

## **EXTENDED ESSAY**

### **Subject**

Group 2– English B

Category 3

### **Title**

The words are more than just sounds, they have the power to change the World.

### **Research Question**

To what extent do the books and words have power on the relationships and personal development of Liesel throughout the novel “The Book Thief”?

### **Word Count:**

3977

## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Death narrates, words empower .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Relationship of The Book Thief and the Books .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Power Of The Words.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

Word is described basically as;

- “*a single unit of language that means something and can be spoken or written*” in the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (“word”) and
- “*a sound or combination of sounds that has a meaning and is spoken or written*” in The Britannica Dictionary. (“word”)

However, words are neither just sounds nor letters. They are the way of communication and we use them in every aspect of our lives to express our thoughts and our feelings. The words we choose have meaning. Whether that meaning is positive or negative, they have an impact on us. Words are powerful. They have the power to build or destroy. How we use the words can empower and inspire on the other hand they can hurt and provoke and even start a war. The Canadian author, Robin Sharma who is best known for the book, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, also indicates that words can inspire. And words can destroy. We have to choose ours well. (Sharma)

In the family and society I am growing with, I have always been taught to think before speaking and choosing my words wisely because once the words are out, you can not take them back. Words we use impact our thoughts therefore words define our identity and reflect who we are. Our choice of words gives an indication of our character, intelligence, knowledge and ignorance.

*The Book Thief* is a novel by Markus Zusak and it is all about the power of words and language hence this essay will analyze the impacts of the words.

As for me, this topic is worthy of investigation as it reveals the question: “*To what extent do the books and words have power on the relationships and personal development of Liesel throughout the novel ‘The Book Thief’?*”.

In order to investigate the impact of the words, this essay will firstly provide a background of the book in order to reflect the dimensions of both warfare and the characters' own personal realities. Then it will investigate the importance of books and its relationship with the book thief. The author Markus Zusak blares out the power of the words many times in the novel. By the help of the quotations, the impacts of the books and words on the characters and their relationships will be explored.

Finally, this essay comes to the conclusion that words have power. They have the power both to build and to destroy. Words have the power to change the World.

### **Death narrates, words empower**

The Book Thief is a historical fiction novel written by Markus Zusak. Even though the novel is fiction and set in the fictional town of Molching, it is told through the actual events that occurred in Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1943 during the World War II and this leads war and death to be the key themes in the novel. The book allows the reader to witness the lives of people living in Germany who are either supporter of the prevailing system or not during the period when Nazi philosophy influenced every aspect of life in Germany.

What makes the novel attractive is the extraordinary choice of narrator and the impact of the books that shape the character of Liesel, the protagonist in the novel. It has a surprising narrator: the death. Death is not just a narrator but also becomes a real and tangible key character in the story with his emotions, ideas and by his own voice. Death travels forward and backward through time thereby narrates the story in a non-chronological style. He can predict the future and perceive the present. He uses foreshadowing many times in order to keep reader's attention on how the characters are going to die. The flash-backs and flash-forwards allow us to see the protagonist's character growth from a variety of perspectives. Providing information not only about Liesel, Hubermans or even the town Molching but also about the events occurring all over

the World is the advantage of the choice of the narrator because he has an unlimited perspective. No other narrator could have the same influence on the reader as Death does.

Even though there are many symbols used in the novel, books are the most significant one. Throughout the novel, language, reading and writing provide identity and freedom to the characters who have them. As Liesel begins to learn how to read and write, she begins to gain power over books and her relationship with the books represents her transformation from a weak young girl to a more responsible, independent powerful young woman. In other words, Liesel's relationship with the books, rather than the books themselves, is what makes them significant.

*“Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone.”* (Zusak 32) In the quote, the writer portrays that Liesel is a powerless little child at the beginning of the novel. She is having a challenging period. Her brother dies and she is placed into a foster family. She starts a new life without her real family. Despite her sensitive character, she has strength inside her from the beginning. As the novel proceeds, she adjusts to her new life and by the help of books, words and literature she matures and establishes her identity. She helps her new family hide a Jewish boy, Max, in the basement because of the Nazi Regime, deals with the hardships of encountered during the war time in Germany, comforts scared people by reading to them during the air raids. These are difficult and dangerous times because they are in the middle of a war and more over there is a man ruling the whole nation by his words. Dangerous poisonous words.

### **Relationship of The Book Thief and the Books**

Books play a significant role in this book. Liesel is deeply bonded to books and she finds the books and herself alike. *“The thought of missing it was eased when she found a gap in the bodies and was able to see the mound of guilt, still intact. It was prodded and splashed, even spat on. It reminded her of an unpopular child, forlorn and bewildered, powerless to alter*

*its fate.*” (Zusak 118) As the quotation indicates, books, newspapers, magazines that are thought to be hostile to the Nazi Party are burned in the bonfire on Hitler’s Birthday. The books are thrown with hatred, waiting to be burnt and there is no one going to save them. All these remind Liesel of herself. They are also suffering pain because of Hitler who lies behind the death of her father and brother and disappearance of her mother after being adopted. She thinks the books are as desperate, lonely and miserable as herself.

