

The Reader: Transcript

I.	Introduction	2
	A. Who is the Second Generation	2
	B. What makes this book important?	2
	C. Themes in the film and novel	2
	D. Presentation outline	2
II.	The Novel	3
	A. Who wrote the novel	3
	1. Success of the book	3
	B. What is the novel about?	3
	C. Interpretations of the novel's name	4
	D. Focussing on illiteracy	4
	E. Themes in the novel	4
	1. Cleaning	4
	2. Reading	4
	3. Violence	5
	F. The Second Generations	5
	G. Encouraging sympathy with the perpetrator	5
	H. Who is the victim?	6
III.	The Film	7
	A. Who made the film?	7
	B. Who stars in the film?	7
	C. Is the film a straight adaptation?	7
	D. What is uncovered in the film?	7
	1. Imagery in the film	8
	2. Less sympathy for the perpetrator	10
	E. The reception of the film	11
IV.	Conclusion	12
	A. Unveiling the perpetrator	12
V.	Bibliography	13

I. Introduction

Hello everyone. My name is Anna White and I am based in Swansea University. My research looks at how American and German films and literature engages with fascism.

A. What makes this book and film important?

The novel and film, *Der Vorleser* or *The Reader*, that I am discussing today have been incredibly successful, so successful in fact that they become part of the UK, American and German school curriculum.

B. Themes in the film and novel

The novel and film contain many different themes which makes it useful for study, and the context in which they were made tells us about the political and cultural issues that were being discussed at the time it was made.

C. Presentation Outline

In this presentation I will briefly discuss for both novel and film:

- The context in which they were made.
- The success they achieved.
- Why it was successful.
- Some of the themes that are present.
- And finally the differences between the film and novel.

D. Who are the Second Generation?

Before we can discuss the novel in detail I will explain some of the context of the novel.

The Reader is based in the immediate postwar years where West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) was undergoing a period of economic prosperity, as well as a fraught political and cultural period that was marked by terrorist activities conducted by the group *The Red Army Faction* also known as the *Baader-Meinhof group*.

This has often been considered to be the result of the politicisation and rebelling of children, or generation, that had not experienced fascism directly but who had parents that had lived through Nazism.

This generation were troubled with the guilt of fascism; they found it hard to love their parents as well as be able to understand how they let the Holocaust happen, openly rejected their families and believed that their government still had ties with Nazism as some of the elected officials had also been Nazi party members.

This group is called the second generation and the activists in this group are commonly called the 68ers, as they became more vocal and revolutionised, as you would expect from the name, during 1968.

The Reader is told from the perspective of Michael Berg, a member of the second generation. Michael does not agree with the 68ers but, still places his story of his former lover, Hanna Schmitz, as part of this generational rhetoric. This was a result of Michael choosing Hanna rather than the 68ers who focused their condemnation on their parents.

II. The Novel

A. Who wrote the novel?

Written by German judge, Professor Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* was published in 1995 only five years since Germany unified. Like the character Michael, he is also a 68er.

1. Success of the book

By 1999, over 500,000 copies had been sold in Germany and 750,000 in America.

The sympathetic presentation of Hanna and controversial subject matter has led to its commercial success. The novel became a best-seller and is the subject of many academic publications and critical reviews with the portrayal of the sympathetic Hanna receiving the most criticism in Germany.

B. What is the novel about

Written from the perspective of hindsight in Germany during the 1990s, the novel is organised in three parts and narrated from the point of view of Michael. He writes that he put his recollection and memory of the past events in this book as an attempt to reconcile his lifelong struggle to come to terms with the passionate love affair he had as a teenage boy with an older woman, Hanna.

The first part sees Michael and Hanna in 1950s West Germany engaging in their sexual relationship until she abruptly leaves him. The second is in the 1960s during which Michael is an undergraduate observing a war crimes trial for his law degree. There he discovers that Hanna is an ex-concentration camp guard who is directly complicit in the murder of 300 Jews. The final part is the 1980s as Michael and Hanna meet again for the final time and Michael meeting Hanna's Jewish victim Ilana in the 1990s.

C. Interpretations of the novel's name

From the title, *The Reader*, three meanings can be drawn and as a result the book is open to many interpretations. In its original German, *Der Vorleser*, means the person who reads aloud. Therefore one can assume the story is about Michael who reads aloud to Hanna and is again narrating his story. However, if one was to understand it as the person who reads then the story revolves around Hanna's journey from ignorance from her initial illiteracy through to her gaining knowledge and learning to read. Finally, it can be about you, the person reading the book and your interpretation of the story.

