

From Polygamy to Divorce: A Study of “Sugar Peas” in Bernhard Schlink’s Flights of Love

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Abstract

The study of polygamy and divorce in “Sugar Peas”, a short story from Bernhard Schlink’s Flights of Love has enabled me to discover that betrayal and sickness in love affairs are some of the causes of divorce. While some characters are ready to forgive their partners in case of betrayal and continue to assist their sick lovers, others,

however, prefer to get rid of them through divorce. Such is the case of Thomas who is forced by his three wives to sign an agreement for his divorce with them because of his secret departure abroad and critical state of health. He ends up losing all of his business activities which becomes his wives’ properties and spends the rest of his life alone in an apartment.

Keywords: Characters, Polygamy, Betrayal, Sickness, Divorce.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the themes of polygamy and divorce in “Sugar Peas”, a short story from Bernhard Schlink’s *Flights of Love*. In its context, the term “polygamy” refers to Thomas’ love affairs with his three wives namely Jutta, Veronika, and Helga. Instead of staying together until death separates them, these characters’ love affairs result in their divorce because of their betrayal towards one another. Published in 2001 in New York, Bernhard Schlink’s *Flights of Love* is a collection of seven short stories, the fourth of which is worded “Sugar Peas” that centers on its protagonist’s polygamic life.

My choice of “Sugar Peas” for this paper is justified by the author’s portrayal of the main character as the embodiment of polygamous men in the United States. Allan Jennifer who first scrutinized it, considers it as “an account of the protagonist’s uncontrolled love feelings which end up putting him into trouble all along his life”.¹ As for Joe Smith, “it is a literary text in which the author shows the advantages and disadvantages of being a polygamous man”.² These quotations evidence that in “Sugar Peas”, polygamy is presented not only as a positive thing, but also as a negative one because of its unexpected side. This means that my main interest in writing on “Sugar Peas” is to draw some moral lessons with regard to the protagonist’s polygamic life that urges me to concentrate on the answer to the following question: To what

extent are polygamy and divorce part of the author’s account in “Sugar Peas”? I hypothesize that Bernhard Schlink’s presentation of Thomas as a husband of three female characters who no longer find their interest in sharing life with him due to his state of health and his secret departure abroad, attests of characters’ love and divorce in this literary text. My main objective is thus to examine the kind of love relationships observed among characters.

Knowing that the short story studied is linked not only to the characters’ living society, but also to their pain from their love affairs, I find it necessary to resort to the sociological and psychological approaches to conduct the above hypothesis. The sociological approach enables me to examine the protagonist’s different love relationships which mirror not only those of some polygamous American men in the United States, but also in every part of the world where polygamy is evident. For, according to Krutch, “*Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community*” (Krutch, quoted by Wilbur: 1962, 123). This quotation shows that a literary text, whatever it may be, is linked to a given society. This means that the sociological approach helps me examine the way Bernhard Schlink recreates the society to which he belongs within his short story, as Toni Morrison states: “*If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write is not about the village or the community or about you (the African Americans), then it is not about anything*” (Morrison: 1984, 339). For Toni Morrison, what the reader finds in a given work of literature is simply the depiction of a society with its people; the relations that these people have among them. The psychological approach which is the application of Freudian theories to the examination of literary texts, helps me analyze the characters’ shocks from love affairs after leaving their partners, as stated by Krutch in these terms: “*Psychology, of course enables biographers to speculate upon “the interior” parts of life (...). Psychology can be used to explain fictitious characters*” (Wilbur, *ibid.*, 71-72).

Three main points are examined in this paper. The first is Thomas’ encounters with his three wives. The second refers to their love affairs as couples. The last tackles their divorce which is viewed as the result of their betrayal towards one another.

1. Thomas’ encounters with his three wives

In “Sugar Peas”, Bernhard Schlink describes Thomas as a hard-working man who has a strong desire to succeed in life. He is known as an architect and painter who also appears as an entrepreneur, because he creates his own business activities. After receiving and training Jutta for a year as a future architect in his own workplace, he ends up falling in love with her. They later decide to share the rest of their life together as a couple. This means that Jutta is no longer viewed as Thomas’ simple business companion, but as his true lover with whom he shares intimate secrets:

To his and everyone else’s surprise he was the runner up. And then he was asked to take part in a competition for a bridge over the Weser. Designing this and entering still more competitions, all without giving up his roof business—it was too much. He named as his partner Jutta, a woman who had trained with his firm for a year and had just received her diploma. She remodeled roofs he builds bridge (“SP”, p. 148).

Through this passage, one understands that Thomas’ encounter with Jutta takes place in an enterprise where the latter is trained as a prospective roof maker. After taking her as his business partner who works in his place while he is busy for the building of bridges somewhere else, Thomas finds it better to have her for wife thanks to her attractive physical appearance and determination to work long hours without any significant rest. The author’s mention of this love adventure appears as a way for him to tell the reader that there is no exact place for a human being to find his sweetheart. He means that even at work, a lover may come across a partner capable of meeting his or her demands. It is by dint of working together with Jutta that Thomas finds out the good qualities which are hidden in her. These qualities urge him to seduce her successfully in order to enjoy the full fruition of life together as a couple. This means that Thomas would not perhaps fall in love with Jutta, if he did not have time and opportunity to cohabit with her daily at his workplace. The fact of deciding to get married with his employee is for the author a way to tell the reader that employers should always have respect for their employees, for they may end up becoming their sweethearts in the future.

