



The Adaptation Study of “The Diary of a Young Girl” in 1950s America

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Abstract. Although the Holocaust has become one of the most important public issues in American society, in the 1950s, the Holocaust had no resonance in the United States. An exploration of the renowned text “The Diary of a Young Girl” and its adaptations from that era exposes the suppression of Holocaust awareness, primarily attributed to a convergence of factors such as post-war optimism, prevailing anti-Semitic sentiments, and the censorship climate during the Cold War.

Keywords: The Diary of a Young Girl; the Holocaust; anti-Semitism; Cold War

1 Introduction

The darkest chapter of World War II, the Holocaust, has been over for more than 70 years. Today, an increasing number of people have come to recognize its significance and meaning. Simultaneously, research related to the Holocaust has become more intricate.

Beyond academic research, numerous countries, with the United States as a representative, have not ceased their enduring memories of the Holocaust. The Holocaust has become a segment of history that American citizens regularly revisit in memorial museums. However, the attention to the Holocaust in the United States, from the government to the public, is also highly distinctive. The United States is neither a victim nor a perpetrator of the Holocaust. This implies that the position of the Holocaust in American society today gradually integrates into the national memory over time.

Academic research also supports this view. Some scholars pointed that, prior to the Eichmann trial, there was minimal contemplation and reflection on the Holocaust in American society. [1]In the Jewish community, due to the complex social atmosphere of the 1950s in the United States, survivors who arrived in the country were often discouraged by other Jewish individuals from discussing the details of the Holocaust. [2]

However, the American society of the 1950s was not lacking in context related to the Holocaust. In the 1950s, Book “The Diary of a Young Girl” achieved success in the United States, and its film and stage play adaptations gained significant influence. As

Hilene Flanzbaum believes, “Any discussion of the Holocaust should start with ‘The Diary of a Young Girl.’ In the United States and other countries, ‘The Diary of a Young Girl’ has always been the most widespread and influential description of the Holocaust.” [3] This paper aims to discuss the adaptation of “The Dairy of a Young Girl” to explore the Holocaust awareness in 1950s America.

2 Content and Stage Play Adaptation of the Diary

Why was “The Diary of a Young Girl” and its stage adaptation so popular in the 1950s? The textual content of the diary evidently served as the foundation for its success. Today, facile access to Anne Frank’s diary affords readers the opportunity to delve into the poignant narrative of Anne and seven others clandestinely inhabiting an attic for two years, seeking refuge from the Nazi atrocities. The diary not only chronicles Anne’s astute observations and reflections on her companions but also delineates her evolving awareness of the Holocaust and personal maturation. Furthermore, the diary delves into the nascent facets of adolescence, encompassing the yearning for love, the perplexities of puberty, aspirations for the future, and minor familial conflicts. These developmental elements, unfolding amidst the precarious backdrop of life and death, not only foster reader empathy but also elicit concern for Anne’s fate. These vivid contents have not only maintained a steady readership for “The Diary of a Young Girl” over the decades but have also led many schools and museums in the United States to consider it a typical text recounting the Holocaust.

After World War II, Anne’s manuscripts were first collected and published by Anne’s father Otto Frank. The diary initially gained immense success in the Netherlands and quickly translated into English for publication in the United States. Then, Otto entrusted the Broadway team, along with the playwrights Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett with the adaptation.

Before the adaptation process began, Otto Frank had already established basic guidelines for the adaptation through communication with the entire team, intending to transform “The Diary of a Young Girl” into a play that could be more widely accepted. The Broadway team agreed to this proposal after discussions. The team faced challenges from two aspects. Firstly, as a non-Jewish adaptation team, how could they closely depict the Jewish elements and the Holocaust-related content in the dairy? The second challenge originated from the text. “The Diary of a Young Girl,” as a diary genre, lacked the plot elements required for a stage play, and the complete characterization needed for a script was scattered throughout the various chapters of the diary.

Finally, the Broadway team did not shy away from these challenges and made efforts to restore the Jewish features of the text. For example, the director Garson Kanin revisited the attic where Anne’s family hid, even spending a night there to better understand Anne’s life. Numerous real-life details were incorporated into the stage setting, including the daily sound of a clock, the cramped space, and the structure of the attic. Moreover, the entire team extensively studied Jewish customs and wartime history before starting the scriptwriting for the stage play.

