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The Acoustic Archive: Illiteracy, Perverse Pedagogy, and Gendered Trauma in *The Reader* and Its Film Adaptation

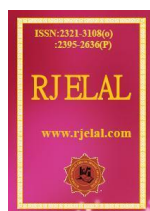
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Abstract

In the cultural and academic discourse on Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Stephen Daldry's 2008 cinematic adaptation of the same work, the dominant theme has been post-war German guilt and second-generation trauma. In contrast, the present paper attempts to bring into focus the theme of Hanna Schmitz's illiteracy as a major site of gender trauma and subaltern silence. Hanna's non-inclusion in the symbolic order of literacy forces her into a socially marginalised status, where she is forced to make sense of power relations and emotional connection with the "acoustic archive" of Michael Berg's voice. The complex bond of maternal warmth and erotic subordination begins with Hanna's seduction of the teenage Michael Berg, which can be read as a form of "perverse pedagogy," where the act of oral reading is both bond and control.

While most research on the novel has used Hanna's illiteracy as a narrative device to reveal her complicity with Nazism, this paper fills a research gap by exploring the role of illiteracy as a disabling condition that intersects with working-class female marginalisation. Informed by Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Julia Kristeva's notion of abjectness, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and Michel Foucault's theory of confession, this paper reveals how logocentrism in the trial scene judges Hanna for a lack of written agency, which she never had, and reinforces her "trauma of the unlettered." The paper concludes by suggesting "epistemic reclamation" as a feminist remedy. Hanna's acquisition of literacy skills in prison is a "language of recovery" that enables her to transform from a passive receiver of sound into an independent reader, overcoming the perverse acoustic and emotional dependency of her life.

Keywords: Hanna Schmitz, illiteracy trauma, perverse pedagogy, acoustic archive, gyno criticism, epistemic reclamation, gendered marginalisation.

INTRODUCTION

When Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* appeared in Germany in 1995 and, subsequently, in English translation as *The Reader* in 1997, it entered a literary field already saturated with the ethical vocabulary of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, the labour of "coming to terms with the past". The novel's narrator, Michael Berg, frames his own coming-of-age as inseparable from the national project of reckoning with Nazi crimes, and it is this framing that has dominated the novel's reception: *The Reader* is an allegory of the "second generation", the children of perpetrators and bystanders who inherit a guilt they did not create. Ruth Franklin has observed that the novel was written for the generation Bertolt Brecht called the Nachgeborenen, those born after, who must find a language for a catastrophe they did not witness (Franklin, cited in "The Reader", n.d.). The tension Franklin identifies is one Michael directly addresses: "I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding." (Schlink, 1997, p. 165).

Stephen Daldry's 2008 film adaptation, starring Kate Winslet as Hanna Schmitz, Ralph Fiennes as the adult Michael, and David Kross as the adolescent Michael, largely preserves this framing, translating Schlink's retrospective, guilt-laden prose into a visual grammar of pale light, archival footage, and courtroom close-ups. Yet this paper argues that a second, underexamined axis of meaning runs beneath the novel's historical allegory: the axis of literacy itself, understood not merely as a plot device that explains Hanna's courtroom silence, but as a structuring condition of her entire subjectivity.

Hanna Schmitz cannot read or write. This single fact, withheld from the reader for roughly a third of the narrative, retroactively reorganises everything that has come before it: her abrupt departure from Michael, her insistence that he read to her before they make love, her preference for promotion over disclosure, her refusal to submit a handwriting sample that would exonerate her at trial. Criticism has largely treated illiteracy as Schlink's vehicle for a moral argument about complicity and shame, asking whether the novel excuses Hanna's participation in Nazi atrocities by displacing her guilt onto a disability (Johnson & Finlay, 2001). This is an important and necessary line of inquiry, and the present paper does not dispute its findings. It argues instead that this moral-historical reading, however dominant, has crowded out a second, equally significant reading: illiteracy as a specifically gendered and classed condition of exclusion, one that produces its own phenomenology of dependency, shame, and substitute communication long before Hanna ever stands trial for war crimes.

The central claim of this paper is that Hanna's illiteracy positions her outside what post-structuralist and feminist theory calls the symbolic order, the realm of writing, law, and rational self-narration through which subjects are recognised as full participants in civil and juridical life. Barred from this order, Hanna develops an alternative epistemology grounded in sound: what this paper terms the "acoustic archive," a repository of intimacy, memory, and control built entirely from the spoken and read-aloud voice of Michael Berg. The relationship that begins in the summer of 1958, when the fifteen-year-old Michael is initiated by the thirty-six-year-old Hanna into both sexuality and a nightly ritual of reading classic literature aloud to her, is therefore read here not simply as

an erotic transgression but as a “perverse pedagogy”: a system of instruction and dependency in which the ordinary hierarchy of teacher and pupil is doubled and destabilised by the hierarchy of literate and illiterate, adult and adolescent, seducer and seduced. When Hanna is later tried for her role as a concentration camp guard and is scapegoated by fellow defendants who exploit her illiteracy without naming it, the trial functions as a second, more violent encounter with the symbolic order, one in which the court’s logocentric assumptions, its faith that guilt can be read off the page, condemn her precisely for the illiteracy she has spent her life concealing. Only in prison, through the halting, self-taught labour of learning to read and write, does Hanna achieve what this paper calls “epistemic reclamation”: a fragile, late, and ultimately tragic entry into literate subjectivity that arrives too late to save her but is nonetheless significant as a feminist counter-narrative to her earlier silence.

