

UNVEILING HANNA SCHMITZ: A SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MORALITY, GUILT, AND MEMORY IN BERNHARD SCHLINK'S *THE READER*

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Abstract

This paper, titled "Unveiling Hanna Schmitz: A Sociocultural Analysis of Morality, Guilt, and Memory in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*," explores the enigmatic character of Hanna Schmitz by examining her moral decisions, guilt, and the influence of societal norms. Through an in-depth analysis, it delves into the complexities of identity formation, memory, and the aftermath of historical trauma, offering insights into the human condition. The study reveals the external factors and internal motives behind Hanna Schmitz's involvement in the Holocaust, following a sociocultural analysis of various aspects that entangle the main character in the consequences of her choices, ultimately leading to her suicide. The analysis highlights how literacy and education can become destructive tools when wielded by ignorant and arrogant elites to segregate and manipulate. Hanna suffers from a societal disease that shapes her actions and fate. The paper argues that society and the tyrannical regime play pivotal roles in shaping Hanna's unfortunate destiny. Her struggle with illiteracy and her efforts to conceal it further underscore the societal pressures and personal conflicts she faces.

Keywords: *holocaust; illiteracy; post-war Germany; power dynamic; socio-culture analysis*

1. Introduction

Bernhard Schlink is a renowned German author and professor of law, best known for his novel *Der Vorleser* (1995), translated into English as *The Reader* (1995). It explores themes of guilt, morality, and the lingering effects of the past. The novel gained international acclaim and was later adapted into a successful film.

The Reader (1995) tells the story of Michael Berg, a fifteen-year-old boy in post-World War II Germany who is in love with Hanna Schmitz, ending it with an affair. Hanna, an enigmatic and complex character, has a significant secret: she is illiterate. Throughout the novel, Schlink delves into the consequences of Hanna's illiteracy and the impact it has on her life and relationships. Hanna's decision to hide her illiteracy has profound consequences that reverberate throughout the story. Firstly, her illiteracy becomes a source of shame and insecurity for her. She fears exposure and goes to great lengths to keep her secret hidden, even at the cost of her relationships. This secrecy isolates her and prevents her from seeking help or addressing her illiteracy.

Furthermore, Hanna's illiteracy plays a significant role in the trial that takes place later in the novel. Hanna is accused of war crimes for her role as an SS camp guard during World War II. Her inability to read and write becomes a critical piece of evidence against her, as it suggests her lack of involvement in the administrative aspects of the camp and her limited understanding of the atrocities committed. The consequences of Hanna's illiteracy extend beyond her personal life and legal proceedings. They raise broader questions about guilt, responsibility, and the nature of justice. The novel explores the complex dynamics between truth, accountability, and how individuals grapple with their past actions.

In *The Reader* (1995), Bernhard Schlink offers a thought-provoking examination of the consequences of hiding one's illiteracy, highlighting the personal and societal implications of such a secret. Through Hanna Schmitz's character, the novel prompts readers to consider the far-reaching effects of personal shame, the power of truth, and the complexities of human morality. By employing a sociocultural lens, this research seeks to unravel the intricate web of influences that contribute to Hanna's moral decision-making process. The novel's setting in post-World War II Germany provides a backdrop of collective guilt and the burden of historical memory, which significantly impact Hanna's choices and her subsequent feelings of remorse. Through an in-depth analysis of key scenes and character interactions, this study will explore the extent to which societal expectations and cultural norms shape Hanna's actions and contribute to her internal conflict.

Furthermore, this research will delve into the concept of memory and its role in the construction of Hanna's identity. The novel's exploration of the implications of selective memory, both on an individual and societal level, raises questions about accountability and the malleability of personal narratives. By examining the interplay between memory and guilt, this study aims to shed light on the mechanisms through which individuals negotiate their past actions and reconcile their present selves.

Ultimately, this study strives to offer a comprehensive sociocultural analysis of *The Reader*, exploring the complexities of morality, guilt, and memory as embodied by the character of Hanna Schmitz. By unpacking the socio-historical context and its impact on identity formation, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted themes presented in Schlink's novel and contribute to the broader discourse on ethics, responsibility, and the human condition.

