

The Sins of the Parents
An Analysis of German Trauma and Memory After WWII in
Bernhard Schlink's Novel *The Reader*

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Degree in English Studies

Academic Year: 2019-2020

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Abstract

The Second World War had a huge impact on German society and left its trace in the cultural history of the country. For this reason, we can find many movies and literature based on the war but also on the years following the post-war, which helps us understand the actions of the different generations. A marvelous example of one of these novels is *The Reader* written by Bernhard Schlink, which gives great importance to the German guilt. The story mediates between past and present by focusing on the relationship between two persons who belong to different generations, Michael and Hanna. The aim of this paper is to explore these characters' memories of German history by bearing in mind the generational gap that separates the two and analyze how it affects their perspectives. The different methods in which they confront the past, exemplify the contrast between the war generation, to which Hanna belongs, and Michael's postwar generation. Thus, the analysis is divided in three sections. In the first one, the characters are examined following Marc Augé's figures of forgetting which are "remembering the past", "suspense" and "new beginning" while stressing the difference between the two characters. The second section will discuss the importance and influence of trauma in their identity by focusing on why it appears and the consequences that it has in their behavior. The last section will analyze Memory Contests and Affective Memory Icons according to the theory applied by Fuchs with the purpose of determining how the characters deal with the past when they are forced to remember by the appearance of said icons. In this way, the paper shows that the different behaviors in which they confront and remember the past, exemplify the contrast between the war generation to which Hanna belongs and Michael's postwar generation.

Key words: remembrance, forgetting, trauma, memory contests and memory icons.

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1. Introduction

Historical memory is always present in our daily life as it is an important tool that helps us understand the background of a society and community. Due to the events of the past we are who we are nowadays and thus, it is important from time to time to stop and look at the past. Moreover, if we look carefully into the past, we may be able to understand the actions of our ancestors. Therefore, this paper will try to reflect on the past by looking into the novel *The Reader* written by Bernhard Schlink.

The paper is divided in five main sections. In the first one, the theoretical framework with the different theories and authors are presented. The concepts that I will be using for the analysis of the essay are remembrance, forgetting and trauma. In order to do so, I selected the following authors and works: “Chapter 1: Memory, Trauma, and History in Post-War Literature and Culture” (2018) by Christos Giantsidis, the book *Las Formas del Olvido* (1998) by Marc Augé and two articles written by Anne Fuchs, “From ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ to Generational Memory Contests in Günter Grass, Monika Maron and Uwe Timm” (2006) and “Postmemory and Trauma Theory” (2007).

Then, in order to comprehend the authors perspective, I will provide a brief exposition of the authors biography and a summary of the novel. In the following section, for the sake of a better understanding of the differences between the generations, a historical and social context of the post war Germany (1945) will be provided. In order to do so, I will be using the classification that Siobhan Kattago, a senior researcher in practical philosophy at the University of Tartu, elaborates in her work *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*. She divides German society after 1945 in three generations taking into account the identity models and the generational changes. The first generation belongs to the 50s and they have an outcast feeling, the second generation, who tries to find justice for the actions of their ancestors, is set between the 60s and 70s. And finally, the third generation appears in the 80s with a normalization process in which the Germans started to accept Holocaust and their responsibility as part of the German national identity. At the same time, there was a revival of the interest in Holocaust and the Nazi past. As a consequence, books, movies and TV-series started to deal with this topic.

In the analysis section, the characters Michael and Hanna from *The Reader* are studied by applying the theories presented before. This analysis is split in three parts: Michael and Hanna through the Figures of Forgetting, Trauma: a key aspect on Hanna's and Michael's identity, and Memory Contests and Affective Memory Icons in *The Reader*. Finally, the essay will conclude with the findings of the whole paper.

Through the following pages, the novel *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink will be interpreted and analyzed by taking into account how Michael's and Hanna's generational gap influences on their point of view on German memory. As well as, how differently each one remembers and deals with the past as they belong to different generations, the war and the postwar generation.

2. Theoretical Framework

Among the authors who have tried to deal with the concepts of memory and forgetting, Marc Augé is one of the best capturing the essence of their significance. For this reason, I will be using his essay *Las Formas del Olvido* (1998) and his theory about the three figures of forgetting as the main source which focuses on returning to the past, suspense and new beginning. Regarding historical trauma, Giantsidis gives attention to memory, forgetting and trauma in Holocaust fiction. Moreover, I will complement and contrast the ideas of these theories with other authors such as, Fuchs who deals with Trauma, Memory Contests and Affective Memory Icons and Kattago who talks about remembrance and forgetting.

According to Giantsidis we need to make a distinction between the different meanings of the words in order to understand the terms "memory", "trauma" and "forgetting" beyond their daily use (2). Thus, he states that "memory is a living and integral part of society that is open to the dialectics of life, that is forgetting and remembering" (11). Taking that in mind, Augé presents "memory"¹ and "forgetting"² as opposite terms, although he claims that those terms can work together like the words "dead" and "life". Even though they are opposite terms, you cannot think about one of them without thinking of the other, as their definitions are correlated. Thus, Augé postulates that "la

¹ Term used by Marc Augé to refer to "Memoria y Recuerdo". (Augé, Marc. *Las Formas del Olvido*. 1998, 18).