In the novel, words hold great value and Liesel is fascinated by the power of words even though she is unable to read. Throughout the story, Liesel learns the power and value of the words and despite being illiterate, the words provide comfort and a means of escape to Liesel. “‘Now,’ he said upon his return. ‘Let’s get this midnight class started.’” (Zusak 67). As we can understand from the quote, her stepfather Hans teaches Liesel how to read during the midnight lessons in the basement after realizing how powerless she is without words.

In time, she becomes a skilled reader and develops her literature skills with the help of her father Hans, by Ilsa Hermann as well as Max. “*She was the book thief without the words. Trust me, though, the words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like the rain.*” (Zusak 85) The quotation proves that “The book thief” mentioned in the title is Liesel for whom theft represents rebellion. According to Liesel, it is opposition to Hitler which means it is a way of getting revenge against him and taking back some of the things he has destroyed and theft also provides distraction from the cruel reality of life under the Nazi Regime thus she feels comfortable with the books.

The driving force behind her thievery is her passion for books. Throughout the story, Liesel steals many books. She begins her career as a book thief stealing from a gravedigger and then steals from a bonfire (the Nazis burn the books) and from the mayor’s wife, Ilsa Hermann’s library.

Some of the books mentioned in the book are stolen by Liesel and some are given as present. One is written for her by Max and the last but the most significant one ‘The Book Thief’ is written by Liesel. Each of these books have different effects on Liesel’s character growth. She grows up to be a courageous and self-assured adult with the help of literature.

“ ‘Goodnight, book thief’. It was the first time Liesel had been with her title, and she couldn’t hide the fact that she liked it very much. (...) she’d stolen books previously, but in late October 1941, it became official. That night, Liesel Meminger truly became the book thief.” (Zusak 314). In the quote above we see that Liesel is called “book thief” during one of her thefts by Rudy who is her best friend and her accomplice. This theft not only causes Liesel to be given the title “the book thief” officially, but also improves Rudy and Liesel’s relationship.

By the end, Death gives the book she lost during the bombing when he goes to take Liesel’s soul. “The Book Thief” is the book that Liesel wrote her own story. According to this information from book, we notice that the novel’s name comes from book thieveries of Liesel. But actually, it is obvious that Hitler is the biggest book thief not only in the novel but also during Hitler’s reign by the reason of book burnings. He is aware of the power of words therefore they destroyed all the books that are against his beliefs and written by the people who are undesirable by the Nazi regime. However, whereas the thieveries of Liesel sound sympathetic, the book burnings sound harsh.

### **The Power Of The Words**

Words are powerful tools that build new relationships. They connect people with one another throughout the novel. After realizing how powerless Liesel is without words, her step-father Hans teaches her how to read during the midnight lessons in the basement. During these lessons Liesel and Hans develop their deep bond. As Liesel begins to learn how to read and write, she becomes a skilled reader and she gains access to that power and also her character develops. By the help of the books, she matures and becomes an empowered girl because

literacy has power to increase our knowledge and understanding of the World around us. To Liesel, the books she steals are not only words on the pages but they also remind her turning points in her life. She learns the difference between right and wrong. As she learns how the words connect people with one another, she starts to become more kinder and more understanding of those around her and she therefore uses words to calm down her neighbors during the bombings.

Hans's son Hans Junior is a supporter of Hitler and a member of Nazi Party. On Hitler's Birthday, he quarrels with his father over not joining the party and even more his opposition to Hitler. He blames Hans of being coward and defends that racial cleansing represents an act of patriotism. *"You're either for the Führer or against him – and I can see that you're against him. (...) It's pathetic – how a man can stand by and do nothing as a whole nation cleans out the garbage and makes itself great. (...) You coward."* (Zusak 113-114) In this quotation it is displayed that the words and how we use them matters and moreover relationships can be destroyed by misuse of words. *"Most People do not understand the power of their words. Words have the power to start wars, or end relationships. They have the power to build trust, loyalty, and love."* (Martin 00:00-15) As it is emphasized in the quote given above, it is through words that we transfer our thoughts and feelings and they all have consequences either good or bad.

As soon as Liesel realizes what is happening to her, what happened to her mother, father and brother are exactly related with Hitler and since the words are used to express our feelings, she publicly declares that she hates Hitler. *"Is my mother a communist? (...) Did the Fuhrer take her away? (...) I knew it. (...) I hate the Fuhrer' she said. I hate him"* (Zusak 124). But Hans reacts protectively and slaps Liesel in order to keep her from saying anything that will get her in trouble with the Nazis. Hans is aware that using such harmful words in public which are undesirable to the ruling party as mentioned in the above quote can result in anyone's death.



This slap hurts their relationship at first but Hans explains that she can feel free in the home but must be careful and should not speak loudly and emotionally in the public.

The novel demonstrates how Liesel uses the words and books to create a refuge from Nazi control and the chaotic environment. *"(...)but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out... Liesel read on. (...) The youngest kids were soothed by her voice (...)"* (Zusak 408). In this quote we see the remarkable change that an illiterate girl becomes the person who uses words to comfort people. Liesel realizes that words can bring tranquility even through a bombing and moreover, in the quote, we see that she uses words to calm her neighbors down by reading to them during bombing raids.

