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A Novel Holocaust Narrative from the Perspective of the Perpetrators

Since the aftermath of the Second World War, the majority of war narratives have highlighted the Holocaust's dire implications on the Jewish community. Granted, such emphasis is not only inevitable but certainly necessary: the Jewish agony is beyond one's capacity to grasp. Nonetheless, *The Reader* is unique in that it portrays the war and its significance from the German lens. The film revolves around three time periods: when Michael Berg is an adolescent schoolboy in 1958, a law student in 1964, and a lawyer with a failed marriage in 1995. All three time periods are oriented around Michael's perverted affair with Hanna Schmitz, a 36-year-old woman, in 1958. Hanna is later partially unjustly convicted to have been a SS guard during the Second World War and intentionally direct the death of three hundred Jews in a burning house. Michael coincidentally attends her trial in 1964. *The Reader* is frequently criticized for humanizing and sexualizing the Holocaust. However, when realizing such controversies are employed to serve an allegorical purpose, the film's commentary is compelling. **In *The Reader,* the setting, conflict and structure, characterization, and symbolism have metaphorical functions to convey the subjectivity of history, depict the aggressive nature of the postwar German generational conflict, and propose an approach to progress beyond it.**

To begin with, the setting of the film, postwar Germany, is microcosmically represented by Michael's family in 1958 and portrays the emotional distance and relegation of responsibility prevalent in contemporary German society. Michael's parents, specifically, do not interfere to regulate Michael's actions. Instead, they defer their parental responsibility to another subject. For instance, when Michael arrives late for dinner from his sexual affair with Hanna and

provides an inconsistent excuse saying he “lost his way home,” his parents do not try to see behind his dishonesty. They merely respond with silence. When Michael claims that he desires to return to school with an excuse that his illness has cured and an ulterior motive to meet Hanna more often, his parents do not directly provide a judgment. His mother claims that “the doctor” recommended that Michael stay home while his father tells Michael to do as “he” wishes. Michael’s parents’ deferral of responsibility resembles the German avoidance from national guilt as perpetrators or bystanders of the Holocaust. The film symbolically depicts the German’s disengagement from social and personal affairs and unwillingness to confront appalling truths. It also illustrates the national atmosphere after the war, marked with repressed remorse, through the cold familial ambiance. Furthermore, through Michael’s secret affair, which is actually a form of sexual harassment, the film hints at the potential of such widespread emotional detachment having an adverse effect on the postwar generation. Likewise, the setting of the film in the exposition of the plot establishes the melancholy mood of the film and reflects the collectively secluded mentality of the Germans.

Moreover, the conflict and structure of the film disclose the aggressive nature of Michael’s affair with Hanna and, thus, the generational conflict in Germany. The predominant source of Michael’s initial internal conflict is his guilt, derived from a sense of accountability to Hanna’s abrupt and unexplained departure in 1958, and irrevocable emotional vacuum, as he believes he cannot experience romantic affection to its full contentment again without Hanna. However, ironically, his realization of the truth regarding Hanna’s identity does not exonerate him from guilt but rather intensifies it. That is, he strives and continually fails to process the fact that he loved a perpetrator of the heinous mass genocide in the 1940s. Such internal conflict is especially apparent in the nonlinear structure of the film. The frame narrative begins not with the exposition where the protagonists encounter but the falling action of the plot in which Michael deals with his guilt from the affair, in 1995. Then, the film proceeds to the rising action consisting of Hanna’s

departure in 1958, the climax of Hanna's trial in 1964, and the resolution of Hanna's suicide in 1995. Employing the frame structure, the film alternates from the past to the present, shedding light on how the affair with Hanna incessantly haunts Michael. The past is intrinsically intertwined in his identity in the present. Moreover, it is also this internal conflict that shifts Michael, a dynamic character, from a malleable and innocent boy craving affection to a reclusive man. Subsequent to 1958, Michael becomes a solitary, precocious character that cannot form steady relationships. His future isolation is foreshadowed in the film which begins in medias res: his wife asks if "anyone ever stay[s] long enough to know what the hell goes on in [his] head." Michael's anguish founded from his love for Hanna allegorically epitomizes the shame of the German second generation for being inescapably associated with the accomplices of the Holocaust. Such emphasis on the internal conflict, not external conflict, enables the audience to explore diverse moral dimensions of the Holocaust; the parent generation's aggression was not only imposed on the victims but also their children.