² Term used as "Olvido" by Marc Augé. (Augé, Marc. *Las Formas del Olvido*. 1998, 18).

definición de olvido como pérdida del recuerdo toma otro sentido en cuanto se percibe como un componente de la propia memoria” (20) which means that the sense of forgetting changes its meaning when you realize that it is an actual component of how memory works. Moreover, Augé goes beyond that idea and claims that remembrance is just an impression that endures in our memory.

At the same time, Kattago and Fuchs elaborate on that idea³ and suggest that memories are connected to a specific group and the mental image is portrayed differently depending on the group, even though they belong to the same past. In addition, Fuchs proposes that remembrance is divided into two branches: memory contests and affective memory icons. As it occurs with the words “memory” and “forgetting”, these two branches also tend to work together. According to Fuchs, memory contests “edit and advance competing narratives of identity with reference to an historical event perceived as a massive disturbance of a group’s self-image [...] memory contests can take place between the members of the same generation” (2006 179). As for affective memory icons, she notes that “memory contests consists in the employment of affective memory icons that aid or trigger the narrator’s investigations of a historical event that is perceived as a disturbance” (Fuchs 2006 184). This means for instance that objects⁴ such as, photographs and books, which can look insignificant, may express a lot from a person’s identity.

On the contrary, if we focus on the word “forget”, it refers to “la pérdida del recuerdo” (Augé 22) which implies that memories are shaped by the oblivion. Therefore, Kattago suggests that “forgetting occurs when individuals are removed from their group or social framework” (15) while Fuchs claims that “[...] forgetting is the very precondition of remembering and remembering always produces new forms of forgetting” (2006 177). In fact, Augé uses a metaphor to describe the process of remembering vs. forgetting by comparing it with the work of a gardener. He proposes that memories are

³ “Memories are linked to a specific group, there can be as many memories as there are different groups of families, religious organizations, ethnic groups, or nations which identify themselves with a certain common past” (Kattago 14).

⁴ “in the act of reading, the letters and photographs are transformed from mere documents to icons of an irreparable loss” (Fuch 2006 185).

just like plants, some of them have to die in order to let others prosper. For this reason, memories are shaped by forgetting (23-27).

In his study, Augé proposes three figures of forgetting using as basis the African rites. However, these criteria also work in more general terms to understand the background and identity of a person. Therefore, I will be using these notions in order to analyze the characters Michael and Hanna from *The Reader*. The figures that Augé presents are first of all, “Returning to the Past”⁵ which refers to “recuperar un pasado perdido, olvidando el presente – y el pasado inmediato con el que tiende a confundirse – para restablecer una continuidad con el pasado más antiguo [...]” (66), “suspense”⁶ which means “recuperar el presente seccionándolo provisionalmente del pasado y del futuro, y más exactamente, olvidando el futuro por cuanto éste se identifica con el retorno del pasado” (66) and finally, “Beginning” or “New Beginning”⁷ which consists of “recuperar el futuro olvidando el pasado, crear las condiciones de un nuevo nacimiento que, por definición, abre las puertas a todos los futuros posibles sin dar prioridad a ninguno” (67).

Finally, Fuchs explains the term “trauma” which “refers first and foremost to a painful psychological condition produced by an event in the past, which the subject could not process adequately on a cognitive or emotional level when it occurred” (2007 49). To which Giantsidis postulates that “traumas are repetitive instances that are not in the control of the victims” (13) and thus, “many survivors decided to shut this aspect of their life out of their memory” (3). Therefore, the person who suffers trauma is unconsciously forced to remember those events of the past that torment her/him, and thus, she/he is incapable of forgetting them. For this reason, this emotional shock has a huge impact in the way a person behaves and reacts.

All the theories presented above are going to be useful in the analysis of Michael and Hanna, the main characters in *The Reader*, because each of them belong to a different

⁵ Term used as “Retorno” by Marc Augé. (Augé, Marc. *Las Formas del Olvido*. 1998, 66).

⁶ Term used as “Suspense” by Marc Augé. (Augé, Marc. *Las Formas del Olvido*. 1998, 66).

⁷ Term used as “Comienzo” or “Re-comienzo” by Marc Augé. (Augé, Marc. *Las Formas del Olvido*. 1998, 67).

generation and hence, they have diverse perspectives of the events. First of all, remembrance and the figures of forgetting are the key to comprehend how and why the character acts in one way or another, but also to understand the role that the past takes in their lives. Then, the concepts of memory contests and affective memory icons are relevant because they take an important function in the development of the story. Finally, trauma will help us understand Hanna's and Michael's relationship because it affects differently on their identity.

3. The Author and his Novel

In this section, I will present the writer Bernhard Schlink and his novel *The Reader* for a better understanding of the analysis that I will be doing later. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration the author's point of view of the different generations as they will be present in his work.

