The Interaction between the Reader and the Fictional Text:
Stimulating the Narrative Imagination in Bernard Schlink’s

The Reader

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in
English and Creative Writing with Honours.
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any University.

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Engeline Lynn Lord

18th October, 2012
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Abstract

Literary representations make an especially rich contribution in stimulating a narrative imagination which may elicit the “cultivation of humanity” of which Martha Nussbaum writes so persuasively. Reading narrative may influence readers to develop an empathetic understanding of others and to develop the capacity to engage with texts that address moral questions arising in their own lives. Importantly, such imagination may influence their relationship to, and understanding of, others and help them develop an informed and empathetic understanding of how others live and why they make ethical or, perhaps, unethical choices.

The postmodern world, one which has led to an enhanced autonomy of the individual, has resulted in an uncertainty which Zygmunt Bauman believes is now a permanent condition of life. It is essential, in such a world, to cultivate self-reflection and self-evaluation as principal activities. Challenging, thought-provoking literature may engender more informed capacities of judgement through the self-reflection and self-evaluation it elicits from readers interacting with narrative.

In light of this view, this thesis will offer a critical reading of Bernhard Schlink’s novel The Reader (1997). Although the novel focuses on an historically different era, the issues raised are particularly relevant to the contemporary postmodern world. The thesis will take a different approach than that employed by many critics and writers in their reading of the text. Rather than focus on the plot, the characters, the Holocaust or, as many have already done, on questions of judgements and justice, the thesis will focus on how the novel encourages and facilitates an interaction between the reader and the text. I contend that such interaction promotes questioning and also self-reflection, as readers engage with the narrative and empathise with the situation or life of someone different from themselves.

Drawing mainly on selected writings from Martha Nussbaum and Zygmunt Bauman, the thesis thus demonstrates how a relationship between the reader and the text may influence the role of an individual’s responsibility when confronting ethical dilemma in their everyday world beyond reading. A highly metaphorical novel, The Reader focuses readers on the ambiguity, contradictions and contingencies of ethical choice, yet also highlights how an engagement with these tensions may stimulate their imagination resulting in a cultivation of their humanity as more ethically informed citizens of the world.
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