D. Focusing on illiteracy

Most academics focus on the allegory of illiteracy, rather than Michael and Hanna's sexual relationship. They regard this allegory to be symbolic of those who had 'forgotten their moral alphabet during the war'.

E. Themes in the novel

There are several themes in the novel as Hanna and Michael's relationship takes the form of ritualised cleaning and reading; it is highly sexual and violent and is often troubled by miscommunication which Michael understands to be a consequence of her illiteracy.

1. Cleaning

It is Hanna's shame that also causes her moral insensitivity and her guilt is subconsciously apparent through her need to wash and clean. Her later physical degeneration that parallels her increased literacy is suggestive of her conscious guilt.

2. Reading

Rather than choosing the weak out of empathy for the victims (which Michael wishes to believe was to make their last month bearable) a more cynical view that Hanna's choice of the weak Jewish

women to read to her was because of their inevitable death. Therefore, it could also be viewed as Hanna compensating for her weaknesses by manipulating and destroying the Jews she was guarding.

3. Violence

It has been argued that Hanna's violence towards Michael is triggered by a 'mixture of vulnerability, helplessness, fear of exposure, and resentment'.

F. The Second Generation

Another interpretation is that Michael and Hanna's sexual relationship is considered to be representative of the dependency of the second generation on their parents. Here Michael is unfulfilled as an adult as he cannot reconcile his knowledge of Hanna as a perpetrator with his persistent sexual desire for her, and thus his dependence on her.

Michael's desire to see Hanna as a victim causes him less shame about their relationship and his dependency on her. In this passage Michael considers that by revealing the 'guilty' ones it released the burden of shame on the subsequent generations, however he still cannot do this with Hanna as it instead transfers the shame of loving a guilty person on to himself.

G. Encouraging sympathy with the perpetrator

There are key points throughout the novel which invite reader sympathy with Hanna and thus indicate that she is actually a good person, which is assisted through Michael's narration and filtered through his perspective.

Michael encourages a sympathetic reading of Hanna by being quick to provide answers for Hanna's actions, thus encouraging the reader not to critically engage either with Michael's beliefs and her actions.

Finding it difficult to reconcile his knowledge of Hanna the perpetrator with his memory of Hanna the lover, he decides that her illiteracy propelled her into the role of camp guard and bears directly on the degree of her culpability.

However, even without Michael's interventions, the reader can understand Hanna as a 'good' character from the way that she is introduced by Michael via a good deed. She comes to Michael's aid as he is sick, cares for him and ensures his safety as she takes him home.

Already, the reader is predisposed to consider Hanna's character in a positive light for the rest of the novel.

H. Who is the victim?

Michael only meets one real 'victim', which is one of the two survivors of fire in the church. Michael is suspicious of these victims and considers them as numb as the perpetrators. Michael instead views himself and Hanna as victims, as he feels Hanna's illiteracy first turns her into a perpetrator and then a victim of postwar justice.

Michael's dubious reasoning and justifications after his discovery that Hanna is illiterate implant his reasoning onto the reader.

Michael portrays Hanna as a victim of circumstance and thus a victim of National Socialism and the post war justice system. It has been reasoned that Michael's discovery of her past as a camp guard can now be reasoned through her illiteracy and can allow him to immediately respond with answers. Therefore, he can justify her actions and with it avoid feeling guilty for loving her although she is being tried as a war criminal in the court. By doing this though, his reasoning that if she is guilty, then he is guilty by association she has to be reasoned to be innocent to exonerate himself.

Michael, therefore, believes that Hanna 'fell' into being a camp guard. Hanna, however, fulfils her obligation as she understood it, which was to be responsible for the prisoners and to prevent their escape, which is acting well within the laws of the time. Hanna is therefore presented as a person and due to her environment has engaged in crimes against humanity. This leads to her actively selecting prisoners to be sent to their deaths, and, along with the other guards, allowing the deaths of hundreds of prisoners to be burned alive in a locked bombed church, with it also implying that the deaths were the result of Allied bombing rather than the guards' inactivity.

Michael believes that Hanna acts without full comprehension of how her actions will have a consequence on her future; she is the only defendant at the trial who admits her actions without resistance to the court. Her shame of illiteracy again leads her to taking the 'wrong path', in Michael's eyes, as she admits to writing a report, thus taking responsibility as a leader of the other

defendants. This results in her receiving a longer prison sentence. Michael views the trial as a cynical game where Hanna does not know the rules and her innocence and ignorance of the other defendants' motives is emphasized by him.

This sympathetic identification by the reader is furthered by Hanna's experience in prison. There she assists in prisoners' rights and maintains recognisable dignity. Through Michael's attempt to deal with the effect Hanna had on his present life, almost a decade after Hanna's internment began, he records himself reading the books he previously read to Hanna and then sends the tapes to her in prison. In this time with Michael's tapes, she overcomes her fears and learns to read, which leads her to reading Holocaust literature.