3.1 Bernhard Schlink's Biography

Bernhard Schlink, born in 1944, is the author of the novel *The Reader*, (*Der Vorleser* in German), which was first published in 1995. Apart of being a well-known writer, he was also professor of law at the University of Berlin from 1992 to 2009, as well as working as a judge in Germany since the year 1987 until 2006 (Hoffman 33). His novel was adapted to the big screen in 2008 by the director Stephen Daldry.

He was raised near the city of Bielefeld, the youngest of four children of a traditional family. His parents studied theology and his father went on to become a theology professor. However, due to WWII, his family suffered some changes in their life style. Wroe explains in his article that Edmund, Schlink's father, had to face difficulties with the Nazis:

He then became a victim of Nazi persecution, rather than a perpetrator, and was sacked in 1937 for his membership of the Bekennende Kirche [the Confessing Church], followers of Martin Niemöller, the pastor who had called for them to break from the Protestant church in protest at Hitler's policies. Edmund then became a pastor and the family moved to Heidelberg when Bernhard was two (3).

While Schlink was studying law at Heidelberg University, he and his colleagues began to look at what their professors had done during WWII, which created a feeling of disappointment in them, as well as a desire to fight for justice. Schlink belongs to the ‘second generation’, a generation of social justice fighters that focused on the actions of their progenitors. Wroe remarks the responsibility that was laid on him, considering that “they had to live with all these tensions” (4).

When he was young, he used to write poems and stories and he loved crime novels due to his uncle’s influence who used to write crime novels that were never published. However, he argues that “[...] the appeal of writing crime novels is that you develop a problem and you solve it, which is similar to my work as a lawyer. I wanted to write something with suspense that people read on the train to and from work” (Wroe 5). Therefore, in the early 80s, he decided to start writing again because he believed that it was a way of making a critique of society. In 1991, Schlink moved from his hometown to Frankfurt in order to teach at the Wolfgang Goethe University and a year later, he decided to move away to Humboldt University in Berlin (Wroe 4). In 2009, Schlink retired from teaching and became a guest lecturer at different US universities.

3.2 An Introduction to *The Reader*

The Reader (1998) tells the story of Michael Berg, a 15 year old boy who lives in Blumenstrasse, Heidelberg, in post-war Germany, and Hanna, a 36 year old woman who resides in Bahnhofstrasse, Heidelberg, and works as a tram conductor. The book is divided in three parts and each of them focuses on a specific period of the life of the main protagonist and narrator of the story. The first period focuses on Michael at the age of 15 and his romance with Hanna while the second part narrates Michael’s student years and the reencounter with Hanna in the Auschwitz trial. The last part, describes Michael’s adulthood and Hanna’s life in jail.

The novel opens with Michael narrating his first encounter with Hanna, when she finds him ill with hepatitis and takes care of him. When he recovers, he decides to visit her in order to thank her for her actions. From that moment on, they will become close friends to such an extent that they will end up sleeping together. Their relationship is mainly based on taking baths jointly, being intimate and reading. Indeed, this becomes a fundamental pillar in their relation because Michael will constantly read books to

Hanna. The romance ends abruptly after a few months, when Hanna decides to leave the town without providing any explanation nor giving a clue about where she is going or why she decides to depart, an action that will affect Michael.

The second part of the novel starts by presenting Michael at law University, where he is member of a group of students who attend a court case on war criminals. It is in that trial where he will see Hanna again for the first time since he was a teenager. At this moment, he will learn about Hanna's past: that she was a camp guard in Auschwitz during the war and that she is accused of murdering a group of Jewish women in a burning church. However, one of the girls and her mother survived the fires and years later, she decided to write a book narrating what happened to her during the holocaust. For this reason, she is a witness at Hanna's trial, and thanks to her, Michael realizes that Hanna is actually illiterate. As the girl explains how Hanna used to choose children at the camps to read to her and how Hanna has kept her illiteracy as a secret throughout her whole life. In fact, he discovers that her illiteracy dictates much of her conduct while working at the concentration camp and those actions would sentence her to life imprisonment.

The last section of the novel narrates Michael's adulthood while Hanna is in jail. After a long time without seeing each other, he decides to record himself reading books aloud to send them to her, so she can hear more stories. Thanks to those cassettes, Hanna would learn to read and write. Eventually, Hanna is scheduled to be released earlier because of her good conduct. Michael makes the arrangements to take care of her, but she kills herself before she is left free. Afterwards, we will find Michael trying to fulfill Hanna's last wish which consists in sending her savings to the daughter who survived the fire in the church during war with her mother, the same woman who was present during Hanna's trial. Hanna insisted that the woman should do what she really wants with the money. However, the lady refuses to take Hanna's money because she does not want to use it for something related with the Holocaust, instead she lets Michael decide what to do with it. The book ends with Michael visiting Hanna's grave for the first time ever.

According to Galle, *The Reader* “es un libro sobre la relación de la generación de los culpables con la generación de sus hijos” (13). For this reason, this novel is particularly important for Bernhard Schlink, as he explained in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel:

It's a story of my generation and the experience of being under the guidance of these dedicated teachers, professors, and other authority figures -- learning from them, being impressed by them, and then finding out what they had done. This certainly has been the overwhelming experience of my generation -- feeling this dilemma of loving and respecting them, being grateful to them as our teachers and mentors, and at the same time feeling the urge to expel them from our reference system, push them out of our community solidarity (3).

