

## MULTILATERAL REPRESENTATION OF SHOAH EVENTS IN SELECTED FICTION TEXTS: PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we present selected results of a probing research investigation that focused on the degree of reception and interpretation of selected literary texts in which the multilateral view of the Shoah or Holocaust is thematized. The respondents of the research were pupils of all grades of the Czech lower-secondary school. After an introduction in which we present the research methodology and briefly outline the potential of artistic narratives that contain a multilateral view of the defined events, we present the results of the research investigation. A multilateral perspective not only on the phenomenon of the Shoah or the Holocaust can develop students' ability to critically evaluate information and can hone their argumentation skills. Finally, these works prevent a schematic view of defined events, which can lead to the prevention of forming hasty opinions or making unfounded or unreasoned judgments.

**Keywords:** Shoah, Holocaust, multilateralism, research investigation, Between Shades of Gray, Salt to the Sea.

### 1 Introduction

In this paper, we present partial results of a research investigation, the focus of which was to determine the degree of reception and interpretation of texts with Shoah or Holocaust themes (for the purposes of this paper, we consider these terms as synonymous; see Carrier et al., 2015) by students who were attending the eighth or ninth grade of basic education the time of the research.

Pupils in the grades reciprocated fictional narratives that combine multilateral representations of defined events. We are convinced that this approach can lead to the elimination of the schematic view of the events in terms of guilty and victimized people, to the detachment from the concept of collective guilt or innocence, or to the view of the events through the prism of different actors (for example, Jews, Germans, Roma, or inhabitants of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia).

We are convinced that the reception of these texts can lead, among other things, to the development of desirable axiological values of pupils, to the acquisition of the ability to argue or to critically assess information, in our case obtained from reading artistic narratives. Finally, we see the approach of reading narratives in which the events of the Holocaust are portrayed multilaterally in developing the recipients' ability to view (not only) these events in a complex way.

### 2 Research methodology

The questionnaire for students from each grade was specific, with a unique research instrument for each group of respondents. The questionnaire consisted of an excerpt from one publication that dealt with a multilateral view of the Shoah events (the publications chosen were those that, in our opinion, have the potential to interest the pupils and which, in most cases, they have not encountered before - this fact ensures a certain identical starting position of the respondents). This was accompanied by five or six questions which measured the level of understanding of the narrative, the depth of interpretation and, in relation to the topic of the extract, the pupils' existing knowledge of the Second World War. We are aware that pupils currently in compulsory education are not introduced to the historical events associated with the 20th century until ninth grade in the History curriculum (see Faltýn et al., 2021, p. 61); however, we are of the opinion that they are also introduced to some historical stages in other

subjects or cross-cutting themes, which are related to the defined issue by their expected outcomes. The pupils' family or their specific interest in certain topics, not only historical ones, may also play a significant role in this area. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a section in which we collected basic demographic information about the pupils relevant to the evaluation of the questionnaires, to find out whether the passage they were working with was long or short for the pupils, and whether the research participants read books in their free time. We also investigated whether pupils would like to read the whole book from which the extract was excerpted. The year group of the respondents, not their age, is central to the evaluation of the questionnaires.

The research probe was carried out in one primary school in the Hradec Králové Region. Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, which was prevailing in the Czech Republic at the time of the research, the questionnaire was administered to the pupils without the presence of the author of the paper. Pupils from grades 6 and 9 filled in the questionnaire at school, while respondents from grades 7 and 8 were given the research instrument as part of distance learning, and thus filled it in without significant teacher intervention.

We are aware that the chosen method may have caused the respondents to have some difficulties in completing the questionnaire, for example due to misunderstanding of the questions and so on. Of course, the students could have addressed their questions to the teacher, but we perceive the absence of the author of the paper during the actual implementation of the research as a significant deficit. We emphasize that the methodology of the research investigation is presented completely, however, in the next part of the paper the results of the pupils from the eighth and ninth grade are presented.

### 2.1 Sample of respondents

A total of 12 pupils from the eighth grade (6 girls and 6 boys) and 18 pupils from the last year of primary education (9 girls and 9 boys) participated in the probing research.

### 3 Salt to the Sea

The eighth-grade students worked with an excerpt from Ruta Sepetys' book *Salt to the Sea* (2016). Multilateralism in the depiction of the events of the Shoah is represented by four characters whose fate is used to portray the life journey of people who lived through the Second World War in Nazi-occupied territory. The writer depicts the somewhat neglected lineage of wartime or post-war events through the figure of the consistent Nazi soldier, who is a typical representative of the German army during the Second World War, through the character of a young pregnant Polish girl who is forced to conceal her origins, the fate of a German soldier who 'woke up' during the German armies' rampage and decided to defect from the army, and through the depiction of a selected section of the life of a young Lithuanian girl who compares the effects of Hitler's and Stalin's policies in relation to the fate of Lithuania, then under the domination of the Soviet Union.