This paper proceeds in six movements. It first situates the argument within existing scholarship on *The Reader*, identifying the research gap the paper addresses. It then outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Elaine Showalter’s gynocriticism, Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, and Michel Foucault’s account of confession, before applying this framework across four analytical sections: the acoustic archive as substitute literacy; the reading ritual as perverse pedagogy; the trial as an act of logocentric violence; and the prison years as a scene of epistemic reclamation. Throughout, the paper reads novel and film in tandem, attending to the specific ways cinematic technique, voice-over, sound design, and the visual economy of the gaze, reconfigures a problem that is, at its root, about the relationship between the body, the voice, and the written word.

Literature Review and the Research Gap

The scholarly reception of *The Reader* has been remarkably consistent in its

preoccupations, even where it disagrees with conclusions. The dominant strand of criticism reads the novel as a controversial intervention into German Holocaust memory, asking whether Hanna’s illiteracy functions as an alibi that softens her culpability as a camp guard who participated in a death march and let prisoners burn in a locked church. Sally Johnson and Frank Finlay’s influential essay “(Il)literacy and (Im)morality in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*” argues that the novel’s account of illiteracy is analytically inconsistent and ethically troubling, because it implies a causal relationship between the inability to read and the incapacity for moral judgement, a relationship the authors find both empirically dubious and dangerously exculpatory when applied to a perpetrator of genocide (Johnson & Finlay, 2001). Their essay was itself written partly in response to the way they quoted the novel’s line that “illiteracy is dependence” as though it were a straightforward public-health testimony rather than a piece of ethically loaded fiction (Johnson & Finlay, 2001). This scholarly lineage, concerned with the novel’s use of disability as a moral alibi, has been extended by later critics who examine the broader phenomenon of “perpetrator fiction” and the risk that sympathetic portrayals of individual Nazis relativise collective guilt.

A second, closely related strand treats shame rather than illiteracy as the novel’s true organising concept, arguing that Hanna is best understood not as a victim of a disability but as a woman who structures her entire life around evading exposure, and that her illiteracy is simply the most convenient hiding place for a shame that is simultaneously social, sexual, and, retrospectively, moral. This reading, associated with work on *Der Vorleser* and the problem of shame, contends that Hanna’s development in prison is more compromised than the novel’s admirers acknowledge, and that *The Reader* has been too readily received as a Bildungsroman of moral growth when its ending is considerably darker and more ambiguous. A third strand,

concerned with the novel's status as a global bestseller and Oprah's Book Club selection, situates *The Reader* within debates about the commercialisation and "tourism" of Holocaust memory, asking what it means for a text about genocide and disability to circulate so successfully as middlebrow, prestige entertainment, a question the film adaptation's own awards-season success only intensifies.

What is conspicuously underdeveloped across this literature is a sustained feminist-disability reading of illiteracy as a form of gendered subalternity independent of, and before, the Holocaust plot. Existing scholarship treats illiteracy almost exclusively as a device that complicates historical judgement of a war criminal; it rarely asks what illiteracy means for Hanna as a working-class woman navigating employment, sexuality, and intimacy in postwar West Germany before she is ever named as a defendant. Her illiteracy is a source of shame and dependency that structures her labour history (her repeated flight from promotions that would expose her inability to read), her domestic life, and, crucially, her erotic relationship with Michael, well before it becomes a legal liability. This paper addresses that gap by asking what changes when illiteracy is read not primarily as a narrative alibi for historical guilt but as a disabling condition intersecting with class and gender, one that produces a distinctive psychic economy: a hunger for voice, an aptitude for command disguised as tenderness, and a vulnerability to accusations she is structurally unable to refute in writing. In doing so, the paper joins a smaller body of work attentive to embodiment, orality, and gender in the novel, while extending that work through an explicit theoretical apparatus drawn from feminist literary theory, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and Foucauldian discourse analysis, an apparatus that has not, to this paper's knowledge, been applied to *The Reader* in combination.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper's reading of Hanna Schmitz is assembled from four theoretical positions that do not, on the surface, share a common vocabulary but that converge productively on the problem of a woman's exclusion from language, judgement, and self-representation.

Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism, developed most fully in *A Literature of Their Own* and in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics," proposes a shift away from reading women merely as images produced by male authors and toward the study of women as writers and as subjects with a distinctive literary and psychological history. Applied to a novel narrated entirely by a man about a woman he loved, feared, and ultimately judged, gynocriticism supplies a necessary corrective lens: it asks the reader to notice everything Michael Berg's narration cannot or will not say about Hanna's interiority, and to treat the gaps, elisions, and silences of his account as themselves meaningful evidence of a female experience that the text structurally cannot access. Showalter's related distinction between the "feminine," "feminist," and "female" phases of women's writing is less directly applicable here, since Hanna herself produces no writing until the novel's final act, but the gynocritical impulse to recover a female subject obscured by a masculine narrative frame underwrites this paper's insistence on reading Hanna's illiteracy on its own terms, rather than solely as a plot mechanism serving Michael's moral education.

Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" theorises the abject as that which is neither fully subject nor fully object, that which unsettles identity, system, and order by refusing to respect borders, positions, and rules. The abject is what must be expelled for the subject to constitute itself within the symbolic order, yet it never disappears entirely; it returns as horror, shame, and fascination. Hanna occupies a structurally abject position in relation to the symbolic order of writing: she is a full linguistic

subject in speech, capable of eloquence, command, and tenderness, yet she is radically excluded from the written word, the very medium through which modern subjects are legally and socially recognised. This paper argues that Hanna's abjection operates on two simultaneous registers. First, there is the abjection assigned to her by the court and by postwar German society once her participation in Nazi atrocities becomes known, the abjection of the perpetrator whose crimes must be expelled from the nation's self-image. Second, and before this, there is a quieter, more domestic abjection rooted in her illiteracy itself: her horror of being "found out," her flight from the tram company's promotion, her elaborate management of a secret that, if disclosed, would expose her as something less than a full subject in a society organised around the written record. Kristeva's insight that abjection is bound up with the maternal body and with pre-symbolic, non-verbal forms of communication also illuminates the maternal register of Hanna's relationship with Michael, her bathing of him, her feeding of him, her physical tenderness, which coexists uneasily with her erotic and pedagogical control over him.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* proposes that traumatic experience is characterised by belatedness: the event is not assimilated or fully known at the moment it occurs, but returns later, in fragments, repetitions, and intrusions, to a subject who is thereby possessed by a history she cannot straightforwardly narrate (Caruth, 1996). Caruth's model, developed from readings of Freud and of literary texts, insists that trauma disrupts ordinary structures of reference and understanding, producing forms of knowing and not-knowing that intersect most visibly in literature itself. This paper extends Caruth's framework to argue that Hanna's illiteracy operates as a kind of trauma before and independent of her wartime guilt, what this paper calls a "trauma of the unlettered": a wound inflicted by her exclusion from the

symbolic order of writing, which she experiences belatedly and repeatedly, in the tram company's promotion she flees, in the note she cannot write for Michael, in the courtroom accusation she cannot refute, and finally in the prison cell where she teaches herself, decades late, to read. A reading through Caruth, Hanna's serial flights, from the tram company, from Michael, from her own defence at trial are not simply evasions of moral responsibility but repetitions of an original, unspoken injury: the shame of illiteracy that structures her relationship to disclosure itself, making confession, correction, and self-defence all equally unbearable.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Michel Foucault argues that Western modernity did not repress the discourse of sex and truth so much as multiply it, chiefly through the mechanism of confession: a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement, and in which the confessing subject requires the presence of a partner, an interlocutor with the authority to demand, receive, judge, and interpret the confession (Foucault, 1978). Confession, for Foucault, is not a private release of hidden truth but a technique of power, one that produces the very truth it claims only to discover, and that binds the confessing subject ever more tightly to the authority who compels and interprets the confession. This paper reads the courtroom scenes of *The Reader* as a scene of compelled confession in precisely Foucault's sense: Hanna is repeatedly asked to explain, justify, and narrate her actions as a camp guard, and the court, structured entirely around written depositions, reports, and the presumed reliability of the documentary record, functions as the authority that will decipher and judge her confession. Because Hanna cannot read the very documents she is accused of authoring, she is caught in a uniquely cruel version of Foucault's confessional apparatus: unable to produce the kind of written self-testimony the court implicitly demands, she instead falsely

confesses to authorship of a report she did not write, preferring the fiction of guilt to the fact of illiteracy. Her confession, in other words, is not a discovery of truth but its opposite. This act actively conceals the one truth, her illiteracy, that would complicate the court's verdict, precisely because the shame attached to that truth outweighs, for Hanna, even the shame of a false admission of greater legal guilt.

