

# The Literary Representations of Holocaust Perpetrators and Its Ethical Dilemma

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the representations of Holocaust perpetrators in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*. The narrator/protagonists in the two stories are thrown into ethical chaos upon realization of the multiple identities of their loved ones and they strive to gain ethical judgment by exercising reason and through different ways of education before finally taking ethical action to accept the past of their perpetrator (grand)fathers. Their experiences reveal that the second and third-generation German war descendants find diversified ways of recognizing the contradicting identities of their ancestors. The essay further argues that the writers of the two stories use similar writing strategies to sustain the basic ethical position in treating materials in relation to mass killing.

**Keywords:** *The Reader*; *The Dark Room*; Holocaust perpetrator; literary representation; ethical dilemma

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**标题:** 大屠杀事件施暴者的文学表征及其伦理困境

**内容摘要:** 本文研究的是本哈德·施林克在《朗读者》和瑞秋·塞弗特在《暗房》中塑造的施暴者形象。两部小说的叙事主人公在意识到亲人的多重身份后陷入伦理混乱的境地，努力通过理性思考和多重教育手段获得伦理判断，最终采取伦理行动以面对施暴者亲人的过去。他们的经历表明，德国战争第二代和第三代后人经由差异化途径终于认可了先辈的矛盾身份。本文据此进一步指出，小说作者采用了相似的书写策略以维系在处理大屠杀材料上的根本伦理立场。

**关键词:** 《朗读者》；《暗房》；大屠杀施暴者；文学表征；伦理困境

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Holocaust literature is generally divided into three kinds based on its “principals”

(Lang 96)—victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Among these three kinds, those portraying perpetrators as the central characters, especially written by the second and third-generation German descendants of WWII, appeared in the recent decades, much later than the other two. In comparison with their (grand)fathers who may or may not have been involved in the persecution of the non-Aryans during WWII but who chose to remain silent about it afterwards, the younger generations are brave enough to engage in writing the perpetrators directly in the hope of reflecting over the effects of their misbehavior on the offspring and on the German ethnicity. For them, whether the Holocaust can be represented in the form of literature is no longer a question although the debate over its validity lasts for several decades.

However, how to represent the perpetrators' deeds in the war, how to portray the complex humanity of the perpetrators, and how to evaluate the perpetrators' behavior upon himself and others—all these questions involve ethical judgment and ethical choice. On elucidating the objectives of ethical literary criticism, Nie Zhenzhao argues that it intends to “criticize literature from the perspective of historicity, and to shed a new light on literature of different historical periods from an ethical point of view” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 91). Seen in this light, it is necessary to appeal to ethical literary criticism in order to address the above-mentioned questions closely. Only by placing the perpetrators and their stories back into the particular historical contexts can we discover the ethical dilemma that were faced by writers and the corresponding writing strategies that are adopted in representing the criminals. In Nie's theoretical discussions, ethical selection<sup>1</sup> is more important than biological selection elucidated by Charles Darwin since it “explains the distinction between human beings and animals in a cognitive sense”: “It is ethical selection that helps to endow human beings with reason and ethical consciousness, and thus eventually turns them into ethical beings” (“Ethical Literary Criticism” 386). Thus, this stage transcends the biological level to the cognitive level in determining the ethical identity of a human being. In this process, reason and education play important roles in shaping one's ethical consciousness. In Holocaust stories, the descendants of perpetrator (grand)fathers are thrown into ethical chaos since they are faced with two opposing images of their beloved, that of a (grand)father and that of Nazi perpetrator. They must go through a difficult journey of making ethical choice by way of reason and education in order to

1 In Nie Zhenzhao's theoretical construction of ethical literary criticism, “ethical selection” and “ethical choice” are different. Whereas the former is related to a stage of human evolution in comparison and contrast to natural selection, the latter refers to the specific action made by the agent in a specific situation. See Nie Zhenzhao, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism,” *Social Sciences in China* 10 (2020): 73.

develop the complicated ethical identity as perpetrator descendants.