The story is set in the winter of 1945, a time when German soldiers are beginning to realize that the goals Adolf Hitler has set will not be achieved. Soviet troops are advancing from the east. Against the backdrop of these events, the inhabitants of the Nazi-occupied territory try to get out of the reach of the Russian soldiers, and these rescues include people against whom the Nazi policy was directed.

Sepetys was inspired by a real event, the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, whose destruction was caused by Russian submarines operating in the Baltic Sea at the end of the Second World War.

As the author herself points out, the tragedy of this ship stands unjustly in the shadow of the sinking of the Titanic or the Lusitania, even though Russian destroyers caused the deaths of some nine thousand mostly civilians.

The multi-lateral view of selected events of the Second World War stands out from this publication, due to the excellent authorial intent, by looking at similar events through the focus of the four characters. Each person, influenced by his or her previous life, his or her pre-war experiences, his or her social position before and during the Second World War, or in connotation with his or her prospects, interprets the event in separate ways. It is on this point that we see a key aspect of why the book in question should be part of children's and adolescents' reading in literary representations of the events of the Shoah or the Holocaust.

The publication also highlights the different perceptions of Jewish people, with the most prominent being the different perspectives of Joana, a young Lithuanian woman, and Alfred, a confident and determined soldier in the Nazi army.

### 3.1 Results and discussion: 8th year

The eight grade research participants who worked with the excerpt from the publication answered six questions after receiving the excerpt. It can be concluded that all questions were directed towards drawing conclusions from the text read.

The first question was *Who is Florian?* The pupils wrote: "a German boy, probably a German deserter, who saved Emilie from the Russians; a German, a murderer; a Polish soldier, a German civilian". In most cases, pupils correctly identified Florian as a German soldier who had defected from the Nazi army. For the answers "Polish soldier" and "German civilian", respondents may have been mystified by Florian's efforts to blend in with ordinary people, civilians, and thus hide his military origins.

The second question - *When and during what did Emilia and Florian meet?* - was oriented towards the main idea of the demonstration, i.e., the situation when a German soldier (albeit a defector) saved a Polish girl, in Nazi terminology subhuman. All students answered like the line "they met in the forest when Florian was rescuing her", which shows their ability to understand even a largely unusually stratified narrative.

The third question - *What did you learn about Joan?* - was oriented to determine the recipients' ability to excerpt from the text information suitable for answering the postulated question. The pupils answered: "she was a girl who fled, worked in a hospital, her mother gave her shoes; she was from a wealthy family, she had her mother's shoes and worked in a hospital; she lost her mother when she fled Lithuania; her mother gave her shoes; she belongs to the refugees, she is from Lithuania; she fled with 15 refugees, she was from a wealthy family, when she and her mother fled Lithuania she stayed alone in Inserburg and she has not known about herself for 4 years".

The fourth question was asked as follows: *What is the relationship between Hannelore and Alfred?* To answer this question, the recipients had to correlate the information they had learned from various parts of the text, moreover, always viewed from a different focus, which entails the necessity not only to excerpt the required information, but also to connect and transform it into a more general level. All respondents wrote "partners" or "lovers". The high difficulty of the task can be demonstrated by the fact that a total of three pupils skipped the question, one wrote "don't know".

Penultimate question *In which part of the excerpt did you learn the most information about Florian?* was specifically aimed at determining the level of orientation in the text, since the most information about Florian is included in the section *Emilie* (second part). Respondents wrote: "in the last paragraph - Alfred; in the first part; in the section about Emilie (second

part)". The overwhelming majority of students answered correctly, which shows their ability to navigate the text, or their ability to understand the text and reflect critically on it.

The last question - *What do Alfred and Florian have in common?* was again included to determine the extent of the recipients' ability to draw inferences from the fiction text they read. All respondents wrote answers like "they were soldiers who sided with Germany", indicating their ability in the area.

The certain maturity of the class in the range of understanding the text, in the ability to interpret it, draw conclusions from it or navigate in a relatively complex narrative, is complemented by a total of 58 % of the respondents' choice of the option that they found the excerpt short, but this is not matched by only five choices of the option that they would like to read the whole book. Although respondents found the excerpt short, suggesting that they were interested in the narrative, only 42 % of students who had worked with the book chose the option that they would like to read the whole book. On the other hand, the choice of the option about the extent of the excerpt corresponds to a total of 8 responses (66.6 %) of pupils that they read books in their free time, which suggests that they are used to reading whole fiction narratives.

