

IBDP Extended Essay

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English B HL

Category 3: Literature

Facing Death Through Its Personal Narration

How does the narrative of Death in Markus Zusak's
'The Book Thief' contribute to the readers' perception
of war?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Markus Zusak is an Australian writer and his historical fiction novel 'The Book Thief' is set in Nazi Germany at the time of World War II. The novel provides a distinctive perspective on the lives of those affected by the war by giving "Death" a physical form and using this character to narrate the story.

The Book Thief is set in Nazi Germany in the little village of Molching, which is close to Munich. The core of the book's action occurs between 1939 and 1945, at the height of World War II. Hitler had already enacted the Nuremberg Laws, which stripped many Jews of their rights, by this point. Concentration camps were established in Germany as the Nazi regime turned hostile in 1939. Many German soldiers perished on the Eastern Front during the war. During the war, air raids, food supply, and finances were frequently precarious for those who were permitted to stay at home, such as older men, women, and children.

Many fictional publications about the events of World War II frequently recount the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany from the perspective of Holocaust victims. Markus Zusak chooses to explore the German point of view and their encounter during that period in history to demonstrate how individuals who opposed the Nazi regime had no choice but to comply with their orders to safeguard themselves and their loved ones.

The Book Thief is an impactful narrative that explores themes of bravery, atonement, and human fortitude amid malevolence. Its portrayal of conquering hardships and discovering optimism amidst hopelessness will strike a chord with readers from diverse backgrounds. The novel's unforgettable characters, insightful themes, and resolute message of hope cement its place as a significant piece of literature. By delving into the influence of language, it prompts us to recognize our ability to form and communicate narratives that can impact our perception of the world and foster unity among individuals. The novel "The Book Thief" is an enduring

and stimulating work that prompts its audience to contemplate humanity's endurance during periods of adversity. It is a crucial prompt of the influence of storytelling and how it can foster optimism and insight in a world marred by unfairness.

Young adults are drawn to the book because the way it is narrated eases the suffering portrayed in the storyline. By relinquishing the grip of the tragedy, Death is able to depict every dreadful event and the general feeling of sadness that pervades the novel. In doing so, Death is portrayed as an amiable, calming, and empathetic character in the narrative sphere. Furthermore, the exploration of Death's domain investigates how literature represents death both as an abstract concept and as a formidable entity. The purpose of this analysis is to evaluate how Death's narrative presence reduces the tragic elements of the plot.

In this essay, I intend to explore the narration of Death in the context of his narrative space and how its effect on the tragic story contributes to the readers' perception of a world at war. I will explore the themes the novel brings up and how death plays a role in conveying these to the readers. The personification of death and his personal narration through the course of the events in the story will also be investigated. By this way, I aim to gain a perspective on how the war is reflected in the story as a result of an unusual narrator. This will further enable me to approach my research question and discover how the narrator contributes to the readers' interpretations related to the war.

2. The tasks of Death

The Book Thief takes place between 1939 and 1943, during a time of war. It depicts a time of conflict and the horrors that resulted from it. The Holocaust and World War II are happening during this time, and this shapes even figures like death. Death is working overtime as residential areas that were made up of civilians were being attacked and would want to take a holiday. As a result, it presents a complex picture of war, which is brutal and compels people to meet their deaths.

The principal storyteller is Death, who is captivated by humanity and the spectrum of colours in the world. However, Death struggles to comprehend how individuals can possess both ugly and beautiful qualities simultaneously. Death is interested in Liesel and her narrative, considering it as one of the few exceptional tales in his experience. Throughout the novel, Death intermittently provides clever, illuminating, or foreboding remarks. Additionally, Death frequently shifts the chronology of the storyline, disclosing future events before revoking them. The narrator is in complete control of the plot, primarily expressing criticism and commentary about how he sees others. Death tries to change people's interpretations about him by demonstrating that he also has a heart and somewhat looks fairly human. He talks about having to follow the directives of multiple different superiors, even those that start wars and murder people, like Hitler. The narrator frequently feels exhausted from his work, and on rare occasions he may even feel sympathy for the people he must take away from the world and away from their loved ones.

“They say that was is death’s best friend, but... was is like the new boss who expects the impossible. He stands over your shoulder repeating one thing incessantly: ‘Get it done, get it done.’ So, you work harder. You get the job done. The boss, however, doesn’t thank you. He

asks for more."¹ Death explains the discrepancy between what individuals believe about death and think about war. Death sees war as a demanding employer, not a friend, because his job becomes much more challenging during times of war. He does not have the authority to decide whether people live or die; he only deals with the fallout, only gathering the souls of those who have passed away. Death rejects the notion that he enjoys his labour; he performs tasks only when they are necessary. He asserts that humans actually bring about their own demise and he is not the agent of death. It is possible to interpret the author's intention as encouraging readers to adopt a more laid-back attitude toward Death.