This essay will discuss these inter-related issues in light of Nie's ethical literary criticism, by analyzing two Holocaust stories which portray the complex characterization of the perpetrators, namely *The Reader* (1998) by Bernhard Schlink and *The Dark Room* (2001) by Rachel Seiffert, written respectively from the perspectives of the second and the third-generation German war descendants. It is intended to achieve a better understanding of the effects of the Holocaust upon the German younger generations, especially with reference to the formation of their ethical identities and their attitudes toward history.

### 1. The Revelation of Ethical Chaos

In Nie's elaboration of ethical literary criticism, the realization of the multiple identities is the central ethical knot since the protagonists have to face the consequences of such revelation. As the story goes, the changes of the characters' ethical identities directly cause ethical chaos and the original ethical order collapses immediately. It is this moment that marks the critical turn in the narrative progression. It is natural to find the complexity of one's identity since "the moral implications of the text within specific historical times" are determined by "the intricacy of characters and plots" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism" 398). In this ethically chaotic situation, man is forced to make an ethical choice in order to resolve "dilemmas around good and evil, duty and pleasure, loyalty and freedom" (Tihanov 560). In this sense, ethical chaos is a preliminary stage for a person to untie the ethical knot and to develop ethical consciousness.

In both *The Reader* and *The Dark Room*, the ethical knot is the revelation of the multiple identities of the beloved family member to the narrators. The story of *The Reader* is told from the perspective of a 15-year-old schoolboy by the name of Michael Berg who, upon realizing the SS identity of the girl he loves, struggles to help her toward redemption. In a similar way, the story of *The Dark Room* is also concerned with the revelation of a hidden identity. In this case, it is the SS identity of the grandfather of the protagonist Michael Lehner (Micha). The pursuit of the historical truth remains as the central storyline of both stories. The revelation of the multiple identities of the (grand)father throws the narrators into ethical chaos where he struggles to find salvation.

*The Reader* begins with the narrator Michael recalling his adolescence when he was struck down with hepatitis. It was just during this period of staying away from school that he fell in love with Hanna, a tram conductor. The affectionate feeling that was developed between them grew stronger each day until Hanna

disappeared all of a sudden. The next time when they meet again is in a courtroom. Michael is now a college student of law and Hanna is on trial for causing the death of several hundred women by imprisoning them in a village church during a bomb attack. Michael does not recognize her until her name is called, but he feels numb: “I recognized her, but I felt nothing. Nothing at all” (Schlink 93). This numbness continues when Michael sits in the several hearings and pieces together what Hanna may have done during the war. The emotional detachment of Michael suggests his negation of the past connections with Hanna since it is against his moral principles to feel sympathetic with a war criminal. It is not that Michael forgets the past romance that has taken place between them, but that his amnesia is the best way to remember the past since forgetfulness and recollection are complementary means of memory.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, it is better to remain numb to the woman he loved. Only by doing so can he keep those sweet memories intact.

Apart from Michael’s deliberate forgetfulness of the connection with Hanna who is now tried in court as a perpetrator, his numbness is also attributed to the loss of verbal expression upon realizing the horrendous deeds that the criminals have done. Judging from the age gap between them<sup>2</sup>, Michael’s attitude toward the perpetrator represents that of the second-generation German offspring. Looking at those people who perform different duties in court, he is puzzled and shocked at the same time at how the lives of the common people have been significantly changed by the war: “[...] when I was preoccupied by this general numbness, and by the fact that it had taken hold not only of the perpetrators and victims, but of all of us, judges and lay members of the court, prosecutors and recorders, who had to deal with these events now” (Schlink 101). What Michael sees now challenges his vision of the world which further causes the collapse of the ethical order in his mind. The ethical chaos has driven him speechless since “he is unable to reconcile his knowledge of Hanna the perpetrator with his experience of Hanna the lover” (McGlothlin 204).

