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facultad de filología

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA
GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES
Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Deconstructing the Character of Hanna
Schmitz in Stephen Daldry's *The Reader*
(2008): Literacy as a Vehicle towards
Moral Awareness

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ABSTRACT [EN]

By writing this paper on Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008), I intend to demonstrate that literacy is overwhelmingly intertwined with moral consciousness. The female protagonist of this film, Hanna Schmitz, an old Nazi concentration camp guard, goes through a process of transition from illiteracy to literacy, and thus, from her prior ignorance to her moral awareness. After briefly summarising Post-World War II German morality as a resemblance to Hanna, I will focus on Hanna's inner development. Her internal evolution is a clear reflection of her educational improvement. In other words, the achievement of her literate condition functions as a borderline between Hanna's shame and moral responsibility. When analysing Hanna's illiterate condition, her feeling of shame for her lack of reading skills comes to light. However, from the moment she gets immersed in reading, she finally becomes aware and acknowledges her moral responsibility in Nazi crimes. Hence, Hanna's raise of awareness is the triggering event of her suicide.

KEY WORDS: Hanna Schmitz, Post-World War II Germany, Nazi Germany, Literacy, Morality, Shame, Moral Responsibility, Moral Awareness, Redemption.

ABSTRACT [ES]

Al escribir este ensayo sobre *El Lector* (2008) de Stephen Daldry, intento demostrar que el alfabetismo está tremendamente entrelazado con la consciencia moral. La protagonista femenina de esta película, Hanna Schmitz, una antigua guardia de un campo de concentración, atraviesa un proceso de transición desde el analfabetismo hasta el alfabetismo, y por lo tanto, desde su previa ignorancia hasta su consciencia moral. Después de resumir brevemente la moralidad alemana de la postguerra como semejanza con Hanna, me centraré en el desarrollo interno de Hanna. Su evolución es un claro reflejo de su mejora educativa. Dicho con otras palabras, el alcance de su alfabetismo funciona como una línea divisoria entre la vergüenza de Hanna y su responsabilidad moral. Cuando se analiza su condición de iletrada, su sentimiento de vergüenza por su falta de competencia lectora sale a relucir. Sin embargo, a partir del momento en el que ella se sumerge en la lectura, se hace consciente finalmente y reconoce su responsabilidad moral en los crímenes nazis. Por lo tanto, la toma de conciencia de Hanna es el hecho desencadenante de su suicidio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hanna Schmitz, Alemania de la postguerra, Alemania nazi, Alfabetización, Moralidad, Vergüenza, Responsabilidad Moral, Conciencia Moral, Redención.

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When I was a child, I was quite interested in learning German history. This ambition was culminated when I applied for an Erasmus in *Freie Universität Berlin*. There, I was in touch with many Germans who introduced me to their culture and idiosyncrasy. Ever since my experience in Berlin, I have realised that shame for the crimes during National Socialism is still a taboo subject in present day Germany.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Analysing Hanna´s Character as a Reflection of German History.....	2
1.1 Nazi Germany and its Moral Impact on Post-World War II German Society.....	2
1.2 Hanna as a Representation of Germany.....	4
2. Hanna´s Literacy as a Vehicle towards Moral Awareness.....	5
2.1 Illiteracy as Hanna´s Exoneration for her Lack of Moral Sensibility.....	6
2.2 Hanna´s Shame and Social Relationships.....	7
2.3 Self-incrimination as a Mechanism to Redeem Individual Shame.....	8
2.4 Hanna´s Internal Evolution: From Shame to Moral Responsibility.....	9
2.5 Suicide as the Culmination of Hanna´s Moral Responsibility.....	11
Conclusion.....	11
Bibliography.....	13

INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, Germany was devastated by a strong sense of remorse for the crimes against humanity that took place during the holocaust. The first and second generation of Germans was plagued by collective guilt and responsibility to such an extent that they could not become detached from their own past. Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008) is a film based on Bernhard Schlink's German novel *Der Vorleser*. It is the story of Michael, a teenager who has an affair with Hanna Schmitz, a grown-up woman. After having been sexually involved for weeks, she disappears without letting Michael know the reason for her leaving. Some years later, Michael attends a trial in which he discovers that Hanna, his past love, is being prosecuted for Nazi crimes against humanity. This trial causes Michael's moral quandary since there is a struggle inside him between his pleasant memory of Hanna and his willingness to judge her.