2. Literature Review

Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, penned by the German judge and writer, rose to fame both within Germany and internationally, particularly after being featured by the popular US talk-show host Oprah Winfrey in 1999. The book became a significant topic of discussion in scholarly literature. Since its publication in 1995, *The Reader* has garnered substantial critical attention and acclaim. This literature review aims to explore the major themes and critical perspectives that have emerged in the analysis of this thought-provoking work.

One prominent theme that scholars have extensively discussed in *The Reader* is the moral dilemma and guilt associated with the Holocaust. Tetrushvily (2012), in his article "*A Moral Dilemma: Evaluating The Reader as a Representation of the Holocaust*," illustrates the difficulty in distinguishing between emotion and justice. The text explores the tension between moral codes and the demands for forgiveness, contrasting the perspectives of the older and newer generations.

Another scholarly article by Uzun (2022), entitled "*Bernhard Schlink's The Reader: The Trauma of Second Generation Germans*," claims that Michael's victimization by Hanna

parallels her treatment of the Jews. Uzun argues that their relationship, marked by silence, mirrors a mother-son dynamic and can be interpreted through the lens of the Oedipal Complex.

3. Research Method

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology for data collection and analysis. Primary data is sourced from Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995), while secondary data includes books on the Holocaust and scholarly academic articles. The use of inductive reasoning is evident throughout the paper, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

A sociocultural approach is employed to analyze the impact of the Holocaust on the protagonist, Hanna Schmitz, and to understand the internal conflicts that shape her identity. This approach considers how societal norms and historical contexts influence individual behavior and identity formation. Hanna's fear of mistreatment by Nazi German society reflects the pervasive influence of Nazi ideology and propaganda, which promoted the notion of the "Aryan race" as central to their ideology of racial superiority. This false ideology, propagated through extensive Nazi propaganda, brainwashed the minds of its followers and instilled a sense of perfectionism that led to the discrimination against individuals perceived as flawed (Snyder, 2015; Evans, 2005).

The sociocultural analysis in this paper reveals how the oppressive and discriminatory practices of Nazi Germany contribute to Hanna's internal conflicts and identity formation. By examining Hanna's experiences and the broader societal context, this study provides insights into the complex interplay between individual agency and societal influence during one of history's most devastating periods.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sociocultural Context

Understanding the sociocultural context of post-World War II Germany is essential to comprehending the characters' behaviors and motivations in *The Reader*. The historical backdrop of the novel significantly influences the personal and collective experiences of guilt, shame, and the struggle for redemption. This section delves into the complexities of German society after the war, examining how the political, social, and economic upheavals shaped the lives of individuals and the nation's collective psyche.

4.1.1 Post-World War II Germany

The aftermath of World War II left Germany physically and emotionally devastated. This section provides a comprehensive understanding of life in post-World War II Germany, highlighting the significant challenges the country faced in rebuilding its society, economy, and political system. Germany was divided into two separate entities: West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) and East Germany (German Democratic Republic), each with different political and economic systems (Fulbrook, 1992). The social landscape of Germany was marked by a sense of loss and the urgent need for reconstruction.

The characters in *The Reader* exemplify the struggles faced by ordinary Germans in their daily lives. For example, Michael Berg reflects on his post-war childhood, stating, "The building on Bahnhofstrasse is no longer there. I don't know where or why it was torn down" (Schlink, 1995, p. 4). Michael, a 15-year-old boy born a year before the catastrophic war in 1939, is torn and lost, although he is not a participant. He is involved in the aftermath of the

war, which changes the frame of the area where he is born. As a child, he does not understand what happened or anything about the regime.

The tyrannical Nazi regime profoundly influenced the adult individuals who blindly followed its anti-Semitic slogans. Societal norms and values underwent significant transformations during this period. The guilt and shame associated with Nazi atrocities became deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of the German people (Giesen, 2004). Nazi propaganda played a crucial role in instilling Nazi ideology, specifically targeting Jews as enemies of the Nazi Party. It promoted values such as heroic death and the Führer principle, which were widely saluted. Additionally, the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community, was emphasized to foster a sense of unity and loyalty to the regime (Kershaw, 2001).

