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

The Reader

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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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Thesis Title: The Interaction between the Reader and the Fictional Text:

Stimulating the Narrative Imagination in Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader

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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.
# Table of Contents

- **Statement of Presentation** i
- **Copyright Acknowledgement** ii
- **Abstract** iii
- **Table of Contents** iv
- **Acknowledgements** vi

## Chapter One: Introduction

1

## Chapter Two: The Novel and the Author

6

- Bernhard Schlink 6
- Critical Reception of *The Reader* 8
- The Plot of *The Reader* 10
- Conclusion 12

## Chapter Three: Self-Reflexive Reading: Key Concepts

13

- The Need for Literature in Contemporary Society 13
- The Role of Ethics in Literature 16
- Narrative Imagination, Compassion and Empathy 17
- An Ethical Critique of Narrative 18
- Conclusion 19
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Chapter One
Introduction

“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel ... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”
— Ursula LeGuin

Reading narrative fiction provides people with the possibility of being transported into a story and a set of circumstances different from their own. It allows them to imagine the lives, the experiences, the opinions, the choices, mistakes, joys and sadness of others. By extension, this enables readers, to look at the world through the eyes of others. It can take readers out of their often very comfortable and familiar worlds and put them into another world, another’s place, country, culture or race. Narrative representations may promote understanding, questioning, knowledge and imaginative empathy, enabling readers to advance, with understanding, from the cultural narrowness into which we all are born, toward true world citizenship (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 294).

My thesis will focus on Martha Nussbaum’s idea of compassionate imagination gained through the experience of reading and an engagement with narrative, and it will argue how, without such imagination, we cannot adequately understand or empathise with others who live in circumstances or act in a manner different to our own. Nussbaum argues, persuasively, that narrative imagination allows readers to empathise with (fictional) others, and that the compassion thereby engendered, in turn, enables readers to understand that they share many problems and possibilities with their fellow human beings (1997, p. 85).

Reflexive literature, that is literature which raises questions about how its fictional characters deal with issues such as love, compassion, fear, justice and human rights allows readers to respond to these emotions, taking responsibility for their own thinking about their own choices as they engage with the characters, though such an engagement is perforce mediated by their own circumstances (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 42-43). Reflexive literature
ensures that readers question their own circumstances and their own ethical standards thereby becoming more self-reflexive and compassionate. Nussbaum further writes that reflexive literature which can transport the reader, while they remain themselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities and differences, is urgently needed today and that we should aim, in our education systems, for curricula which reflect this plurality (1997, p. 111). It is for this reason that this thesis will focus strongly on reading as an act of engagement with the situation of others which could encourage readers to ask “What would or should I have done in that same situation?”

Compassionate imagination encourages readers to fairly engage with others, not necessarily with sympathy, as some events and some actions cannot be always condoned, but certainly with empathy and imagination. Compassion is an emotion directed at another person’s suffering or lack of well-being and requires the thought that they are in difficult circumstances (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 14). Imagination is enlivened, reflective thinking in which readers reason with their hearts and minds (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 3). Narrative imagination is the ability to think what it might be like to be in the same circumstances as someone different from oneself. As a reader engages with the characters and their lives in the narratives, they become an intelligent reader of another’s story and come to the understanding that those others may have wishes and desires not dissimilar from their own, (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 10-11). Understanding others with empathy requires identifying and judging them in the light of our own goals and aspirations (1997, p.11).

The task required of the would-be world citizen is to become an empathetic interpreter (1997, p. 63) of another’s story. This is especially true in today’s society which, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, has become highly individualised, and in which many of society’s previously universally prescribed ethical standards may no longer apply (Bauman, 1994, p. 23). If, as Bauman states, people are shaped, moved and guided by the world they together inhabit, and that what people are or appear to be, wholly or in part, depends on the kind of world we live in (1994, p. 2), I believe, as Nussbaum does, that an engagement with the other through a critical engagement with narrative fiction is one way to attempt to change that world.

In order to work through the claims of my thesis, I explore the novel The Reader by Bernhard Schlink (1997), which I argue stimulates the imagination and self-reflection Nussbaum
sees as essential to developing a compassionate imagination. I discuss how readers may engage with narrative and also focus on the different aspects of reading, as a literal act, an ethical act of interpretation and as a metaphorical engagement with narrative, and how these concepts are central to both Schlink’s novel and my argument that such engagement does, indeed, stimulate the narrative imagination. (Although Bauman distinguishes between them, I interchange, as Nussbaum does, the terms ethics and morality.)

Despite the fact that many authors have discussed, debated and argued about Schlink’s novel, they have not discussed the novel’s ability to provoke an interaction with readers, an interaction which develops their capacity for interpreting and actively taking on the task of learning and understanding others (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 63). This is the approach I have chosen to take. The Reader is a novel which deserves close scrutiny and I examine it in terms of its power to create a dialogue between the reader and text thereby inviting an ethos of self-reflection and stimulating compassionate imagination.

As suggested, the thesis will focus strongly on the work of American philosopher, academic and author, Martha Nussbaum, and also of philosopher and author, Zygmunt Bauman, as well as work by other selected writers. I believe, as Nussbaum does, that literature may promote a stronger sense of citizenship, better informed moral choices and, as I address Bernhard Schlink’s fictional narrative, I will demonstrate that the experience of reading and evaluating this text reinforces those claims. I will detail how, when readers engage with narrative they, perforce, begin to evaluate themselves. I propose that as readers practice self-evaluation they become citizens who can consider others, how they live, how they suffer and what life has done to them. Considering the situation of others demonstrates that readers may themselves be vulnerable and also enables them to share in someone else’s humanity because of the way literary imagination inspires them to understand the rich inner life of the characters (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90). I also focus on Zygmunt Bauman’s writing because, although he believes that, in a postmodern world, there is no guarantee that we can build a community of citizens resourceful enough to cope with the present challenges of a society of individuals rather than of community, he also writes that what (and how) we think of others matters, ethically (Bauman, 1994, p. 2).
In order to become a world citizen we need to move beyond our own inner world and our own local society and look at the entire world as our society. Nussbaum believes there are three capacities which are essential for the cultivation of a world citizen. Firstly it requires a capacity for self-examination. Secondly, it is necessary to see ourselves as human beings bound to all other humans by ties of our responsibilities towards them, ordering our various loyalties but understanding that we are also bound to all of humanity by common human abilities, possibilities and problems (1997, p. 9). We cannot stand by and judge others or ignore their suffering without understanding that, as part of the human family, we must feel some responsibility towards others. Finally the cultivation of a world citizen, Nussbaum writes, requires the cultivation of narrative imagination, an imagination which puts oneself in another’s shoes, not uncritically and not necessarily unmitigated by our own circumstances, beliefs or morality however, but in order to develop an empathetic understanding (1997, pp. 10-11). To this end, she writes that literature and the arts play a central role as they can cultivate capacities of judgement and sensitivity which should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes. In a curriculum for world citizenship, literature, with its abilities to present the specific circumstances and problems of people of many different sorts, makes an especially rich contribution (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 85-86).

Chapter Two offers a brief biography of Bernhard Schlink, discusses his work and his approach to writing and demonstrates the relevance his text has had, not only for his compatriots, but also for many readers around the world. The chapter also includes a brief account of the novel and an overview of its critical reception to date, how key reviewers/critics have approached it and, finally, it details how this thesis will differ from the approach of those critics.

Chapter Three discusses the key concepts involved in self-reflexive reading. It will discuss the role of literature today and reflect on the role of ethics in literature. I concentrate on Nussbaum’s idea of narrative imagination and compassion and show how an ethical critique of narrative may influence readers’ capacity for engagement with the text as they interpret the lives and actions of others and, consequently, their own lives.

Chapter Four evaluates the novel through the notion of reading as a literal act, as a negotiation between the reader and the text which creates meaning, and as an act of ethical
evaluation and interpretation in which the reader is an active participant and a mediator of the
dilemmas which arise from the narrative. Encouraging readers to read critically is closely
connected to arguments and deliberation about fundamental civic values, about human goals
and motives (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 100) and is, therefore, at the very heart of a quest for world
citizenship.

Chapter Five argues that Schlink’s novel is strongly metaphorical and demonstrates
how this metaphorical quality encourages the dynamic interaction between text and reader. It
shows how the capacity to read metaphor can be understood as the capacity to read others
and how, in my view, such a metaphorical text “speaks” to readers so that they make
connections between self and other. This interaction is the path to the compassionate
imagination Nussbaum believes results in ethically sensitive world citizens.