In *The Reader* (2008), Hanna belongs to the first generation of Germans who experienced the Nazi Regime. Although she is shaped by several nuances that provoke ambiguity, literacy plays a fundamental role on her evolution. The changeover of Hanna's illiteracy towards her acquisition of literacy represents a moral shift that goes from a feeling of shame for her lack of reading skills towards moral responsibility, and hence, her will to cease her illiterate condition makes her aware of her outrageous involvement in Nazi Germany. In this essay I will demonstrate that Hanna's literacy plays a fundamental role on her internal progression since her decisions during her entire life have revolved around her attempt to hide her illiteracy.

1. ANALYSING HANNA'S CHARACTER AS A REFLECTION OF GERMAN HISTORY

1.1 Nazi Germany and its Moral Impact on Post-World War II German Society

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 marked the beginning of one of the most dreadful periods in German history. The Nazi party implemented racial politics based on hatred towards Jews, handicapped people, gypsies, and many other ethnic groups as well as political dissidents. The implementation of such legislation was the starting point of the genocide of around 6 million people. After the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, the painful consequences of the holocaust were such that German citizens avoided confronting the outrageous genocide that took place in their country and the neighbouring ones. These massive and inhumane killings triggered a moral decline in Post-World War II German society when referring to its National Socialist past.

After the Second World War, the first generation of Germans, not only the main perpetrators of the Holocaust but also people outside the Nazi Party, were reluctant to admit their moral implication with Nazism. Hence, until 1960, Germany's discourse was characterised by a devastating silence that restricted the revision of the past. Participation in Nazi Germany became a clear taboo subject at that time. Moreover, witnesses belonging to the first generation were covered by a strong sense of shame when confronted with Nazi atrocities. As portrayed in *The Reader*, Hanna had not uttered a word about her past until the day of the prosecution for the crimes she had committed. She had remained silent for most of her life.

In 1960, there was a new approach when dealing with the Holocaust memory. At that time, several historical studies regarding Nazi Germany were conducted, and the

Post-World War II German discourse began to explore the intricacies of morality and ethics as a legacy of National Socialism in order to condemn perpetrators and other individuals involved in it. By doing so, Germany was able to create a new national identity based on remembering history so as to prevent the coming generations from committing similar cruelties. Hence, to overcome that traumatic past, it was necessary to organise numerous trials to judge Nazi Party members. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, in which Hanna was summoned to testify, took place between the end of 1963 and 1965 and it was considered the most outstanding criminal prosecution in Post-World War II West Germany, the so-called Federal Republic of Germany.

Judges and attorneys had an internal conflict in judging alleged criminals, for both law and morality had to be taken into consideration. Although many crimes were regarded as violations of Post-Nazi Germany legislation, they were committed under Hitler's Third Reich Law, and thus, those actions were not illegal at that time. Another essential point in the judicial process was the moral questioning concerning the collective responsibility and guilt of every German. For instance, in *The Reader*, when Hanna asserts that all the women that worked with her in the concentration camp took part in the selection process, and thus, were liable for the mass murder, the judge alleges that it is easier to blame others than just herself.

The dichotomy between moral awareness and moral ignorance became visible at that time. Germany had one of the highest literacy rates in Europe and a great number of German citizens were cultivated. On the one hand, many people, despite their education, argued that they were ignorant of what happened in their country. On the other hand, many perpetrators asserted that they did not know what their role in the Holocaust was, nor did they have knowledge of the effects of their actions. Hence, they claimed

themselves to be morally unaware. In the case of Hanna, her illiteracy works as a moral blindness that does not permit her to raise awareness of her participation.