The leader of the Nazi Party has a ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda; they fill German people with pride and poison them with the illusion of false concept addressing the German people belonging to "Aryan race." At the same time, they denigrate Jews, Black people, and Gypsies) as "non-Aryans".

"His vision for a new Germany—one that elevated "Aryan" Germans to the top of the Nazis' racial hierarchy and that ranked all other groups along a spectrum of relative inferiority. Nazi leaders wasted no time conceiving and adopting measures that would safeguard the "Aryan" German race, thereby ensuring that future generations would be—in their eyes—racially pure, genetically healthy, and socially productive and loyal to the state" (Meinecke. 75).

In post-World II Germany, people lose their pride, and are left with a psychological scar. Cultural expression becomes a means for Germans to cope with the trauma of the war to rebuild their national identity. Schlink's novel also reflects the emergence of a new literary movement known as the "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" or the "coming to terms with the past." This movement aims to confront the atrocities committed during the Nazi era and encourages dialogue about Germany's culpability. The character of Michael Berg as a representative of the post-war generation symbolizes the nation's quest for understanding and reconciliation. For instance, in Chapter 14 part two of the novel, Michael Berg is depicted as a law student attending a seminar on the Holocaust. Later, he tries to visit Auschwitz, a concentration camp in Poland, but he has to wait weeks to get the visa therefore, he changes his mind and decides to visit Struthof. There Michael hitchhikes, and rides a truck with a driver; they are both engaged in quarrels about all the tortures and murders that occur during the war, and in the concentration camps like Auschwitz and Struthof. The truck driver is still under the false propaganda of Nazi Germany, and the young Michael wants to illustrate the situation and reconcile and convince the man what has happened is wrong and disastrous. The driver ironically states, "But the people who were murdered in the camps hadn't done anything to the individuals who murdered them? Is that what you want to say? Do you mean that there was no reason for hatred, and no war?" (Schlink, 1995: 150)

Throughout this chapter, Michael engages in discussions about the Holocaust, ethics, and collective guilt. He explores the notion of inherited guilt and the challenges faced by the post-war generation in reconciling with the actions of their predecessors. Michael's internal struggle is to understand his role in this historical context and his desire to find a path toward reconciliation.

4.1.2 The Legacy of the Holocaust

The Holocaust one of the darkest periods in human history leaves an indelible impact on not only the victims but also on the German people who witnessed its horrors and the generations that followed. Schlink's *The Reader* explores the lasting effects of the Holocaust on individuals and society. The Holocaust has a profound impact on the German people who directly witness its atrocities. They are confronted with the harsh reality of genocide forcing them to grapple with their complicity guilt and responsibility.

The Holocaust is a product of the contaminated false ideology of the illusion of Aryan supremacy and the prevalence of anti-Semitism. Nazi party worked on brainwashing the German people and censored the education system, and manipulated the schools to poison the purity of the upcoming German generation. Johnson and Reuband (2006) in their book *What We Knew* stated, "Was the anti-Semitism mostly from the teachers or the other schoolchildren? Both. They were trying to teach us Nazi songs. I vividly remember this song they were marching in the street with. The Hitler Youth, young boys actually of our age, were singing, "Das Judenblut vom Messer spritzt, geht's uns nochmal so gut" [The Jews' blood spurting from the knife makes us feel especially good]. They were also singing it in the school".

Schlink's novel delves into the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by those who bore witness to the Holocaust. This is evident in the character of Michael Berg who becomes entangled in a secretive relationship with a former Nazi concentration camp guard Hanna Schmitz. Michael's struggle to reconcile his love for Hanna with her participation in the Holocaust highlights the internal conflict faced by German witnesses. As it has been stated, Michael is in an affectionate and sexual relationship with Hanna. Michael is only 15 years old when he meets Hanna, 36 years old in 1953. Although Hanna is much older yet when she gets upset, Michael makes the first move and reconciles with her. Michael knows that conflict in his relationship as he thinks that he has already made her angry, and Hanna becomes frustrated as if some bad experiences from the past irritate her, saying "It looks? Do you think it looks like you upset me? You don't have the power to upset me. And will you please go, finally? I've been working, I want to take a bath, and I want a little peace." She looked at me commandingly. When I didn't get up, she shrugged, turned around, ran water into the tub, and took off her clothes" (Schlink, 1995: 46).