Similar ethical chaos also happens to high school English teacher Micha in *The Dark Room* who travels to Belarus three times in order to find out whether his grandfather has been involved in the shooting of the Jews. Different from the previous story, however, this story takes place almost half a century after WWII and focuses on the third-generation offspring of the perpetrator. Micha remembers

1 See Patrick J. Geary, “History as Memory,” translated by Chen Hao, *History, Memory and Writing*, edited by Luo Xin, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2018, 137.

2 Hanna was 36 years old when she developed affectionate feelings with the 15-year-old Michael. She always addresses Michael as “kid.” This suggests a parent-child age relationship between the two characters.

his grandfather as a kind old man who loves his family. On a colored photo taken shortly before grandfather's death, "Michael sits on his Opa's lap, legs dangling, smiling into the lens [...] Opa has his hands folded across Michael's tummy and is smiling, too, but not at the lens. He is looking only at the boy on his lap" (Seiffert 234). This intimate and affectionate relationship between the grandfather and the grandson is imprinted on the photo and remains in Micha's memory for many years after grandfather's death. However, when he wonders whether Opa was an SS soldier and thus a war criminal, the loving image of Opa on the family photo changes: "My Opa. Mostly. But sometimes he's a Nazi, now" (Seiffert 245). The reason why the same image carries different meanings is that people tend to understand the world based on what they think and feel about it. The static image on the family photo reveals only one aspect of a person, "a fragment": "A photograph changes according to the context in which it is seen" (Sontag 82).

Micha's hesitation suggests his ethical chaos since the image of a loving grandfather and the image of a possible SS killer go against each other. He later engages in three trips to where his grandfather has served in the army until he meets Josef, a survivor and "collaborator." Josef is a person from the past and embodies the legacies of the war. In him Micha reconnects to the lost memories that the family photo fails to convey, thus clearing his doubts about his grandfather's involvement in the mass killing. The ethical knot in the story remains tied until Micha reaches the historical site of the killing in his third trip: "Micha stands on the edge of the clearing [...]. Feet on the boundary where forest floor gives way to grass. Fists, teeth, stomach clenched. [He] can't stand here on this soft ground, on this grass and moss. He turns away again" (Seiffert 386-387). Micha's escape from the site of the killing reveals his inner terror at facing the historical truth. For the third-generation war descendants such as Micha, they can only establish a link to the past through imagination and by reconnecting to "the referent of the mark" (McGlothlin 10), which may include the oral narrative of the survivors, the photos of the historical events and the historical remains. Thus, standing by the clearing means a return to the past, a bare truth which is too shocking for Micha to face. This moment marks the complete collapse of the ethical order for him.

In both stories, the narrator/protagonists experience a similar moment of mental confusion. The revelation of the different identities of the persons they love is the ethical knot in the narrative progression. This moment of revelation is crucial in the development of the story since it requires them to make ethical judgment. For both Michaels, the revelation is a betrayal of their emotions, a denial of their own previous lives and a challenge to their past memories. Their immediate actions, to remain

silent or to run away, are their unconscious responses, but neither action is an ethical choice made upon reason.

## 2. The Development of Ethical Consciousness

Both Michaels experience similar dilemma and only after they react to the situation with reason can they become “ethical beings” (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 386). The development of reason is an important process for human beings to become “an advanced species with ethical consciousness” (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 89). The ethical consciousness gained through reason is crucial in helping human beings to form “notion of good and evil” and furthermore, in differentiating them from animals (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 386). Therefore, the development of ethical consciousness is the necessary step for human beings to gain salvation from ethical chaos. As discussed above, both Michaels in the two selected stories have to face two contradicting identities of those to whom they feel emotionally attached. In *The Reader*, Michael tries to put together the two sides of Hanna, and in a similar way, Micha in *The Dark Room* struggles “to reconcile the images of the Opa with those of the Nazi” (Berberich 272). However, two Michaels experience different ways to acquire ethical consciousness.