1.2 Hanna as a Representation of Germany

Although Hanna's character may be atypical to the first generation of Germans involved in National Socialism, several deep-rooted moral conflicts in Post-Nazi German society, such as shame, guilt, and moral responsibility come to light when analysing her internal development throughout the story. Hanna's moral struggle as a consequence of her implication in the Third Reich can be equated with the internal suffering of Post-World War II Germany. As Bill Niven has stated, "before 1945 Germany was marked by a 'culture of shame', while post-1945 developments were towards a 'culture of guilt', although elements of a shame culture remained." (Niven 384) This quotation clearly depicts both Hanna and Germany in its entirety. In the case of Hanna, her internal development goes from a feeling of shame for her illiteracy towards guilt and moral responsibility. In Germany, the evolution is similar to that of Hanna inasmuch as German society was ashamed of the numerous deaths that National Socialism had left behind. When German citizens assumed their liability for those crimes, they internalised their collective guilt.

In order to show Hanna's similarity to Germany, it is necessary to compare her inner self to some Nazi party members. In the first place, Hanna's conduct may remind of Hermine Braunsteiner's, known as the Mare of Majdanek. She was a guard at Majdanek concentration camp who became famous for her brutality. While Hermine's nickname is *Mare*, for it makes reference to her behaviour with prisoners, in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*, Michael admits that Hanna "reminded [him] of the way a horse twitches its hide to repel flies." (Schlink 28) Both names, *horse* and *mare* have a

striking similarity. Another outstanding linkage between them is that both women undergo the same process in Post-World War II Germany. Neither Michael nor Hermine's husband are aware of the Nazi past of their lovers. During their respective trials, Hanna and Hermine claim that they followed orders since they were part of the Nazi process. In the same way, in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann, one of the most influential men of the Nazi Party, states that he obeyed orders, a way of excluding liability. Hanna Schmitz could be the fictional counterpart of Eichmann since both of them trivialise their involvement in the Nazi crimes, softening the real implication of their labour within the Nazi regime. According to Amos Elon on an introduction to Hanna Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, "Evil, as [Arendt] saw it, need not be committed only by demonic monsters." (XI) This sentence clearly represents Hanna Schmitz as well as Adolf Eichmann because she is not portrayed as a cruel woman but as an average person who enlisted in the SS moved by her lack of reading skills rather than by her wickedness: "Evil comes from a failure to think." (XIV) In other words, Hanna's evil nature derives from her illiteracy.

2. HANNA'S LITERACY AS A VEHICLE TOWARDS MORAL AWARENESS

Illiteracy is revealed in the trial in which Hanna is being prosecuted for her enlistment and involvement in the SS. Her inability to read determines Hanna's involvement in Nazi Germany. She is morally unaware of her implication as a camp guardian until she learns to read, the moment in which she becomes morally conscious. At the end of the film, Michael suggests to donate Hanna's money to an organisation that encourages literacy, for he considers Hanna's absence of reading skills the main reason for which she committed such cruelties. Therefore, literacy plays a fundamental

role in Hanna's inner development. Literacy represents the dividing line between individual shame and moral responsibility.

2.1 Illiteracy as Hanna's Exoneration for her Lack of Moral Sensibility

In Nazi Germany, many well-educated Germans collaborated with Hitler's government despite their high educational level. Therefore, there was no association between their cultural background and moral values. However, in *The Reader*, literacy and morality are strongly intertwined. Hanna's lack of reading and writing skills is regarded as an excuse to diminish the effects of her actions since being illiterate is used as a clear pretext for Hanna's moral redemption. According to Daniel Reynolds, "her crimes are illiteracy's accident. Illiteracy is her exculpation." (qtd. in Reynolds 243) In other words, her illiteracy justifies her work as a guard. She is portrayed as a victim because of her illiterate condition, and thus, her involvement in the Third Reich is seen with compassion when analysing her background. When she becomes literate, she raises awareness of her lack of ethics regarding her Nazi past, and consequently, her moral responsibility comes to light. Hanna's illiterate condition could be regarded "as an allegory for the reduced responsibility and culpability of Germans in the Third Reich." (Slabbert 150) Hanna's moral ignorance because of her inability to read could be compared to German questionable moral ignorance of National Socialism.

Illiteracy is the main reason why Hanna enlists in the SS. Hanna refuses a promotion at Siemens for the reason that her disability to read is at risk to be uncovered, and thus, her secret would excessively embarrass her. For this reason, she willingly joins the SS. By collaborating in the Nazi hierarchical structure, Hanna's illiterate

position would remain untouched, and her inability to read and write and, as consequence, her feeling of shame because of it would be self-ignored.