Hanna Schmitz's dichotomous character, vulnerable and simultaneously authoritative, manifests the versatility of history—mainstream knowledge of the past corresponds to a predominant subjective narrative. Hanna partakes in both superior and inferior roles in diverse power dynamics: she is superficially a sexual, dominant woman but an insecure, conflicted perpetrator. The domineering aspect of her ego is what the majority perceives; it correlates to the common association between SS guards and barbaric authority. It was also Hanna's initial disposition revealed to Michael—in their representative external conflict during the affair, it is Hanna who hollers at Michael to leave and Michael who returns lamenting for forgiveness. When Michael apologizes for upsetting Hanna, she bickers back: "you don't have the power to upset me." However, when Hanna's illiteracy is revealed the audience is astonished due to the situational irony. That is, in retrospect, Hanna was not truly an overbearing individual; she was merely coveting to exercise authority by forming an alternate realm of reality through her affair with Michael, due to

her impotence as an illiterate in society. For instance, Hanna's ambivalent expression, exhibiting curiosity and envy, is emphasized with a close-up shot, as Michael says that due to his hepatitis, he "could not even bother to read." This single expression manifests how a mere reference to reading can internally impact Hanna; her vulnerability not only overwhelms her but almost defines her. Her inferiority complex as an illiterate is further emphasized during the trials when the judge asks for a sample of her handwriting to determine if she was a leading figure in the concentration camps as stated in false allegations by her colleagues. Hanna refuses to expose her illiteracy and instead submits herself to a lifelong sentence to obscure it. She has an insecurity she is willing to obscure which she more prioritizes than her own personal liberty and dignity. Such scene evokes a sense of prohibited sympathy within the audience; they can, to an extent, construe the perpetrator's inner conflict and anxiety. This concurrently elicits revulsion as the audience are attempting to understand the abominable criminal, which is deemed to be a forbidden act against moral codes. However, the film does not "humanize" the Holocaust to redeem or justify it. It provides a possible circumstance to assert the inefficacy of blind castigation and stress the significance of viewing the issue in an impartial manner to redress it properly.

Hanna's illiteracy holds value not only as a physical inability constituting her vulnerable character but also as a moral inability that governed Nazi Germany. While Hanna's colleagues deny any allegations to mitigate their punishment during the trial in 1964, Hanna persistently explains her actions. She does not try to diminish the moral weight of her actions: she does not understand it. For instance, when the judge inquires why the guards did not let the Jews locked in the burning house escape, Hanna answers with a nonsensical answer that she regards cogent: "we were guards; we couldn't let them escape." When the judge questions if she thought such action was justifiable, she preposterously asks, "what would you have done?" From the modern perspective, the answer to her question is obvious—any ethical individual would have assisted the victims who were burnt to death. However, *The Reader* insists that the past should be understood based on the

circumstances of the contemporary society. Similar to how illiterate people's world view is limited, *The Reader* portrays the "morally illiterate population," reduced to mere perfunctory fulfillment of societal duties—their individual values and principles were diminished to serve a more extensive function of the nation. As such, with the symbolism of illiteracy, the film further expands the idea of "humanizing the Holocaust." That is, one should not simplify the issue by framing the perpetrators simply as abhorrent beings that cannot be understood. The film instead provides a potentially more accurate explanation; the crimes were based on erroneous moral judgment, or "illiteracy," that must be addressed. Sheer detestation will not facilitate the progress of civilization—constructive criticism and development are necessary. Hence, *The Reader* stresses the vitality of the constant reconstruction of the past.

The film also employs symbols beyond illiteracy: the symbolism of reading and Hanna's tea tin holds prominent value in proposing an approach for the postwar generation to confront its past. After Hanna is imprisoned, Michael begins to record himself reading books on cassette tapes and sends them to Hanna. He refrains from visiting Hanna or even writing letters; reading is the least, and the most, he can do. As Michael sustains the spirituality of their relationship, the film communicates that the younger generation cannot repair the state of blissful ignorance nor should not disown the sinful. Instead, they should endeavor to comprehend the situation with love—not blind love, but critical love. It is not negativity that will facilitate moral progress. The tea tin with Hanna's entire fortune, which she hoped to give to a Jewish survivor from the burnt house, also depicts a similar message. Hanna did not want absolution for selfish emotional relief; she intended to deliver it after her suicide. The parent generation, similarly, must engage in altruistic self-reflection. The Jewish survivor did not accept Hanna's money noting its potential to be perceived as amnesty. However, she did accept the tin withholding personal, not financial value. She had attempted to reconcile with the barbaric past. Similarly, through various symbols, the film illustrates an approach to embracing the German fate.

In conclusion, *The Reader* counters erroneous "truths" regarding the Holocaust and examines the often neglected German perspective of the issue through various narrative features, including the setting, conflict and structure, characterization, and symbolism. The film ultimately provides a direction in how we should advance to progress into an ameliorated society. Though from the public perception the film frequently denounces it to be euphemistic, offensive, and provocative, in literary analysis, it clearly contains value. *The Reader* demonstrates the potency of fiction to recreate reality, shed light on different facets of society, and ultimately precipitate societal change.

Works Cited

The Reader. Directed by Stephan Daldry, performances by Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, David Kross, Lena Olin, and Bruno Ganz, The Weinstein Company, 2008.