Without any form of reconciliation upon her release to Michael, Hanna kills herself. Although Michael throughout the novel attempts to justify Hanna's actions, he fails to understand her.

III. The Film

A. Who made the film?

Less than ten years after the book's publication, the Anglo-American film, directed by Stephen Daldry, was released as *The Reader* (2008), screen play by David Hare.

B. Who stars in the film?

The film won Oscars for Best Actress and Best Picture and stars Kate Winslet and Ralph Fiennes.

C. Is the film a straight adaptation?

The film is a remarkably faithful adaptation, though ultimately it offers a different interpretation of key aspects of the novel, as the same material is presented differently.

D. What is uncovered in the film?

The film became a box office success in Germany, while it flopped in the US and UK. This can be attributed to the new presentation of Hanna. She is now no longer the misguided and sympathetic camp guard but instead presented as a war crimes perpetrator. Although it is a Hollywood film, it shied away from typical Hollywood themes by changing the story from that of a heroine coming to self-understanding, which is how the novel can be interpreted, to one where neither of the main characters learns anything.

David Hare believed that using a voice over in the film was the 'wimp's way out' and attempted to

show Michael's internal workings instead by using subtle acting.

The result, which may or may not have been intended, is that a less sympathetic Hanna is presented to the audience.

The story still unravels from the point of view of Michael, who reflects from the present day on his past with Hanna through the use of flashbacks. As the flashbacks increase so does Michael progress with his the coming to terms with the past.

Hare has attempted in his screenplay to show the Holocaust from the point of view of the perpetrator and to achieve this he has removed the sympathetic narrator, Michael, which has led to a bare-bones portrayal of the events depicted in the novel.

1. Imagery in the film

Through reoccurring imagery in the film, Michael is reaffirmed as Hanna's victim as he becomes by-proxy her concentration camp victim because he too read to her like her camp victims. The scenes of Michael moving continuously by train or tram throughout the film and novel also symbolically associates Michael to a camp victim.

Hanna is in command of the tram and Michael. Symbolically, we can also see that throughout his life he takes the tram or train when she has affected him. He takes the tram when he first becomes infatuated with her; again it takes him to her at her trial and we see his conflicting emotions surrounding seeing her again. He also takes the train with his daughter to tell his mother about his newly failed marriage, which as an audience we recognise is due to the effect Hanna had on his personal relationships. It is only as an adult that he travels independently by car, which is symbolic that he has broken his dependency on Hanna.

Michael's father has been replaced in the film by Professor Röhl, a holocaust survivor. Whereas in the novel his father talks philosophically to Michael about revealing Hanna's illiteracy, which leads to Michael concluding that he would not reveal Hanna's secret as she did not want him to. This in the film has changed as Röhl directly tells Michael that he should reveal Hanna's secret, and that if he doesn't then the trials become meaningless and that they have not learned anything at all. Hanna and her personal reasons for not revealing her illiteracy have been removed from the equation.

Like in the novel, their relationship revolves around the act of Michael reading aloud to Hanna with their relationship predominantly taking place in her apartment. Here, not only is there an obvious social class difference between Michael and Hanna as Michael's family home is bright and luxuriously furnished while Hanna's is dark sparse and functional. The lighting in the different apartments suggests to the audience that Hanna has a seedy dark past and indicative of her holding a secret past.

Hanna changes as does the lighting in the film when she is with Michael on their bike trip. She appears happier and less withdrawn, this changes during the trip the one time she goes indoors. Inside a church listening to children singing she appears vulnerable to the viewer and proceeds to cry. The scene is shot with light coming in from the side and reveals the duality of Hanna as the other side of her fades into shadow. The music creates a sound-bridge to the future Michael, again the middle aged adult, in an expensive car on his way to work. Hanna showing her vulnerability in a church implies that she is hiding a secret from Michael that he discovers when he is older as the music bridges the two. Later in the film, the audience discovers the reason for Hanna's vulnerability along with Michael, that she is haunted by the screams of women and children burning to death in a church.

The routine of washing put in place by Hanna is often considered to be tender, loving and a motherly act, but it is also symbolic of the nature of their relationship. Whereas in the novel it would appear to the reader that Hanna is aware that her and Michael's relationship is unconventional and is guilty about her past. By washing Michael, Hanna can cleanse her guilt. However, this is lost in the film and the washing of Michael has been referred to as a reference to the hygiene measures used during the Third Reich.