That is to say, the novel tries to reflect the feelings of the second generation after becoming aware of the actions of their friends and family during WWII. Schlink himself had to struggle with his feelings because the image that he had of his partners, teachers and family was broken. Therefore, he pointed the necessity of the second generation needing to understand how to act, even though to judge the people that you admire was not an easy task to do (Wachtel). He also claimed that *The Reader* (1998) was a good way of learning about the second generation because there were only works about the first generation (Gilbert) and that this novel shows “how the second generation attempted to come to terms with the Holocaust and the role in it played by their father’s generation” (Wroe 5).

4. Historical and Social Context: Post War Germany (1945)

World War II left many consequences in the countries who took part directly and indirectly in it and according to Bourke “at the end of the war, hundreds of millions of people were forced to sift through the ashes of their ruined lives” (214) because “their homes had been destroyed and their jobs no longer existed” (Bourke 214). Therefore, their lifestyle, the one that they used to know before war detonated, had forever changed. In addition, those who survived are eternally marked, on the one hand, by the physical scars and, on the other hand, by the trauma caused by the shocking events of war. Furthermore, Shabot depicts that the lives that were lost due to the holocaust, most of whom were Jewish, affected significantly into the way of living of the survivors:

Las pérdidas humanas para muchos de los pueblos afectados fueron tan grandes, que dejaron un gigantesco hueco demográfico en la siguiente generación. Para el pueblo judío, el Holocausto [...] significó [...] la desaparición de [...] un tercio de sus integrantes. [...] borrando con ello todo un entorno cultural y social que por entonces constituía uno de los centros más vibrantes de vida judía (Shabot 1).

By the time WWII ended in 1945, also Germany had been destroyed and gone bankrupt. The Germans did not only lose millions of lives and infrastructures during the war, but they also suffered the loss of their identity. Pozárlik claims that “identity” is created from “[...] a lack of wholeness which is ‘filled’ from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others” (78). This means that the German collective identity, which was constructed following the ideals of the Third Reich, was destroyed when the population encountered the real image of Germany that was being perceived by the outside world, a representation that did not fit the image that they had of themselves. This realization was a traumatic experience which explains why it took years until they were capable of looking back at their past and facing the consequences of the atrocities that they had denied and the part they took in the crimes carried out by Nazis, that is to say, it took years until they were capable to admit their guilt. For this reason, Bourke claims that “the memory of the Second World War often consists of selective recitals of the past and significant silences. [...] The Nazis wished there to be no memory of their atrocities” (218).

Therefore, Siobhan Kattago establishes a division of the German society in three different generations in her book *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*. In order to do so, she takes into account, on the one hand, their role in history and, on the other hand, their feelings about the German national-socialist past. Kattago claims that during the Occupation from 1945 to 1949, West German confrontation with National Socialism occurred ‘from the outside’ because the Allies were the ones who helped them to reconstruct the nation’s identity by letting the Nazi past behind (39). Thus, “the 1950s was not so much about the repression of the Holocaust as about a desire not to know what really happened

(*Nichtgenauwissensollen*)⁸ accompanied by a sense of not being able to bear the truth of what happened (*Nichtertragenkönnen*)” (Kattago 41). For this reason, Kattago places the first generation, the people who took part in WWII, in the 50s and relates them with the feeling of being an outcast. Moreover, the people who took part directly or indirectly in the atrocities of the war would always be marked by the Holocaust as Galle suggests “gran parte de la población alemana estuvo directa o indirectamente involucrada en los crímenes [...] los otros, que habían escapado como inocentes o menos culpados, prefirieron no ocuparse más de ese tema de culpa, vergüenza y dolor, a pesar de las voces aisladas que reclamaban una responsabilidad colectiva frente a la historia” (4). It is possible that, faced with the perspective of taking responsibility for the Nazi crimes, many preferred to leave the past behind and look to the future instead.

Attitudes change at the beginning of the 60s and until the 70s when themes such as, Nationalism and Holocaust become increasingly important in the German Culture and its public debate. As a consequence, we have the public appearance of the second generation known as the 1968 generation. The influence of literature is so powerful that it plays a very important role in the process of getting over and understanding the past. This idea, known as “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (in German) or “Overcoming and Mastering the Past” (in English) has an impact in the scholarly work and among the political culture of the Federal Republic (Kattago 36). Kattago describes it as “a political and moral term which signifies the debate which a person, group, or nation has with its own history” (37). In the German case, the debate revolves around the crimes committed during the national-socialist regime and the impact and consequences that their actions have in the society. Therefore, Kattago argues that “after National Socialism, the question of German national identity in the Federal Republic has been linked to questions of how to confront and internalize the Nazi past” (38). Given that the first generation is more focused on forgetting, the task of finding an answer to these questions is in hands of the second generation.

⁸ In this context, it would be more adequate to use the form *Nichtgenauwissenwollen* which could mean that there has been an erratum in the book: *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*.