To support this analysis historian Peter Fritzsche explores the psychological effects of the Holocaust on the German people in his work "Life and Death in the Third Reich." Fritzsche argues that witnessing the Holocaust creates a collective trauma among the German population leading to a sense of guilt and a need to confront the past. Peter goes further and states that, "Images such as "abyss" and "collapse" are deceptive. They indicate how difficult it is to write about or comprehend the Holocaust and to account for the accumulation of individual actions that lead to mass murder. National Socialism delivers a traumatic blow to Western thought; not even a thinker as radical as Friedrich Nietzsche could have imagined the Holocaust. Information about the Nazi war against the Jews is known and collected, but it is not easily transformed into knowledge about genocide (Fritzsche, 2018: 14).

4.1.3 Strategies employed by Hanna to maintain her literate facade

A. Secretly listening to audiobooks and lectures

Hanna Schmitz employs various strategies to maintain her literate facade. Hanna's house is in Bahnhofstrasse. She is quite happy to assist him in washing and cleaning him.

When he begins to cry, Hanna asks where he lives and brings him home. Later, Michael visits Hanna's home. Hanna bathes Michael, and later they make love. Their relationship is characterized by a combination of emotional and physical intimacy. As their connection develops, they engage in a clandestine affair that spans several months. The nature of their relationship is complex, with elements of tenderness, passion, and secrecy. Before engaging in physical intimacy, Hanna asks Michael to read to her. This becomes a ritual before their encounters, with Hanna requesting Michael to read aloud to her from various literary works. Each time before they make love, Hanna asks him to read, and even makes Michael sure if he does not read aloud, she will not sleep with her. Hanna hides the fact she is illiterate, and she is ashamed to read, and she does not even tell Michael about her illiteracy.

By requesting Michael to read to her, she can experience literature through his voice and gain access to a world in which she has been denied. It becomes a way for her to bridge the gap between her illiteracy and the world of words and knowledge. For instance, Michael states,

"But the next day when I arrived and wanted to kiss her, she pulled back. "First you have to read." She was serious. I had to read Emilia Galotti to her for half an hour before she took me into the shower and then to bed." (Schlink, 1995: 40).

Throughout this conversation, again Hanna imposes her identity as a literate, well-educated lady, and the reality of her literacy. Moreover, Hanna uses her age and experience to foist the identity that she has created for herself, being older and more experienced, holding a position of power in their relationship. By asking Michael to read to her, she establishes a dynamic in which she exercises control and dominance. It allows her to assert her authority and create a sense of hierarchy between them. Hanna uses this physical intimacy and sphere to compensate for all the unfortunate experiences she has been through and she never reveals to anyone yet.

Hanna always wants to know what Michael is learning in school, and she makes sure to listen to all the topics, especially the literary classes, as if she thinks of literature as a window of her soul, as a language that she wants to use to contact to the world outside her mysterious gloomy world. She becomes interested in Greek literature as she is seeking a diamond or an answer. We can say that Hanna's eagerness for reading and writing makes her behave just like Oedipus the Rex when Oedipus vows to find the culprit and lift the curse on Thebes, and this leads him to his downfall. Michael shows his readiness to read out aloud about Homer, Cicero, and other literary works. She also has interest in other languages to see how they sound like.

B. Memorizing passages and quotes

Hanna cunningly conceals her literacy by memorizing passages and quotes. Hanna's use of memorization as a deceptive tool is a deliberate choice that allows her to maintain her secret identity as an illiterate woman. Through this act she successfully avoids suspicion from those around her including her lover Michael Berg. Hanna's use of memorization not only shields her illiteracy but also influences her relationships, particularly with Michael. As Michael becomes enamored with Hanna, her intelligence and knowledge supposedly showcase through her discussions of literature and this becomes a significant factor in their bond. However, this connection is built on a false premise as Hanna's intellectual facade is entirely constructed through memorization. As Michael explains during their ritual meetings,

"She was an attentive listener. Her laugh, her sniffs of contempt, and her angry or enthusiastic remarks left no doubt that she was following the action intently and that she found both Emilia and Luise to be silly little girls. Her impatience when she sometimes asked me to go on reading seemed to come from the hope that all this imbecility would eventually play itself out.

