

Andrea Lin 林怡德

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Literary Criticism (~19th)

From Personal Shame to National Shame—

the Unspeakable Truth in “The Reader”

In Bernhard Schlink’s novel “The Reader,” the main character Hanna Schmitz poses as a woman with high self-esteem and pride. However, there is a secret that tugs and drags her pride into a never ending nightmare—the inability to read and write. Her deep shame over her illiteracy defines her entire life---her subsequent love affair with the narrator, her urging him to read her stories, her constantly changing of jobs, her poor self-defense on the court, as well as her actions as a SS guard (Kern 113). However, Hanna’s moral deficiency is not caused by her illiteracy nor her character; behind her crimes, there is a much bigger culprit—the mechanism of Nazism, which binds Hanna and makes her become a criminal. Nazism, in other words, is a national shame which Germany carried at that time.

Despite of the fact that Hanna is illiterate, she does not behave uneducated or stupid. On the contrary, Hanna is smart and intelligent. She is competent in her job as a street car conductor. As a result, later, the street car company asks her to become one of their drivers. This means that regardless of her inability to read and write, Hanna somehow makes her way through all kinds of difficulties and boundaries to

achieve her job. She takes pride in her job and ability, and is satisfied with it. However, things do not go the way she wishes and anticipates.

Her pride is limited. She always fears of exposing her secret—illiteracy. This is a shame that keeps haunting her. Beneath the appearance of a qualified and outstanding employee, she is timid and insecure. Thus, she forms a shell which no one and nothing can break. She does not want to be treated like an illiterate or an uneducated woman. She wants to be treated equally and have same opportunities as everyone does. It is a common reaction for people who are illiterate. People often endeavored to 'pass' as literate in order to maintain social standing in quotidian social interactions (Bartlett 553). Yet, even she yearns for equal chances, she still cannot conquer the monster which devours her pride and sheds shadows of shame in her heart. Her constant changing of jobs can be explained as the escaping of shame and an extreme method when facing anxiety. Anxiety in general has the aim of flight, whether it is actual or only metaphorical (Wurmer 84). By moving and changing her job, she does not have to be challenged by her fear. Her shame is also the reason that she chooses Michael and some victims to read to her. Hanna enjoys bathing in the atmosphere of reading and absorbing knowledge. However, Hanna's excessive appreciation for words and language also puts her into a plight. Words and language is a powerful force that she cannot control; it thus dominates her life (Kern 113).

Hanna's deformed and moral deficiency does not result simply from her illiteracy. As pointed out by Ernestine Schlant that 'illiteracy cannot serve as an explanation for cooperating in and committing criminal acts' (213). Social and historical factors play an important part in her many decisions. The Reader is more concerned to establish Hanna as a victim than as perpetrator (Niven 381). To a significant degree, Hitler was able to benefit from the support of the threatened sections of the lower middle classes; if they saw in him a 'savior,' then it was one from feelings of insecurity or shameful resentment generated by social decline (Niven 384). Hanna can be viewed as the representative of the lower middle class for the fact of her being illiterate and lack of professional skills. She is somehow tempted by the high salary the SS guard-camp gives her and is confused by Hitler's, so she accepts the offer of a position as camp guard to escape the prospect of promotion at Siemens factory.

Wolfgang Sofsky describes in his book *Die Ordnung des Terrors* that the SS organization within the camp-guard system is strictly hierarchical and governed by precise codes of discipline to the point of over-regulation (Niven 385). This can explain Hanna's reaction to the judge's answer when he asks her why she didn't open the church door for the victims. At that time, Hanna simply replies, "What would you have done?" (Schlink 128) Maybe this is the reason why Hanna dares not to open the door of the church. She is afraid that her kindness to the dead victims might be

followed by serious of punishments. So she explains their death as an inevitable incident.

In conclusion, the shame of Germany---Nazism, had put its people under difficult situations. The order of civilization was turned on its head, enabling individuals such as Hanna to compensate for weakness by manipulating and destroying others (Niven 386). It is a national shame which Germany cannot wipe out on its history to make up for the dead victims.

Works Cited

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