Chapter Six, the Conclusion, reviews and affirms the claim that fictional representations
can, indeed, be significant in demonstrating for readers the moral skills and ethical orientation
which may create a world in which we all have the potential to develop as the world citizens
discussed in Chapter One. The chapter confirms the thesis that the engagement of readers
with the narrative plays a strong role in influencing the compassionate imagination crucial for
confronting ethical dilemmas. The chapter will clarify how the approach the thesis has taken
will enable readers, through the act of reading reflexive fictional representations, not only to
evaluate their personal connections, moral decisions and the judgement they bring to these
decisions with regards to The Reader, but also enable to engage imaginatively and interpret,
evaluatively, any narrative representation.
Chapter Two
The Novel and the Author

“A writer without interest or sympathy for the foibles of his fellow man is not conceivable as a writer.”
- Joseph Conrad

This chapter introduces the author, Bernhard Schlink, his novel The Reader, its critical reception, and outlines how the text engages readers to consider the contingencies of ethical choices the characters face. The chapter will provide the background necessary for further discussion of how readers address the circumstances of fictional others and approach moral judgements about them with compassionate imagination.

Shortly after the novel’s publication, Schlink was lauded for ingeniously provoking readers to question their own actions when confronted with difficult moral or political conditions (Anton, 2010). He was praised for becoming the voice of a nation by putting the current state of political thought in Germany into textual form (Anton, 2010). For the citizens of Germany, as for all world citizens, there are benefits in reflecting on the kind of citizenship which questions human beings in all their variety and complexity (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 84)

Bernhard Schlink

“Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.”
— Benjamin Franklin

To demonstrate how the text creates a dialogue with readers, it is essential to begin with an understanding of the author, Bernhard Schlink, his background and his work and how
they relate to his writing. His best-selling 1997 novel, *Der Vorleser*, has been translated into English as *The Reader*, but it has resonated with many different cultures, has been translated into dozens of languages and is internationally available. In this regard, Martha Nussbaum would surely approve, since she believes we should all interact, as citizens, with issues and people from a wide variety of traditions and learn about the cultures and histories of many different groups (1997, p. 68).

Schlink is a well-respected judge and legal educator and has focused his many fictional writings and many essays on the Holocaust and Germany’s haunted history (Anton, 2010). Interestingly, Schlink has written the principal character in the narrative, Michael Berg, as following his own trajectories. In fact, although readers should not confuse the author and his characters, even Schlink has acknowledged that many fictional texts contain elements of autobiography, something we note when reading *The Reader*. Not only do Schlink and Michael have very similar career paths but Schlink grew up in the town he chose for the text’s setting, both have a professor as a father, the narrator’s age and generation are the same as the author’s and both are legal educators (Anton, 2010). It is therefore easy to understand why Schlink explicitly sees himself as part of what has been called “the second generation”, the same generation of his protagonist, the generation whose parents failed to measure up, as he writes, during the Third Reich or after it ended (Schlink, 1997, p. 167). Schlink has stated that *The Reader* is a book about how the second generation attempted to come to terms with the Holocaust, and the role of his father’s generation in it (Wroe, 2002).

Schlink, in an interview (Marriott, 2008), discussing his writing, credited his linguistic interests to one of his teachers at grammar school. “He encouraged us to start reading in English. By the age of 14 or 15 we were reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dickens, Balzac.” It was this same beloved teacher, however, who, it later emerged, had been with the Gestapo, and had been complicit in the death of a colleague. Perhaps this event foreshadowed Schlink’s writing of Michael’s relationship with his lover, Hanna, in *The Reader* and his subsequent discovery of her involvement in the Nazi prison camps. It was the realisation, shared by so many Germans of his generation, that the person one loves often has a darker side, which has added such tension and poignancy to much of this novel. The wartime generation, says Schlink, ended up speaking guardedly about their experiences. This, in turn, affected Germans of Schlink’s age, who found it next to impossible to talk to older Germans.
about what the latter did in the war, but also to communicate openly with their own contemporaries (Marriott, 2008).

Schlink’s measured fiction most clearly leaves readers with the troubling conclusion that, when it comes to people’s cruelty to each other, no one can afford to occupy the moral high ground. Even Schlink admits it is possible to feel guilty, by having benefitted from this or that teacher, who themselves had a part to play in the war (Marriott, 2008). For Schlink, as for Michael Berg, the collective guilt of their parents’ generation was a lived reality, difficult to face and difficult to talk about (Schlink, 1997, p. 167).

**Critical Reception of The Reader**

Schlink has tried to ensure that the world continues with the culture of turning people’s investigative gaze inwards (Anton, 2010) by putting his story of the Holocaust into print. His narrative is not only a moving story but offers depths which readers can plumb, not only for reading pleasure, but also to further ruminate on. Since *The Reader*’s publication, there has been much controversy over it and many different views expressed by commentators in response to it, which clearly demonstrates that the narrative not only stimulates the imagination through its plot and its underlying themes, but continues to provoke argument and raise ethical questions amongst those various commentators who have disparate views of Schlink’s approach. The novel raises questions about the ambiguity, contradictions and contingencies of the ethical choices people make and the complexities involved in making moral judgements about these choices. It also raises questions of how, as readers, we may approach issues such as blame, guilt and responsibility. Thus *The Reader* has stimulated and continues to stimulate dialogue and provoke critical discussion.

The view this thesis puts forward differs in focus from that of other critics. Most commentators and critics have approached their reading of Schlink’s novel from the perspectives of justice, judgements and condemnation. In fact, Pedro Tabensky’s book entitled *Judging and Understanding: Essays on Free Will, Narrative, Meaning and the Ethical Limits of Condemnation* (2006), is a collection of essays each of which debates, in relation to *The Reader*,
various views of the novel reflecting on these issues. Tabensky has divided the essays into three sections with three different approaches as they relate to the novel. The first essays are concerned with the limits of condemnation, the next detail different cases for retributive judgement and the last essays discuss the ethical function of judgement. Martha Nussbaum has included an essay which focuses on judgement, mercy and retribution.

Many critics have approached the text from the perspective of the historical issues it addresses in terms of guilt, judgement and justice for crimes against humanity perpetrated during the Holocaust. Jeremiah Conway, for example, has written of compassion and also moral condemnation in *The Reader*. He writes that even though many may have willfully ignored or avoided responsibility for any part in the Holocaust, perhaps many were suffering from the numbness which engulfs people when surrounded by death and terror on a daily basis (1999, p. 288). Conway has also focused on testing Nussbaum’s analysis of compassion as it relates to *The Reader* (1999, p. 285). He concludes that reading is merely a prophylactic against complicity in the atrocities of the Holocaust but does agree that a reading, as a critical interpretation, will lead to the examination of one’s own situation and culture. However, he believes reading alone is insufficient (1999, p. 289).

Richard Weisberg, who reviews essays from the journal *Law and Literature*, which were part of a symposium on *The Reader*, in 2004, at the Cardozo School of Law of Yeshiva University, demonstrates just how differently different individuals interpret the novel. Those involved in the symposium came to widely varying conclusions and offered conflicting readings but particularly focused on the text itself and the issues it raises. Weisberg himself posits that *The Reader* proves narrative is the locus of accountability, and provides a space in which human behaviour can both understand and when it finds culpability, accurately judge it (Weisberg, 2004, p. 233). In a metaphorical reading, Weisberg notes that the judiciary and the trial in the text can be conceived of, not merely a trial of Hanna’s crimes, but also as a critique of Bernhard Schlink’s two passions, law and literature as a space where culture had died (2004, p. 235). John McKinnon writes that the novel becomes a philosophical investigation into the nature of freedom and responsibility, between the law and emotion (McKinnon in Weisberg, 2004, 179).
These are all readings which are distinctly involved in the moral, judicial and historical issues *The Reader* presents for consideration by readers. My approach differs from the above critics as it demonstrates how the narrative and readers together create meaning and how an interpretive engagement can engender the compassionate imagination, self-reflection and self-evaluation necessary for the creation of ethical world citizens. This thesis demonstrates that critical reading goes further than an examination of one’s own situation, that through actually engaging with narrative, readers can examine not only their own situation and culture but relate to the situation of others in a way which will bring the world together as a community of humans from any, or perhaps many, cultures.

**The Plot of *The Reader***

*The Reader* begins by focusing on the relationship between a young boy from a middle-class background and an older woman in Germany in the 1980s. It is a post-war Germany which has undergone rebuilding and renovation, at least structurally, if not psychologically. However, the novel soon becomes more than simply a study of seduction. Schlink’s award-winning novel is not only a depiction of an erotic, illicit relationship and a sexual awakening, but it is also a thought-provoking look at personal relationships, social responsibilities and ethical judgements.