"Unbelievable!" Sometimes this made even me eager to keep reading. As the days grew longer, I read longer, so that I could be in bed with her in the twilight" (Schlink, 1995: 41).

Hanna's enthusiasm to pretend that she is literate and educated reflects her clothes as well, she even tells Michael while they have made love in bed that her job and also her uniform have influenced on her. Hanna's concealing the fact of being illiterate can be interpreted as an act of deception, especially with Michael. In a literary critique by Sarah Johnson she argues that Hanna's deception blurs the lines between genuine connection and manipulation (Johnson and Reuband, 2006). They suggest that Michael's attraction to Hanna's perceived intellect reflects his desire for intellectual stimulation and the power dynamics inherent in their relationship.

Hanna's use of memorization can be highlighted as a survival mechanism. Hanna's illiteracy stems from a place of shame and humiliation leading her to memorize passages as a means of compensating for her perceived deficiency. This interpretation aligns with Hanna's admission later in the novel where she confesses her fear of being seen as "stupid".

4.1.4 Sociocultural implications and consequence

A. Hanna's role as a tram conductor and the power dynamics at play

In the novel, Hanna Schmitz serves as a complex and enigmatic figure whose actions and morality raise intriguing sociocultural implications. Hanna's occupation as a tram conductor holds significant sociocultural implications in *The Reader* (1995). As a working-class woman in post-World War II Germany, Hanna's role represents the struggles and challenges faced by individuals in the aftermath of war. The tram conductor profession symbolizes the rebuilding process and the re-establishment of normalcy in a society shattered by the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Hanna's job as a tram conductor also reflects the power dynamics inherent in the German society of that time. The hierarchical structure of the tram system with its clear division between conductor and passengers mirrors the societal divisions and the subtle exercise of authority. Hanna as a conductor holds a position of power over the passengers determining their movements and enforcing rules. This power dynamic becomes even more pronounced when considering the context of post-war Germany where individuals are grappling with guilt shame and the burden of collective responsibility. Occupations like tram conductor plays a crucial role in rebuilding trust and establishing a sense of normalcy. Furthermore, it shows Hanna's continual attempts to hide the reality of being illiterate, and makes others believe in her potential and no one can dare to ask about her education level as well because she is the one in a position that determines the passenger's movements and enforces power.

Hanna's role as a tram conductor allows her to have a sense of order and control. She takes charge of the tram, ensuring the smooth operation of the vehicle and the adherence to schedules. This position of authority and responsibility may provide her with a sense of structure and control over her surroundings. Hanna's behavior during the physical intimacy

when she has made love with Michael can prove the fact of her dominant character, as Michael states, "When we made love, too, she took possession of me as a matter of course. Her mouth took mine, her tongue played with my tongue, she told me where to touch her and how, and when she rode me until she came, I was there only because she took pleasure in me and on me. I don't mean to say that she lacked tenderness and didn't give me pleasure. But she did it for her playful enjoyment until I learned to take possession of her too" (Schlink, 1995: 31).

Moreover, it can be argued that Hanna's job as a tram conductor serves as a way for her to hide her illiteracy. The nature of her work does not require extensive reading or writing skills, allowing her to avoid situations where her illiteracy would be exposed. By focusing on a job that does not rely heavily on literacy, she can maintain her facade and avoid potential embarrassment.

