

## Rationale

For my written task, I focused on Bernard Schlink's *The Reader*. For this assignment I wrote a vignette from Hannah's point of view called "The Prisoner". The purpose of this story was to take a look at what Hannah's last few hours of life were like in her jail cell before she hung herself. The form of the vignette follows Bernard's style of questions being asked, then being answered quickly after. One of the most questioned events of the novel is Hannah's death, and why she would commit suicide right before her release from jail. The story seeks to capture the guilt that she must've felt after reading the memoirs of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. However, I also wished to show her awareness of the events that took place, and her direct effect on them. The effect on Michael was one of the biggest highlighted. She believes herself a burden on Michael. She understands the effect she had on the boy growing up, or at least infers it, and finds more guilt as the result. The most important aspect of this relationship that I wanted to highlight was her unwillingness to keep living after coming to this realization. Her death only serves to further warp Michael's life, and her reaction in the vignette is meant to be symbolic of the ever-escalating guilt cycle that the German's created for themselves following WWII. The older generation's pride caused the events. The younger generation comes along and is given guilt that they don't know what to do with, and instead of helping them work through it, the older generation leaves the younger generation to deal with it, completely exasperating the issue.

(Word Count: 280)

## ***The Prisoner***

I sat on my cot staring at the far wall, trying to push back the thoughts threatening to take over. This cell has been my home for eighteen years. This small, bland room trapped me with the darkest of my thoughts. A bed, closet, table, chair, a shelf on the wall over the table, a sink and toilet in the corner behind the door were my only companions over the years. Them and my thoughts. I glanced to the bookshelf on the wall. Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Améry— guilt crashed into me anew. Why did I let my own personal pride control me all those years ago? Was it really that hard to admit the facts? But I knew the answer already. I couldn't face the truth myself. My sense of self so small, so insecure that any scrutiny from the outside threatened my ability to feel useful. The worst part was the pity. As if others knew what I went through. They didn't help and neither did their expressions of compassion. Their worried looks always held a look of disappointment. Disappointment that a grown woman couldn't read. Disappointment that she would let it hold her back. It wasn't my fault I never learned. I had to work when others could sit in their classrooms and learn.

At least, that's what I told myself. Deep down I sensed the falsity of my thoughts. I could've learned. Should've learned. The looks are what scared me away. I couldn't stand the disappointment that lurked behind their compassioned expressions. In the end, I was weak and others paid the price. Others like the ones who read the books. The knowledge I once thought lost to me forever. Oh, how I wish that it were.

I could still feel the heat of the flames, intense on my brow. With the heat always came the screams. Primal and laced with terror, the haunting noises accompanying me all these years. I could ignore it, run from it when I was ignorant, but not anymore. The guilt threatened to wash over me again. All those people condemned to death all because her fellow Germans, like her, couldn't swallow their pride. Instead they tried to expand it. What was an illiterate person compared to something little better than an animal. We had power. We were more than the disappointments, and it was addictive. In my state of ignorance, only my sense of self mattered and it was a brittle thing, always ready to shatter.

I condemned women in my selections to the horrors of Auschwitz. In the words of Elie Wiesel in his memoir *Night*, "Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky." I would never forget. I would never forgive myself. The dark thoughts brought uncontrollable tears. My tear-filled eyes scanned over the cassettes on the end of the shelf. The kid.

I don't know how he knew. He always was extremely bright. Maybe it was the trial, the examination of evidence, and my eventual refusal to write. I tried to hide it. I could. I spent my whole life hiding it. But not from him. I saw him in the trial, always in the stands. Every day, every week, for the entirety of the ordeal. And in that time, he figured it out. My biggest secret, the reason for my journey to this cell.

But something always bothered me about the kid. He knew. He sent me the tapes. One after another, until I mustered the courage to learn on my own, and still he sent them. Why? He still cared. After all those years, he still saw something in me. Was it that I introduced him to a primal love? Did he fully love me? Yes, I suppose he did. It was to be expected of any 15-year-old when a beautiful woman embraces them.

I can still remember the time I spent with him as if it were yesterday. The traveling, the reading, and the lovemaking spoke of a happier time. One that could never had lasted. The train car company wanted more of her, asked more questions, and I had to leave. Escape.

What did this do to the kid? A new-found love abandoning him with no explanation. To be found again as a war-criminal and sentenced as a mass murderer. Yes, he knew I was innocent. But he must've known I didn't want it shared, so he didn't. But at what cost to himself. Here he is, helping me, an old Nazi war criminal. He shouldn't have to. I'm a burden, one that he shouldn't be allowed to carry any further.

The guilt continued to eat away at my thoughts. I caused so much pain and suffering because of my own pride. I couldn't fix the issue because I was too afraid to admit my own faults. But most haunting, I warped a bright young man's life all to satisfy my own basic needs.

The darkness threatened me again and tears ran unbidden down my cheeks. I'm not strong enough. All those people, all their lives, ruined by my careless actions.

No more. Never again. With a clarity of thought I had not experienced since before prison, I got up from the bed and walked to the table. I grabbed a cord from book shelf, meant to hold together books, and tied the knot. I gently got on top of the table, looped the cord into the ceiling, and put the rope around my neck. I stared at the cassettes, took a deep breath, and stepped off.

I barely noticed the tightening of the rope and the pressure on my neck. It was over. I was done. I was be free.

(Word Count: 975)

### Works Cited

Schlink, Bernhard. *Reader*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017.

Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017