Despite the Broadway team's efforts to restore Jewish features and Holocaust content in the characters and plot, a careful reading of the stage play script reveals that the rewritten character features align more with pre-existing biases against Jews than with the authentic representation of the text. Scholar Jonathan Krasner once summarized various patterns of Jewish characters in traditional Western dramas, including the "stereotypical, dominant Jewish mother, inept father, sexually desirable beauty, money-obsessed Jew, wise yet secular elder, and estranged son." [4] The adapted character images in "The Diary of a Young Girl" stage play script seems to fit into these stereotypes.

The character of Anne's mother, Edith Frank, is significantly simplified in the stage play compared to the diary text. Edith is portrayed as a stereotypical woman who expresses despair in the face of difficulties and often shows a lack of understanding towards Anne. The character of Mrs. Van Daan is the most vivid example, and her image deviates greatly from the original intent of the diary. If the slightly stereotypical Edith still shows some kindness on several occasions, the rewritten Mrs. Van Daan combines traits of being greedy, seductive, and lascivious, significantly diverging from the original text. In the script, the description of the female character not only includes being "very voluptuous," but also notes Mrs. Van Daan's actions: "She hikes her skirt up above her knees." [5] Through these actions, Mrs. Van Daan fulfills her sexual task - drawing Otto Frank's attention. Until the end of the stage play, Mrs. Van Daan, besides constantly causing arguments and chaos, does not play a significant role in the plot. At the same time, her husband becomes a prototype of the "greedy Jew" who expresses his love for his fur coat throughout the play, and in the specific circumstances, exhibits greed for food. To shape the new Mr. Van Daan's image, the adaptation team specifically created a plot. In the dead of night, Mr. Van Daan steals the already limited food, only to be discovered by the others.

Anne's character, the most essential role, diverges significantly from the image in the diary text. In the stage play script, Anne is transformed from a girl who expresses her thoughts openly in her diary into someone who often hesitates in speaking. Moreover, she is portrayed as emotionally fragile and dependent on others. The character of Anne in the script, lacking the firm will portrayed in the diary, has a greatly weakened personal consciousness and subjectivity.

In addition to the distortion of character features, the stage play script also simplifies the plot, reducing the complexity present in the diary. For example, the daily tension and fear in the attic are highlighted in the diary. Residents must adapt to a confined and limited life while facing the fear of Nazis at any time. In comparison, the stage play script emphasizes daily trivialities and often neglects the underlying psychological pressure. The adaptation team tends to avoid illustrating the existential fears and instead focuses on humorous elements, lightening the tone of the story. At the end of the stage play, everyone is arrested by the Gestapo. Notably, the play does not feature actors portraying the Gestapo on stage; instead, the scene is conveyed through the suggestive use of footstep sounds.

The stage play is particularly noteworthy for Anne's closing line in the script: "I still believe people are good at heart." The play aims to present a optimistic atmosphere, yet the original diary conveys starkly different emotions. Anne, after learning about the

Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people through broadcasts and conversations, experiences inner turmoil. Her belief in the goodness of people stems from her unwavering commitment to ideals and her enduring faith in finding hope amidst adversity. Clearly, the stage play has simplified the Holocaust content in the diary.

Despite the criticism presented in this chapter regarding such an adaptation approach, people in the 1950s were particularly eager to embrace such adaptations. The stage play not only achieved significant box office success but also garnered praise from numerous film critics. Clearly, this suggests that such adaptations were not merely the result of the adaptation team's individual choices but were closely connected to the Holocaust narrative prevalent in 1950s America.

3 1950s America: Overlooking the Holocaust

Firstly, the economic development coupled with the victory in the war led to a lack of interest among the American public in the wartime tragedy of World War II during the 1950s. Throughout the war, the United States did not suffer significant ravages, resulting in most Americans perceiving the war based solely on media propaganda, devoid of a deep and visceral sense of the war's catastrophic impact. Additionally, the United States' position in the war set its post-war sentiments apart from other nations. American involvement in the war tilted the balance in favor of the Allied forces, portraying the United States as a "savior" rather than a victim in the conflict. Moreover, the war drove the swift growth of the overall economy. The implementation of the Marshall Plan in the post-World War II era not only stimulated economic development but also instilled confidence among Americans about future progress. [6]

The second factor influencing the adaptation is the social status of American Jews in the 1950s. In today's United States, the Jewish community occupies a highly significant position. From Obama to Trump, visits to the Holocaust Memorial Museum were essential during their terms. In the 1950s, the situation for American Jews was quite different. Before that, Jews not only were not at the center of American society but were often excluded from the mainstream. In fact, there was a strong anti-Semitic sentiment in American society before the 1950s. Subsequently, the Second World War further intensified anti-Semitic sentiments in the United States. [7] Various statistics also indicate that anti-Semitism reached its peak during World War II. After the war, as the pressure of war gradually eased, anti-Semitism began to decline over the subsequent decades.