Unlike in the novel, Hanna does not physically whip Michael; instead costume and appearance are used instead to be suggestive of Hanna's past. Hanna appears comfortable in a tram uniform with blonde hair and blue eyes, a stereotyped Aryan figure. The tram uniform already reminiscent of a camp guards uniform, when she is sentenced wearing a black and white suit, suggestive of an SS uniform, Hanna transforms in front of the audience into the Nazi with the ability to carry out the crimes she was charged with.

2. Less sympathy for the perpetrator

The audience already unsympathetic to Hanna does not want to see her sentence lessened as they might in the novel, but want the other defendants to receive an equally high sentence and are therefore also angry with the continued injustice in the post war Germany, as Professor Röhl in the film says ‘we have learned nothing’. Michael’s continued and repeated visits to his past through flash-backs and then engaging with Hanna as an adult is not only part of his titillation and fascination with Hanna but is symbolic of the contemporary society’s desire to revisit its past in an attempt to explain its present.

Michael’s patronising questioning of Hanna over what had she learnt in her time in prison provoking the response that she had ‘learned to read’, can be seen to be an admission of her previous lack of understanding, which is better conveyed in the novel as the reader discovers that the books she has been reading are from Holocaust survivors, thus broadening her knowledge of what was going on around her and what she was participating in.

The film does not convey her broadened understanding of the past through the Holocaust literature, thus making her answer that she had ‘learned to read’ an abrupt dismissal of Michael rather than an admission that she had learned through reading like the novel suggests.

The removal of the Holocaust literature was questioned in a public Q&A with Daldry and Hare where it was discussed that they had an argument with Schlink about the removal of this literature from the film as:

Daldry said he and Hare eliminated the Holocaust education aspect of the novel (over the strong objections of Schlink) because he didn’t want the film to seem to be about redemption; [...] The elimination of the Primo Levi reading list in the novel—however meretricious a gambit it is—deprives the literacy she achieves of any relationship to the Holocaust, which eliminates the fraudulent moral redemptiveness but also makes the film incoherent as a response to the Holocaust.

Therefore, the removal of the Holocaust literature from the film has reduced the impact reading has had on Hanna as she is removed from the literature and therefore understanding of her part in the Holocaust.

Michael remains lost and alone, attempting to seek a mixture of redemption and reconciliation with his past. He remains a victim and is viewed as such, even to Hanna’s other victim, Ilana, who is transformed on screen to a survivor. Ilana, unlike Michael, understands that nothing can come out

of the camps whereas Michael pushes for forgiveness for Hanna and for himself. Ilana reaffirms Hanna's complicity by not accepting Hanna's money, saying that 'there is nothing I can do with this money. If I give it to anything associated with the extermination of the Jews then to me it seems like absolution and that's something I'm neither willing nor in a position to grant'. But she takes Hanna's tea caddy and places it next to a photo of her dead relations, thus reaffirming that Michael is also an acknowledged victim of Hanna.

The audience can see that Michael is guilty of not caring about the 'real' victims of the Holocaust in his pressing of Ilana and instead continues with his sympathising with the perpetrator. This is similar to the novel's ending, however the audience is left unaware of what Michael does with Hanna's money and if he sends it to any organisation in her name as part of her atonement.

The final scenes of the film are changed significantly from the novel. Whereas the novel sees Michael coming to terms with his past by relating it to the generational issues between family members as his generation, the second generation, Michael in the film begins to come to terms with the effect Hanna had on his life by telling his story to his daughter Julia, the third generation. With this he symbolically breaks the generational guilt of having loved a perpetrator along with his shame and silence that came with being her victim.

Unsurprisingly this is set in the 1990s, about a decade after Hanna's death. It appears that only in a united Germany can Michael come to terms with his past

E. The reception of the film

Despite this critical success, international audiences were less enthusiastic of the film. The film averaged an approximate gross of one million four hundred thousand dollars in each of the 53 countries it was distributed, while in Germany the film grossed twenty million six hundred thousand dollars with the UK following second at eight million five hundred thousand dollars. In the US the film grossed thirty four million one hundred thousand dollars just thirteen million seven hundred thousand million dollars more than in Germany. When you consider the geographical size difference between Germany and America the film's success and popularity in Germany is astounding.

IV. Conclusion

A. Unveiling the Perpetrator

In summary, the film has not conveyed the same messages as the novel and thus the ambiguity and focus on the sexual nature of the film have dominated the reviews.

Where the original German novel was favourable in its interpretation of a perpetrator, the film has fully and unsympathetically exposed the perpetrator. Rather than the sympathetic good German that has won over readers in *Der Vorleser*, Hanna remains a perpetrator in the audiences' eyes.

Thank you for your time and thank you for listening.

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