Thomas’ encounter with his second wife, Veronika takes place in a plane while travelling from Leipzig to Hamburg. The short story reads that Veronika is a female German character from Hamburg, who runs a gallery in Hamburg. While talking about professional occupations, Thomas finds the opportunity to express his deep feelings of love for Veronika who finally falls in love with him after agreeing to promote his paintings:

By chance he met a woman from Hamburg, a gallerist who first promoted his paintings. They were sitting next to each other on flight from Leipzig to Hamburg. She was on her way home from a branch gallery, he was commuting between construction sites. He told her about his paintings, dropped by with a few of them a couple of weeks later, painted one or two she suggested he try, and one day to his astonishment and delight discovered that she was his paintings (“SP”, p. 150).

Though this passage, the author draws the reader back to the moment when Thomas and Veronika come across each other on a flight while travelling to Hamburg. He demonstrates that the motivation of these characters to become partners derives from their social occupations. While Veronika is attracted by Thomas’ paintings which, for her, are worth selling because they are of high quality, the latter finds this lady as a prospective promotor capable of boosting his painting activities thanks to her gallery. These interests which inhabit the two lovers’ spirits push them to fall in love with each other regardless of their marital status. It is indeed with regard to this precipitation that Thomas lets himself into Veronika’s beauty without taking time to study her behavior quite well. This precipitation in love affairs urges Thomas J. Scheff to argue: “*One can love someone that one doesn’t even like. A popular song from the 1940s, I don’t know why I love you as I do, evokes this kind of love: You never seem to want my romancing. The only time you hold me is when we’re dancing*”.³ Bernhard Schlink’s endeavors to account for this love adventure are nowhere more evident than in the passage wherein he

tells of Veronika who finishes up inviting Thomas to Hamburg in order to share their reciprocal feelings of love:

She had invited him to Hamburg on the pretext that she wanted him to advise her about remodeling her gallery. But when he arrived, he found his paintings in all the rooms and everything set up for a vernissage. He came at four o'clock, at five the first guests had arrived, and by eight the first paintings had been sold (“SP”, p. 150).

As it can be seen, the author’s mention of Thomas’ beautiful paintings which urge Veronika to see him as a true love partner for her, is a way to advice all men that it is always important to have a job before seducing a given lady. For, he demonstrates that if Thomas was not a painter, he would not be accepted by Veronika. Similarly, Thomas would not perhaps fall in love with her, if she was not a gallerist. This relationship appears as a type of love affair crammed with reciprocal interests for both partners. It is indeed in regard to these love interests that Thomas does not hesitate to reach Hamburg as soon as he receives an invitation from Veronika whose excitement pushes her to buy a bottle of champagne for the celebration of their love encounter: “By nine, Veronika and Thomas were so drunk on champagne, success, and one another that they didn’t wait for the showing at the end, but drove to her place” (id.). What is described in this quotation is not only the two lovers’ moment of joy with a bottle of champagne, but more the female character’s courage in such a love affair. For, instead of being invited by Thomas who is the man, she is, on the contrary, the one who does so to her future spouse. This means that, for Bernhard Schlink, women should not always wait for men to express their feelings when they fall in love with a given man. He believes that when a woman is active in a love affair, things often go better.

Veronika is presented here as the embodiment of all those women who find it better to be active rather than being passive in love affairs. Her activeness in her relation with Thomas is evident not only when she starts selling his paintings, but more when she receives him with a bottle of champagne. This activeness is certainly what urges them to stop the selling in time and go quickly to Veronika’s dwelling where they enjoy the full fruition of their intimate parts, as the narrator evidences it in these terms: “By morning he knew that he had found the woman of his wife” (“SP”, p. 150). This quotation attests of Thomas’ feelings of satisfaction after discovering her sweetheart sexually. What the reader may find shocking in this love adventure, as said early, is the precipitation of both lovers in falling in love with each other. The choice of a given partner to get married with should not be made in a hurry, as Jo-Ellan Dimitruis and Marck Mazzarella state:

“Observing people properly takes time. Most people simply don’t take enough time to gather information and reflect upon it. Instead, they frequently make critical decisions about people in a hurry, as if life was a game show in which quick answers scored more point” (Dimitruis and Mazzarella: 1998, 10).

Thomas’ eagerness to have Veronika for a true partner capable of meeting his demands is reinforced by the satisfaction he has after sharing bed with her. What he means is not only to have children with her, but more to share the rest of his life with her as a couple. The narrator insists on this aim when he refers to the male character voicing out that: “*I have met a woman. I mean, I’ve fallen in love with a woman*” (“SP”, p. 151). The presence of the first subject pronoun “I” in this quotation is meaningful, for it stands for Thomas who reveals his motivation to have Veronika for a true sweetheart capable of respecting and looking after him. His utterance here is that of a man who is deeply attracted by a woman.