The *Book Thief's* use of Death as a narrator and the territory he seizes have a profound impact on how readers interpret the narrative. Death uses his narrative space to ameliorate the tragic scenario and his heavy duties during the time of war, which makes it less overt. The story contains magical components because Death is a fantastic being and inhabits his area. Throughout the novel, Death employs several techniques to express personal feelings to make the reader feel empathy and sincerity towards him. In this way, Death leads the reader and make the narrative simpler to understand.

¹ Markus Zusak 309

3. Mortality

As the story is set in Nazi Germany during World War II, there is a continual sense of tension and peril; therefore, the idea of mortality is relevant throughout the entire book. Death is personified to demonstrate that he is stealing human souls, and the Nazis are giving Death a plethora of options. All the characters in the book have had personal experiences with death, including Liesel when her younger brother passes away at the start of the story. The characters are acutely aware of their own mortality as well as the growing number of lives lost during the conflict, and death is not a stranger to them. Most of the characters cope with dealing with a loved one's death and subsequent survivor's guilt.

Death, who is introduced at the beginning of the book, highlights the omnipresence of death in the lives of every character. The deaths of key characters further underscore the theme of mortality throughout the entire book. He narrates and explains the causes of each character's demise, which makes death seem less remote and menacing. Again, Death explains why he feels compelled to take each character's life, replacing dread with a sense of empathy. Even Death, according to Death, "has a heart,"² at one point.

The novels' treatment of death has an impact on how readers read it. Death is made a significant character in a tragic story by miraculous occurrences, Zusak's decision to portray Death in a certain way, and the political responsibility of the text. Death's role as narrator and the prominence he is given in the book lessen its impact and make it more tolerable for a broad readership. The perspective of the story would be quite different if Death's narrative space were not present. For instance, Liesel's anguish would be greatly heightened if she were the narrator. She has gone through a lot in her life, and to read about those things from her point of view could make the book way more sorrowful.

² Markus Zusak 246

3.1 Colours of darkness

At the beginning of the book, Death notes that people tend to notice colors mainly during dawn and dusk, which mark the transition between light and darkness. The book frequently depicts darkness as a symbol of ignorance and misery, from the Hubermanns' cellar where Liesel learns to read and brings light into the darkness, to the closet where Max hides before leaving Stuttgart. Throughout the story, darkness is a recurring motif. As a result of Max's line of work, which entails painting over people's blinds to produce darkness during blackouts, the motif of darkness also refers to safety in this context. Max is only able to observe the stars at night. Darkness, however, presents a challenge in a book about reading, and Liesel and the other characters must battle it continually in order to see the words they read and hear. This represents the continuing efforts to see through the darkness the war creates in their lives. Reader gets the sensation that even when the characters are battling with the harsh circumstances the war causes, Death underlines that there is still hope in the world beyond darkness.

4. Glimpse of Death's opinions

Death imagines the sky beyond the rain clouds that envelop the death camp while carrying souls from the Auschwitz gas chamber. "Sometimes I imagined how everything looked above those clouds, knowing without question that the sun was blond, and the endless atmosphere was a giant blue eye."³ Death conveys optimism that there is hope beyond the atrocities occurring on Earth in the face of extraordinary sorrow. The "big blue eye" may represent a vigilant and just God, whose vision has been blocked while the Nazis are annihilating His Chosen People.

Zusak also mentions Death's opinions about Hitler a few times during the course of the narrative. For example, "No one could serve the Führer as loyally as I could. A person's heart is not like mine. I possess the limitless power to be in the right location at the right time, whereas the human heart is a line and mine is a circle. Death expresses his adherence to Hitler here. Death asserts that he can assist Hitler in a way that humans cannot by virtue of his heart. Hitler may also be the worst if Death, the worst possible entity, serves him best. Ironic commentary on the story's historical setting lessens the horror of death.

The *Book Thief* also uses a lot of foreshadowing; each chapter offers both indirect clues and outright disclosures about the characters' futures and the outcomes of alternative choices. Liesel is described by Death as a "perpetual survivor," suggesting that she survives the war while those around her die. Zusak emphasizes the futility of the characters' individual actions in the face of an all-consuming conflict by using this technique and implying future occurrences in advance while maintaining the reader's focus on the actual processes by which the characters reach their objectives.

³ Markus Zusak 347

5. Dualities of humanity

The conflict between humanity's innate kindness and its capacity for significant evil is examined in *The Book Thief*. There are several instances of the residents of Molching performing tiny deeds of goodwill and benevolence, despite the extreme brutality of Nazi Germany as it is presented in the book. The Hubermanns sheltering Max, Liesel bringing snow into the basement so she and Max can make a snowman, and Ilsa choosing to reward Liesel with a dictionary rather than disciplining her for stealing books are a few examples.