2.2 Hanna's Shame and Social Relationships

When Germany was defeated in **the II World War**, Hanna, unlike other guards that tried to integrate into Post-Nazi German society, suffered from self-exclusion, for she could be underestimated and humiliated for her limited educational background. Isolation was the best way to go unnoticed in the eyes of society. By doing so, she is able to hide her cultural inferiority caused by her lack of reading skills. Hence, in order to conceal her feeling of shame because of her illiteracy, she tries to take control over others. On the one hand, by analysing Hanna's sentimental affair with Michael, a teenager, many traits of her Nazi past, such as authority and cruelty, **clearly underlie** throughout their **sexual intercourse**. She behaves with him in such a cruel and brutish way that, at some specific point, their relationship could be analogous to the treatment prisoners received from the hands of concentration camp guards during the Nazi era. Hanna's evil nature with Michael is due to her lack of empathy because her illiteracy limits her moral capacity. On the other hand, her relationship with camp prisoners is clearly based on Hanna's Nazi superiority to abuse Jewish women. Hanna's process of selection consists in the recruitment of the weakest and most vulnerable prisoners who are about to be sent to Auschwitz to die in the gas chamber. Although she works as a guardian, the lowest level within the SS, she has authority to force them to read aloud to her. This means that Hanna subverts reality inasmuch as illiteracy is regarded as a handicap to succeed in the outer world; nevertheless, in the concentration camp, even though the prisoners are literate, such condition does not prevent them from Hanna's

exploitation. Both interactions with submissive individuals, Michael and the weakest prisoners, place her on the top of the social hierarchy in which, despite her illiteracy, she is the most powerful individual since she is able to control them. By doing so, she takes advantage of a situation in which she is able to force the weakest individuals with the aim of mitigating her shame.

2.3 Self-incrimination as a Mechanism to Redeem Individual Shame

Germany was regarded as a country in which literature, history, and several other academic discourses were praised for being the basis of its culture. Therefore, being illiterate could condemn Hanna to suffer from social displacement. This is such a threat for Hanna that her shame to admit her illiterate condition forces her to blame herself as responsible for writing a document that justifies the death of hundreds of innocent women. The concealment of Hanna's illiteracy plays a fundamental role throughout her entire life: "For Hanna is not simply ashamed; she feels deep, overwhelming, unshakable shame-- shame that overrides any shame at being regarded the leader of a group of Nazi guards responsible for a massacre." (Markotic 240) Her sense of embarrassment is so deep that she prefers not to tell the truth, and consequently, she implicitly refuses to do justice for Nazi crimes. Hanna's false testimony in the trial assigns Michael the responsibility to confess the truth. Michael's "decision to keep silent about Hanna's illiteracy allows the other Nazi guards, including the one who actually wrote the report, to return to civilian life more quickly." (Markotic 231) Not only Michael but also second generation of Germans must be involved in the judicial process so as to, finally, leave Nazism behind.

2.4 Hanna's Internal Evolution: From Shame to Moral Responsibility

Hanna faces history as many Germans involved in National Socialism do. This means that her internal dilemma revolves around a feeling of shame throughout the whole film. Firstly, she is ashamed of her illiteracy, but once she begins with her reading in prison, she acknowledges her moral responsibility on Nazi crimes. Such participation determines Hanna's feeling of shame. Thus, Hanna is shaped by a progressive shift of this feeling, from being illiterate to moral aware. During the trial, she claims that she followed orders, for instance, the selection of prisoners and their imprisonment in the church during the death march. Hanna states: "We were guards. Our job was to guard the prisoners. We couldn't just let them escape." Her job as a guard is more important than the prisoners' lives. She normalizes her work in the concentration camp by downplaying her role there. In her prosecution she clearly describes the selection process as if it was a normal routine activity for her: "There were new arrivals. New women were arriving all the time, so the old ones had to make room for the new ones." Hanna does not seem to take any moral responsibility for the Nazi crimes since she emphasises that she had no other choice than to obey the orders of her superiors and dispatch the selected prisoners to the gas chamber. When working in Auschwitz, Hanna's lack of individualism became visible since she was shaped by a totalitarian society that blocked her moral and rational capacity. During her trial, she excuses herself from her evil actions, for she had no other alternative than that of getting involved in the Nazi concentration camp system. By asking "what would you have done?" during the trial, she intends to be comprehended by the judge since she highlights that she could not have done anything to save those prisoners, otherwise "how could we have restored order." (*The Reader*) In other words, Hanna's job was to control prisoners in order to avoid chaos.