Schlink describes Thomas’ love encounter with his third wife, Helga as a meeting by chance, for none of them expects to meet the other. The short story reads that they come across each other while each of them is accompanied by his or her friend. As a result, they decide to form two couples: That of Thomas’ friend with Helga’s friend and that of Thomas himself with Helga. This decision takes place in a room while sharing dinner together. It is exactly at this moment that Thomas and Helga have the opportunity to express their deep feelings of love to each other. Thomas is attracted by her partner’s physical appearance and way of reacting while talking to him. He is convinced that he has found a woman of his life capable of meeting not only his demands, but more those of his family members who will end up visiting them in their home one day:

Their second evening, they met two girls from Germany-one a student of art history, the other of dentistry. The third evening they met again by chance. Dinner together was relaxed, cheerful, easy, and after his friend took the art historian to the room the men shared, it went without saying that the evening would end as it had to end, with him and the dentist in the girls’ room. Helga was blond, with none of the delicate-limbed, delicate-nerved elegance and energy that Jutta and Veronika had in common (“SP”, p. 155).

This passage attests of Thomas’ first encounter with Helga, his prospective sweetheart while sharing their dinner. The fact of dining together for the first time evidences their agreement with regard their love affairs. For, it is often out of question for a given woman to accept to share time or dinner with a man if she is not attracted by him. What reinforces Thomas’ motivation to have Helga for a true love partner is her behavior which, he thinks, is comparable to that of Jutta or Veronika, his two first wives. He even means that Helga is as beautiful as his two first spouses. Helga’s impressive-physical appearance pushes Thomas to womanize her in order to form a legal couple in the future. Her natural beauty as described by the author recalls that of Silvia in Eric Segal’s *Only Love*, as evidenced by Matthew who argues: “*She wore jeans, sweatshirt and no makeup. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail*” (Segal: 1997, 14). These words show how Matthew is deeply attracted by Silvia’s beauty which intertwines with that of Helga in “Sugar Peas”. This beauty, as portrayed by the author, is far from being from his personal imagination, for it is also found on some women like Hester who, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, appears as the sunshine:

The woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides

being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes (Hawthorne: 1850, 47).

Through this description, one sees how Hester’s body which is impressive and attractive mirrors that of Helga in “Sugar Peas”. Such a description shows that, for the author, most of men are very often attracted by those women who are naturally beautiful with their good size and abundant hair. This appearance is, in fact, what urges Thomas to think of sharing the remaining of his life with her as a couple. For, he considers it as a cure that heals deception and gives new hope to enjoy the full fruition of love affairs. But this consideration may leave the reader with the impression that Thomas is more interested in Helga’s beauty than her behavior, for one sees the precipitation with which he shares dinner with her the first day he meets her without even questioning about her marital status. The author’s endeavors to account for the female character’s beauty which makes Thomas fall in love with her from the first day he comes across her are so excessive that he continues to describe her attractive features in these terms:

“She had a more generous substantiality and was so certain of her own delight in him and his in her, so feminine and inviting, that all the stress, all his worries, all his decisions seemed immaterial” (p. 156).

When the narrator claims that she is “so feminine”, he tells the reader not only of her beauty, but more of her behavior. He means that a woman who has a masculine behavior is very often disobedient to her husband. For, instead of acting as a wife within her home, she often dominates her partner who ends up becoming “a hen-pecked”.

What is worth knowing is that Thomas is not truthful to Helga, for the novel reads that while seducing her, he does not take time to tell her that he is already married to two wives, Jutta and Veronika. It is only after enjoying life with her in Berlin that she is aware of this truth:

“When he was with her, and she couldn’t help noticing that he made two phone calls, each one saying that he had urgent business in Leipzig, she laughed and asked. Do you have two wives?” (“SP”, p. 151).

This quotation attests of Thomas’ lie to Helga and his two first wives whose desire is to see him back home. The fact of asking him to come to Leipzig for urgent business is for them a way to express their jealousy to their husband. The fear they have here is that of women who do not want to see their partner in the hands of another woman capable of destroying what they already have in common.

2. Thomas’ love affairs with his three wives

Love is pictured as a strong feeling of deep affection that a given human being has for his fellow. In “Sugar Peas”, Bernhard Schlink starts portraying this kind of feeling through Thomas and Jutta. This couple’s love affair is evidenced through the way Thomas takes pleasure in having sex with her sweetheart before their official marriage. By dint of having sex with her,

Jutta carries a pregnancy which ends up making Thomas get married with her in order to share life together forever: *When he learned that she was carrying his child, they married* (“SP”, p. 148). This quotation attests not only of the manifestation of love between both characters, but more of the reason for which Thomas decides to get married with Jutta. One may argue that if Jutta did not fall pregnant, Thomas would not perhaps be motivated to marry her.

The author’s mention of Jutta’s pregnancy appears as a way to tell the reader that a pregnancy may push many partners to take their responsibilities in love affairs, for one sees how Jutta’s pregnancy results in the couple’s wedding which urges them to move to a new apartment:

“They moved into the most beautiful rooftop apartment his firm had ever built (...). The view from the terrace extended from the Spree and the Biergarten to the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate. They could watch sunsets from their terrace garden” (“SP”, p. 148).