Consequently, critics mark a clear generational confrontation between the first and second generations. On the one hand, Assmann claims that “the 1968 generation was much more concerned with pinning the guilt on their parents than with listening to their sufferings” (192). In other words, their main aim is to make their parents aware of their actions and at the same time, to take responsibility from those actions instead of complaining about their generation’s post-war agony. On the other hand, Galle suggests that the second generation can be differentiated from the previous one, not only because they have critical awareness but also because they try to create a positive identity that comes from keeping alive the memory of the German shame (6). In the creation of awareness, it is necessary to mention the Auschwitz trials (1963-65) which had a huge impact in the process of becoming conscious of the events that took place during the war. The accused of these trials included many people who worked at the concentration camps. Their actions, together with the trials that exposed their shameful involvement in the holocaust, will forever be kept in the German memory and became fictionally immortalized among others, in the novel *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink.

Finally, the third generation belongs to the 80s, the period when the normalization process started for the German unification. In the 90s, for “the Berlin Republic, normalization meant first and foremost unification and full national sovereignty” (Fuchs 2006 175). As a consequence, the Germans tried to create a shared perspective and a collective memory that does not erase the actions of older generations. Furthermore, the perfect image of the Third Reich started to disappear as they lost this idealized vision of patriotism and realized what they were responsible of. However, it remains as an important period that marks the history of the previous generations. Their need to understand their shared past explains why “this normalization tendency was accompanied by a growing interest in the Holocaust” (Kattago 45). But this investigation also led to the discovery of previously overlooked episodes in the war, such as, the bombings to the Germans, many of which were portrayed in cinema, television and literature.

The novel at hand, *The reader* by Bernhard Schlink, is a fine example of the generational clash that resulted from the different reactions to the country’s past, as its main characters belong to the first and second generations that clashed in their views of historical revisionism.

5. Analysis

The following section is devoted to the analysis of the characters Michael and Hanna from *The Reader* by applying the theories presented above. It is divided in three different parts. In the first part, I will focus the analysis on how the figures of forgetting are present in the actions and decisions the main characters take in the story. Then, I will talk about the presence and influence of trauma in the character's identity and behavior. Finally, in the last section, the importance of some events and objects that are present in the novel will be explained.

5.1 Michael and Hanna through the figures of forgetting

Michael, as stated before, is the storyteller which means that he is the one guiding us through the events that occur in the novel. His narration alternates between the past and the present, memories and oblivion. Thanks to his recounting, we can recover the memories and secrets that Hanna hides about her identity and background. It is ironic that to the reader Michael is an element that triggers remembrance, while inside the story the character allows Hannah's forgetting through "suspense" according to Augés classification. This occurs because Hanna only lives in the present as it can be seen in Chapter Nine (Part One) when Michael says that "she certainly didn't nourish herself on promises, but was rooted in here and now" (Schlink 37). She also avoids to think or talk about the future or the past at all cause, like most of the people who belong to the first generation. However, Michael will find out the atrocities that Hanna committed during war in the Auschwitz trials and he will be unable to understand and condemn her for what she did because that is not the Hanna that he met and fell in love with. This struggle that Michael has between understanding and blaming the actions of a beloved friend will be the key to understand the feelings of the second generation to remember.

Hanna is a good example of the theory of "forgetting". First of all, when Hanna appears in the story is through Michael's eyes and she is immersed, as Augé suggests, in the "new beginning". We are aware of it because she continuously refuses to talk about her past, thereby she lives in the present. This suggests that she is constantly living between "suspense" and "new beginning". When Michael asks her about her past in Chapter Nine (Part one) is a good sample of it because she takes a while to tell him just what he wanted to hear: "I asked her about her life, and it was as if she rummaged around in a

dusty chest to get me the answers” (Schlink 37). We can see how she is detached from her background and part of her identity and thus, she only shows to Michael the parts of herself that are unaffected by her past. However, her background is exposed and she is forced to move to another figure of forgetting which is “returning to the past”. Suddenly, she will find herself in a trial where she is asked about her past. Which means that she is forced to remember her past as a guard “in a small camp near Cracow, a satellite camp for Auschwitz” (Schlink 103) during WWII and about the crimes that she has condemned such as, letting people die in a burning church, “You don’t want to remember, you want to hide behind something that everyone did [...]” (Schlink 115). Therefore, if we come back to the theory of “forgetting”, we can say that Hanna decides to forget the memories that she created with the Nazis because she does not belong to them anymore until she faces the Auschwitz Trials. In there she will meet with her coworkers again but also with the daughter who survived the fires of the church with her mother. As a result, we have two different groups that have a certain past in common which is the holocaust, but at the same time, each of them belong to a common group linked by their memories; the Nazis vs. the victims. Consequently, the memories are perceived differently depending on the collective memory that each group has. Thus, it is possible that this separation from the group that shared this past triggered Hanna’s forgetting and helped her to move into her new life. So this idea fits into Augé’s idea of “new beginning”, Kattago’s point of view of “forgetting” and the hypothesis about memories being linked to specific groups that Kattago and Fuchs presented.