The Acoustic Archive: Voice, Sound, and Substitute Literacy

The term "acoustic archive" is used in this paper to describe the substitute system of memory, intimacy, and knowledge that Hanna constructs out of Michael's spoken voice, in place of the written archive from which her illiteracy excludes her. An archive, in its ordinary sense, is a repository of documents: texts that can be retrieved, cross-referenced, and verified independently of any single person's memory or testimony. Hanna has no access to this kind of archive. What she builds instead is a living, embodied, and radically contingent archive made of sound: the particular timbre of Michael's adolescent voice, the rhythm of his reading, the texture of Homer, Chekhov, and Lessing as mediated through his mouth rather than through her own eyes. This acoustic archive is powerful precisely because it is unmediated by the abstraction of print; it is intimate, immediate, and embodied in a way that written text, for a reader, rarely is. In the novel, their ritual is intimate and repetitive. Michael recalls how "we would shower, and then I would read to her... After we made love... she liked me to read to her" (Schlink, 1997). But it is also acutely vulnerable, because it depends entirely on the continued presence, willingness, and fidelity of another person. The film adaptation heightens this through sound design, with David Kross's voice narrating passages as Kate Winslet's Hanna listens; her face a study in absorbed dependency. Where a literate subject can return to a text at will, alone, Hanna can only return to "her" texts through Michael, and later, once he is grown and

estranged from her, through the cassette tapes he begins mailing her in prison.

The cassette tapes are the novel's, and especially the film's, most vivid symbol of the acoustic archive as both gift and prison. Once Michael, now a young law student who has just watched Hanna sentenced to life imprisonment, begins recording himself reading aloud and sending her the tapes without a letter, without his voice ever addressing her directly, he reconstitutes in mediated, technological form the very ritual that once bound them together as lovers. The tapes allow Hanna to access literature, but only ever in the passive, dependent posture of the listener; she remains, even in her prison cell, a receiver rather than a producer of textual meaning. Hanna uses them to learn: "She had learned to read with the help of the books I had read onto the tapes" (Schlink, 1997). The film adaptation renders this dependency with particular visual clarity: extended sequences show Hanna, now aged and drawn by Kate Winslet's late-film performance, seated alone with a small tape recorder, headphones or speaker close to her body, her lips sometimes moving soundlessly as she follows along, her eyes tracking library books she has borrowed to match the printed words to the sounds she hears. This is the moment at which the acoustic archive begins, however haltingly, to convert itself into literacy: Hanna is using Michael's voice not merely to receive comfort but to teach herself to read, matching phoneme to grapheme in a private, self-directed pedagogy that finally reverses the direction of instruction that structured her earlier relationship with him.

It is worth insisting, following Kristeva's account of the pre-symbolic and Caruth's account of trauma's belated structure, that the acoustic archive is not simply a poignant workaround for a practical deficit. It is the site where Hanna's abjection from the symbolic order becomes legible as a specific psychic economy: an economy in which voice substitutes for text, in which listening

substitutes for reading, and in which erotic and maternal intimacy become entangled with epistemic dependency. Michael's voice does not merely narrate stories to Hanna; it is, for her, the material of memory itself, the only durable trace she has of the literary tradition, and, later, of Michael himself. When Hanna asks the teenage Michael to read to her before they make love, ostensibly a small ritual within an already asymmetrical relationship, the demand in fact reorganises the entire structure of their intimacy around Hanna's need for a substitute literacy, one she cannot admit needing and one Michael, in his adolescent infatuation, mistakes for simple pleasure in his company.

Perverse Pedagogy: Reading Aloud as Bond and Control

This paper uses the term "perverse pedagogy" to describe the specific structure of instruction, intimacy, and control that organises the summer Michael spends with Hanna. The term is chosen advisedly. Pedagogy ordinarily names a relationship in which knowledge flows from an instructor to a student for the student's benefit, underwritten by an ethical asymmetry of care. What occurs between Hanna and Michael inverts and contaminates this structure at every point. On its surface, Michael appears to be the one being educated: initiated sexually by an older woman and set the recurring task of reading aloud to her from the canon of European literature, an education in both eros and letters that he later describes as formative to his intellectual and emotional life. Yet the deeper current of instruction runs the other way. It is Hanna who is being taught, silently and without acknowledgement, by Michael's voice; the reading sessions are not primarily for his benefit but for hers, an informal and covert literacy education disguised, even from Michael himself, as a bonding ritual and a prelude to sex.

The perversity of this pedagogy lies not merely in the age gap between a fifteen-year-old and a thirty-six-year-old woman, an asymmetry the novel itself treats with troubling

ambivalence and the film renders through the visual conventions of a tender, sunlit romance rather than an exploitative one. The deeper perversity, for this paper's argument, lies in the way the pedagogical relationship is structured to conceal its own primary function. Hanna never tells Michael she cannot read. Hanna commands the ritual: she withholds or offers intimacy tied to the reading. Michael reflects on the power dynamic, noting how her demands structured their encounters. The novel captures the entanglement: after illness, Michael returns, and Hanna initiates with practical tenderness before seduction: "Come, I'll bathe you" (Schlink, 1997), blending maternal care with erotic control. The entire elaborate architecture of their relationship, the demand that he read before they are intimate, her volatile mood swings when he deviates from the ritual, her sudden, unexplained departure once his devotion threatens to expose or complicate her secret, is organised around a need Michael is never permitted to know. He experiences the relationship as an erotic and intellectual awakening; Hanna experiences it, this paper argues, as a desperately needed and carefully hidden mechanism of literacy access, made available to her only through the coercive intimacy of controlling a much younger, infatuated boy. The reading ritual is thus simultaneously a bond, offering Hanna genuine tenderness, comfort, and connection to a wider literary and emotional world she is otherwise barred from, and a form of control, in which Hanna manages the terms, timing, and content of Michael's reading, and by extension his access to her, with an authority that inverts the ordinary vulnerability of the illiterate subject.