The novel is predominantly narrated in the first person and is organized in three parts. Part one is of the liaison between the 15-year-old narrator and principal character, Michael Berg, and Hanna Schmitz, a woman 21 years his senior. Michael meets Hanna when he is taken ill outside her house. She takes care of him then subsequently seduces him. During the affair, Hanna asks him to read to her. She is enraged at one stage when he goes out leaving her a note which she claims not to have seen, believing instead that he has abandoned her. She hits him with her belt in, perhaps, a hint of the violence readers later learn she is capable of. After several months of their liaison have passed, she disappears leaving no forwarding address and it is many years until he sees her again.
Part two tells of how Michael encounters Hanna again while he is studying Law at university. While in a courtroom as part of his studies, he witnesses a group of women, including Hanna, on trial for the death of a large group of Jewish women prisoners during the war, in a conflagration which left only two survivors. Michael witnesses Hanna being made the scapegoat for the crime yet offering no defence. It becomes apparent that she had not been able to read a report found in the SS archives about the deaths, but had signed it anyway in order to hide the shame of her illiteracy, a shame which had dominated her life and her life choices. By now, Michael has ascertained that Hanna is illiterate but realises her pride would not allow her admit it in a public court. Eventually, she is prosecuted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Part three traces Michael’s life after the trial as he examines his relationship with Hanna and the German people, and introduces readers to the idea of both the collective and individual guilt of those who had been involved or had looked away, whilst atrocities were committed by the Nazi regime. Later, in an echo of Schlink’s own life, Michael becomes involved in legal research in the area of the Third Reich. Eight years later Michael begins to read classic books onto tapes and sends them to Hanna in prison. He also begins to write his own novels. Four years after the first tape, Michael receives a note from Hanna. She had finally learnt to write.

Many years pass before Michael receives a letter from the prison warden informing him that Hanna is to be paroled and asking him to visit her. He finds Hanna now an old woman and struggles with what he had felt for her earlier in their relationship. When he asks how becoming literate has changed her life, she tells him that “when no one understands you, then no one can call you to account”. She was able to avoid accounting for her actions because she was isolated by her illiteracy until, having become a reader of others stories, especially the stories of Holocaust survivors. She has since reflected on her own actions but cannot however, forgive herself. Before Michael can collect her from the prison she hangs herself because she believes she had not been moral enough. It is ten years before Michael comes to terms with his feelings of guilt for loving Hanna and also for her sad end.

Readers finally hear Hanna’s real voice, one so long silenced by illiteracy. It is only because learning to read has allowed her to engage with the voices of those she had excluded
(Nussbaum, 1997, p. 98), those who suffered as victims of the Nazi death camps, that she no longer feels herself part of a marginalised group of people who could not avail themselves of others stories due to illiteracy. Narrative had freed her to judge herself.

Conclusion

The critical response to The Reader has been interesting in its varied scope. The novel has, as stated, been very successful on an international scale and many critical debates have focused on a discourse of guilt, shame and the willingness of post-war generations to uphold the moral obligations towards the dead and the surviving victims (Anton, 2010). Many critics have also posited the idea that Schlink offers a critique of the law and justice. Schlink’s novel as it provoked questioning and debate has, ingeniously, encouraged readers to question their own actions should they be confronted with a similar situation (Anton, 2010). Schlink’s fictional narrative has encouraged readers to appreciate the details of personal circumstance (McKinnon, 2004, p. 182).

The Reader raises many ethical questions and promotes self-reflection as an invitation to explore and undertake a critical scrutiny of the text in a self-reflexive reading. The next chapter will explore the key concepts of self-reflexive reading, its value in today’s society and the role narrative plays in an ethical and imaginative approach to others.
Chapter Three
Self-Reflexive Reading: Key Concepts

“There is creative reading as well as creative writing.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

In order to lay the foundations on which a detailed discussion of the critically acclaimed and internationally received novel, *The Reader*, can build, this chapter examines, in broad terms, the ethical orientation to literature, drawing particularly work of Martha Nussbaum and Zygmunt Bauman. The chapter details the key concepts involved in a self-reflexive reading of the text, a reading in which readers undertakes a critical scrutiny of their own traditions and may be willing to discover a view which would not be identical to the view they held before such scrutiny (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 33). The chapter also discusses the role of literature in society today, the role of ethics in literature and how it may stimulate readers’ moral imagination. I argue that moral imagination developed through a self-reflexive reading of fiction, plays a valuable role in society. I aim to demonstrate how an ethical critique of narrative enables readers to see its internal structure with a new sharpness, one which makes their own relation to it more precise (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 101).

The Need for Literature in Contemporary Society

As Bauman writes, it is true of many things that the more they are needed the less readily they are available. This, he writes, is certainly true about commonly agreed ethical rules, which can guide our conduct towards each other (1993, p. 16). Bauman explains how the contemporary, mostly westernised, materialistic world in which advanced capitalism reigns supreme, has changed from the society of the previous modern paradigm based on a belief in a social totality which saw that society was greater than the sum of its parts (2008, p. 20), to one in which individualism is the new way of life and ethical discourse is no longer institutionally
preempted (in Beilharz, 2001, p. 185). In other words, Bauman writes, we have moved, and continue to move, from a society in which individuals care for the well-being of that society as integral to the whole community’s success and happiness, to a society whose dominant ideology supports privatisation and individualisation (2008, p. 20). In such a climate the greater good is subsumed by individual needs or wants. Bauman sees today’s society as no longer subordinating individual action to a common good. He argues that instead, living in a “work more and earn more” society (Bauman, 2008, p. 20) has resulted in the cessation of looking at the whole and resulted in a society in which people mostly look to themselves and their own successes and achievements. In such a life, according to Bauman, we urgently need to develop moral knowledge and skills in order to avoid an “ethical crisis” (1993, pp. 16-17).

If today’s society comprises individual consumers (Bauman, 2008, pp. 20-21), how do we address the selfishness of such a society where individual consumers consider their own commercial, material and/or personal needs above the well-being of others? Is this a society which will bring long-term happiness rather than the short-term gratification in which consumerism and individualisation seem to be the way to contentment? Nussbaum does not see that this is the case because, as she states, the traits of understanding and humility will not be developed by personal experience alone, especially in our contemporary global and interdependent world (1997, p. 147).

Contemporary living can contribute to an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty (Bauman, 1997, p. 21) because what we and others do may have profound, far-reaching and long-lasting consequences that we cannot necessarily predict and the scale of “unanticipated consequences” may dwarf any moral imagination we possess (Bauman, 1993, pp. 17-18). Society has been changing rapidly over the previous century and, in the twenty-first century, it has become even more confusing and ambiguous. Today’s world is one in which we find ourselves alone in what Bauman calls an ethical and moral paradox (Bauman, 1993, p. 28) in which there are no supports or certainties. He writes that postmodernity has simultaneously deprived us of the comfort of the universal guidance we once received from social/political/religious structures yet has also given us the fullness of moral choice and responsibility. As he says, “moral responsibility comes together with the lonliness of moral choice” (Bauman, 1992, p. xxii). Despite this paradox, Bauman believes that we need to re-personalise morality by returning responsibility from the finishing line to the starting point of
the ethical process (Bauman, 1993, p.34). To this end, it becomes necessary, as Martha Nussbaum writes in a chapter on Socratic self-examination, to train and sharpen our moral capacity (1997, p. 27). Moreover, Nussbaum claims that the Socratic activity of questioning one’s own values cannot be engendered without literary works which stimulate the imagination in a highly concrete way (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 100). Bauman believes that we are alone in our moral choices and need to rethink and re-personalise our choices and Nussbaum’s argument for a Socratic re-evaluation of our values, therefore, makes a self-evaluative interaction with narrative an even more urgent activity.

In a world of “privatised” citizens, one in which people feel loneliness, in which some of the! old, formerly solid, social and religious institutions underwriting and endorsing individual identities lie in ruins, even Bauman believes that identification through membership with a larger entity, be it social or simply human, may provide a foundation on which to build a new, more responsible, personal identity (Bauman, 1994, p. 29). Bauman writes that responsible citizens, in an engaged society, may provide the basis on which can be built a human community resourceful and thoughtful enough to cope with society’s present challenges (Bauman, 1994, p. 45).

Bauman proposes that, in the fight to live in the world as it is, we must struggle against a sense of “one-and-onlyness” (Bauman, 1997, p. 201). Thus, in order to understand or make sense of our world, it is essential to have empathetic understanding of others and to realize that we need an ethical and evaluative means of exercising and extending our ethical interaction with the other, which we can gain from reading about them (George, 2005, p. 108). The imagination can be woken and, similarly, the moral conscience is also capable of being woken (Bauman, 1993, p. 249). By developing narrative imagination, the opportunity for stimulating moral interaction and an empathy which cultivates a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community (one which can still respect the primacy of the individual but will also cultivate an empathetic response to another’s needs) is exactly what is needed in postmodern society. Perhaps it is such moral interaction and engagement with others through evaluative reading of narrative which could contribute to making sense of our contemporary world.
Novels such as *The Reader* play a crucial role in awakening the ethical and empathetic imagination of readers and, as Nussbaum states, getting them to take responsibility for their own thinking and choices. When readers interact with texts in this way, significant meanings are generated and questions thrown into relief. These help to discipline readers’ intellectual lives in a general way, making them both richer as individuals and better informed as citizens (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 43).