An early phase of the Holocaust was the dehumanization of Jews. Hitler dehumanized Jews, gradually revoked their civil rights, and eventually denied that they were even human; as a result, the Nazis were free to attempt to wipe out the whole Jewish race.⁴ Max bitterly quips that the only place he deserves to hide from persecution as a Jew in Nazi Germany is in a frigid basement. In Max's imagination of fighting Hitler, the German leader is depicted as portraying Max as a dangerous villain and a significant threat to the German people through his propaganda. Max is deeply affected by the widespread anti-Semitic propaganda of the Nazi regime and the fact that he is forced to seek asylum in his own country, causing him to internalize the notion of his own inferiority. This sentiment is echoed in Death's sardonic narrative. Max presumably feels guilty for having abandoned his family on account of preserving himself, which contributes to his self-deprecation with time.

Death tells the story of Hans handing a piece of bread to an elderly Jew who was being transferred to a concentration camp: "If nothing else, the old guy would die like a human. Or, at least with the thought that he was a human. Me? I'm not so sure if that's such a good thing."⁵ Death finds it difficult to comprehend how human beings can be both kind and bad. Death is astounded by the ruthless Nazis, humanity's inexplicable need for war, and the rare individuals

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Introduction to the Holocaust." Holocaust Encyclopaedia.

⁵ Markus Zusak 390

who, like Hans and Liesel, show extraordinary compassion and fortitude. Death, who is torn by this conflict and unable to reconcile it, wonders whether the human race is worth anything: "I am continuously overestimating and underestimating the human race — that rarely do I ever simply estimate it."⁶ In the novel's final phrase, Death informs Liesel that "I am plagued by mankind." Death, who is only capable of one action, is haunted by the ability of people to make various moral judgements and the seeming arbitrariness of these choices.

Zusak both focuses on an important historical event in a poignantly specific way while also going beyond the specific by using the war as a lens through which to examine the damage people cause to each other. The writing highlights the significance of understanding a text's political responsibility. It is imperative that *The Book Thief* correctly address the historical setting as Zusak utilized Death to narrate Liesel's World War II story. He does so in a way that makes the dreariness and horror of the historical setting less overwhelming. Zusak's decision to write Death in this fashion acknowledges the political significance of the work and has a significant impact on how readers view it. In turn, he appears less terrifying thanks to these instruments of Death. For young adults, it is more appealing as a Holocaust text because of the illustrations. Along with leveraging pathos to tell the story effectively, it also adds an educational component.

⁶ Markus Zusak 538

5.1 Nazi Germany

Another notable aspect of the novel is how it depicts how so many different kinds of individuals in Germany suffered as a result of the war. It is a well-balanced tale that depicts the viewpoints of Germans during the war, from fervent Nazis to individuals who opposed the entire dictatorship, like Hans Huberman. The execution of this is excellent, but it should be highlighted that Zusak is not an apologist; rather, he is able to provide the reader with insight into the nature of the human psyche.

The book illuminates Nazi Germany's troubles outside of the war as well. For instance, Liesel's close buddy Rudy Steiner has a thing for the Black athlete Jesse Owens. He is frequently criticized for his support of Owens, despite the fact that Owens motivates him to be the finest athlete in the Hitler Youth, and his backing of this athlete serves to show the pervasive racism of the time. Isla Hermann, the mayor's wife, is another character whose concerns depict the intricacies of daily life in Germany. Despite being financially stable and well-liked in society, she is unable to overcome the depression brought on by the death of her son during the First World War.

The work depicts a sense of shame in both minor crimes like Liesel's book theft and more heinous ones like the use of weapons of mass destruction and concentration camps to kill people. This issue of guilt and its consciousness is important because of the juxtaposition between this tiny offense and the terrible crime of killing the Jews. Liesel experiences this sense when she witnesses her brother's death, and Max experiences it when he puts the Hubermann family in jeopardy. Michael has the same consciousness, but he chooses suicide to atone for it.

The characters become more believable and realistic as a result of these instances, which also bring to light other disturbing events that took place in Nazi Germany. Zusak weaves together horrific incidents like the Munich Bombing and a teenage lad giving bread to a starving Jew with believable people and scenes from everyday life.

6. Death as a character

Death, who serves as both our guide and storyteller, tells the tale. By the end of the novel, the reader has grown to respect and even feel sad for Death. Particularly in contrast to many of the antagonist Nazi figures in the novel, Death is a very real and nuanced character. He is not the traditional literary figure of the Grim Reaper. For instance, Death goes through both happy and sad moments throughout the book; he even becomes unhappy at the thought of how many unjust Jewish deaths are taking place. Death turns into a character we do not blame; instead, he appears to be a destitute individual with a never-ending, miserable work.

