an old woman… I moved closer. I had seen that I had

disappointed her before, and I wanted to do better, make up for it.

“I’m glad you’re getting out.”

“You are?”

“Yes, and I’m glad you’ll be nearby.” I told her about the apartment and the job I had

found for her, about the cultural and social programs available in that part of the city,

about the public library” (Schlink, 1998:197).

The conversation between Michael and Hanna shows that Michael did not want to live with Hanna. 'But why should I have given her a place in my life?' (Schlink, 1998:198). The question confirms Michael's concern for his current feelings towards Hanna.

The unique form of relationship between Hanna and Michael was a meaningful one, from Michael’s perspective at least. Their breakup was a tragic end to their relationship resulting in Michael’s coldness throughout the whole story. Thus, love was a major theme throughout the whole story and was successfully portrayed by Bernhard Schlink.

For my photographic essay, I attempted to capture the feelings of emotional absence and one-sided love. I aimed to compose photos deep with emotion and used a variety of styles to create an emotional series. The series is in black and white to evoke more emotion and the images all feature solidarity in varying ways. I used models to represent Michael and his feelings of detachment from the world and hurt and confusion after the breakup.