Finally, great importance is attached to *The Odyssey* by Homer in the novel because since the beginning of the story it is going to be present in Michael’s and Hanna’s relationship. The book narrates the journey of Odysseus and it can be related with Hanna’s journey because as Encinas states “la ausencia del héroe por motivo de un viaje es la causa del conflicto en muchas tragedias” (107). The main point of it is that Odysseus is making a journey and during that period of time, he will be returning to the past but also starting new beginnings. The reason for this to occur is because every time he tries to go back home, which Augé calls “returning to the past”, he ends up in a new place and thus, he starts a “new beginning” as Augé suggests. Furthermore, in the period that he spends in each place, he is living as Augé claims in the “suspense”

because he does not think about the past nor the future. For this reason, the journey that Hanna is living with Michael can be related with *The Odyssey*.

The first time that we come across with the book is when Michael decides to read it aloud to Hanna because she wanted to hear how Greek and Latin sounded (Schlink 40). This occurs at the beginning of the story but also at the same time when Hanna starts her new beginning with Michael. The second instance of *The Odyssey* that we find is after Hanna's trial when Michael reads it again. He realizes that "Odysseus does not return home to stay, but to set off again" (Schlink 180), in other words, he returns to the past in order to start a new beginning and this is what Hanna does once and again. After war, she left her Nazi past behind to start a new life, she moved from one place to another until she met Michael but at the end, due to the presence of her past she also leaves him behind. Finally, the last appearance of the book in the story is when Michael claims that he read it after he had separated from his wife (Schlink 181). This idea suggests that this book gives him memories of the past and as we have already seen, he is always dealing and trying to understand the past. Therefore, one night when he cannot sleep, he decides to read it aloud and at this moment, he will notice that he reads it for Hanna "it was always Hanna who predominated, I read to Hanna" (Schlink 181). Once again, he keeps holding onto the memories that he has of Hanna, he keeps going back to the past. Therefore, we reach to the conclusion that Michael is incapable of letting his past behind in order to start a new beginning.

As shown above, there are significant differences between how Michael and Hanna handle the past. Furthermore, their generational gap has an influence in how they act when they come across with the past. On the one hand, Hanna has difficulties to deal with her Nazi past and hence, she avoids at all cause to talk about it. Moreover, every time that she feels that her past is going to come back, she starts a new beginning and thus, she achieves to keep living in the present. On the other hand, Michael preserves the past alive not only the romantic one but also Hanna's past. Consequently, he struggles to understand her behavior.

5.2 Trauma: a key aspect on Hanna's and Michael's identity

The remembrance of Hanna's past at the concentration camp is a traumatic event for Hanna, because it reminds her of the direst consequences of the illiteracy that she has been hiding throughout her whole life. This is the reason why her trauma appears as a result of a painful psychological condition produced by her illiteracy which fits with Fuchs theory of trauma. She enrolled voluntarily to the SS because she did not want to accept the promotion in Siemens and when war ended she moved from one place to another trying to avoid the letters and summonses to court (Schlink 94-96), all that because she could not read. For this reason, while she was working at the camps, she used to choose "the youngest and weakest children" (Schlink 115) that could read books to her. Those children as victims of the camps, sooner or later were condemned to die, leaving Hanna as the only survivor with the knowledge of her deficiency.

In addition, throughout the story we see how her illiteracy determines the course of her life, not only because it limits her choices but also, because her instinct works pushed by the fear of her illiteracy being uncovered. Schlink points out this idea in Chapter Eleven (Part One) when they set off by bike on a four day trip and they have an argument in Amorbach because Michael decides to let her a note notifying her that he is going out to bring breakfast: "Good morning! Bringing breakfast, be right back" (52). Hanna gets angry because she cannot read those words and instead of telling him the truth, she prefers to lie to him by telling that there is not any note left:

"You did? I don't see a note".

"You don't believe me?"

"I'd love to believe you. But I don't see any note" (Schlink 54).

However, Hanna is forced to remember when she is at the trial. The judge asks for a graphical evidence, which is Hanna's signature, with the intention of determining whom of the defendants is responsible of writing the report and, hence, the superior boss of the guardians. As a result of keeping on hiding her illiteracy, she admits that she has written the report that describes what occurred in the fires of the church, along with the names of the people who died and those who were in charge: "I admit I wrote the report" (128). Moreover, she does not even try to write her signature because she knows that

she is not capable of writing it. So once again, she prefers to hide her secret and face the consequences instead of saying the truth. It is not bizarre to experience illiteracy as a trauma because Fuchs claims that trauma is “an iconic signifier of historical experience in the post-Holocaust era” (2006 171), which means that each person who took part in the war in one way or another suffered its consequences. For Hanna, her illiteracy is bounded to the past that she is always avoiding to remember.

Trauma also takes a fundamental role in Michael’s and Hanna’s relationship. Since Michael meets Hanna, he will be trying to not only understand her but also her actions and her identity. At the beginning, Michael does not talk about Hanna with anyone and he lies to his family about where he spends his time. This is evident in Chapter Seven (Part One) when he arrives late to dinner and says “[...] I’d lost my way, that I’d wanted to walk through the memorial garden in the cemetery to Molkerkur...” (Schlink 27). Furthermore, Hanna unconsciously acts as a trauma for Michael because she is always present in his thoughts and he cannot take control of the world that he has created with her. Therefore, as stated before, he does not talk about her with anyone even though he knows that he should do it, but he does not want to break the “bubble” where he lives in.