B. Impact of hiding her illiteracy on her relationships with others

Hanna's illiteracy is a closely guarded secret during her time as a camp guard. This secrecy allows her to maintain a position of authority and avoid scrutiny from her colleagues. By concealing her illiteracy, she presents herself as knowledgeable and competent, which helps her assert control over the prisoners. Her ability to hide her illiteracy in this context allows her to maintain a sense of power and distance from those she interacts with in the camp. Hanna knows the burden of responsibility on her shoulders as a member of SS. (Schutzstaffel), with the other female colleagues who are working as a camp guard at Auschwitz. Yet, she refuses to inform others that she is illiterate, and even she pretends that she reads about all her responsibilities during her work at Auschwitz.

As a member of a sensitive brutal organization, Hitler depends on implementing all the brutalities that are needed to achieve his goal. Therefore, Hanna and the other female guards are required to sign forms or reports documenting the arrival and departure of prisoners, as well as other administrative tasks. These documents are often related to the processing and registration of prisoners, including their personal information, movements, and fate. It is suggested that by signing these documents, the guards are acknowledging their participation in the operations of the camp.

The act of signing documents serves as a symbolic representation of the guards' complicity and active involvement in the atrocities committed at Auschwitz. By putting their signatures on these papers, they become part of the bureaucratic machinery that facilitates and perpetuates the Holocaust. Hanna confesses to the court that she reads and signs the paper, and she is ready to get a life sentence in prison just not admit that she does not read the documents and she has no clue of what is going on. She claims in front of the judge, "Hanna described how the guards had agreed among themselves to tally the same number of prisoners from their six equal areas of responsibility, ten each and sixty in all, but that the figures could fluctuate when the number of sick was low in one person's area of responsibility and high in another's, and that all the guards on duty had decided together who was to be sent back" (Schlink, 1995:109).

Hanna tries her best to be honest in the course of the process and she also declares things she has committed. Hanna is asked by the judge during the trial if she has already sent the prisoners to death. In her honest response, Hanna assures the judge that she has done that due to the large number of the new comers, as they are out of the space. Hanna answers as if she is in front of God, and wants to repel the burden of the past guilt on her.

Hanna's honesty will lead her to her downfall, yet because she considers herself a woman of principles, she does not want to repeat the mistakes and bury another secret in her heart just as she buries being illiterate in her heart, and that false identity of being literate chases her all her life. Although, the judge has no concrete and sufficient shreds of evidence and all the defendants could easily be free, Hanna insists on saying the truth as it has been stated in chapter seven, "In fact, the evidence itself was favorable to the defendants. The only evidence for the main count of the indictment was the testimony of the mother who had survived, her daughter, and the daughter's book. A competent defense would have been able, without attacking the substance of the mother's and daughter's testimony, to cast reasonable doubt on whether these defendants were the actual ones who had made the selections. Witnesses' testimony on this point was not precise," (Schlink, 1995: 112). The whole process is a great chance to other defendants to put the blame on her, thus she is found guilty.

C. Internal conflicts and moral dilemmas faced by Hanna

Hanna Schmitz grapples with various internal conflicts and moral dilemmas that arise from her decision to hide her illiteracy. Hanna's decision to conceal her illiteracy has significant repercussions on her relationships, particularly with Michael Berg. As the central protagonist in the novel, Michael becomes intimately involved with Hanna, unaware of her inability to read. This concealment creates an asymmetry of knowledge between them leading to a power dynamic that shapes their interactions. Michael's love for Hanna becomes entangled with his desire to protect her secret ultimately affecting their emotional bond. After years Hanna's disappearance, Michael attends a court case as a student of law, where he meets Hanna, the woman whom Michael considers the most valuable person in his life. When he is a teenager and falls in love with Hanna, Michael tells her that it is very difficult to sleep and all he has to do is to think about her, always all the time.

Michael feels a profound sense of betrayal upon discovering Hanna's secret during their relationship, and he states, " During the weeks of the trial, I felt nothing: my feelings were numbed. Sometimes I poked at them and imagined Hanna doing what she was accused of doing as clearly as I could, and also doing what the hair on her neck and the birthmark on her shoulder recalled to my mind. It was like a hand pinching an arm numbed by an injection" (Schlink, 1995: 99). He has been deeply involved with her, and their relationship is built on trust and intimacy. Learning that Hanna has hidden her illiteracy, a significant aspect of her identity creates a sense of deception and betrayal within Michael.