**The Role of Ethics in Literature**

Wayne Booth argues that the majority of fictional texts are not only implicitly ethical but designed to elicit ethical responses from readers (Booth in George, 2005, p. 30) and engage them in ethical debate. Readers therefore, become ethical critics of what they read. Ethical debate is especially needed in world which has become individualised but remains, as a globalised entity, a world in which people must interact with unknown others. Reading a novel as an active, ethically engaged participant, transforms reading into a complex interpretive act which is an essential part of thinking and judging well (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 95).

Literature which challenges our thinking, which asks readers to evaluate their own approach to others and which unsettles their entrenched views or opinions, is the aim of ethical criticism. Ethical criticism also opens readers’ minds to understanding. An ethical critique of narrative is one in which novels may confirm that readers have choices in their lives, according to their individual circumstances, of course, but that they are decisions which impact on others in ways they may not fully appreciate. If we take this as a standpoint, then literature which may encourage the reader to question their own choices or evaluate the choices of others can stimulate productive debate about how our own society functions, how we function within it and how we function in the world. Fictional representations and an ethical criticism of them can, indeed, be significant in demonstrating for readers that moral choices can assist in the creation of a society which is more integrative and in which there is the potential for the emergence of world citizens.
Narrative imagination engenders compassion for the other and Nussbaum believes that compassion is an emotion directed at another person’s suffering or lack of well being (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 14). When readers realise that a character may share vulnerabilities and possibilities with them, they develop a dialogue with text in which they are able to imagine the other’s predicament as their own (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 15). Nussbaum writes that it is through stories that readers learn to decode the suffering of others (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 24).

An engagement with literature can develop the reader’s narrative imagination because, according to Nussbaum, the novel embodies a moral or political vision (1995, p. 36) which can extend the understanding of the circumstances of others of different races, cultures, social backgrounds, gender or situation and, thereby, influence the capacity of readers to make informed judgements and ethical decisions about them. It would be catastrophic if the world consisted of people who, through the lack of reflexive literature in the curriculum or in their lives generally, were technically competent people who could not think critically or examine themselves and thereby come to respect humanity and the diversity of others (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 300). Narrative imagination allows the reader to become an intelligent reader of someone else’s story (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 10-11), and engaging with the stories of others will demonstrate their circumstances for our consideration or illumination.

We engage with tragedy, violence and misery every day, though not necessarily our own. Nevertheless, we are constantly informed via the media, the arts and literature of the ill or the injustice which befalls some of humanity somewhere in the world. How do we learn to understand or to empathise about what is occurring to others? Narrative fiction may encourage readers to empathise, even if not necessarily identify, with those who live different lives from their own, instead of distancing themselves from the other’s circumstances because the challenge seems too great.

Empathy involves understanding the wishes and emotions of someone, engaging with a character in a novel or with a distant person whose life story or personal history and social world readers come to know (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11). Readers can judge them or their story in
the light of their own goals and aspirations, yet try to understand the world from the other’s point of view. They then put themselves in another’s shoes, not uncritically, but with empathetic understanding. Compassion however, requires not simply an empathetic understanding of another’s circumstances but is engendered by a sense of one’s own vulnerability to similar misfortune or suffering (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 91). Narrative imagination is not uncritical however, as readers will, necessarily, bring their own judgements and background into the encounter as they identify with characters (1997, pp. 10-11). Whichever way readers approach understanding, Booth writes that when they engage with the characters of a book and see the moral choices they face, ethical changes occur in them for good or ill (Booth in George, 2005, p. 26).

An Ethical Critique of Narrative

It is especially important, in the new paradigm, that readers should consider Nussbaum’s belief that the “cultivation of humanity” is necessary in order to create effective world citizens and to investigate the effects of the postmodern shift to individualism as Bauman describes it. The commitment of narrative in the making of a social world and in encouraging readers to critically consider that world, is what makes the adventure of reading so fascinating but also so urgent (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 104). Readers should bring to the narrative capacities of understanding, empathy and compassionate imagination because such an approach ensures that judgements will be made from a basis of self-reflection and with a sense of responsibility.

The reader’s sense of compassion can, however, become narrow and self-serving, focusing only on what is close or familiar to them so that they are merely “spectators”, without imaginative empathy, of the lives or circumstances of those from other backgrounds or cultures. People may have compassion for others from a different culture when they are far enough away and do not intrude in local life but may fear those from an unfamiliar culture when they become part of their own society (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 11). They may feel compassion for the circumstances of refugees for instance, and yet find difficulty in welcoming them into their own world because they fear changes to their own lives. Compassion however,
also requires the thought that someone suffers emotionally or physically (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 14) and involves understanding their pain.

Compassion must also contain an element of judgement, one which Nussbaum calls “the judgement of seriousness” (2003, p. 14) and, of course, readers come to this from their own personal perspective. For example, in The Reader is Schlink not also asking how far we can allow compassion to stretch? Readers may rightly feel moral outrage at characters whose choices may be morally reprehensible despite the fact that they may have suffered through no fault of their own. Readers can and do distinguish between situations which warrant compassion and those which patently do not (Conway, p. 286). Yet, compassion, with all its limits, is still our best hope as we try to educate citizens to think well about human relations (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 11). Conway writes that part of the appeal of The Reader stems from the fact that its struggle between the issue of compassion and moral condemnation is a salient one (1999, p. 284) for readers who effectively identify with its characters.

Readers are aware of the seriousness of Hanna’s crime but with the fairness engendered by a compassionate imagination, they know that behind the crime is a tangled and difficult history without which the situation may have been different. Readers are encouraged, by engaging with characters of the narrative, to see character itself as something formed in society, something for which morality rightly holds individuals responsible but also as something over which, in the end, individuals do not have full control (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 23). Readers have to take responsibility to read critically, to examine their moral beliefs and to take responsibility as they confront the hard questions of what good citizenship entails (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 48).

Conclusion

Literature is vital to the flourishing of world citizens because it offers an expansion of sympathies that real life cannot sufficiently cultivate (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 111). Literary representations play a role in the everyday lives of readers, their personal connections and in listening to and understanding the voices of others. Humanity has often turned a blind eye,
condemned without consideration, or perpetrated violence against others simply for the attainment of power, the making of riches, the promotion or condemnation of religion, or simply because of a hatred or mistrust of any people seen as other. People often fear that which they don’t understand or that which is very different to their particular norm because unfamiliarity often breeds uncertainty and anxiety. Fictional representations can, and do, attempt to familiarise us with the other, and encourage readers to reconsider the merit of their own choices, their prejudices and their moral determinations. Novels may introduce readers to “other ways of imagining the world” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 3), to a more inclusive way, the way of the world citizen.

In order to achieve long-term happiness as a human society we need to try to regain the sense of belonging which Zygmunt Bauman writes we have lost in our ever-changing “liquid modern times” (Bauman, 2011, p. 12), times in which values have changed and power structures have changed in a shift to a stronger focus on the individual. Achieving long-term happiness and a sense of belonging will necessitate learning to understand others with empathy and evaluating ethical choices, not only those we make ourselves but also those others may make, through an ethical criticism and emotional engagement of what we read and learn.

In the next two chapters I will explore how the practice of reading, both literally and metaphorically encourages an interaction between the reader and the text that stimulates a reflexive engagement with, and empathy for, (fictional and real) others.
Chapter Four

The Literal Practice of Reading

"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body."
— Joseph Addison

Reading is a complex negotiation of meaning between a reader and a text. Developing the art of interpretation may develop the reader’s potential for civic participation and awareness (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 97). Nussbaum argues that the task of exercising imagination may foster a compassionate imagination and that involves caring about literature (Nussbaum, p. 92). She writes that narrative art has the power to make readers see the lives of those different to themselves with more than a casual tourist’s interest, with involvement and understanding. She further states that readers come to see how circumstances, as they are depicted in narrative fiction, shape the lives of others because they influence not only people’s possibilities for action, but also their aspirations, desires, hopes and fears (1997, p. 88). Reading narrative can cultivate capacities of judgement and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices we make and can shape our understanding of the people around us (Nussbaum, 1997).

The very title of The Reader, as well as its narrative, has the concept and practice of reading, its consequences and its potential influence on readers, as one of its central themes. The title of the book illustrates the text’s interest in reading in its many forms. Reading in the novel, is a physical, cognitive, emotional and ethical practice depicted through reading out loud and it is interesting to note that the original German title of the novel, Der Vorleser, in translation, conveys the sense of reading out loud (Weisberg in Tabensky, 2006, p. 277). In the text when Michael offers to bring her one of his school texts to read, Hanna asks him to read it to her because she says he has “such a nice voice” and that she’d rather listen to him than read it herself (Schlink, 1997, p. 40).