However, the 1950s still presented a dilemma. Firstly, despite the eventual voice that Jews found in American society, it was still a gradual process. As some scholars have pointed out, the Jewish community at that time was "both outsiders and insiders," finding themselves in an awkward position. [8] Even Americans without anti-Semitic tendencies had to admit that America did not have space for diversity." The promotion of "universal values" in post-war America, while correcting anti-Semitism, undoubtedly also erased the distinctiveness of Jewish identity.

This situation also led to the thorough concealment of discussions about the Holocaust. Here, I need to further explain this "universal value." Similarly, many scholars

in the 1990s often used the "universalization of the Holocaust: as a crucial argument to criticize the adaptation team of "The Diary of a Young Girl" during discussions. This easily confuses researchers: the universalization of the Holocaust, as an event revealing the evil of humanity, implies everyone's responsibility to prevent its recurrence. On this level, the "universalization of the Holocaust" and "universal values" seem not to hinder the memory of the Holocaust but rather contribute to it.

The discussion of this issue cannot be separated from the reality of American society in the 1950s. The "universal values" advocated by the United States in the 1950s were not truly "universal" but more accurately described as "homogeneous." We can briefly review various events in which the United States, at the national level, shaped its ideological consciousness after the war. In 1945, the U.S. established the House Un-American Activities Committee as a permanent institution of the House of Representatives, with Senator Joseph McCarthy, later the spokesperson for "McCarthyism," as its main figure. By the late 1940s, the pattern of the Cold War had officially taken shape, and espionage trials were ubiquitous in the United States. It can even be said that power and censorship are omnipresent in American popular artworks. [9]

Despite the nominal purpose of the House Un-American Activities Committee to examine the content of communism, in practice, this scrutiny was greatly magnified. The Jewish community, already on the margins, was significantly affected. The first ten people scrutinized by the committee were called the "Hollywood Ten," and six of them were Jews. The political pressure triggered a prolonged period of self-censorship within Hollywood. This censorship clearly could not only cover elements of communism but also expanded to anything that did not conform to mainstream American culture. As observers at the time noted through the popular culture texts of the 1950s: "We find Jews increasingly silent... but if we pretend Jews do not exist, then anti-Semites cannot find a target." [10]

It can be said that in 1950s America, due to the optimistic mood after the war, the marginalization of Jews, and the government's scrutiny during the Cold War, these three factors together produced a narrative framework in American society that concealed the Holocaust. In this context, it is not difficult to understand the tendency towards the simplification of character personalities, Jewish characteristics, and the Holocaust in the adaptation of "The Diary of a Young Girl."

4 Film Adaptation of the Diary

As the stage play "The Diary of a Young Girl" was being performed, plans for a film adaptation were also put into motion. Eventually The Hollywood chose the renowned director George Stevens at that time.

Stevens' background was particularly noteworthy. While the previous production team needed to research to recreate Anne's life, Stevens was different. Stevens not only served as a soldier in World War II but also worked as a journalist reporting on Nazi atrocities on the front lines. He even ventured into concentration camps, capturing images with his camera. It can be said that he might have been among the first Americans to encounter the truth of the Holocaust.

If we focus solely on the plot, Stevens followed the classic Hollywood production pattern in telling the story of "The Diary of a Young Girl." Although there were some differences in details from the stage play, most of the plot elements from the stage play, especially those depicting Anne leading everyone to overcome difficulties with optimism, love, and courage, were preserved. The film's portrayal of Anne can be divided into two parts. The first half of the film mainly shaped the characters inside the annex and depicted a conflicted environment. The second half emphasized Anne's growth, ultimately leading everyone to overcome adversity.

Compared to the 1955 stage play, the film version of "The Diary of a Young Girl" clearly aimed to portray Anne as a Hollywood-style idol to attract audiences. This tendency to idolize Anne was evident in the casting process. Initially, the team approached the famous actress Audrey Hepburn, who declined the role, believing she couldn't handle it. Later, the film also considered casting Susan Strasberg, who played Anne in the stage play. While Strasberg had a beautiful image, her facial features were more pronounced, adding a touch of bravery but reducing a bit of the girlish charm. Eventually, after negotiations, the team chose Millie Perkins, an advertising model with a sweet image, somewhat resembling Hepburn. Perkins had larger eyes, longer eyelashes, and softer facial features compared to Strasberg. This emphasis on sweetness was most prominent in the scene celebrating Hanukkah. Anne in the film was beautifully dressed to celebrate the Jewish holiday, wearing a dress with a large bow, creating a more charming and sweet impression than the stage play.