This quotation evidences the new lifestyle experienced by Thomas and Jutta after getting married. For, one sees how they find it better to live in a very beautiful apartment wherein they enjoy the full fruition of life as a legal couple. The narrator describes this apartment as a luxury place where they have the opportunity to watch from the terrace the landscape of the city. Their decision to live in such a beautiful and expensive house attests not only of their deep love for each other, but more of their desire to share life together regardless of what their neighbors may think of them. Schlink describes love between Thomas and Jutta as a true love affair thanks to their will to deal with business activities together. None of them speaks ill of the other or takes a decision without informing the other in due time, as evidenced below:

As he sat sleepy-eyed but happy on the train to Berlin, he prepared for his conversation with Jutta. It would not be easy. They had been married for twelve years, had had good days and bad, had coped with caring for three children, including a difficult pregnancy with daughter, with the struggle for professional success, and with her minor affair and his two. He felt as if they had become intertwined, she a part of him and he a part of her (“SP”, p. 150)

In this passage, the author shows how couples should normally behave, for through Thomas and Jutta, he demonstrates the good atmosphere that is needed by lovers in different love relationships. He certainly means that instead of disputing for nothing daily, lovers should consider dialogues as a good method to find solutions to problems that may hamper the evolution of their love affairs. They should learn how to work together as it is the case for Thomas who leaves his business activities in the hands of his wife. It is only by so acting that partners can trust each other and remain married until the end of their life. The short story, for example, reads that when he comes back to Berlin, Thomas always has a talk with Jutta in order to let her know about his trip:

They had always been open with one another and also open to a world in constant motion, where things are always changing, including relationships between people. And it wouldn’t

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be easy, either, to confront his children with separation and divorce and the new woman in his life. But Jutta would be fair, and Veronika would find the right approach, the right tone, with the children. She was simple wonderful (“SP”, pp. 150-151).

This passage evidences Thomas’ dialogue with his wife, Jutta after his trip abroad where he has met a new woman of his life. His habit of not hiding the truth to his sweetheart urges him to inform her about his intention for Veronika, the woman he considers as his second wife, as he voices it out in these terms: *“I’ve met a woman. I mean, I’ve fallen in love with a woman”* (“SP”, p. 151). This quotation evidences not only Thomas’ love for a new woman, but more his betrayal towards Jutta who is not ready yet to live with a polygamous husband. The telling of the truth to her here appears as a way for her husband to preserve his love affair with her. The author’s mention of Thomas’ unfaithfulness is viewed as a way to denounce men’s uncontrolled love feelings which very often constitute a great hindrance to the evolution of their love affairs. What is incredible is that Jutta does not get angry at him.

In spite of this betrayal, Jutta and Thomas continue to share life together as a couple:

“Jutta was already in bed. Suddenly it seemed childish for him to sleep on the couch in the living room as he had intended. He undressed and lay down on his side of the bed. Already half asleep, Jutta cuddled up to him” (id.,).

One understands that self-control is of paramount importance in love affairs, for it helps the couple find solutions to the problems that seem to destroy their union. Jutta’s humility to continue sharing life with Thomas appears as a moral lesson to all those women who prefer to divorce their husbands after being informed about an unbearable truth. This humility attests of Jutta’s maturity in life, because it is not given to any woman of her age to act as such after being betrayed by a given partner.

Apart from self-control, the author also considers “patience” as a powerful means to solve problems in love affairs. For, he demonstrates that thinking twice before acting is very important to all those who face a given situation in life. In this regard, he agrees with the saying which states that “let’s sleep on it”. This means that one should compose oneself and take time to think about a given problem before acting in one way or the other. This patience is obvious in the novel through Jutta who, knowing that her love affair with Thomas is in trouble because of Veronika’s presence, she keeps cool and orders Thomas to tell her about his decision latter: *“Tell me about her tomorrow”* (“SP”, p. 152). This utterance, as it can be noticed, attests of Jutta’s patience and mastery in the question of solving problems, for one sees how she prefers to wait until the next day to give her opinion about her husband’s decision to take Veronika for his second wife.

In “Sugar Peas”, love between Thomas and Veronika is evident through the way they share life with each other. They enjoy spending time together in order to take profit of their love relationship. Although he is presented as a polygamous man, Thomas does his best to show his love for his second wife, Veronika by coming back to her as soon as he finishes spending time with his first spouse: *“After a week of skiing with Jutta and the children, he flew from Munich*

to Florida for a week, where Veronika had a condo” (“SP”, p. 151). This quotation evidences not only Thomas’ deep affection for Veronika, but more the latter’s humility for accepting to be the second wife of a polygamous man. The author’s portrayal of this female character’s humility is certainly a way for him to teach women that sharing life with a man who has more than one wife is not synonymous of being ugly, weak, or second zone woman. It is on the contrary a sign that shows the woman’s open heart, humility, and sympathy.

By accounting for Thomas’ agenda which gives priority to his wives, the author also tells polygamous men that they should always have time to share with their partners in order to make the latter feel at ease and happy within their homes. Such is the case of Thomas who, despite the fact that he is a polygamous man who often travels around the world, knows how to manage his time for the profit of his wives. Bernhard Schlink illustrates this reality when he shows how the male character divides up his vacations in order to satisfy his sons and wives:

“He divided up his vacations (...). In summer he joined his two sons on a ten-day bike ride, before joining Veronika for two-week hike through the Peloponnese. During the holidays, he spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at home” (“SP”, pp. 152-153).