Foucault's account of pedagogy and pastoral power in the *History of Sexuality* is instructive here. Foucault describes how relationships between educators and students, doctors and patients, adults and adolescents, become in modernity "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure," governed not by simple prohibition but by continual incitement,

capture, seduction, and evasion (Foucault, 1978). The relationship between Hanna and Michael exemplifies this spiral precisely: it is not a relationship of straightforward domination in one direction, but a mutually constituting exchange in which Hanna's erotic and pedagogical power over Michael coexists with, and indeed depends upon, her structural powerlessness as an illiterate working-class woman. She commands the ritual of reading because reading is the one currency she desperately needs and cannot produce herself; her authority over Michael's body and time is, in this sense, the exact obverse of her exclusion from the symbolic order that his fluent, unthinking literacy represents. When Michael, now a law student observing her trial, finally understands that Hanna is illiterate, and grasps retrospectively what the summer of reading aloud was actually for, the novel stages a moment of devastating pedagogical revelation: the student realises he was, all along, unknowingly the teacher, and that his own education in literature and love was inseparable from Hanna's use of him as an instrument of literacy she could never publicly claim.

Logocentrism on Trial: The Courtroom as a Site of Epistemic Violence

The trial sequence, which occupies the novel's second part and the film's central act, stages what this paper terms an act of logocentric violence: a judgement rendered by a court that is structurally incapable of recognising, let alone accommodating, a defendant's exclusion from writing. Logocentrism, in the sense inherited from Jacques Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics, names the assumption that writing is a secondary, derivative representation of an prior, more authoritative speech or truth; but in the specific institutional context of the courtroom, logocentrism takes a more literal and consequential form, the assumption that written documents, reports, depositions, and signatures constitute the most reliable, indeed the primary, evidence of a subject's actions and

intentions. The court trying Hanna and her co-defendants operates entirely within this assumption. When asked about the report, she falters. In the novel: "Did you not know that you were sending the prisoners to their death?" "Yes, but the new ones came, and the old ones had to make room for the new ones." (Schlink, 1997, p. 111). Guilt is to be established through documents: the SS report on the church fire, the order of selection for transport to Auschwitz, the handwriting that will supposedly identify who among the defendants authored the incriminating report.

It is precisely at this moment that the court proposes to compare each defendant's handwriting to the report's handwriting that the trial becomes, in this paper's reading, a scene of gendered epistemic violence. Hanna's co-defendants, who did in fact author or co-author the report, allow her to be identified as its sole author, understanding correctly that she will confess rather than submit a handwriting sample and expose her illiteracy. Hanna's silence in this moment is not an admission of guilt in the ordinary sense; it is a refusal, motivated by shame rather than by culpability, to enter into the court's logocentric economy of proof. She would rather accept a harsher sentence, life imprisonment instead of a lesser term, than have her illiteracy entered into the record as a fact about her personhood. The court, for its part, never considers illiteracy as an interpretive possibility; its entire procedural apparatus, its faith that a person's relationship to the written record straightforwardly indexes their relationship to the truth, has no place for a defendant who is fully capable of moral reasoning and eloquent testimony in speech but who exists, in relation to the written word, in a position of total exclusion. The court thus judges Hanna for a lack of written agency she never possessed, mistaking her silence about a report for an admission of its authorship, and in doing so enacts the very logocentric violence this paper identifies as structurally continuous with, but analytically distinct from, the historical

violence for which she is legitimately being tried.

This is not to suggest, following the important cautions of Johnson and Finlay, that illiteracy in any way diminishes or excuses Hanna's culpability for participating in the machinery of the Holocaust; the paper takes seriously their argument that the novel risks a "naive causal explanation" linking illiteracy to moral incapacity, and this paper's analysis is not an attempt to rehabilitate Hanna as a victim in place of a perpetrator (Johnson & Finlay, 2001). Rather, the claim is narrower and more precise: that the specific procedural injustice of the trial, its logocentric assumptions about evidence and authorship, produces a miscarriage of accurate historical accounting even as it correctly convicts her of participation in atrocity. Hanna is sentenced more severely than her co-defendants not because the court has more fully understood her role in the crimes, but because her illiteracy makes her incapable of defending herself within the court's chosen evidentiary framework. The trial thus operates on two simultaneous and not fully reconcilable registers: as a legitimate reckoning with Nazi genocide, and as an illegitimate, gender and class-inflected failure to read a working-class woman's silence correctly. Daldry's film underscores this second register through its visual staging of the courtroom: repeated shots frame Hanna alone, physically isolated from her co-defendants, her face registering confusion and calculation rather than comprehension of the documents being discussed around her, while Michael, seated in the gallery, is shown in a moment of visual revelation, his understanding of her illiteracy communicated through editing and close-up rather than dialogue, a filmic technique that allows the audience to occupy the position of privileged, literate insight that the court itself never reaches.