For Michael in *The Reader*, the acquisition of ethical consciousness is made possible through several hearings at court. As a law school student, Michael has the opportunity to sit in the courtroom to observe the trial. “The persecutors sat in front of the windows, and against the bright spring and summer daylight they were no more than black silhouettes. The court, three judges in black robes and six selected citizens, was in place at the head of the courtroom and on the right-hand side was the bench of defendants and their lawyers” (Schlink 93). The detailed description of the layout of the courtroom displays a solemn atmosphere against which Hanna appears. The persecutors, sitting against the sunlight, do not show clear facial expressions and they represent anonymous power of accusation; whereas the faces of the defendants and their lawyers are fully exposed in the sunlight. Against the several charges, Hanna insists on what she believes to be right or wrong: “When she thought she was being done an injustice, she contradicted it, and when something was rightly claimed or alleged, she acknowledged it” (Schlink 108). Hanna’s honesty paves the way for the upcoming puzzle. When the judge asks her whether she has made room for the new prisoners by sending them to be killed, she comes up with a question that remains as central to the debate: “[...] so what would you have done?” (Schlink 110) This question is directed to the judge since Hanna is at a loss with what she could otherwise have done in that circumstance. It is also directed to all others in the courtroom—

judges, lawyers, prosecutors and the jury panel—to question whether they could have done the same thing as Hanna did. Michael certainly takes that question seriously and he begins to question whether Hanna’s choice is an ethical one.

Michael’s reason is reinforced by his discussions with his professor at law school, “one of the few at that time who were working on the Nazi past and the related trials” (Schlink 88). Michael participates in his seminar during which the topic of “retroactive justice”<sup>1</sup> is brought to open discussion. After a chain of five questions concerning law and law enforcement, Michael is awakened to the realization that probably no one would believe that they have committed the same crime now. The concept of “retroactive justice” is believed to be put forward by Randy E. Barnett to refer to the possibility of doing justice after the event, particularly by reflecting on the effects of the deeds afterwards. To evaluate justice across a span of historical time is to think of the issue in the perspective of historical materialism. Nie reiterates the importance of placing a text into “specific historical contexts or ethical environments.” Only by doing so can we locate the ethical value of a text (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 85). As a result of all the legal debates he has participated in, Michael gains ethical consciousness concerning the judgment of the past deeds of Hanna. He sits calmly in the courtroom to listen to the final verdict of Hanna.

For Micha in *The Dark Room*, the acquisition of ethical consciousness is gained from his visits to Belarus where he meets the war survivor Josef and hears him recall the past. At the same time, his discussions with his family members about Opa’s possible misbehavior in the war only drive him more bewildered. His sister Luise negates Opa’s participation in the mass killing and tries to find excuses for him, “maybe he never really knew what to think himself [...] it was war and it was cruel and confusing and he couldn’t tell right from wrong any more” (Seiffert 373). Micha’s wife Mina draws his attention to “all those nice things” that Opa has done to his family (Seiffert 379). His father, too, insists that he should remember Opa’s love for the grandchildren. However, Opa’s image on the family photo sustains the image of a loving ancestor, “the myth of the ideal family” (Hirsch 8); whereas Opa’s duty as an SS soldier is only imagined in Micha’s mind based on his knowledge of history. The stronger the family negate the dark side of Opa, the more anxious Micha becomes to probe into the historical truth. Therefore, for Micha, ethical consciousness is only acquired by listening to the oral narratives of those who went through the war and by visiting the historical site.

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1 For a definition of “retroactive justice,” see Randy E. Barnett, “Restitution: A New Paradigm of Criminal Justice,” *Ethics* 4 (1977): 279-301.

Both Michaels were absent from the historical sites. Michael in *The Reader* lives through the war but did not join the army because of his young age, so he was not present in Hanna's event. He belongs to the second-generation descendants to make judgment about their parents' misdeeds during the war. Micha in *The Dark Room* is the third-generation offspring of the war criminals. He, too, was not part of Opa's experiences. "The offspring of perpetrators inherit the history of their parents' unacknowledged crimes, a legacy of violence and violation whose effects are felt as a stain upon their souls" (McGlothlin 9). Since the memories of the second and third-generation offspring are not direct, they have to check the validity of the materials again and again before they are able to reach an ethical judgment. Such is the case with Micha whose judgment of Opa comes only after he finally arrives at the clearing in the woods, the remains of the mass shooting. Since historical remains are the foundational support of memory<sup>1</sup>, Micha now gains ethical judgment concerning Opa's deeds during the war.