The novel’s focus on illiteracy becomes a metaphorical as well as literal concept as readers are encouraged to engage with the characters and issues raised in the text. By reading
beyond the surface, by engaging with the metaphor, readers are able to make sense of the deeper significance of reading and illiteracy. Metaphor gives texts an immediacy and vitality (Hawkes, 1972, p. 91). I will, in the following chapter, examine the role of metaphor more closely, and demonstrate how such a reading creates a more effective, interactive process of engagement between readers and narrative. However, in this chapter I look at reading as a literal practice, an interpretive practice and as an ethical practice, with close reference to The Reader. (Nonetheless, readers will note that there is an inevitable slide and resonance between literal and metaphorical understandings of reading in Schlink’s novel, but, for the purpose of this discussion, I try to separate these into separate chapters.)

**Reading as a Literal Practice**

Reading comprises the discovery of meaning in a text which comes about through an intermingling of the common characteristics of language and as a complex form of action and interaction between the text and readers (Khair & Doubinsky, 2011, p. 83). Reading is a profoundly cultural and, by no means, natural process. It is a conscious process by which the narrative emerges in the mind of readers (Chatman, 1978, pp. 41-42). It is mediated through the reader’s cultural and/or social circumstances and takes into account the reader’s own goals, aspirations, history and social context (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11). Reading as a technical skill makes possible reading as an act of critically interpreting and assessing one’s situation in the world (Conway, 1999, p. 289). Hanna’s own illiteracy makes it difficult for her to find an self-determining place in the world because, as a result, the only opportunities open to her were very basic work, in a factory, later in the army and currently as a tram conductor (Schlink, 1997, p. 37).

The title of Schlink’s novel, as previously remarked, denotes one of its central themes, that of the value and effects of reading and literacy in everyday life and of how, without the ability to read, we struggle to develop an understanding of how our actions have an impact on others. Schlink writes that illiteracy is dependence (1997, p. 186) and the ability to read opens a new world for the previously illiterate. The significance of the physical activity of reading and its consequences permeate the narrative just as it permeates the lives of its two major
characters. Without the ability to read Hanna does not understand the impact she has had on the prisoners she was in charge of in the camps as discussed earlier. It is only when she learns to read in prison and reads the stories of the survivors, that she tells Michael she always believed no-one understood her, no-one knew what made her do the things she did and therefore no-one could hold her to account for her actions, not even the court. Having read the stories of the victims she is held to account by them. (Schlink, 1997, p. 196).

The book’s title flags the importance of reading, not simply as an act of reading words, but as an engagement with education, an opportunity for, and also a path to, enlightenment and freedom, freedom certainly from ignorance, but also the freedom to understand the consequences of one’s actions. As Nussbaum points out, reading is the path to knowledge, and knowledge should lead to the ability to think critically (1997, p. 19) and question one’s own convictions. Michael’s father, as Schlink writes is “a professor of philosophy, and thinking was his life – thinking and reading and teaching” (Schlink, 1997, p. 28). This is a man who has two libraries and an academic education and yet lacked the ability or the will to speak up against the Nazi regime. He was one of those who, despite his education and background, approached the Holocaust with a deliberate “blindness”, a blindness or a refusal to see; this mirrors Hanna’s inability to read. His failure is, as Conway writes, a failure of which many of Germany’s distinguished intellectuals and judiciary were guilty (1999, p. 296). He is as culpable in his refusal to see, as Hanna is in her inability to relate to her prisoners as human. He, and his generation, did not do what philosophers should do (Conway, 1999, p. 296), what Hanna did not do, they did not question. (I develop the question of Mr. Berg’s culpability in the following chapter.)

Schlink has offered the two opposing experiences of literacy and readers will judge each according to the moral faculties of discretion and discernment necessary when they meet such difficult cases, cases that do not seem to be commensurate with any existing rules or conventions (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 24). These faculties are cultivated through reflexive and interpretive readings of texts as I will discuss below.
Reading as an Interpretive Act

Only by reading texts from an interpretive approach, concentrating on one’s own experience of being in the world, and taking into account meanings given to life events in the text and how these meanings are communicated to us through the narrative, can we fully appreciate it (Wiklund, 2010, p. 61). The plot of *The Reader* inspires a narrative imagining which creates concern for the fate of its characters and through which readers learn to have respect for the hidden contents of the characters’ world (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90).

Novels construct a paradigm of ethical reasoning (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 8) and *The Reader* encourages readers to make judgements about the characters by harnessing ethical reasoning through emotional engagement. Judgements involve weighing issues of blame, guilt, culpability. Extenuating circumstances require compassionate imagination when considering the ethical questions involved. Michael and his university compatriots, as members of the second generation of Germans, since the war, judge their parents because they see them as a generation that had served as guards and enforcers during the Third Reich, or had done nothing to stop the Nazis and had not brought their forebears to account in the years after the Holocaust. In their studies, the students put them in the dock, subjected them to the light and condemned them to shame (Schlink, 1997, p. 90). Readers, as they engage with the text, will judge the characters for themselves. Novels do not withhold all moral judgements because they contain villains as well as heroes, but the novel form invites our participatory identification (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006. P. 24). Should readers consider either Hanna or Mr. Berg as a hero or as a villain? Schlink’s novel does not offer any answers; it only complicates the questions and invites readers to actively participate in them. The power of the narrative is that it introduces the vexing dilemmas of questioning, disagreement, empathy or antipathy for the reader’s consideration.

*The Reader* shows us the darker side of Hanna’s life, her seduction of a young boy, her acts of omission when she does not open the doors of the burning church to let her prisoners out and, although readers understand that these are heinous crimes, they have also read of her confusion and her cowed reaction to the charges as she tells the trial judge that she couldn’t let them out because she was charged with the responsibility of keeping them under control.
(Schlink, 1997, p. 126). As a naïve and illiterate person she may not have understood the gravity of her crime. Readers are thus motivated to interpret the characters of the text empathetically, although they may have difficulty empathising with someone who was involved in terrible deeds. Nussbaum writes that if we can easily empathise with a character, the invitation to do so has relatively little moral value (1997, p. 98).

Readers learn most from literature which writes of difference, which interacts with opposing views and texts such as The Reader, texts which invite an interaction with characters who may act differently from the way that readers believe they should (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 107). The Reader offers several approaches to such understanding. They include an empathetic approach in which we may sensitively interpret another person’s circumstances (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 63) and a compassionate approach in which we make a connection between our literary imagination and a merciful attitude (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 21). Readers are thus provoked to empathise with Michael’s dilemma as he negotiates the contentious field which Nussbaum describes as the tension between judging people for their actions and understanding them (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 3). Michael struggles with his knowledge of Hanna’s fallibilities and her illiteracy but he also empathises with her because understands how her life has been affected because of her circumstances. During her trial he envisioned Hanna as a guard, in her uniform, with the cold, hard look she had, at times, given him during their liaison, yet he also remembered her with skirts flying as she rode her bicycle, laughing at him (Schlink, 1997, pp. 145-146). He sees the worst in her but also the best. Schlink has written her as a character who has, as readers will be able to understand and perhaps interpret as mitigation, missed many of life’s possibilities (1997, p. 187). Michael struggles with coming to terms with loving a criminal (Schlink, 1997, p. 133) but he does have the compassion to stand back and ask whether Hanna’s judgement has taken the full measure of her actions (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 91). He understands that on the night of the fire, the screaming women and the departure of the army escort would have led to confusion and a sense of helplessness, but he still finds it hard to accept Hanna’s actions and inactions. He is not uncritical, just as readers will not be uncritical, as they judge the events in the light of their understanding of Hanna’s history and context (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11).

In order to judge others, readers need to understand them and their motives as well as the context in which they made their decisions. Choices and the judgements people make are
not simple or clear cut. As humans, readers need the ability imagine themselves in someone else’s situation before they can presume to judge them. More importantly, they need the ability to judge what they would, themselves, do in certain situations with the knowledge and understanding to, perhaps, make different moral choices. Schlink is posing the same question for readers as Hanna does, “What would you have done?” When readers address this difficult question, they need the faculties of discernment and an empathetic imagination central to addressing the complex contingencies of life (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 24) both for themselves but also for the characters of Schlink’s novel. Although the time of the Holocaust was a time of moral difficulty, Tabensky agrees with Nussbaum that readers can condemn the act but not always the actor (in Weisberg, 2004, p. 30). We are, after all, all social beings attempting to work out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be the best way to live (George, 2005, p. 101).

Reading is more than an ability, it is an act which, as it introduces readers to the lives and circumstances of others, creates an avenue for readers also to assess and question the values of their own culture and their own society in relation to others. A civic and evaluative approach to reading is both moral and political. It asks how the interaction between reader and text constructs a friendship and/or community and it invites us to discuss texts by making moral and social assessments of the kinds of communities texts create (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 101-102). As readers interpret the lives and the actions of Schlink’s characters they make sense of them in a process of ethical evaluation.