However, it does not mean that Stevens completely abandoned the expression of history. The unique experiences of the Holocaust clearly influenced Stevens in the recreation process of "The Diary of a Young Girl." One of the most significant differences between the film and the stage play was the direct inclusion of images related to the Holocaust in the movie. Firstly, the stage play only indirectly informed the audience about the existence of the Gestapo through some lines or as off-stage voices. In the film, the image of the Gestapo wearing Nazi uniforms directly appeared. Secondly, the movie also used the stage play's original plot of "Anne's Nightmare," but while reproducing this plot from the stage play, the film presented the following image: a group of indistinct people standing in line in the wilderness, gradually approaching. They all wore headscarves and striped uniforms representing prison personnel. Although the film did not explicitly indicate, those familiar with the Holocaust would recognize that they were prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Finally, the focus shifted to a girl. This girl wore the same striped uniform, had a blurry face, but bore some resemblance to Anne. Clearly, this scene not only created a dreamy and ambiguous atmosphere but also hinted at Anne facing the danger of the Holocaust. These explicit elements with a historical background of the Holocaust were absent in the stage play.

Similar content also appeared in the scene where Anne's family celebrated Hanukkah. In the stage play's script, Anne's family only sensed an intruder in the building and speculated that it might be a thief. In the movie, the character invading the building was explicitly changed to two Nazi soldiers. These soldiers heard a noise, entered the building, and searched. As the soldiers gradually searched the interior of the building, the tension rose for Anne's family and the audience. In the end, Anne's family's cat appeared in front of the two soldiers, dispelling their suspicions. These scenes clearly

indicated that the film aimed not only to create a simple tense atmosphere but also specifically pointed out that the source of tension was Nazi and the Holocaust.

The use of light and shadow is another aspect where Stevens excelled in creating a tense atmosphere. The most famous example was the scene of the thief breaking into the annex. When everyone was asleep, a ray of light outside the window gradually approached the bookshelf. Suddenly, the light disappeared, replaced by a shadow. The sound of footsteps and the thief's movement added to the tension. The darkness outside the window suddenly brightened again, and the thief's head appeared. When he opened the window, the light in the room dimmed. As the thief entered the room, the shadow of the window gradually covered his face, adding to the suspense. When he left the room, the thief's figure disappeared into the darkness. These meticulous designs on light and shadow not only heightened the tension but also brought a unique atmosphere to the film.

In summary, the film version of "The Diary of a Young Girl" reflects Stevens' hesitation, ambivalence, and uncertainty in expressing the Holocaust. On the one hand, he possesses a genuine awareness of the Holocaust, but constrained by the general lack of awareness and interest in the 1950s, he finds himself compelled to succumb to commercial considerations. As a result, he creates a film that neither fully adheres to the Hollywood commercial model nor adequately portrays the unique historical event of the Holocaust. This uncertainty indeed affected the film's box office performance, and the box office results were not satisfactory. Some individuals were even unaware of the film's efforts in depicting Holocaust history. After the film's release, John Stone, the director of the American Jewish Advisory Committee, stated, "this screenplay is even better than the stage play. You(Stevens) have given the story a more 'universal' meaning and appeal." [11]

5 Conclusion

This paper selects the adaptation of "The Diary of a Young Girl" as its research subject, aiming to explore the discourse surrounding the discussion of the Holocaust in 1950s American society. The paper begins by analyzing the adaptation process of the stage play based on "The Diary of a Young Girl," revealing a prevalent tendency in society to shape an adaptation that overlooks Jewish specificity, emphasizes an optimistic mood, and simplifies the portrayal of the Holocaust.

This adaptation phenomenon is closely intertwined with the socio-cultural context of 1950s America. The paper contends that post-war optimism, the marginalized status of Jewish people, and the impact of post-Cold War censorship were pivotal factors shaping the narrative of the Holocaust during that period. In the final section, the paper further explores the film adaptation of "The Diary of a Young Girl." Despite the director's attempt to convey the content of the Holocaust, the oscillating and nuanced expression also indirectly affirms the profound influence of the narrative framework of 1950s American society on creative endeavors.

Through the study of the adaptation of “The Diary of a Young Girl,” it is evident that the narrative framework of 1950s America indeed hindered people from remembering and exploring the reality of the Holocaust. Due to the limitations of the paper length, other adaptations are left for more research and discussion.

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