Although the two Michaels in the selected stories experience different ways of acquiring ethical consciousness, they successfully become ethical beings after mental struggles. Governed by reason, they are able to distinguish two contradicting sides that coexist in the same person: The good side is the one that they cherish as loving persons in their lives; the bad side is the one as SS soldiers that should be condemned as war criminals. This ethical judgment marks the turning point in the story lines since the narrator/protagonists have to respond ethically to the circumstance that they have found themselves in. The final resolution shows the triumph of the human factor over the animal factor because only the former "contributes to the formation of ethical consciousness" and works further as "the determining component of human nature" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism" 388). This ethical choice salvages the narrator/protagonists from the previous mental confusion and marks their transcendence over the biological desires to the cognitive level of understanding history and humanity.

### 3. The Ethical Position in Literary Representations

Now that both Michaels have recognized the contradicting sides of the same person, they are now ready to untie the ethical knot based on their ethical judgment. The exercise of reason over the situation has helped them to gain salvation from the ethical chaos. The final resolution of the stories leads to further consideration over the ethics of representing perpetrators in literary writings, which is related to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Aleida Assmann, *Spaces of Memory*, translated by Pan Lu, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, 364.



purposes of such representation for the writers as well as for the readers since “the ethical value of literature is its positive moral edification value” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction” 88). The possible choices that the writers have made and the objectives that they intend to achieve in the process of writing these stories, therefore, should not escape from our attention.

Both *The Reader* and *The Dark Room* concern the representation of perpetrators, Hanna and Opa respectively. In portraying the perpetrators, Schlink and Seiffert take extra precaution since an essential ethical dilemma is placed before them: To portray perpetrators as mere criminals, they end up with creating flat characters that fit into character stereotypes; to portray perpetrators as complicated human beings who have their excuses for performing horrendous deeds during WWII, they run the risk of “speak[ing] on their behalf” (Adams 4), thus losing the basic ethical position. Against this ethical dilemma, the writers have appealed to a few writing strategies to avoid falling into this primary trap.

In the first place, neither writer writes the mass killing scene in a direct way. The horrible killing action is deliberately omitted in the narrative as if it is a taboo. In order to maintain the basic ethical position, both writers avoid writing the killing scene for fear that they would possibly be accused of beautifying the evil and of arousing uneasiness among readers. In *The Reader*, a gap of a few years is inserted between the initial acquaintances of the two protagonists and the courtroom scene. When Michael meets Hanna on trial again, the killing action has already taken place. In *The Dark Room*, too, the crime has already been committed when Micha was born. Therefore, neither Michael was present at the crime scenes, which does not disrupt the basic ethical order in the narrative since as Micha says to himself: “Stupid to feel guilty about things that were done before I was born” (Seiffert 247). However, the absence from the crime scenes does not guarantee total ignorance of the past tragedy since Michael realizes that he should be “guilty of having loved a criminal” (Schlink 133) and Micha realizes that he has been held dearly in the family photos by a killer Opa. In a way, “it is the very absence of this experience that is often an uncanny presence” (Grimwood 3). The emotional connection to the ones whom they love forces them to make ethical judgment with regard to history. In this sense, both writers place emphasis on the effects of the killing over the loved ones rather than the killing action itself.