Reading as a Process of Ethical Evaluation

The Reader strongly resonates with Bauman’s observation that, in postmodernity, we live among a cacophony of moral voices which leaves us in an area of never-placated qualms (1992, pp. xxii-xxiii). Even though the Holocaust predates postmodernity, Schlink’s narrative demonstrates the ethical tensions and contingencies involved in trying to negotiate this cacophony of voices.
As Michael struggles with the tension of judging and understanding Hanna, within the context of another set of tensions, that between the moral complexity and the moral enormity of the Holocaust (Fellman in Tabensky, 2006, p.112), readers become involved in the same quandary. For example, on his way to visit Auschwitz Michael is given a lift by a truck driver who was a participant, in the murder of the Jews not because he “was ordered to”, but because he was “doing his work” as an executioner. The driver tells Michael that the victims were a matter of such indifference to him that he could kill them as easily as not (Schlink, 1997, p. 150). His comments leave Michael outraged and speechless. Readers must also negotiate their ethical standpoint and consider their own ethical responses as they address such a character. Perhaps, as Nussbaum writes they should look to Seneca’s argument in On Anger, in which he proposes that people who do bad things, from bad motives, are yielding to pressures that lie very deep in the fabric of human life (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 17). Nussbaum believes that readers may feel anger and hatred and that these are not unreasoning emotions, but have to do with the way readers think, imagine and interact with characters (1997, p. 65). When reading texts readers may be led to have empathy for many characters but texts may cultivate empathy unevenly. Readers may empathise entirely with some characters but not as readily with others but as readers decide and interpret why, they will gain an understanding of themselves and their own morals (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 101). Morality is conflicted and, as Bauman states, each of us needs to decide which rules are to be obeyed and which discarded (1993, p. 20).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated the significance of reading, as a practice, as a tool and as a necessary step for characters in The Reader in reflecting and discovering what truly matters, becoming sensitive and empathetic interpreters (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 28). As well, the chapter has addressed what it means, in terms of readers’ own practical capacity and ethical responsibility, to read, interpret and evaluate the events, experiences and relationships of those characters (of others) through fiction. It has invited readers to empathise with the ethical and emotional struggles and motives of its characters and, perforce, allowed them to appraise their own responses. The chapter has demonstrated that empathy is not, and
perhaps should not, be rendered lightly but it should be rendered from an evaluative approach. Sympathetic reading and critical reading should go hand in hand as readers ask themselves how that sympathy is being distributed and focused (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 101).

The next chapter discusses how the metaphorical strength of Schlink’s text creates, for readers, an interaction through their engagement with the text, a connection between the text and their own experience (Hawkes, 1972, p. 61). The forging of such connections, between readers’ local society and more global contexts pinpoint, as Nussbaum’s suggests, that becoming a world citizen requires developing compassionate imagination through narrative engagement with others.
Chapter Five

A Metaphorical Reading

“The language of friendship is not words but meanings.”
— Henry David Thoreau

The metaphorical style of The Reader creates a dialogue which prompts readers’ close investigation of its narrative web. Schlink’s narrative is many-layered and the varieties of responses from readers of The Reader signify that it is a deeply significant and nuanced text. The novel is redolent with metaphoric possibilities which need addressing and, in this chapter, I will explore how Schlink’s metaphors speak to me as I make a case for the moral importance of the novelist’s art (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 5).

The world of human beings, as a narrated world, is also a world of metaphors. As human beings we use metaphors in our reasoning; they can enable us to gain a new perspective on things and open up new horizons of understanding (Wiklund, 2010, p. 61). Metaphor is a function which covertly influences overt meaning (Hawkes, 1972, p. 60). It brings a nuance, an underlying structure of “secondary” narrative meaning to the text which deserves and demands closer scrutiny from readers (Chatman, 1971, p. 333). Words are not events in themselves so much as a totality of the conventions which derive from our own employment or interpretation of them. Words do not “mean”, we “mean” by words (Hawkes, 1972, p. 58). It is when they interpret a work that readers discover the way the work speaks to them. The Reader is not only about reading as a literal practice, but also as a metaphorical endeavour and thus, is a task which involves the forging of connections, and the identifying of similarities and differences between situations and events. Metaphor involves a special, out of the ordinary use of language (Hawkes, 1972, p. 60), one in which Hausman believes metaphors create the similarities which connect disparate literally interpreted concepts (Hausman, 1989, p. 1) and characters. Metaphors are designed by their creator to provoke responses from those who read them (Hausman, 1989, p. 11).

Because of the characteristics of metaphors, that is, their ability to juxtapose disparate entities, they can add meaning far beyond what is possible with simple descriptive language (Wiklund, 2010, p. 66). In a metaphor, two or possibly more, conceptual domains are
understood in terms of the other, establishing connections between text and meaning and working as tool to communicate (Wiklund, 2010, p. 61). In order to illustrate how the text and its complex language and metaphors, unsettle and disturb, in this chapter I offer an analysis of how the text speaks to readers through a strongly metaphorical style of writing, thereby creating an interaction which may lead to readers’ self-reflection. A dense web of effective metaphors contributes to the total aesthetic value of a work (Chatman, 1971, p. 73).

When readers engage with fictional texts they read them, as individuals, each in their own way. The text thus becomes an interaction between text and reader and as readers are individuals, with different backgrounds and experiences, the interaction will be perceived by each reader as a different conversation. Literature shows us not just something that has happened, but something that may happen (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 86); in other words, not just what is written but what we may read into the text, not just what we read in the text but also what we may read in ourselves.

In order to “read” the metaphorical aspect of The Reader, it is first necessary to understand why it is valuable exercise. This thesis argues that narrative is especially enriched by the depth of meaning a metaphorical reading engenders.

The Reading Metaphor and Illiteracy

The layered aspect of the novel begins with its very title. Reading, in The Reader, is metaphor for growth, understanding and enlightenment. It is related to coming to grips with life, its choices and its opportunities. It is related to absolution of guilt, the acceptance of responsibility, condemnation and the limits of forgiveness or retribution. A fruitful interpretation requires a creative leap beyond the parts of the narrative, something that metaphor provides (Wiklund, 2010, p. 65).

In one sense, Hanna’s illiteracy can be read as the illiteracy of the German people (Weisberg in Tabensky, 2006, p. 274). It is a metaphorical representation for Germany or, perhaps more broadly, Europe may be the referent here (Weisberg, 2004, p. 232). Hanna, as
an accomplice in the Holocaust, deserves condemnation but, as victim of her illiteracy, deserves compassion. After Hanna is imprisoned, Michael reads everything he can about illiteracy and realises the obstacles faced by an illiterate person carrying out everyday activities such as finding their way, choosing a meal, sticking to prescribed patterns and familiar routines and being restricted in opportunities for work (Schlink, 1997, p. 186). In this way Michael can empathise with Hanna’s unfortunate circumstances. In turn, and through Michael’s narrated experience, as readers are introduced to her circumstances; as they reflect on what they read, they achieve an expansion of sympathies that real life may not cultivate sufficiently (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 111).

For Hanna, reading is the path by which the dead can finally make their claim on her in absolution or payment for her part in their death (Conway, 1999, p. 300). Hanna, as she learns to read, finally hears the voices that are raised, the testimonial voices of the survivors (Hartman, 1997, p. 117) of the camps in which she worked. Just as Hanna never learned to read, perhaps the people of Germany refused to “read” the Nazi regime and its programme. Like Hanna, but on a figurative level, Europe is illiterate (Weisberg, 2004, p. 233). Schlink is asking readers to consider which “illiterates” they should empathise with and which deserve judgement for their failures. If we value “literacy” in the sense of understanding, of reading and judging the actions of others, we must interpret those others, both literally in the text, and those implied by metaphor, with care and the degree of empathy which we believe they deserve and which is the path to the narrative imagination required of a world citizen.