Trauma of the Unlettered: Gendered Shame and Working-Class Marginalisation

This section develops the paper's central theoretical contribution: the concept of a "trauma of the unlettered," a form of psychic injury produced by exclusion from the symbolic order of literacy that operates according to Caruth's model of belatedness, repetition, and structural unspeakability, but that is here specified as gendered and classed in ways Caruth's original framework, developed primarily around Holocaust testimony and its immediate historical referent, does not directly address. Hanna's illiteracy must be understood within the specific social conditions of her formation: a working-class woman born into interwar Germany, for whom illiteracy would have carried a distinct, doubled stigma, first as a marker of failed or interrupted education, itself classed and gendered, since girls from poor families were historically less likely to receive extended schooling, and second, retrospectively, as a badge of shame in a postwar West German culture increasingly organised around print literacy, bureaucratic documentation, and the educated articulacy that Michael's own bourgeois, university-track background exemplifies. The novel repeatedly stages the class gulf between Hanna, a former tram conductor and, previously, a low-level administrative worker, and Michael, the son of a philosophy professor, destined for law school; this class asymmetry is inseparable from the literacy asymmetry that structures their entire relationship. Hanna is not simply a woman who cannot read; she is a working-class woman whose illiteracy marks her as excluded from the class mobility, professional advancement, and social legitimacy that literacy secures in a modern bureaucratic state.

The trauma of the unlettered, in this paper's formulation, has three interlocking features. First, it is belated in Caruth's precise sense: Hanna's illiteracy does not register as trauma at any single legible moment of origin; it accumulates through repeated, smaller humiliations, avoided promotions, deflected questions, unexplained departures that only

become fully intelligible in retrospect, once the reader or viewer learns the secret that organised them. Second, it is repetitive: Hanna's characteristic response to any situation threatening exposure is flight, whether from the tram company, from Michael, or, at the trial's end, from life itself, a repetition compulsion that mirrors the structure Caruth identifies in traumatic memory's tendency to return the subject to the scene of injury rather than allow its resolution. Third, and most significant for this paper's feminist argument, the trauma of the unlettered is gendered in its very shape: Hanna's shame is not merely personal but is continually reinforced by a set of gendered expectations, that a woman of her generation and class should be capable of domestic and clerical competence, that femininity itself implies a certain baseline of social and textual fluency, expectations about Hanna's illiteracy violates in ways that compound an already precarious social position. Her illiteracy is never treated by other characters as a neutral disability; it is treated, when it is treated at all, as evidence of some deeper deficiency, a reading the trial itself ultimately performs at the level of moral judgement, conflating her inability to read with an inferred inability to reason, testify, or take responsibility in the manner the court expects.

A reading through Kristeva's account of abjection sheds light on how Hanna's shame also has a somatic and pre-verbal dimension that the novel's insistently retrospective, literary narration by Michael tends to obscure. Michael's account of Hanna is filtered through his own education, and his prose repeatedly aestheticises Hanna's body, her smell, her physical strength, her bathing rituals, in ways that this paper reads as symptomatic of the abject: her body becomes, for Michael's narration, a site of both desire and horror precisely because it is the body of someone radically outside the symbolic economy he will spend his life mastering as a law student and eventually a legal scholar. The gynocritical task,

following Showalter, is to read against the grain of Michael's aestheticising narration and recover the shape of Hanna's own, structurally silenced experience of that shame, an experience the novel gestures toward but can never, given its first-person male narration, fully represent.

The Film Adaptation: Visual and Aural Reconfiguration of Hanna's Silence

Stephen Daldry's 2008 film adaptation, working from David Hare's screenplay, translates the novel's literary preoccupation with voice and text into a medium uniquely equipped to literalise the acoustic archive. Where Schlink's prose can only describe Michael's reading and Hanna's listening, the film can render the actual sound of reading aloud, the cadence of David Kross's adolescent voice reading Chekhov and Lessing, later replaced by Ralph Fiennes's more measured adult voice recording cassette tapes, allowing the audience to experience something closer to Hanna's own acoustic dependency. This is among the film's most significant contributions to the novel's thematic architecture: sound design and voice-over transform an abstract literary concept into an embodied cinematic experience, positioning the audience, at least momentarily, in Hanna's position as listener rather than reader.

At the same time, the film's visual grammar introduces its own complications to the novel's gender politics. Kate Winslet's performance, and the film's cinematography, frequently aestheticise Hanna's body in ways that risk reproducing rather than critiquing the very objectification this paper argues the novel's narration performs. The early scenes of Hanna's and Michael's sexual relationship are shot with a warm, glowing intimacy that has drawn criticism for romanticising what is, by any contemporary legal standard, the statutory sexual abuse of a minor; the film's visual pleasure in Hanna's body arguably intensifies the very perverse pedagogy this paper identifies, by aestheticising the power

imbalance rather than interrogating it. Where the novel's retrospective, guilt-ridden first-person narration at least signals Michael's own uneasy awareness that something was wrong, the film's more objective camera can flatten this ambivalence into simple visual beauty, a tendency literary and film scholars alike have noted in adaptations of morally complex source material for prestige cinema. This paper's gynocritical commitment requires flagging this adaptation choice as a point of tension: the film's technical capacity to literalise the acoustic archive is purchased, in part, at the cost of a more visually seductive, less critically framed depiction of the relationship's origins.

