

### Rationale

I wrote a vignette from Hanna's perspective in *The Reader*. While it is a charged moment that is not commented on in the book, I wanted to consider Hanna's decision to commit suicide in this piece and the potential motivations behind the decision, even as she was so close to being released from prison. I feel like her sudden death in the text is extremely thought-provoking and merits exploration because the general consensus is that people in prison want to be freed and reenter society; however, Hanna's actions at the end of *The Reader* suggest the opposite.

I worked on incorporating Hanna's insightfulness, allowing her to understand the nuances in her relationship and interactions with Michael, but not necessarily the implications of her actions. I used elements of her exchange with him when he visited her in prison, as well as how he recorded and sent her tapes to "read" to her, as the foundations of this story. I wanted to use this story to play into the themes of the generational interaction that the author presents in *The Reader*, demonstrating how the older generation can harm and burden the younger generation through both greater-reaching and smaller scope actions. I included the moment where she hits Michael to illustrate how her abusive treatment of him in their relationship parallels how she treated the prisoners in the camps, but also how she fails to acknowledge the extent of the parallel. This reflects Hanna's denial of guilt and remorse for her past actions while illustrating how she regards Michael. Similar to how Schlink uses retrospective perspective in his novel, I used allusions to events in the book while Hanna is in prison awaiting for her release and use literary allusion to demonstrate Hanna's more recent literary learning.

Word Count: 297

There is a numbness to this life. The rasp of the cell door. Plodding routines of wake and slumber. Pleasantries over lunch. The rhythm of pulling a needle through cloth.

But I wait.

No, not for absolution. The living cannot judge me; only the dead--the silent judgment in their glare persistent. I await something more... material, but itself a ghost of bygone times.

My fingers graze the row of labeled cassette tape spines. The plastic cases softly rattling at my touch. My library--spoken stories instead of written books.

I find it in the inmost corner, the very first in the procession of tapes. Almost automatically, I remove the tape from its casing, slotting it into the cassette player on my table. I press play, instinctively straining forward to hear. Once I followed along in a desperate chase to trace the glyph-like shape of letters, but now?

Now, this is revisiting an old friend on the other side--the outside.

“The Odyssey. By Homer.” The words play over the familiar whirl of the cassette. No starts and stops of a frantic scramble to understand words on a page. There’s a pause in the recording, the hint of an inhale caught by the recorder.

*Him.*

I know these words--more surely than anything. I mouth the words as they rattle their tinny notes into the empty air.

“Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns, driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy--”

These are the words that marked a beginning--the first words he read to me, in the small apartment on Bahnhofstrasse. I can still see his indistinct silhouette of his curled form, a book propped open as he reads through half-closed eyes.

He’s all grown up now, a deeper timbre tempering the voice that once read to me on those hazy summer afternoons. He sounds wearier, wiser with time. A kind of innocence and naivety has worn away, exposing a weathered, battered man underneath.

He was here earlier, just days ago. *Here.* I could see his confusion at my dishevelled state, a quiet questioning of whether to judge or to sympathize. Our exchange had an awkward, stilted way about it, the stumbling words of strangers. He praised my literacy with syrupy warmth and admiration. He spoke of arrangements and welcomes and the state of his marriage, but in the pleasantly casual manner of distant banter.

But he also asked of shame with questions pointed by his own thoughts that had festered with the passing years. They probed and pried with curious judgment, awaiting a certain answers to confirm the worst of his conclusions.

Even as he looked for my shame, there was a striking look in his eyes. They were distracted, a glassy guilt to his gaze. The joyful innocence, gone from his voice, was gone in his eyes as well.

He feared its legacy of the Holocaust. He expected repentance after years of atonement. He was ashamed. Of me. Of the past. Of his own emotions.

I had read the stories of the survivors: Wiesel’s *Night*, Améry’s *At the Mind’s Limits*, Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. I sought out of the stories of the Jewish women, hunting down poignant accounts of the brutality and horror of the camps.

But I had done what I had to do in order to survive in my own right, even as they suffered. I had my reasons for what I did and those words--the tragic accounts of broken men and women--could not change that. I have nothing to atone for; I only did what was asked of me.

I was a guard, and I did my duty.

I shiver, but not from cold.

The guilt in his eyes. It was piercing--more than the court's accusations, more than the judge's verdict, more than the survivors' stories. It was an accusatory guilt, one that struck me to the core. I had only seen that kind of look once before, from a younger him--a look had stopped me in my tracks then and it haunted me again now.

There was still a divot in his lip. That scar is my fault.

That day, the hurt in his eyes sliced through my agitation, stilled my hand, a hand that'd stricken others over and over without hesitation. I had seen the pain of those in the camps, yet his?

His was different. I was no guard then, yet I remained in those ways; after losing him, I punished him in my panic. His written note, which had greeted my waking, had been hidden in my fist, rumpled.

But now, in the back of my mind is a question I failed to ask: why didn't you write?

I know the answer already: he saw my past as his punishment. What other scars does he carry, on his person or otherwise? What has made him weary and worn?

The tape recording prattles on, the voice now unbearable. My finger rests on the button for a second, feeling the hum of the machine.

I press it down and the sound ceases, leaving only the silence of the dead's judgment.

It will all be over soon. The arrangements for my release have been readied. I'm ready.

I grab a sheet of paper, find a pen among my things. My fingers wrap around the pen, trembling as I put the tip to paper. The letters are clumsier, resembling my rough first letters. But despite their unkempt appearance, each word is deliberate, transmitted to paper with purpose.

He never wrote to me, but even now I write to him.

Amongst scrawled sentiments is a simple one wrought with regret--a kind of last minute thought. I smile to myself, a sad, guilty smile brimming with wistful longing.

"Tell Michael that that I am sorry."

Word Count: 983

### **Works Cited**

Homerus, and Robert Fagles. *The Odyssey*. Penguin, 1997.