However, Hanna’s image ends up taking so much control on him that he compares it with an illness. This idea is presented first of all when Michael is talking with Sophie, a friend from high school, and he realizes that Hanna controls his behavior in some way that he is incapable of understanding it, "Hanna as illness. I was ashamed" (Schlink 74). Nevertheless, this idea is reinforced when Michael becomes an adult. After Hanna’s death he goes to visit the daughter who survived the fires of the church, the one who was present during Hanna’s trial, in order to give her the present that Hanna left as her last wish. While they are talking about Hanna, she asks Michael if Hanna knew what she had done to him and Michael replies that she was aware of what she had done to the people in the camp and on the march (Schlink 211). So, instead of answering the question, he justifies Hanna’s actions because he glorifies her. He cannot understand that Hanna has been using him for her own benefit and that he was a way of evading from her past, in other words, he helped her to live in the “suspense”. Furthermore, even after her death he cannot get her out of his mind: “In the first few years after Hanna’s death, I was tormented by the old questions of whether I had denied and betrayed her,

whether I owed her something, whether I was guilty for having loved her” (Schlink, 214). Taking this into account, we see that Michael is unable to overcome his past with Hanna.

Finally, the fact that Hanna departs due to her own trauma in order to start a new life is the main reason why she provokes a trauma on Michael. She tries to leave her past behind which is what her generation is accustomed to do while Michael, who belongs to the second generation, does the contrary. He keeps trying to understand Hanna’s behavior and this will cause him an inability to process her abandonment. She leaves the city without saying goodbye nor providing any explanation to him. As a consequence, he feels broken because for him it is like a double abandonment, she withdraws as a mother and as his girlfriend. For Michael, Hanna apart from being her lover, she was like a mother to him because she took care of him while he was ill and worried about his education like a mother is supposed to do. That is why at the beginning of the story, he claims that he feels ashamed when he goes shopping with his real mother but that he would not feel like that if he was with Hanna: “but to be seen with Hanna, who was ten years younger than my mother but could have been my mother, didn’t bother me” (Schlink 38).

As years pass by and the story follows its course, we realize that Michael is trying to hide his emotions but he is unable to forget Hanna. He says that “it took a while before my body stopped yearning for hers; sometimes I myself was aware of my arms and legs groping for her in my sleep, and my brother reported more than once at the table that I had called out ‘Hanna’ in the night” (Schlink 85). Thus, she is not just an illness as he claimed before, she has become like a drug to him because he cannot take her out of his mind.

Overall, trauma is present in both characters but it acts differently on them. For Hanna, trauma – and trying to overcome it - works as a tool for remembrance because it is bounded with her past as a Nazi and hence, with her illiteracy. For this reason, as we have seen in the examples above, she works hard to leave that part of her background behind as it seems that she wants to escape from it. In contrast, trauma acts as an obstacle for Michael as unconsciously he keeps Hanna’s memory alive as it does not let him move on because he is incapable of forgetting his experience with Hanna.

5.3 Memory Contests and Affective Memory Icons in *The Reader*

We can find many examples for affective memory icons in the novel. Thus, I have decided to focus on the books, Hanna's last letter and the tea caddy as they have great importance in the development of the characters and they also disclose many aspects of their characterization. Furthermore, I will use Fuchs's theory of memory contests, not with the purpose that she uses it, which is to explain the confrontation between different social groups, but in order to understand the internal psychological conflict of a person. Which refers to how they try to deal with their struggles, the ones that affect on how to take decisions that affect their lives, as well as, how they act.

First of all, books play an essential role in the development of the plot, as we have already seen with *The Odyssey*. On the one hand, for Michael books are a part of his life not only at the beginning of the story when he is a student nor when he becomes a lawyer, but specially in his relationship with Hanna. This is due to the fact that he takes the role of the reader because Hanna is an illiterate. Furthermore, he is the one who decides what they read every time that Hanna wants him to read. At the beginning of the story Hanna asks Michael if he is ever going to write a book which he answers that he does not know (Schlink 61) but at the end, we see him actually writing the story of his romance with Hanna (Schlink 214). This is how Michael returns to the past and holds onto the memory of their story. Furthermore, once and again he will recall the story as he claims when he says "Since then I've done it many times in my head, each time a little differently, each time with new images, and new stands of action and thought" (Schlink 214). As a result, the book that he writes is the symbol of his memories and the way that he has to bring his past back every time that he needs to. Therefore, each time that he goes back to rewrite his romance with Hanna, he is actually reanalyzing the events from different perspectives as Fuchs suggests with memory contests.

On the other hand, the books for Hanna are a reminder of her illiteracy but also a wakeup call to never forget who she was before knowing how to read. For this reason, at jail she read books about the holocaust in order to understand the atrocities that she and the people who took part in the war did. She read a lot of literature of the victims

and about the concentration camps as it can be seen in the conversation that Michael has with the governor when they are at Hanna's room:

I went to the bookshelf. Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowiski, Jean Améry — the literature of the victims, next to the autobiography of Rudolf Hess, Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann in Jerusalem, and scholarly literature of the camps.