Moreover, both writers aim at presenting the stories as a collective tragedy rather than an individual case, which strengthens the effects of Holocaust both for those who live through the war and for those who were born long after it. It is true in a sense that “[t]he Holocaust remains a profoundly personal matter for many

people who were not there” (Grimwood 30). The first-person narrative perspective in *The Reader* creates an intimate circumstance to bring the reader into the story. This perspective makes it easier for the reader to experience the same situation as the young protagonist who goes through mental confusion and who finally exerts his efforts to achieve salvation. Hanna herself is conscious that she was not alone in obeying the orders. The plural form of “we” (Schlink 114) that she uses to defend herself in court reveals a collective crime that the Nazi soldiers have committed against common people. Different from the first-person narrative perspective in *The Reader*, *The Dark Room* applies the third person point of view, and the story of Micha is presented in a relatively detached way. However, it is equally important for the reader “to consider the experience of alterity, of the otherness of others” (Nünning 47). This distance makes it easier for the reader to reach an ethical judgment in Micha’s situation. For Micha, his quest for Opa’s past is not only a personal obsession to know what is not written as family history, but also a collective reflection over this part of the national history. By making the personal collective, both Schlink and Seiffert successfully draw the attention of the reader to the nature of the Holocaust which is linked to the collective memory of the Germans.

Furthermore, both writers arrange for the narrator/protagonists to take the right ethical actions after gaining ethical consciousness. Both Michaels choose to accept the historical past: Michael in *The Reader* decides to help Hanna gain redemption, and Michael in *The Dark Room* takes his daughter to visit Oma (grandmother) as a way of “coming to terms with the past” (Berberich 267). In either way, they accept their identity as the descendants of war perpetrators. “Ethical choice is decided by one’s identity. Different persons may make different choices, and different choices construct new identities” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction” 77). The mutual influence between one’s identity and ethical choice is well illustrated in the two stories in which the narrator/protagonists, caught in the ethical chaos as a result of the revelation of the contrasting identities of their loved ones, have to take ethical actions with regard to how to evaluate the deeds of their (grand)fathers in the war. The two writers, therefore, convey a clear message to the reader as to how to face the historical legacy of WWII, especially in relation to the deeds of war perpetrators, thus maintaining the essential ethical position in literary representations.

Ethical literary criticism “attempts to unpack the ethical values of literature, and the truth about social life depicted in literature from an ethical perspective” (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 100). For literary writings of the Holocaust, this ethical perspective is first revealed through the ethical judgment that the

protagonists have made, and then impregnated in the ethical duties of the writers. When Michael asks himself, “What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews? [...] Should we only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt? To what purpose?” (Schlink 102) He may not have affirmative answers in mind, leaving some space for the readers to think over the ethical choice that they would have made. Micha’s story continues with the discussion and provides affirmative answers to those questions. By persistently probing into the historical truth, Micha realizes that it is not ethical to remain silent about the past; neither is it ethical to pretend that the Holocaust has nothing to do with people of the present day. By writing about the effects of the event on the second and third-generation German war descendants, both writers aim at increasing the reader’s awareness of how the darkness of humanity could bring such catastrophe to mankind. In literary spaces, they establish “mental processes that can subsequently be activated in real-life situations” (Nünning 47) so that mankind can avoid committing similar crimes again. In this sense, both writers display strong ethical duties toward history.

Bernard Schlink was born in 1944, shortly before the end of WWII and works as a law teacher at college. Rachel Seiffert was born to a German mother and she now lives in the UK. Both writers ask questions about the legacy of the war and what it means to be born a German. In their writings they try to reconstruct a link with history, from the perspectives of the second and the third-generation war descendants respectively. Both stories represent the complex identities of the perpetrators in the hope of enlightening an understanding of the complexity of humanity. Faced with the ethical chaos that has arisen from the multiple identities of their loved ones, both narrator/protagonists in the selected texts exercise reason to help make ethical judgment. Their final resolution reveals the triumph of the human factor to make them ethical beings. This process of moving from revelation to realization suggests that in reading Holocaust literatures, it is not enough to develop hatred, anger or condemnation on the part of the reader, but it is more important to keep alert to any possible danger that the darkness of humanity may lead to. It is this latter concern that stays much longer and deeper with every reader and that marks the true value of perpetrator representations in Holocaust literature.

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