Death, like many humans, is attempting to defend his actions, and he achieves this by compiling accounts of valiant people like Liesel. It seems like a very human necessity that he repeats these tales to "prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it."⁷ However, because he is in control of people's deaths, Death has an omnipotence that makes him distinct from humanity. This narrative stands out because it gives an unusual and occasionally philosophical perspective due to the use of Death as the narrator. As Death is in the unfortunate position of having human-like emotions while being distinct from mankind, he narrates stories in a fresh, intriguing way.

⁷ Markus Zusak 24

7. Narrative of Death

In *The Book Thief*, Death's unique perspective as the narrator helps to soften the impact of the tragic events in the story. He achieves this by alternating between external and internal narration, describing the appearance and emotions of the characters. Death also presents the story in an unconventional and distinct manner, which contributes to its unique style. As a strong character, Death uses his narrative voice to guide the story and humorously convey the sadness of the events. He presents the story as if he were a character, even though he is not directly involved in the events of the plot.

At the book's conclusion, Death discusses speaking with Liesel after she passes away. "Did you read it?"⁸ she inquired, according to Zusak, although she did not turn to face death. Her gaze was fixated on the spoken words. "I nodded. 'Many times.'"⁹ In this instance, Death uses the encounter with Liesel to demonstrate that he is not intentionally evil. Liesel passes away from old age, and Death talks to her about reading her story when he comes to take her soul. This demonstrates his desire for the reader to understand his connection to Liesel; out of interest in her, he read her story numerous times. As a result, it shows that Death has a solicitous quality.

⁸ Markus Zusak 537

⁹ Markus Zusak 537

8. CONCLUSION

The investigation of Death's part in the book might go in several different paths. Paying closer attention to stylistic decisions in speech and grammar may be considered. This is a device Zusak employs frequently, and it affects how readers view the book. Numerous visual components in the book can also be analysed in relation to the author's aesthetic decisions. In terms of narrative analyzation, Death manages to lessen some of the intensity of the historical context's tragedy while still conveying it. This gives the story's melancholy theme a humorous spin. Ironic observations about the historical setting are also used to lessen its horror. Readers' cognizance of the Hitler era and the catastrophe it brought about is improved in this way.

Death explains how he gathers Jews in and how he was fed with souls rather than giving a factual account of a gas chamber. He presents this historical fact in a way that defies the reader's expectations. In order to change how the historical background is seen by the readers, he loosens the sad plot's hold to create a sense of optimism in the readers. Death still succeeds in conveying the horror of the circumstance, but he does so by altering how he recounts the story. His surprising remarks on the historical setting of the war so lighten the plot. The narrative of death offers a different perspective about a world struggling with genocide and war. It is especially pertinent because as Death is the narrator of a novel about World War II in Germany, he presents a comprehensive view of World War II and its impact on the world; he modifies his storytelling style to appeal to a wider audience. The narration of Death lessens the dread of dying and therefore contribute to how readers perceive the world around them.

In this essay, I tried to exhaustively examine the role of the narration of Death in conveying the story. For this purpose, I used historical and literary articles as I believe they are the most reliable sources that can be utilized. In the light of these research studies and analyses, I discovered that Death is the lighthouse that illuminates the obscurity of events and the murky

circumstances. By empathizing with the book's characters and by endeavouring to explain the essence of death to the readers, he succeeds in his goal. Additionally, he makes an effort to comprehend humanity himself; his own confusion about human nature fosters empathy between Death and the reader as they both struggle to comprehend the complexity of the Holocaust and mortality. In this grim story, Death achieves more than just reader solidarity as the narrator's character and interests serve to frame the reader's comprehension of the book and the war.

Aside from these, Death confronts the reader with several troubling truths through his narration, including the harsh duties of death, mortality, and the evil that permeates history and appears woven into human nature. Death's reflection on the value of humanity and his inability to reconcile the astounding brutality and tenderness that humans are simultaneously capable of serve as the framework for *The Book Thief*. Both are present in Liesel's life narrative, and by the book's conclusion, Death seems to be no more able to judge people than he was at the beginning. At the end of the novel, Death explains to Liesel that just as people are "haunted" by Death, Death is also haunted by mankind. A metaphysical entity so accustomed to passing away could only be terrified of, and occasionally astounded by, those who survive.

The conclusion provided at the end of the book, in which the souls of the departed are healed and brought into a new existence, serves to partially separate readers from the finality and horror of mortality and the Holocaust. Death influences both how readers perceive death and how the world remembers the Holocaust.

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