Because metaphors can and should be creative and “alive” (Wiklund, 2010, p. 63) they can convey more than one view. On one level, Hanna can be read as a metaphor for the German people, but readers are nudged to consider how Hanna’s failure is also that of all those educated people who may not have been perpetrators but who share Hanna’s failure, not just to read, but to understand the significance of the looming tragedy of the Holocaust. Just as she avoids seeing her crimes until compelled to by her reading of narratives, many of the old Nazis who made careers in the courts, the administration and universities (Schlink, 1997, p. 168), the officials of Germany, have not faced their own role in the camps and many have escaped responsibility, judgement or punishment for avoiding responsibility, even for their willful participation. As readers interpret the metaphorical link between Hanna and the citizens of Germany, the profound differences between the lives and the thoughts of those citizens is
revealed and yet, paradoxically, such an interaction makes the German citizens more comprehensible (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 111)

As readers travel vicariously and imaginatively with Hanna on her path to reading and knowledge, the narrative demonstrates that, not only does she gain knowledge, but reading also stimulates her imaginative understanding and therefore, her ability to make judgements. After her suicide, Michael inspects Hanna’s books with the prison governor and he realises that the collection contains all the scholarly literature on the Nazi camps, especially those relating to women in the camps, both prisoners and guards (Schlink, 1997, p. 203). Readers therefore, come to understand, by means of their engagement with this narrative unfolding, that Hanna has undergone a transformation, albeit one which Weisberg believes is too little and too late, a similar charge he makes about the citizens of Germany and indeed those of Europe (Weisberg, 2004, p. 233). Hanna realizes that she was complicit in her prisoners’ dreadful fate because of the way she lived her life in ignorance of the full responsibility of her actions and, because she, at the time, lacked the moral faculties of discretion or discernment (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 24). Her inability to read blocked her access to questions, critiques and alternatives (Conway, 1999, p. 289). She is left as Nussbaum states “with a morality that is empty of urgency”, without the knowledge and imagination to treat others with dignity and compassion (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 12). Hanna understands as readers also do, as they engage with Hanna’s struggle to comprehend her own actions, and those of the citizenry of the time of the Holocaust, that they cannot escape facing the world (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 102).

When Michael asks her, just before her pending release from prison, if she has ever thought about the things which came out in the trial, she responds, telling him that no one understood her anyway, that no one knew who she was or what made her do the things that she did (Schlink, 1997, p. 196). Michael felt that he knew her and he had been proud that she had learnt to read but he suddenly realises how little his admiration of her accomplishment has meant compared to what learning to read and write has cost her (Schlink, 1997, p. 196). He realises just how much he has let her down by never answering her notes and also realises that he is guilty of reducing her to a small niche but never to a place in his life (Schlink, 1997, p. 196). Michael realises that he is also one of those who had never understood her and never got to know her. Hanna however, tells Michael that she is being held to account at last by the dead. She tells Michael that only the dead now understand her (Schlink, 1997, p. 196).
Reading not only brings her such enlightenment but it also provides her with a place in the human community which she obviously did not feel she had previously. She has moved from the margins into the mainstream, a move which may be read metaphorically as the move from illiteracy to literacy but also to an awareness of her culpability.

**Silence as Metaphor**

In reflecting on of the Holocaust victims, Hanna can also be read as a metaphor for what Nussbaum calls “silenced people” (1997, p. 105), as illiteracy takes away her voice, her choices, her potential and her opportunities in life, drawing the reader to see a (metaphorical) similarity between Hanna and those she victimized, the silenced Jewish and other marginalised people who suffered incarceration, torture and extermination. In this regard Michael, and by implication, the novel’s readers are caught between empathy for Hanna and condemnation of her crime (Schlink, 1997, p. 114).

Is a person simply evil or simply someone thrust into extraordinary circumstances and who has temporarily lost sight of his or her own humanity (Ward, 2009, p. 91)? As Conway argues, Michael’s compassion makes him inclined to understand Hanna’s actions before he attempts to judge or blame (1999, p. 288) because he understands, as readers will, that her struggle was not simply her struggle at the trial, her struggle to hide her shame but that her whole life had been a struggle, not to show what she could do but to hide what she couldn’t (Schlink, 1997, p. 113). This struggle, as readers eventually come to learn, was what silenced her in the court as it had all her life. Hanna, in the end, offers herself no more compassion and no more voice in the court than the Holocaust victims were offered by many of the German populace. Readers are pricked to consider if acceptance and inclusion of the silenced or the different they read about could lead to a world in which they may commit to becoming, not only citizens who know themselves, but also who know how to fight prejudice against others (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 185).
Metaphorical blindness

As suggested in the previous chapter, both Mr. Berg and Hanna metaphorically represent the blindness of many German citizens during the period of the Holocaust. As opposite to each other with regard to education and literacy, they create an ambiguous metaphor and, as Hawkes points out, ambiguity is a necessary aspect of language which enables the process of metaphor to operate most fruitfully (Hawkes, 1972, p. 63). Ambiguity also implies a dynamic quality in language which enables readers to find deepened and enriched meanings (Hawkes, 1972, p. 64) as they interpret the many layers of meaning in the text.

The social context in which the novel is set accommodates an educated and informed populace governed by similarly educated and informed administrators and members of the judiciary, yet this society is also blind. The novel equates illiteracy with an inability or refusal to see as also a metaphorical critique of the deliberate blindness and deliberate avoidance of responsibility of the many educated people who had knowledge of the Holocaust and yet still chose to do nothing in the face of this horror. Had they not deliberately avoided reading what was to come, they may well have had what Nussbaum calls a more “intense concern with character and community” (1997, p. 89).

Narrative, especially narrative about difference, shapes not only the practical choices people make but also their “insides”, their desires, their thoughts and ways of looking at the world and of shaping their world (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 85-86). Narrative can create characters as both individual subjects, but also as representations or metaphors of attitudes or ideologies.

The role that Michael’s father serves in the narrative is as a metaphor for, as representative of, the educated society and the influential people of Germany, those who did not speak out against atrocities of the Holocaust but only reacted with silence. Mr. Berg functions as a foil to Hanna on many levels. He had a library of texts, was a professor, had every advantage and was someone who, according to Michael, was a philosopher who occupied himself with moral issues (Schlink, 1997, p. 139). Readers can thus appreciate the irony of his experience compared with Hanna’s. He is complicit in avoiding the reality of the Holocaust by
withdrawal and silence, firstly from his family with whom he was undemonstrative and uncommunicative, leaving a distance between them (Schlink, 1997, p. 138). Secondly, he is complicit with the Nazi regime by his silence, even thought he too is one of their victims, losing his job as a professor of philosophy during the war because of his teaching of Spinoza (Schlink, 1997, p. 18). He is one of many educated people who either felt they could not, or simply would not, see what was happening, those who had done nothing to stop it (Schlink, 1997, p. 90). Ironically, he speaks to Michael about dignity and freedom and then tells him that he sees no justification for setting other people’s views of what is good for them above their own ideas of what is good for them (Schlink, 1997, p. 141). Like Hanna, Mr. Berg is disengaged from others despite his education. However, unlike Hanna who eventually understands her crimes, he never learns to see, to attain a self-reflective position, despite talking about dignity and freedom. He therefore, also cannot read the other.

Although Hanna’s crimes are apparent and the results horrific, Andrew Gleeson believes Hanna’s crimes pale in comparison to that of the high officials and wealthy individuals who made crucial policy decisions (in Tabensky, 2006, p. 171). Despite Mr. Berg being a professor of philosophy for whom thinking, reading, writing and teaching was a way of life, he never actively agitates or protests against the regime. He remains metaphorically blind. Surely, as part of the powerful ruling class, he should have been bound to speak up? He shuts out what was happening in Germany and withdraws to the isolation of his study which becomes a “capsule” from the outside world (p. 140). Should readers understand him as a tragic result of the Nazi regime or a willing accomplice or, perhaps, as someone who lacks the capacity to read others, to approach them with compassion, because he avoids the task which Nussbaum believes makes us all better world citizens, that of becoming a sensitive and empathetic interpreter of others (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 63)? Readers of The Reader are confronted with these questions as they consider what both forms of illiteracy mean in terms of the capacity and ethical responsibility to read. Hanna could not read, Mr. Berg would not read and therefore, neither is able to identify with others. The dilemma dramatizes for the reader what lies at the very heart of the novelist’s art, an art which ensures or may provide the space in which a reader comes to be actively involved in the tangled complexities and struggles of another’s life (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 24).
The Guilt Metaphor

The term “the gray zone” was one which philosopher Primo Levi used to describe those few prisoners used by the Nazis to control other prisoners. The “gray zone” shifts the perspective away from the simple dichotomies of “good and bad” and blurs the demarcation between victim and perpetrator (Anton, 2010). Readers are made acutely aware that the tension between compassion and guilt will plague Michael for the rest of his life. As Levi writes, how can we judge and how can we find someone guilty when often there should be something in the middle (Levi, 1989, p. 42). For readers, Hanna’s predicament represents that gray zone between blame and guilt as becomes obvious when readers see how the trial uncovers the plot against her by the other prison guards who shift the blame entirely to her (Schlink, 1997, p. 123). She is both a perpetrator of a crime and a victim of an incompetent lawyer (1997, p. 111) and an intolerant judge (1997, p. 109). It is this gray area in which readers will reflect on Hanna’s situation as one in which the suffering person could be themselves as they contemplate what Levi writes of, as he confirms that both inside and outside the camps there were people ready to compromise (Levi, 1989, p. 49).