We are aware that due to the layout of the excerpt, which replicated the differentiation of the text in the publication, the reading of the excerpt may have been difficult for the students, especially because the narrative appears fragmented, which may have been difficult for the recipients in the eighth grade, given their presumed previous reading experience. Moreover, as mentioned above, the book is inspired by a real event in which thousands of civilians died: we assume that the research participants from the given year of the lower-secondary school do not yet possess sufficient factual knowledge, which is essential in the reception of such texts. Despite the considerable cognitive demand of the narrative in terms of its reception, the results of the probing survey point to the fact that students from the eighth grade can interpret this narrative in a complex way. As the results of the research pointed out, the key factor for a comprehensive reception of the publication *Salt to the Sea* is sufficient mastery of critical thinking methods.

### 4 Between Shades of Gray

Ruta Sepetys's publication *Between Shades of Gray* (2020) falls into the area of a multilateral view of one line of events of the Second World War in looking at the Nazi regime and its representatives as saviors from the domination of the Soviet Union in Lithuania. The narrative itself describes the process of "liberation" of Lithuania by the helpers - the Nazis. The family of the main character, Lina, experiences persecution by the Soviet army under Stalin's leadership. The process of eliminating inconvenient people (especially the so-called intelligentsia) is comparable to what the leaders of the National Socialist German Workers' Party perpetrated on selected national groups. Lin's family is evicted from their apartment in Vilnius and deported in cattle cars to the Siberian Gulag.

In Siberia, internees are forced to work slavishly: without work, they receive neither meagre food rations nor firewood: in winter, temperatures in this region fall well below freezing. The author portrays the issues of the Soviet concentration camps through the stories of individuals, Lina's family, and the people Lina meets on the way to the gulag or in the gulag itself. The presentation of forced internment under various totalitarian regimes through the life story of specific individuals is currently one of the most popular methods of introducing these events not only to pupils and students at various levels of institutional education. We are convinced that this approach can be applied to a wide variety of events that must be warned against to avoid their repetition and to be able to recognize their germs.

Multilateralism in the Shoah is represented by a different view of the Nazi regime's supporters, specifically its army. The inhabitants of the Baltic countries and Finland view it as their

saviors from Soviet terror, as their liberators. This fact is quite understandable: the inhabitants of these countries have felt the persecutory practices of the Soviet Union, and so far, they have only learned about the actions of the German army by hearsay, and from their assumptions they mainly excerpt the fact that Hitler's troops were strongly opposed to communism. They have not yet heard of the Nazi extermination policy directed against persons of Jewish nationality; a case they consider marginal because the majority Baltic society is not among the active practitioners of Judaism.

We are convinced that the publication falls within the area of a multifaceted view of the Shoah, because in a way it disrupts the view of the Nazis primarily as a source of evil; in Sepetys' publication they are paradoxically seen as saviors and liberators. Of course, it is important to relate this point of view to the historical and social relations between the Baltic States, Finland, and the Soviet Union. This point of view can also be transferred to the perception of the soldiers of the Soviet army, who, in a way, form a contrast to the German army in *Between Shades of Gray*. This view can, with a certain degree of simplification, be compared to the perception of the Nazis in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the Soviet soldiers as liberators.

#### 4.1 Results and discussion: 9th year

As part of a probing research inquiry, students answered questions that stemmed from a passage at the heart of which is a situation from a cattle car transporting selected people to Siberia. The extract paints a picture of confusion represented by a dead child and his mother's efforts to cope with the situation, with the help of the other passengers in the wagon. The second part of the excerpt, with which the pupils participating in the probing research investigation worked, demonstrates the uncertainty associated with the arrival of Hitler's troops in Lithuania. The passengers develop two views: the first perceives Hitler as a savior, the second perceives Nazism as a successor to Soviet terror, with one totalitarian regime replacing the other, and it cannot be said that one is better or worse than the other.

The first question related to the excerpt from *Between Shades of Gray* was about the application of what was read to the lives of the recipients. The students were asked to answer the question *How do you imagine life in the grey tones?* Pupils wrote: "life during the Second World War; devastating; cramped; life in fear; life without rights, without power; harsh and dangerous; that people were oppressed, had to hide". As can be seen from the above, the research participants from the ninth grade were inspired by reading the excerpt rather than relating the phrase "life in grey tones" to their own lives, to their subjective perceptions.

Two questions were oriented towards excerpting information from the narrative: *What did you learn about Andrius?* and *Who is the narrator of the story?* To the first question, respondents answered "he was strict; a friend of his mother; he protected his family; he was brave; he had bruises on his face; he was a prisoner in the gulag; he was aggressive; he liked to cause conflict". The pupils' responses are widely dispersed, especially as the sample thematizes a considerable amount of information that respondents could have recorded in their answer to this question. Within the second query we encounter the replicas: "the woman; Andrius; she; the daughter of Jonas". Most of the answers referred to Ona, the girl who lost her child.

