The Reader: Victimization And Guilt

When knowing that a certain action is morally wrong, it is hard to portray one's self as the victim. That being said, one can fall victim to such a situation based on the totality of the circumstances that surround them. In Bernhard Schlink's novel ?The Reader, ?the theme of victimization is prevalent amongst the two main characters: Hanna and Michael. Both fall victim, but in very different ways, with Hanna becoming the victim of the Nazi trials and her co-defendants turning against her, and Michael falling victim to Hanna's sexual advances, which after having gone through dramatically changes his life. However, under Karl Jaspers framework for guilt outlined in ?The Question of German Guilt?, they would also be considered harborers of guilt to a certain extent. This being said, Jaspers also makes mention of victims, which he claims as "he who feels absolutely safe from danger is already on the way to fall victim to it," (93). What Jaspers is saying is that any safety from danger is due to encounter it and fall prey to it, and it is this definition that will apply to the stories of Michael and Hanna. By applying Jaspers' frameworks on guilt and victimization, we come to the realization that both Michael and Hanna are victims of the circumstances they have been put in, but they also feel guilt for their actions regardless of whether or not they committed a crime.

Hanna is a complex character for a multitude of reasons. A former S.S. guard during the Holocaust, she oversaw the deaths of many little girls, and often treated them sadistically. After the war, she engaged in an intimate relationship with a 15 year old boy named Michael Berg, but suddenly disappeared at the end of the book's first act. She reappears later, and testifies later in trial, claiming "in monosyllables that yes, she had served in Auschwitz until early 1944 and then in a small camp near Cracow until the winter of 1944-45," (97). For these actions, Hanna is subject to both moral and political guilt, with the former being described by Jaspers as someone who is "morally responsible for all my deeds, including the execution of political and military orders," (25), and the latter being described as "involving the deeds of statesmen and of the citizenry of a state, results in my having to bear the consequences of the deeds of the state whose power governs me and under whose order I live," (25). Based off of these definitions, and given that Hanna worked for the Nazis in Auschwitz, as well as supposedly knowing that her actions were criminal. Despite this, it is likely that Hanna is also a victim of the Nazis, even though it in no way excuses her actions. She is the victim because she, too, is easily betrayed by her Nazi contemporaries. During the trial, Hanna and her co-defendants were performing poorly, and the other defendants were getting increasingly frustrated with her testimony. Annoyed, they turned on Hanna, and Michael recounts, "When the other defendants' lawyers realized that such strategies were being undone by Hanna's voluntary concessions, they switched to another, which used her concessions to incriminate Hanna and exonerate the other defendants." (114). While Hanna was a sadistic Nazi, she was in the end the victim of Nazi viciousness by having her fellow Nazis betray her. In addition, given the definition that Jaspers has laid out in ?A Question of German Guilt?, she was a victim of herself because Hanna and her defense were not competent, and as a result she felt safe from danger. As Michael recounts, "Just as Hanna's insistent contradictions annoyed the judge, her willingness to admit things annoyed the other defendants.

It was damaging for their defense, but also her own," (113). Due to Hanna's conduct towards the trial, she was not safe from the defendants, who had grounds to turn against her because

she was damaging their case. More importantly, however, Hanna was also victimizing herself by not standing up and fighting back, and ultimately dooming her case. Due to her own self-victimizing, it demonstrates that there doesn't always need to be a physical perpetrator; rather, we are our own perpetrator, and we can oftentimes sabotage our own well-being. The victimization is imposed by the individual, not any man nor law, and is mental, not physical. Hanna was both the victim of the other defendants in court, as well as herself for not fighting back against the prosecution or other defendants as hard as she could have.

In a way, Michael was guilty, but he never really committed a specific crime during the Nazi era, as he would've been too young to remember such a time or not alive at all. Michael's guilt is what Jaspers would classify as metaphysical guilt, which he describes as "a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge," (26). In interpreting the relationship between Hanna and Michael when the latter was in his youth, he was in solidarity with her, but did not know of her crimes. However, upon learning of the crimes he still wanted to have a connection with her, even if she was incarcerated. He did so in his own unique way, but it sounds like it was a struggle for him, claiming "And because in all my confused half-waking thoughts that swirled in tormenting circles of memories and dreams around my marriage and my daughter and my life, it was always Hanna who predominated, I read to Hanna. I read to Hanna on tape," (183). By sending Hanna the tapes of him reading, he was still demonstrating his commitment with her, despite her crimes. It is in this solidarity that Michael is metaphysically guilty, as by continuing his relationship with her by sending her the tapes, he is showing that he is still by her side, even though he knows clearly what she did and who she worked for. Most importantly, it demonstrates that one can be guilty without committing a crime, at least based on Jaspers' definitions of guilt. By showing solidarity with someone, there exists metaphysical guilt, and while it is less detrimental to one's well-being, it still exists and becomes a part of one's self. For example, Michael never committed a crime, but by showing some form of solidarity with Hanna and knowing about her crimes he still bears metaphysical guilt. That being said, Michael is still a victim, as he is still suffering years after the trial of Hanna, and it is best demonstrated in further relationships he has. After the trial was over, Michael married a woman named Gertrud, a woman with whom he was studying law with, and they eventually had a daughter. However, Michael is haunted by Hanna, claiming "I could never stop comparing the way it was with Gertrud and the way it had been with Hanna; again and again, Gertrud and I would hold each other, and I would feel that something was wrong, that she was wrong, that she moved wrong and felt wrong, smelled wrong and tasted wrong...I never got over the feeling," (173). Michael's marriage ends in divorce, further demonstrating the depth of his relationship with Hanna that falling in love again was wrong, and that there will always be something missing. This echoes Jaspers' definition of the victim laid out in the introduction: Michael may feel safe at times with other women, and his relationships may lead to marriage, but in the end he has fallen victim to Hanna once more, as it almost never leads to happiness. Hanna is the only relationship that matters, and Michael will always be the victim because he may search for safety in other lovers, but will always fall victim to longing for Hanna.

It is entirely possible that one can live amongst the victimized and the guilty. But it is necessary to be free from both. Jaspers recommends at the end of his writing that to be free of guilt, one must go through a process of purification, a phenomenon "in which we continually become ourselves," (114). By becoming ourselves and acknowledging guilt, humans can take a step towards freeing themselves from such shackles. The same has to be said for those suffering from victimization: it is necessary to have a process in order to free ourselves from it. What that

would entail is up to the individual and would be considered a case by case situation. Whatever the case, at the end of the day both victimization and feelings of guilt are both different concepts and yet restrict humans from moving on in life, and are obstacles that may never be eliminated.

Works Cited

1. Jaspers, Karl. ?The Question of German Guilt?. Fordham UP, 2001. Web.
2. Schlink, Bernhard. ?The Reader?. Vintage Books, 1998.