Thomas is presented here as the embodiment of all responsible men who, despite their occupations and marital status, devote their time to looking after their children and wives. The way the author insists on this male character’s assistance to his second wife attests of his affection and true love for her. It is exactly thanks to this love that Veronika decides to build a painting studio for her husband in order to have him besides her in Hamburg. The building of this studio is, for her, a strategy to prevent Thomas from visiting Jutta daily. For her, Jutta constitutes a menace to her love affair, because her husband never ceases to take care of her:

After all, with her gallery in Hamburg and the two branches in Leipzig and Brussels, Veronika was up to her ears, too. And in any case, she wasn’t the sort of woman who constantly had to have a man around. Wasn’t it enough that his marriage was an empty shell, encrusted with his firm and children, and that he was living his real life elsewhere with her, every free minute of it? (“SP”, p. 152).

In this passage, the author portrays Veronika’s jealousy towards Thomas who also shows his love for Jutta, his first wife. This jealousy is evidenced through her discontent about the way her husband devotes time to visiting Jutta after spending some days with her. What she normally wants is to have Thomas besides her daily in order to enjoy the full fruition of their love affair. But she seems to forget that she is married to a polygamous man who is compelled to look after all his wives with no distinction. Bernhard Schlink’s portrayal of this female character’s jealousy is a way to show men what may happen to them when they succeed in getting married with more than one wife. What he means is that some women are likely ready to accept a married man for husband but end up complaining about their choice within their home, especially when they miss the latter. This reality is evident in the short story through Veronika,

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who despite her awareness of being the second wife of Thomas, feels sad whenever her beloved partner is a way for the fulfilment of his duty within his first wife’s home:

Yes, suddenly, with spring, summer, fall, and winter, the year had come had come around. On January 15, the anniversary of the vernissage, Veronika opened a second show of his paintings. The next morning, he again took the train to Berlin, not quite so happy-eyed as a year ago, and not quite so happy either. But he was happy. Granted, he didn’t think his double life was the right thing. A man really shouldn’t live this way. A man shouldn’t treat women this way. A man couldn’t be a father this way, there for his children only half the time and always on the ago. And what would happen if Veronika were to have a child? She hadn’t mentioned it, but it had noticed that she was no longer taking precautions (“SP”, p. 153).

What is described here is Veronika’s vain efforts to her husband. Despite her motivation and will to show her true love for him by giving him the opportunity to improve his painting activities, he does not spend much time besides her. He is often motivated by the desire to join Jutta, the woman with whom he has children. This means that in love affairs, men are sometimes more attracted by those women who carry their kids rather than those who are childless. Being conscious of this reality, Veronika ends up accepting to carry a pregnancy from Thomas in order to confirm her true love for him:

“The next year Veronika gave birth to a daughter. He was there for the birth, visited her as he was allowed, and spent the days in her apartment, painting and waiting until he could bring her and Klara home from the hospital” (“SP”, p. 153).

This quotation attests not only of Thomas and Veronika’s love affair, but more of Klara’s birth. This new-born female character comes to make this couple’s relation stronger than it was before, because Veronika’s complaints about her childless status vanish with the presence of her first daughter. She is now convinced that she can talk to her rival proudly and fearlessly thanks to her baby whose arrival results in her husband’s consideration and permanent visits to her, as the narrator voices it out in these terms:

He had taken leave of his home in Berlin for two weeks, and when the two weeks were over, the apartment in Hamburg had become his home. His second home-his apartment in Berlin had not stopped being home as well. But life here was no longer life home while life there was just time spent with another woman (“SP”, p. 154).

As it can be noticed, Thomas’ decision to live in Hamburg where Veronika dwells is a proof of his attachment to the latter. It is certainly the fact of being once more a father thanks to a new love relationship that urges him to be more interested in his love affair with Veronika whose desire is to see him besides her baby. For, she believes that raising a fatherless child is boring. The author’s mention of Klara’s birth in “Sugar Peas” is a way to show the reader the importance of children within a couple, because he demonstrates how this daughter comes to

reinforce love and affection between Thomas and Veronika. This means that children are the good fruits expected by parents within their couple. The more the latter have children, the less they think of divorce in case of a situation, as evidenced by Thomas who thinks that he cannot get divorced with Jutta:

He firmly resolved that he would speak with Jutta. But everything at home was the same as always and there was no reason to talk about separation and divorce just now. As they sat around the dinner table, he knew that he didn't want to lose his family. His two sons, a little wild but great kid, straightforward and always ready to help; his daughter, his blond angel; and Jutta, affectionate, generous, efficient, and attractive as ever-he loved her. Why should he give her up? (“SP”, p. 153).

One understands that after disappointing Jutta by having a sexual relationship with Veronika, Thomas is reluctant to break his love affair with his first wife. Seeing what they have in common like children and secrets, he prefers to become polygamous by getting married with both of his sweethearts. For, he does not see the exact reason that can urge him to hate one of them. The sentence “he didn’t want to lose his family” attests of his fear to lose Jutta who may end up rejecting him because of his betrayal to their love relationship. This is to say that a couple which has children seldom breaks up, because parents often hesitate to take a bad decision for the sake of their children’s future.

In “Sugar Peas”, the author also accounts for the way Veronika reacts to her husband’s behavior towards their daughter, Klara. In fact, when she compares Thomas’ affection and love for Jutta’s children, she finishes up losing her temper, because her husband’s consideration for these children differs from what Klara receives from him. This difference urges her to become a bit big headed to him in order to make him change his way of behaving towards Klara who, she believes, is also his daughter because born thanks to his sperm. For Veronika, Thomas loves more Jutta’s children than Klara, because he does not act as a true father to her:

“I’ve never pushed you, but I’m pushing you now. For my sake and Klara’s. She needs you especially during these first years. Your kids in Berlin are long past that stage” (“SP”, p. 154).