The fourth question was directed at the comparison between the Stalinist regime and Nazism. Based on the reception of the demonstration, students were asked to answer the question *What do the Soviets (Stalin) and Hitler (Nazis) have in common according to the demonstration?* Pupils from ninth grade wrote: "they make trouble; nothing; cruelty, horror, brutality; they cooperate in war". The lack of factual knowledge that ninth grade pupils should have at the theoretical level is indicated by one "don't know" response and a total of six pupils who omitted this question.

Comparing the responses of pupils from eight grade with the responses of the ninth-grade readers, it can be concluded that the pupils from the lower grade show a higher level of knowledge based on the evaluation of the questionnaire items that were in some way related to determining the level of knowledge about historical and social aspects related to the Second World War. We are aware that our statements cannot be generalized, as the respondents' answers could have been influenced by many internal and external factors.

The penultimate question was directed at correlating what was read with the existing factual knowledge of ninth-grade pupils: *Where and when might the story take place? According to what do you think?* Pupils answered: "in the Second World War; in Russia during the Second World War; at a railway station during the Second World War (talking about Hitler); on a train during the war; in a house; probably the First or Second World War; in Lithuania in the Soviet Union in 1943". The responses to this question demonstrate a certain lack of factual knowledge on the part of these recipients, as discussed in more detail in the previous commentary. It is worth noting the considerable dispersion of pupils' responses in terms of the correct and inferior temporal (and local) placement of the plot of the excerpt. In this sense, we encounter quite detailed answers (see "in Lithuania in the Soviet Union in 1943"); on the other hand, some respondents entered "in a house" or the general, though correct, statement "during the Second World War".

The last question again focused on the ability to extract information from the text about who killed Andrius. Respondents entered "Soviet soldiers; Germans and Russians; no one; either the bald man or the Germans; Ona". As can be seen from the above replicas, pupils had considerable difficulty in extracting relevant information from the text relating to the question. This fact may be due to the complicated narrative structure to which pupils may not be accustomed; they have probably not yet encountered the corresponding fiction patterns, which is also related to the relatively balanced scores in the responses to the question whether respondents considered the passage to be short or long. A total of eight pupils (44 %) chose the first option, while a total of seven respondents (39 %) chose the second option. Three pupils chose the "don't know" option.

The fact that only 55 % of the respondents in this year group read books in their free time cooperates with a certain absence of fiction models and the related lack of reading competence. The possibility that this group of respondents would like to read the book from which the excerpt that was part of the questionnaire they completed was even less likely to have a positive response (44.4 %).

#### 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we present selected results of a probing research investigation, which investigated the degree of reception and interpretation of selected fictional narratives in which a multilateral view of the events of the Shoah or the Holocaust is applied.

Students from the eighth grade answered questions based on an excerpt from the publication *Salt to the Sea*. The reception of this text caused difficulties for a certain group of pupils evaluated, which stemmed from the need to generalize in a certain way the different views of the same event and to answer the postulated questions based on a certain generalization. What was unexpected was the finding that the pupils from this grade had sufficient knowledge of the historical phase of the Second World War.

Given the fact that the pupils who worked with the excerpt from *Between Shades of Gray* were in their final year of primary institutional education at the time of the probing research, we assumed that this group of test pupils would have a sufficient command of critical thinking methods or text-orientation skills. Based on this thesis, the questions postulated for pupils from ninth grade were quite challenging. It is beyond the power of the

researcher to ascertain the extent to which pupils did not understand the question, did not want to answer it, or did not master the assumed competencies. For questions related to comprehension of the text and drawing inferences from what was read, pupils were unable to answer adequately in most cases. For questions centered on establishing the knowledge of the sample of respondents about the Second World War, pupils again did not answer satisfactorily - it can be concluded that pupils from the previous year had a greater amount of factual knowledge. Despite some dispersion between the theoretical potential of the publication in presenting a literary representation of a multilateral view of the events of one line of the Second World War and the results of the research investigation, we believe that the publication by Ruta Sepetysová could be familiarized with by pupils from the ninth grade, since on a theoretical level they should already have sufficient reading experience and factual knowledge by this time.

The publications included in the questionnaires are non-intentional. We believe that this fact should not be an argument for why the selected students failed to answer the postulated questions, especially those that focused on skills related to critical thinking, comprehension, and orientation in the text. Leaving aside the plot of the narrative, it can be said that the pupils who took part in the probing research should have mastered these techniques and should be able to apply them to any text (considering its content, of course). Another argument why we do not consider the selection of non-intentional texts as a certain limit is the fact that pupils in institutional education in literary education classes are introduced through reading books to texts that can be classified as literature not primarily intended for children and young people (compare Mašát, 2019).

#### Literature:

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