The film's courtroom and prison sequences, by contrast, largely preserve and in places sharpen the novel's critique of logocentric violence. The visual isolation of Hanna within the courtroom, filmed in cool, desaturated tones that contrast with the warm palette of the earlier reading scenes, reinforces her structural exclusion from the semiotic community of the court, while the prison sequences, in which Winslet's aged, weathered Hanna is shown painstakingly copying letters and matching library books to cassette tapes, render the labour of late literacy acquisition with a physical, tactile specificity that the novel's more summary prose treatment cannot match. The film thus offers an uneven but valuable supplement to this paper's argument: strongest where it can literalise sound and the body's relationship to text, weakest where its visual pleasure risks softening the very power asymmetries the paper identifies as constitutive of the perverse pedagogy between Hanna and Michael.

Epistemic Reclamation: Prison Literacy as a Language of Recovery

If the trial enacts a logocentric violence against Hanna, the eighteen years she subsequently spends in prison stage a slow, self-directed, and ultimately incomplete reversal of that violence, which this paper terms "epistemic

reclamation." The term is intended to name something more specific than mere literacy acquisition: it describes the process by which a subject previously excluded from the symbolic order begins to reconstitute herself as an agent of writing and reading rather than a passive recipient of others' speech, thereby reclaiming a portion of the epistemic authority the trial's logocentric procedures had denied her. Hanna's self-teaching, matching Michael's taped voice to library books borrowed specifically for this purpose, tracing letters with a pencil in her cell, represents a remarkable feat of autodidactic labour, undertaken without institutional support, structured entirely around the residue of the acoustic archive Michael has continued, however guiltily and at a distance, to supply. "Illiteracy is dependence. By finding the courage to learn to read and write, Hanna had advanced from dependence to independence, a step towards liberation" (Schlink, 1997, via warden's reflection). This line, delivered late, crystallises the novel's view of her lifelong wound.

Epistemic reclamation, as this paper frames it, is a feminist remedy in a specifically qualified sense: it does not undo the trauma of the unlettered, nor does it retroactively grant Hanna the legal or social standing that literacy, had she possessed it earlier, might have secured for her at trial. It arrives too late for that. But it does mark a genuine transformation in Hanna's relationship to her own subjectivity. Where the younger Hanna commanded Michael's voice to receive literature she could not access herself, remaining structurally passive in relation to the written word even as she exercised erotic and pedagogical power over him, the imprisoned Hanna becomes, for the first time in the narrative, an independent reader and eventually a writer, corresponding with Michael in her own increasingly confident hand. Once literate, she turns to Holocaust literature; the warden notes her reading of Levi, Wiesel, Borowski, and others (Schlink, 1997). This shift from passive acoustic dependency to active

written agency is the novel's clearest embodiment of what this paper calls epistemic reclamation, and it is significant precisely because it occurs outside the reach of the institutions, the tram company, the court, that had previously structured Hanna's relationship to literacy entirely around concealment and shame.

The specific content of Hanna's late reading matters as much as the fact of it. Once she has taught herself to decode Michael's tapes against the borrowed print texts, she does not stop at the classic literature of their original ritual but turns, unprompted, to the literature of the Holocaust itself: survivor testimony by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, and Jean Améry stands on her cell shelf beside Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial and, disquietingly, the autobiography of the Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, alongside scholarly studies of the camps that the prison warden confirms Hanna specifically requested. Michael Lackey's analysis of this reading list argues that Hanna's suicide should be read in direct dialogue with Améry's own postwar writing on the survivor's impossible position, and that her death enacts a demand articulated in Améry's work rather than a simple collapse into guilt (Lackey, 2018). Hanna does not merely acquire literacy as a technical skill but immediately redirects that skill toward the one body of knowledge, the documented experience of her own victims, from which her illiteracy had previously barred her. Her belated capacity to read is thus inseparable from a belated and devastating capacity to know, in Caruth's sense, what she had done, a convergence of literacy and historical reckoning that the trial's logocentric procedures had never made available to her and that arrives now with an emotional cost the earlier legal process never had to reckon with.