The author’s mention of this small passage is a way to tell the reader that parents should be tender, affective, and close to their children in their childhood, because the more they do so, the more their children have affection for them and will never forget them when they grow up.

Schlink accounts for love affair between Thomas and Helga through physical intimacy which helps them know each other better. Helga’s physical appearance which is so impressive and attractive urges Thomas to have her for wife. Despite his being polygamous, he is really convinced that he can no longer live without his third sweetheart, as the narrator evidences it in these terms:

“Without Helga he wouldn’t have made it through the winter. She didn’t ask many questions, didn’t say much of anything, but was beautiful, soft, took pleasure in him in bed, enjoy their drives and dinners together” (“SP”, pp. 156-157).

This quotation illustrates Thomas and Helga’s love for each other, for one sees how Thomas swears not to live without his attractive third partner. The author’s description of this female character’s physical appearance leaves the reader with the impression that Thomas never resists to women who are beautiful, tender, and soft. This lack of resistance may also lead the reader to consider him as “an easy goer” capable of falling in love with anyone he encounters in his way. By mentioning Thomas’ such a wrongful attitude in love affair, the author certainly teaches men not to act as such. They should compose themselves and take time to study their prospective partners’ behaviors before falling deeply in love with them. For, having a lady who has a good physical appearance is not a byword for having a good wife.

It is exactly because of this blind love that Thomas is no longer recognized as a hard-working man capable of feeding his families with the money he used to earn from his painting activities: *“He had to reschedule meetings for the evening and take more work home on the weekends, and his elaborate structure of hours and days in Berlin and Hamburg began to totter” (“SP”, pp. 157).* This quotation shows how Thomas’ blind love for Helga results almost in the destruction of his love affairs with his two first sweethearts who no longer feel loved because of their husband’s uncontrolled sexuality. Schlink’s account for love affair between Thomas and Helga is so excessive that he continues to show how both lovers share their thoughts and feelings through verbal communication. The narrator relates that after Helga passes her medical exams, she and her husband plan to own a private dental clinic in order to make money capable of satisfying their needs, as evidenced below:

You’re thinking that while your doctor often sends you to a clinic, your dentist hasn’t ever sent you to a dental clinic. But you’re getting older, you can bet on it, and even if your dentist takes care of the whole thing, one way or the other, you can be sure you’ll be better off with specialists in exodontists, prosthetics, and periodontics (“SP”, p. 159).

Bernhard Schlink’s mention of Thomas and Helga’s project of opening a clinic is meaningful because, through these characters, he demonstrates that men are often attracted by women who provide them with good ideas capable of improving their lifestyle. Thomas’ abandonment of his two first wives and his attachment to Helga is certainly due to the latter’s projects which, he thinks, are promising. This means that through this female character’s good project, the author aims at advising women to be active in love affairs by sharing good ideas and projects with their husbands. He certainly means that a passive woman in a given love relationship seldom brings happiness, because she is likely to observe the collapse of her home whenever her husband fails in doing something.

3. Thomas’ divorce with his three wives

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In “Sugar Peas”, Bernard Schlink shows how Thomas who, after noticing his incapacity to take care of his three wives, decides to go abroad in order not maybe to look for a better job so as to come back and take his wives, but to restart life alone as a single man. After being aware of his decision to leave the country for this purpose, Jutta, Veronika, and Helga start speaking ill of him as a way to express their discontent about his irresponsible behavior which leaves them in despair:

Not that he had actually began to believe he had cancer. But when Veronika barked at him one weekend in Hamburg—for sitting at the table after their meal instead of helping with the dishes—he was outraged. How could she demand he help with housework knowing that he had cancer? Besides, the incision really did still hurt; if they had opened him up for an appendectomy and sewed him up with metastases still inside, it couldn’t have hurt any more that it did now without them. And he still felt weak, overtaxed, exhausted (“SP”, p. 176).

In this passage, the author tells the reader of the main reason which pushes Thomas to think of travelling abroad. In fact, what reinforces his desire to leave his three wives is the latter’s misbehaviors towards him. Despite their awareness about his sickness because he suffers from cancer, Veronika, for example, forces him to wash the dishes. His decision to go abroad is viewed then as a way for him to have a rest with regard to the housework shifted on him by this female character who seems to have no mercy on him. What pushes Veronika to behave like that towards her husband is the latter’s incapacity to fulfill his duty as a polygamous man. The short story reads that Jutta, Veronika, and Helga no longer show their love for him because of his state of health. Whenever he decides to spend time with them, they no more find their interest in staying besides him, as evidenced below:

All women complain that their husband have too little for them, even those whose husband don’t have other women. No, he had done all he could for them, and they were not repaying him as they should. They had forced him into a situation from which his only escape was cancer and death. What was he actually going to do in a few weeks or months? Health as he was? They had driven him into a dead end (“SP”, pp. 176-177).

This passage brings evidence that Thomas no longer receives true love from his wives who now consider him as a burden to get rid of, for he has become unable to look after them appropriately because of his cancer. It is exactly because of his wives’ misbehaviors towards him that he no longer finds interest in sharing life with them. He finds it better to go abroad in order not only to have medical care about his sickness, but more to restart a new lifestyle as a single man. The author accounts for his journey abroad in a very small passage wherein he wonders whether his wives are shocked because of his absence: “*Where you hurt when I just slunk away like that?*” (“SP”, p. 190). This question, as it can be seen, attests not only of Thomas’ journey abroad, but more of his awareness about the consequences of his behavior towards his three spouses.