Michael's feelings for Hanna are complex and layered. Despite the betrayal, he still harbors deep emotions for her. He is torn between his love for Hanna and his moral conflict over her actions as a former camp guard. This internal struggle contributes to a state of emotional numbness, as he grapples with conflicting emotions and cannot easily process or express them. Meeting Hanna in the courtroom confronts Michael with the reality of the situation and the gravity of the crimes she is being accused of. It shatters any remaining illusions or idealistic notions he may have had about their relationship. The stark contrast between the intimacy they once share and the courtroom setting further reinforces his emotional detachment and numbness.

Hanna's inability to openly communicate her illiteracy hinders her ability to form intimate relationships. She struggles to be vulnerable and shares her true self with others, which creates a barrier between her and those around her. This lack of intimacy leads to a sense of loneliness and a feeling of being misunderstood. She lives in constant fear of her

illiteracy being discovered. This fear drives her to great lengths to keep her secret hidden, including actions that harm her relationships. She becomes defensive and guarded, always wary of being caught, leading to strained interactions with others.

Internal conflicts and moral dilemmas are the biggest obstacles in front of post-war Hanna and her decision to hide her illiteracy creates internal conflicts within her. She grapples with feelings of guilt, shame, and self-doubt. The weight of her secret burdens her conscience and contributes to a sense of moral ambiguity. She must reconcile her actions and deception with her sense of right and wrong. Hanna's illiteracy becomes intertwined with the moral dilemmas she faces throughout the novel. As a camp guard, she is complicit in the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. Her illiteracy becomes both a way to hide her involvement and a source of guilt for her. She must confront the moral implications of her actions and decide how to reckon with her past.

Although Hanna has no clue when she is only 21 and works for Siemens, suddenly she is approved to join SS in 1943, when the judge asks her whether she enrolls herself in SS voluntarily or not. The answer is yes, and again the judge rephrases the questions and asks again to ensure about being offered another job. She does not deny it, keeps silent, and never admits that she is not a literate person, she is ready to follow blindly but never admits that she is illiterate.

4.1.5 Morality, guilt, and memory in *The Reader*

Hanna's decision to become a camp guard reflects a moral choice with devastating consequences. As a guard at Auschwitz, she participates in the selection process, deciding who would be sent to their deaths. Her complicity in the Holocaust and her role in the brutal treatment of prisoners lead to immense suffering and loss of lives. The consequences of her choice haunt her throughout the novel, shaping her guilt and moral dilemma. It is true that Hanna is young and has pride, and just out of self-esteem following some instructions, and she joins SS while she does not know that fact that she would become responsible for the lives of 300 people, yet she confesses to that judged that her colleagues and herself are aware of the fact that those inmates will be selected and will be replaced by new prisoners, and they eventually meet their imminent death, and never return. Hanna explains the case like this, "Hanna described how the guards had agreed among themselves to tally the same number of prisoners from their six equal areas of responsibility, ten each and sixty in all, but that the figures could fluctuate when the number of sick was low in one person's area of responsibility and high in another's, and that all the guards on duty had decided together who was to be sent back" (Schlink, 1995: 109). After the war, Hanna is implicated in a tragic event where she and her fellow guards lock 300 women in a burning church, resulting in their deaths. Hanna's choice to take responsibility for this action during the trial demonstrates a moral reckoning. Rather than denying her involvement or shifting blame, she accepts her guilt and acknowledges the consequences of her actions. This choice leads to her imprisonment, further isolating her from society.

The trial reaches its climax when the judge investigates the tragic events at Auschwitz. The judge asks the defendants consecutively why they do not unlock the door of the burning church. Each of them says that it is not possible and that this report is wrong. However, Hanna explains that they have all written the report together. When another defendant rejects this and the judge asks Hanna for her handwriting, Hanna admits that she has written the report. As the judge asks, "Why did you not unlock the doors?" (Schlink, 1995: 123), other defendants state that they could not because they are wounded, but

Hanna answers, differently, although she knows that her answer is not serving her case; she explains that, " We couldn't just let them escape! We were responsible for them . . . I mean, we had guarded them the whole time, in the camp and on the march, that was the point, that we had to guard them and not let them escape. That's why we didn't know what to do. We also had no idea how many of the women would survive the next few days. So many had died already, and the ones who were still alive were so weak . . . (Schlink, 1995: 126).