Yet the novel and film both resist a straightforwardly redemptive reading of this reclamation, and this paper follows them in that resistance. Hanna's newly acquired literacy

does not reconcile her to herself or to her past; if anything, her prison reading, which comes to include Holocaust survivor testimony and historical accounts of the camps, appears to deepen her isolation and her confrontation with the moral weight of her actions, a confrontation the narrative associates with her eventual suicide on the eve of her release. This paper reads that ending not as a refutation of epistemic reclamation's value but as a sober acknowledgement of trauma theory's own central insight, that belated understanding does not simply heal a wound but can also, in Caruth's terms, retraumatize the subject through the very act of finally, consciously confronting what was previously unassimilated (Caruth, 1996). Hanna's literacy allows her, for the first time, to read the historical record of the crimes in which she participated, and this new capacity for reading is inseparable from a new and perhaps unbearable capacity for self-judgement. Epistemic reclamation, in other words, restores her agency without restoring her innocence, and the novel's refusal to offer a simple redemption arc is, this paper argues, one of its more intellectually honest features, even as it complicates any straightforwardly celebratory feminist reading of her late literacy.

Nonetheless, the significance of epistemic reclamation as a feminist counter-narrative should not be understated. Across the novel's three parts, Hanna moves from a woman who commands a body (Michael's, and by extension the bodies of the women she selected for transport at the camp) because she cannot command a text, to a woman who is finally able to occupy the position of reader and, briefly, writer, on her own terms, without an intermediary voice. The trajectory recovers, in miniature, the gynocritical project of tracing a female subject's passage from silence to a language, however fragile, of her own. That this passage ends not in liberation but in death registers the paper's broader argument: that the trauma of the unlettered, compounded by the logocentric violence of the trial, inflicts a

damage literacy acquired too late cannot fully repair, even as that late literacy remains a meaningful, and meaningfully feminist, act of reclamation in its own right.

The novel's final movement extends this ambivalence beyond Hanna's death. Her will asks Michael to deliver her small savings to the daughter who survived the church fire that killed her mother and the other prisoners under Hanna's guard; when Michael travels to New York to carry out this request, the survivor, Ilana Methner, refuses to accept the money, declining to let it function as a private absolution for a public crime, and permits Michael only to donate it, in Hanna's name, to the Jewish League Against Illiteracy, keeping for herself only the tea tin that once held Hanna's savings because it recalls a tin of childhood treasures stolen from her at Auschwitz. This closing exchange refuses the reader any comfortable resolution to the paper's argument. On the one hand, the survivor's insistence that the money be redirected toward combating illiteracy, rather than toward a Holocaust remembrance organisation, tacitly acknowledges illiteracy as a legitimate and separable object of concern, distinct from, though entangled with, Hanna's culpability for genocide, precisely the analytic separation this paper has argued criticism should take more seriously. On the other hand, the survivor's explicit refusal to grant Hanna absolution insists that epistemic reclamation, however real, cannot be mistaken for moral redemption. The two claims are not contradictory: illiteracy remains a legitimate site of gendered trauma worth serious feminist attention, and Hanna remains fully culpable for atrocity, and the novel's ending, small, exact, and unsentimental, is the clearest statement either text offers of how those two claims must be held together rather than allowed to cancel one another out.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the dominant critical frame for *The Reader*, which reads

Hanna Schmitz's illiteracy chiefly as a device for interrogating postwar German guilt and the moral status of ordinary perpetrators, has obscured a second and equally significant dimension of the text: illiteracy as a gendered, classed condition of exclusion from the symbolic order, with its own psychic economy of shame, dependency, and substitute communication. By tracing Hanna's construction of an "acoustic archive" out of Michael Berg's voice, her deployment of a "perverse pedagogy" that inverts the ordinary hierarchy of teacher and student even as it exploits an adolescent's infatuation, the "logocentric violence" of a trial that judges her for a written agency she never possessed, and her eventual, costly "epistemic reclamation" in prison, this paper has sought to demonstrate that Hanna's illiteracy is not merely a plot device in service of a historical allegory but a subject in its own right, deserving of the sustained feminist and disability-studies attention this paper has attempted to model. The theoretical framework assembled here—Showalter's gynocriticism, Kristeva's abjection, Caruth's trauma theory, and Foucault's account of confession—has allowed this paper to read across the novel's historical, erotic, and juridical registers without losing sight of the specifically gendered shape of Hanna's exclusion from language.

This reading does not seek to displace the important historical and ethical scholarship that has examined the novel's treatment of Holocaust guilt and complicity, work this paper has drawn on throughout, particularly Johnson and Finlay's caution against reading illiteracy as a naive moral alibi. Rather, it seeks to supplement that scholarship with an account of what illiteracy means for Hanna, independent of and before her wartime crimes: a condition that organises her labour history, her capacity for intimacy, her vulnerability before the law, and, ultimately, her relationship to her own past. Future scholarship might extend this paper's framework in several directions: a comparative reading of illiteracy and gender across other

postwar German and European perpetrator narratives; a disability-studies analysis attentive to how literacy functions as a normative, ableist criterion for legal and moral personhood more broadly; or an extended study of adaptation theory examining how cinema's capacity to literalise sound and voice reshapes literary treatments of illiteracy in other adapted texts. What this paper has attempted, more modestly, is to make audible a dimension of *The Reader* that its most influential criticism has left comparatively unheard: the acoustic archive of a woman who could not read, and the long, costly labour by which she finally, if too late, became one.

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