In asking the above question, Thomas aims at letting his wives know that it is because of their mistreatment against him that he has decided to go abroad in secret. He was conscious that they would be shocked after noticing his absence. This means that going abroad is for him a way to heal his wounds from his wives’ torture, as Richard Templar writes: “*Do yourself a favor. Go away and hide somewhere while you lick your wounds. Enjoy your friends and your family, and wait until you’re recovered before you start looking for a new partner*” (Templar: 2008, 13). What is worth knowing is that Thomas’ secret departure abroad is viewed as a form of betrayal towards his three wives who feel shocked. It is indeed with regard to this betrayal and Thomas’ state of health that the author shows how Jutta, Veronika, and Helga are no longer ready to continue spending the rest of their life with Thomas. The narrator relates that Thomas suffers from paralysis which is the result of his train accident. This sickness makes him rely on other people for financial support, because he is no longer able to take care himself and his different families:

No longer able to keep up with the train, he threw himself backward in desperation and in the hope that his would rip. But the heavy woolen fabric held, and the train pulled away, dragging him with it the length of the platform and then over the gravel beside the rails. Someone leaning out of a carriage window became aware first of the sudden horror of the travels on the platform and then of the emergency itself and pulled the emergency brake, but before the train finally came to a halt, Thomas was nothing but a bloody sack (“SP”, p. 184).

This passage illustrates Thomas’ pitiful state of health. He completely destroys his body because of his desire to go and enjoy the full fruition of life away from his three wives abroad. His spine being injured, Thomas is no longer ready to meet the demands of his wives who later end up betraying him by forcing him to divorce with them. Schlink’s endeavors to account for the protagonist’s state of health which appears as a great hindrance to the future of his love affairs with his three spouses, are nowhere more evident than in the passage wherein he tells the reader of his transfer to a regular ward for deep medical care: “*All patients are equal in intensive care. But when Thomas was transferred to a regular ward, he was placed in one of sixty beds in a large hall that had been constructed in the twenties*” (“SP”, p. 185). Through this quotation, the author shows that the main character is not neglected in the hospital, for the sentence “all patients are equal in intensive care” implies that in this hospital, natives and foreigners are equally treated for the simple reason that they are all human beings who deserve the right of health. The narrator explains that while receiving his medical care, Thomas feels loved by doctors and the other patients through their different conversations with him. It is indeed in these circumstances that his injuries vanish, as illustrated below:

His injuries healed. After three weeks he knew he could endure the noise and strength no longer. Hadn’t life before the accident become a phantom and an irrelevance to him, hadn’t he felt removed from it and from himself? Now life of cripple in a sewer. Only that sense of floating that he had known before the accident held true. He had felt as if his feet weren’t

really touching the ground, and that was the case now—his feet would never really touch the ground again (“SP”, p. 186).

One understands that even though his injuries are healed, Thomas finishes the rest of his life on a wheelchair because of his paralysis: “*He often felt as if he were floating. As his feet weren’t touching the ground*” (“SP”, p. 182). It is indeed because of this state of health that Jutta, Veronika, Helga call into question the future of their love affairs and decide to get divorced with Thomas. For these women, the reason their husband gives to justify his secret journey abroad is viewed as an alibi to abandon them because of his incapacity to take care of them appropriately. Their anxiousness against him becomes more obvious when they continue to give a lesson to him by asking him to do the housework without having mercy on his state of health. They join together as a group to create some strategies capable of helping them achieve their goal of getting rid of him. To begin with, they take pleasure in transferring him to rehab clinic for intensive medical care. They even contact one of his classmate friends who is a doctor to help them in the situation in which they are. But this so-called friend is used by them as a facilitator in the accomplishment of their common objective:

He had learned that his doctor, a friend of many years, had arranged for him to be transported from Milan to the rehab clinic. His own insurance had paid for the journey and the stay. When he wanted money to buy underwear, shirts, pants, books, and CD player, he called his bank. His account had been closed. But then several thousand marks were wired into it and made available to him. Six weeks into his time at the clinic, he had his fifty-first birthday. That morning he received a bouquet of fifty-one yellow roses. The card attached identified them as coming from TTT, a licensing and marketing agency that he had never heard of. That afternoon his doctor friend paid him a visit (“SP”, p.187).

In this passage, Bernhard Schlink presents Jutta, Veronika, and Helga as clever women whose planning for divorce is not known by Thomas. The fact of sending money to him to the hospital whenever he needs to buy books, pants, or shirts is for them a strategy to make him believe that they have nothing against him. The narrator relates that on the day of Thomas’ birthday, they offer him a present. This appears as another strategy used by them not only to show their love for him, but more to achieve their common goal of divorce. Their eagerness to divorce their husband finally leads them to claim for what they have in common with their husband:

The friend let him a package from Jutta. Thomas opened it and found the catalog from his show last spring. There had actually been one in Berlin, arranged by Veronika’s gallery in Hamburg. His drawing—Veronika had collected his sketches, roughs, and first drafts and tagged them with audacious prices. Thomas also found a small brochure that identified him as the author of “Thoughts” on Building a Fantasy Bridge over a Fantasy River.” It was a lecture that Jutta had delivered for him in Hamburg the precious spring. He recognized ideas he had occasionally played with and jotted down in a note; Jutta must have found the notebook and assembled the ideas into a lecture (...). Thomas laughed, he had not imagined

Jutta capable of licensing and marketing him so acutely, or of seizing the bridge over the Hudson for herself. (“SP”, pp. 188-189).