As portrayed in *The Reader*, Hanna tells Michael: “Before the trial I have never thought about the past. I never had to.” Firstly, she was not in need of thinking about her role in the concentration camp, but, in the trial, she prefers to describe her experiences in Auschwitz rather than remain silent. As shown in *Der Vorleser* by Bernhard Schlink, once Hanna acquires reading skills, she discovers the negative impact of her actions through the work of Primo Levi and many other writers that address the issue of the holocaust. Therefore, from that moment on, there is a shift in the approach towards Hanna’s Nazi past. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*,¹ a term coined to address German confrontation with their own past, might be relevant when analysing Hanna’s implication in Nazi atrocities as well as her moral awareness and responsibility for her decisions. When Michael visits Hanna in prison, she states: “I prefer being read to.” By saying this, Hanna suggests that she would rather not have learned to read since she would still be ignorant but with a clear conscience. In other words, she realises that her overcoming of illiteracy results in the understanding of the Nazi atrocities in which she has taken part. Her words could be interpreted as Hanna’s regret for having been a member of the SS.

Hanna’s moral development is related to her physical condition. In order to represent this progress, the symbolism of her bathing is perfectly used. Prior to her **illiteracy**, through an obsessive cleaning, Hanna’s bathing implies that she tries *to purify* herself from her involvement in Nazi Germany. However, once she becomes literate in jail, she neglects her personal hygiene. Therefore, “ceasing to wash would appear to denote acceptance of guilt.” (Niven 391) To put it in other words, Hanna’s awareness of National Socialism ruins her to such an extent that she decides to kill herself rather than to confront her background.

¹ Coming to terms with the past

2.5 Suicide as the Culmination of Hanna's Moral Responsibility

When imprisoned, Hanna becomes morally conscious because of her willingness to learn to read. Her cultural enhancement triggers Hanna's understanding of the holocaust and the implications of her work as a guardian. In other words, "Hanna is destroyed by learning to read and write." (qtd. in Niven 392) Her knowledge of her past actions torments her to such an extent that she takes justice on her own terms. Although she had already served a sentence in jail, she decides to commit suicide, as a way of moral judgement in order to be equated with the victims of the holocaust. Hence, "Hanna is together with her victims in her suicide, suggesting perhaps the moment where her guilt is assessed in metaphysical terms." (Niven 395) Suicide is regarded as her final judgement through which she acknowledges her moral responsibility. By saying "it doesn't matter what I feel. It doesn't matter what I think. The dead are still dead" Hanna shows her deep remorse for the victims. She is not completely relieved after ending her life. For this reason, Hanna's monetary donation to the Jew survivor of the concentration camp might be seen as a way to ease her conscience, and thus, to diminish her guilt.

CONCLUSION

As explained above, Post-Nazi German morality is strongly influenced by the terrifying legacy of National Socialism. As portrayed in *The Reader* (2008), moral issues such as shame, guilt, responsibility or victimhood become entrenched in Germany over the years after the German defeat in the Second World War.

Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008) has been condemned by many critics for its victimized portrayal of Hanna Schmitz, a concentration camp guard at Auschwitz.

Stephen Daldry does not overlook Hanna's work in the SS; on the contrary, he intends to understand the reason of her involvement, her illiteracy. Therefore, the director's aim is to make people aware of the possibility of being both, victim and perpetrator. Unlike many other Nazi members, Hanna is regarded as a victim of her illiteracy, a condition that exculpates her. Her scope of literacy plays an outstanding role on her inner growth since her inability to read determines her actions throughout her life. Therefore, Stephen Daldry tries to take into consideration what moves Hanna to do what she does. Nazism cannot be confronted, nor overcome if Germany avoids focusing on the actual reasons why the holocaust took place. Understanding the past is a fundamental key so as not to relive the evil deed of National Socialism.

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