“Did Hanna read these?”

“[...] Several years ago I had to get her a general concentration-camp bibliography, and then one or two years ago she asked me to suggest some books on women in the camps, both prisoners and guards; [...] As soon as Frau Schmitz learned to read, she began to read about concentration camps” (Schlink 203).

As a result, this idea suggests that the remembrance that she had of the Holocaust is different to the one that she reads about. As Michael does, she would reconsider the memory that she has of what happened in the camps by reading others perspectives of the events. Thus, books for her are the memory icon that will help her to and hence, her memory contests are triggered by the books which Fuchs suggests as memory icon.

Then, Hanna's last letter is a highly charged memory icon for Michael, as it is the physical representation of what he has lost. He has all her written letters in paper except for the last one because she decided not to write it for him, but to the governor of the prison instead, as it is presented in Chapter Ten (Third Part). Even though she does not write directly to Michael, she makes sure of leaving a message for him in her last letter “and tell him I said hello” (Schlink 205). Once again, she leaves without providing any explanation, but this time will be different because she will be gone forever. As a consequence of hearing Hanna's last words Michael feels broken. In fact this “hello” gives the power back to Hanna even after her death as she has chosen the word “hello” instead of “goodbye” taking away Michael's opportunity to leave that part of his life behind. He is not able to carry on as she did not give him the chance to say goodbye, therefore, she will forever be a part of him.

Furthermore, Michael believed that he was the one who left behind their relationship and that she has dependency on him and not the other way around. He remembers that Hanna used to rely on him because he was always at her mercy. He was the one who taught her to read, thanks to the cassettes that he recorded for her and he also found her a place to stay after she got released from jail (Schlink 193-199). However, due to her last words, he realizes that she has not changed her attitude after the trial and that she still has control over him. He also becomes aware of the fact that he has not overcome their romance nor his trauma caused by her abandonment. Moreover, his trauma will become worse due to this new abandonment because, as stated before, she will be seizing him forever.

Finally, if we focus on the tea caddy, it is an object that symbolizes the loss of a life such as Hanna's death. At the end of the book, Michael meets the woman who survived the fires with her mother. He brings Hanna's tea caddy and the 7000 marks that Hanna had in the bank as a present for her, which was Hanna's last wish. When she saw the tea caddy, she tells Michael that she had one of those when she was at the camp but then one day it was stolen from her (Schlink 212). Furthermore, she claims that "[...] the caddy wasn't stolen for what was in it. The caddy itself, and what could be done with it, were worth a lot in the camp" (Schlink 212). As a result, the tea caddy can also be a symbol for the loss of her family.

If we go beyond and we focus on Hanna's grave, which appears at the end of the book, on the one hand, it can be a symbol for remembering the dead not only Hanna who has recently passed away but also, to those who died as a consequence of the war. On the other hand, it can also represent the end of their relationship and hence, a way of letting the past behind. Thus, this action may suggest the start of Michael's new beginning because he says that "it was the first time and only time that I stood there" (Schlink 216), which implies that he is ready to get rid of Hanna and their past.

Finally, affective memory icons and memory contests work as a trigger to remember the past, as we have already seen in the examples presented above. However, this remembrance does not act in the same way for the characters as they do not have the same past in common. Therefore, we can see how this generational gap between Hanna and Michael influences on their behavior and way of looking at the past.

6. Conclusion

By applying the theories presented above about memory, trauma and forgetting, this essay has shown that there is a generational gap between the characters from *The Reader*, Michael and Hanna, which influences their perspective of remembrance. In fact, Michael belongs to the postwar generation, which is characterized by their confrontation of the war generation, to which Hanna belongs. This hypothesis has been proven in the analysis section of the paper by analyzing different scenarios of the main characters.

On the one hand, Hanna, before her imprisonment, achieves to keep living in the present, as she avoids to talk about the past. In addition, she also tries to avoid remembering the past as it makes her recall her illiteracy and Nazi connection. On the other hand, Michael does completely the opposite because he conserves the past active, which establishes a generational gap between them, as it has been seen in the examples provided during the analysis. Furthermore, Michael is not capable of overcoming his trauma as it links him to Hanna's memory. This remembrance is specifically related with her abandonment which becomes an obstacle for him, as it stops him from letting his past behind and to start a new beginning. Therefore, the past impacts in the development of the characters as Affective Memory Icons and Memory Contests play a fundamental role in how they feel about the existence of the past in Hanna's and Michael's present.

After conducting this analysis, it can be understood that there is a theoretical reason why the novel had an impact on German society 50 years after the end of WWII because it contrasts different ways of overcoming the past and exemplifies the mechanisms and factors that influence this remembrance. Therefore, the analysis of this novel has been useful for the understanding of German culture and its background. However, this investigation has some gaps because on the one hand, it has not been possible to focus in this paper on all the Memory Contests present in the novel and on the other hand, the novel itself does not take into account how the third generation experiences this Nazi past. Thus, it would be interesting to develop more research focusing on how this third generation deals with the Nazi past but also with the society that the two previous generations let them.

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