In this passage, the author tells the reader of the document written by Jutta. This document shows that Thomas is no longer the owner of the project which consists in building bridges. He is without his consent replaced by his wife, Jutta, and Veronika his second wife who is said to be the manager and the person in charge of contacting clients. The sharing of tasks here is not for these women a way to work in the place of their husband because of his state of health, but a proof of their divorce with him, for they no longer inform him about his business activities. Seeing the way these two female characters start changing positively their lifestyle in no time thanks to Thomas’ wealth, Helga also plans to open her own private hospitals with Thomas’ financial means: “*You’ve also got to get to work on plans for dental clinics in Hanover and Frankfurt*” (“SP”, p. 190). One sees how Helga plans to build her own hospitals based on dentary in Hanover and Frankfurt. Knowing that his husband is good at architecture, she refuses to associate him in her project because of her desire to divorce him by any means necessary. The main character is used by his own wives as an object because of their will to succeed thanks to his business activities and to get divorced with him afterwards. This need for illicit success urges them to take him to his own apartment where he is astonished to discover that his business activities belong now to his wives who have even falsify his credit card:

Helga interrupted Jutta. “I’m sorry to press ahead, but Veronika has to leave in a minute and so do I. He’ll catch on to the apartment and the housekeeping arrangements. There’s a rush on the design. We’ve promised it to the English by fall, and I’ve arranged for Heiner to come by here tomorrow to show Thomas what he’s done. Heiner,” she said, turning to Thomas, “has already done a little preliminary work on the design. And next Monday the journalist from vogue will be here. If we start the media campaign now, we’ll have wild momentum going by the time of the show this winter.” Helga paused to think. Then she looked from Jutta to Veronika. “Is there anything else?” (“SP”, p. 193).

Through this passage, one sees how Jutta, Veronika, and Helga invite Thomas to his apartment to make things clear about his business activities which, they think, are no longer his but theirs. It is exactly at this apartment that Thomas starts realizing what his three wives try to plan against him, for they even tell him that they are the owners of his properties. In the following passage, for example, the narrator shows how the three female characters enjoy the full fruition of life thanks to their husband’s possessions:

To be more precise, you’ve already transferred them. When you just vanished like that, without so much as a thought about your children, us, your firm, your studio, or my clinic, life had to go on, and it wouldn’t have gone on without your signature on things. Don’t get upset, it’s not good for you. We didn’t plunder your credit card or your bank accounts. We didn’t abuse your signature, but we used it when we needed it” (“SP”, pp. 193-194).

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The sentence “we didn’t abuse your signature, but we used it when we needed it” shows that Jutta, Veronika, and Helga who are no longer ready to share the rest of their life with Thomas, end up imitating his signature in order to have access to his wealth without his consent. The cause of this inhuman practice, as said early, is Thomas’ secret departure abroad. What his wives do to him is viewed as a revenge for what he has done to them. Through these characters, the author shows the drawbacks of being a polygamous man. For, he means that when things go wrong, in one way or the other, very often women join together as a group to do harm to their husband before divorcing him, as evidenced below:

He rolled himself through the apartment. Every he needed was there. He rolled out of the apartment to the stairwell and pushed the elevator button. The elevator didn’t come. He rolled onto the terrace, stuck his head over the railing, and call down, “Hello, hello” No one heard him. He could slide down things down the stairs without this wheelchair. He could throw things down onto the street until some pedestrians noticed. He could use large drawing paper to make a Help! Sign and hang it from the terrace railing (“SP”, p. 195).

In this passage, the author shows how things fall apart between Thomas and his three spouses. The reason they give to justify their current reaction against him is pictured as an alibi, because they no more have love for him. The main reason which justifies their surprising reaction is their husband’s state of health, for they believe that he is no longer capable of satisfying their needs. In this regard, the author seems to attract men’s attention in thinking twice before choosing a partner to get married with. For, through Thomas who gives up his wives by going abroad secretly and through the latter’s reaction against him that results in their divorce with their husband, one may call into question the different declarations of married people made at the city hall. Thomas’ forced divorce with his wives is thus viewed as part of the complications of love, as Richard Templar confesses it in these terms: “*Love between people almost has its complications because people are complicated*” (Templar: 2008, 12).

CONCLUSION

At the end of this exploration, I have discovered that in “Sugar Peas” Bernhard Schlink accounts for the themes of polygamy and divorce through Thomas and his three wives, Jutta, Veronika, and Helga. After being successfully seduced and married by the protagonist, these female characters are later shocked to find out that their husband goes abroad secretly in order to enjoy the full fruition of life alone as a single man, ignoring that he has spouses and children to look after. It is indeed because of his secret journey abroad and his state of health that Thomas is forced by his own wives to get divorced with them. For, they are no longer ready to share the rest of their life with a man who is no more able to satisfy their needs. I finally bear in mind that betrayal and sickness are likely to bring about divorce especially when one lover is not ready to forgive or assist his or her sick partner.

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