The Judge eventually investigates the report that is written aftermath of the burning church. Again he asks Hanna about the one who writes it, yet she does not admit she cannot neither write nor read, yet she says, "We all discussed what we should write. We didn't want to hang any of the blame on the ones who had left. But we didn't want to attract charges that we had done anything wrong either" (Schlink, 1995: 128), as the inquisitions and investigations go further one of the defendant's claims that it is Hanna who writes the report, and the judge asks for an expert to check the handwriting, under all these pressures, Hanna refuses to disclose her illiteracy even when it could potentially benefit her. This moral choice highlights her desire to maintain her dignity and preserve her secret, despite the potential consequences. It also reflects her internal struggle and the importance she places on keeping her true self hidden from others. She confesses she has written it.

Hanna is ready to accept the life sentence in prison while she is still young only 41 years old, but she is not ready to stoop and hurt her dignity and self-esteem by confessing her being illiterate. Hanna is charged with life imprisonment. In prison, Hanna, and Michael stay in touch with each other. Michael begins to record books on cassette and he sends them to Hanna in prison. Later, he also writes stories himself, which he records on tape to send to Hanna. He never talks about anything personal in the record, only the text and the author: starting with *The Odyssey* followed by the stories from Anton Chekov.

After years in prison, Hanna's insistence on learning to read and write while serving a life sentence in prison can be understood as a manifestation of her desire for redemption, self-improvement, and a means to connect with the world outside. Despite her incarceration, Hanna seeks to overcome her illiteracy and engage with the power of words. Here are some possible reasons for her persistence, as Michael receives the note from Hanna, he sees handwriting of a child-like: clumsy and terrible. Hanna's insistence on learning also can be interpreted as seeking redemption. Hanna carries a profound guilt for her role in the atrocities committed during her time as a camp guard. Learning to read and write could be seen as an attempt to educate herself and confront the ignorance that allows her to participate in such acts. By engaging with literature, she may hope to gain a deeper understanding of humanity and seek redemption for her past actions.

Eventually, after spending 18 years in prison Michael calls Hanna the day before Hanna's discharge and asks her what they should do tomorrow, to spend the day outside or to go home straightforward. Therefore on the day of her discharge, Hanna hangs herself. Hanna's dark and gloomy past chases her throughout her life, starting from the moment she joined the SS as an attractive German girl with the pride of Aryan race supremacy, and her self-esteem and pride are obstacles in front of her. Eventually, these feelings lead her to actions that cost the lives of others and herself as well.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Hanna is burdened by a profound sense of guilt and shame for her actions as a camp guard. The enormity of her past atrocities may have become unbearable, leading to feelings of hopelessness and the belief that she could never truly

atone for her crimes. This intense guilt and shame drive Hanna Schmitz to suicide. Additionally, after spending years in prison, Hanna may have felt overwhelmed by the prospect of reintegrating into society. Her prolonged isolation from the outside world likely resulted in fear and anxiety about adapting to a new life. The uncertainty and challenges of readjustment may have further contributed to her decision to end her life. Moreover, Hanna's illiteracy, a closely guarded secret throughout her life, could have been a source of immense shame and humiliation, especially upon her release. The fear of this truth being exposed may have led her to believe that the ensuing disgrace was insurmountable, prompting her to take her own life to avoid perceived humiliation. Hanna is not prepared for the outside world; she is not ready to be a part of a society that deluded her from the very beginning, nor to face a regime that poisoned her soul. She is unprepared to live under the same sky that, in her view, restrains her freedom, activities, and desires with various oppressive terminologies. Education and literacy are intended to bring ultimate freedom to individuals, but they lose their value when society uses them to differentiate between the literate and illiterate. By hiding her illiteracy, Hanna ultimately orchestrates her own downfall, much like a Greek tragic heroine.

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