Nussbaum writes that sometimes readers need to see the inner lives of others as a complex web of circumstances, circumstances which often justify mitigation of blame, guilt and punishment (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 26). Readers will evaluate which circumstances deserve mitigation for themselves as they engage with the inner lives of the characters of Schlink’s novel. Michael, and perhaps readers, may feel empathy or even happiness for Hanna as she emerges from the prison of her illiteracy, a prison which has isolated her, not only from others, but also from herself (Conway, 1999, p. 289). She finally rejoices in her new-found ability to write about the things she enjoys, nature, poetry and the books she is able to read (Schlink, 1997, p. 187). Readers may empathise with Michael’s struggle to deal with his conflicted feelings for Hanna. Perhaps few, however, will empathise with the truck driver because readers may recoil in horror as Michael did when they read of the driver’s coldness and indifference to his victims. Michael wished he could find the words to erase what the driver had said and to “strike him dumb” (Schlink, 1997, p. 150) as, no doubt, readers will.

Nussbaum writes that readers have a willingness to criticize when criticism is due will, thereby, to invigorate their own thoughts (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 294).
Metaphor for Indifference

Metaphor operates as a “stretching” of language (Hawkes, 1972, p. 71). Readers working their way through the novel will find that there are ways of reading that extend beyond the literal especially when they realise the driver who gave Michael a lift to Auschwitz is a metaphor for those who condoned, or participated willingly in, the genocide. He is a metaphor for those who refused to address a minority group of humans with the respect and dignity which Nussbaum believes each person, each member of the human family deserves (1997, p. 67) as he devolves responsibility to a collective “other”. He differs from Hanna in that he has had a normal education and is in no way impaired or restricted but he became involved in the death camps because he was indifferent to his victims. As he tells Michael, the prisoners were a matter of complete indifference to him. He mocks Michael by asking him “Isn’t that what they taught you? Solidarity with everything that has a human face? Human dignity?” He excuses his work in the camps by telling Michael “You’re right, there was no war, and no reason for hatred. Because executioners don’t hate the people they execute, and they execute them all the same. Because they’re ordered to” (Schlink, 1997, p. 150). The driver’s cold and insensitive attitude and his complete lack of acceptance for any responsibility, not only horrify Michael, but will most likely provoke readers to react similarly and to question what may have led to such indifference. With Bauman, readers may consider that the driver is inoculated against accepting responsibility as he is the product of a society in which discipline is the sole responsibility, in which his duty towards the organisation or ruling regime preempts moral questions (Bauman, 2011, p. 10). However, Nussbaum writes that all humans are the product of social or natural conditions that may be subversive of justice and love, but that this attitude needs the reader’s patient resistance because such deeply internalized attitudes cannot be changed in an instant (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 41).

Collective guilt is diffused guilt and this renders it easier to deny personal responsibility. We cannot, and should not, dissolve our moral selves in the all-embracing “we” (Bauman, 1993, p. 47) but must accept our own guilt for our own decisions. When groups, especially of educated people, engage in apparently amoral behaviour, condone or offer only silence on amorality, confusion is the result (Gregory in George, 2005, p. 47). Many large organisations or groups of people do not see or hear the ultimate and remote results which
they helped to create. As Bauman writes, they may go on feeling moral and decent persons even while helping to commit gruesome atrocities (1994, p. 9). Even if readers never fully understand the actions of those such as the truck driver, the very activity of asking the questions and trying to understand, and then interpret, the person’s psychological and emotional state, can often help readers to avoid vindictive feelings (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 97).

Conclusion

*The Reader* motivates readers to reflect on and evaluate these questions as they interpret the diverse metaphors employed in the narrative. In doing so readers are reminded of the importance of learning to understand the situations and experiences of others before holding them to account. They should recognize them as fellow citizens in a community of reason, with imagination and compassion, because actions and motives require the patient effort of interpretation (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 63).

The metaphorical depth of Schlink’s novel opens it up to a rich interpretation. Readers are encouraged to interpret and evaluate for themselves with reason and imagination, the events and experiences of those whose lives were entangled in the horrors, the difficulties and dilemmas of the time of the Third Reich. Without the narrative form, and its gift of rendering complex and nuanced meaning, it would be much harder to keep the events of the Holocaust in mind (Hartman, 1997, pp. 108-109). Literature has the potential to wrest readers from their frequently obtuse, blunted imaginations to a compassionate acknowledgement and imaginative understanding of those who are other than themselves (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 111-112).
Chapter Six
The Conclusion

“The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose.”
— Margaret Atwood

There are no set answers and no “correct” readings or critiques to be derived from any novel. Many critics have written about different aspects of *The Reader*, but this thesis has taken the more esoteric investigation into how the interaction between the readers and the text stimulates an interpretive and imaginative act of reading. It has demonstrated how such engagement encourages readers to imagine the lives and problems of others, and to make connections between the literal and metaphorical realms of experience. This activity, in turn, stimulates the empathetic narrative imagination and the self-reflection necessary for readers’ development into world citizens.

*The Reader* has created much argument and discussion but, as Martha Nussbaum tells us, we need argument as an essential tool of civic freedom, to unmask prejudice and to secure justice (1997, p. 19). *The Reader*’s central trope is concerned with reading as both a literal and metaphorical practice and this thesis has demonstrated that Schlink’s novel encourages readers to read introspectively and to ask the questions “What would I have done. What should I have done?” In other words, readers are invited to evaluate themselves by means of a process which enables them to develop as world citizens, as they see how others live, feel, think and suffer. By active engagement and interaction with the text, readers see that they are also, or might also be, vulnerable and therefore, they share in someone else’s humanity.

I believe, as Nussbaum does, that the best way to connect with other members of our human society is to learn that we share much in common. We all have hopes of justice, a fear of prejudice, of our own failings, and have our own dreams. We are all just as capable of morality or immorality.
With Zygmunt Bauman, I also understand that we have become a society of individuals. However, although a society comprising individuals who, by cultivating an empathetic imagination through the reading and learning of fiction, we may be part of the world citizenry which Nussbaum sees as possible. The process of reading, more often demands that we become more self-critical about our own moral judgements because, as Mary Midgley claims, we need moral judgement to orient us in plotting our way on the path of a moral life (Midgley in Tabensky, 2006, p. 114).

Literature that introduces us to humanity as a community of individuals opens our eyes to how that community may best work collectively and collaboratively. Although we are individuals with individual responsibility, we are also members of the human community, which is made up of fallible individuals; and to survive and to thrive in this environment requires tolerance and understanding to afford us all a better world in which to live together. If we learn to understand the motives and lives of others through direct emotional interaction and through narrative fiction, compassionately and with imagination, we will see a more tolerant world citizenry emerge.

*The Reader*, although on one level a story of love, horror and illiteracy, offers readers unusual depth, richness and a wonderfully imaginative use of metaphorical language. The novel can thus be regarded as an effort to enact, in dramatic terms, the implications of Martha Nussbaum's claim that the literary imagination is crucial because texts construct readers who, while making judgements, still remain capable of love and can still open up their hearts to admit the life story of someone else (Nussbaum in Tabensky, 2006, p. 41). Schlink’s masterpiece cleverly illustrates exactly what Martha Nussbaum tells readers about narrative: that “If literature is a representation of human possibilities, the literature we choose will inevitably respond to, and further develop, our sense of who we are and might be” (1997, p. 106).

We begin to learn about good and bad, heroes and villains, at a very early age, from narratives and fables and we learn to judge what is right or wrong. For the young this is a simple process. As adults these judgements are tempered by the knowledge that choices are often mitigated by circumstance or situation. It is still, however, through learning and through our interaction with fictional texts, that we gain an understanding of others’ choices or
judgements and thus learn to question our own. Narrative plays a part in this process throughout our lives as we learn the understanding and self-evaluation necessary to make informed moral choices and judgements. Narrative can not only influence readers to approach others with an empathetic imagination, compassion and understanding, it can also, Nussbaum writes, teach them how to interpret the texts, to attain an insight which will also illuminate the literary experience and its role in their lives (1997, p. 101).

Reading literature which promotes debate, engagement, questioning and self-reflection, literature which brings readers into the lives of others, is and will continue to be essential in our academic curricula. Becoming a world citizen requires educators, critics and authors and readers to continue to foster, not only respect and understanding of others, recognizing not only difference, but also shared aspirations and problems (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 69).

Becoming a reader who interprets, with understanding and empathy, the lives of others contained in narratives, requires that our curricula from early childhood, and our reading throughout our lives, includes reflexive narrative which generates narrative imagination. Interactive and interpretive reading of narrative fiction which introduces readers to difference, is essential to them becoming world citizens, citizens who can take charge of their own reasoning and who can see the different and the foreign, not as threat to be resisted, but as an invitation to explore and understand, expanding readers’ minds and their capacity for citizenship (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 301).
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