In the novel, words are sometimes used to cause pain and result in destruction of relationships. Besides providing comfort and tranquility, they also have the power to hurt meaningful relationships. When Ilsa Hermann tells they no longer need Liesel's mother Rosa to do their washing, Liesel feels desperate and powerless and anger takes over her and she expresses this anger the best way she can. *"Now she became spiteful. More spiteful and evil than she thought herself capable. The injury of words. Yes, the brutality of words. 'It's about time you faced the fact that your son is dead. He got killed!'"* (Zusak 283-284). She berates Ilsa Hermann and uses the words possessing the inhumanity of even the strongest weapons. She abuses this power and calls Ilsa Hermann pathetic for continuing to feel sorry for herself about the death of her son. Since Liesel has experienced losses, she is aware of how these words will wound. As Fletcher emphasizes *"Words are powerful. They can build up or they can tear down. They can bring joy or they can bring pain. (...) That's why we need to be careful of what we say and always choose our words wisely"* (Fletcher). The novel highlights that even used by a child like Liesel, words have positive or negative effects on our lives, depending on how they are used.

In addition to healing and hurting, words connect people and build relationships in the book. Max writes the book "The Word Shaker" on the pages of Hitler's book "My Struggle"

and gives this unique gift to Liesel. Despite the fact that they have a strong bond, their relationship progresses after this book. The stories and sketches in this book tell about the story of Max and Liesel's friendship and the rise of Hitler due to the power of the words. In the story, words grow on the trees and "word shakers" are the ones who are aware of the power of words and will throw them from the trees down to the people on the ground.

In this book, Max tells that words are the most powerful force on the world. Hitler, according to him, rules the world by words rather than by guns. *"'Words!' (...) the Führer decided that he would rule the world with words. 'I will never fire a gun,' he said. 'I will not have to. (...) great forests of words had risen throughout Germany.... It was a nation of farmed thoughts.'" (Zusak 475).* This shows that Hitler creates a nation, starts a war along with persecution of the Jews, and causes the deaths of millions of people by just using his words. All of those are because of words. Moreover, *"Some words are like weapons, they wound like bullets, some are like poison, they slowly affect the mind and activate a lethal semantics. Using language as a tool in order to discriminate against and demonize human beings as members of a hostile group, can lead to radical political and social consequences in a society."* (Schwarz-Friedel). By making such a depiction in the quote given above, Monica Schwarz Friedel wants to demonstrate that language can be used as a weapon, a dangerous weapon of control, as with the Nazi Propoganda. Hitler rules with words and forms a nation by using his poisonous words. As Nathaniel Hawthorne said, *"Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them."* (qtd. in Beckwith)

Max admires Liesel's effort to learn reading at age ten and fight to gain her power over words. According to Max, she understands their importance better than most of the people, which in turn gives her more power as expressed in the quote *"THE BEST word shakers were the ones who understood the true power of words. They were the ones who could climb the*

*highest. One such word shaker was a small, skinny girl. She was renowned as the best of her region because she knew how powerless a person could be WITHOUT words. She has desire. She was hungry for them” (Zusak 476).* In this quote we see that Liesel is the skinny girl in the story who is without words in the beginning and knows how powerless a person can be without words. She is a word shaker as well and knows the power of words as well as Hitler. This word shaker later meets a man who is despised by her homeland and she takes care of him while he's ill. She plants an impenetrable tree because of love for her friend that grows considerably taller than any of Hitler's trees. She uses her words' power for good. In the story, Liesel has power on the words as well as Hitler, but she uses them for the opposite purpose.

Max's book shows how words can be powerful for good and bad. It also demonstrates how one little girl can have such a major impact and can stand against Hitler and save a Jew who is despised by his entire country. Liesel is overwhelmed with the pain of seeing Max on the way to the concentration camp Dachau. Along with all of the other deaths and losses she has witnessed over the past few years, she breaks down. She makes a connection between the words and all these sufferings. Liesel blames the words and believes that words are the reason of Hitler's power as it is stated in the following quote. *“The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this. Without words, the Führer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or wordly tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words? (Zusak 553-554).*

At this moment, by the reason of her grief, she is not able to recognize that words can be used for good too. *“(…)I have ruined one of your books. I was just so angry and afraid and I wanted to kill the words. I have stolen from you and now I've wrecked your property. (…) I love this place and hate it, because it is full of words.” (Zusak 554-555)* The writer portrays that many months later, she feels guilty about letting her darker feelings control her actions. She realizes that it is easy to ruin relationships but hard to build them. But her friendship with Ilse

Hermann resumes after Liesel writes a letter apologizing for the bad words, for destroying one of her books in the library and for the repeated thefts.

Up to now, the writer highlights that words saved Liesel by giving her voice and power, by providing refuge from her nightmares, escape from the chaotic environment. But this time, words physically save Liesel by keeping her in the basement. *“Only one person survived. She survived because she was sitting in a basement reading through the story of her own life, checking for mistakes.”* (Zusak 528) If she wasn't editing her book in the basement when the bombs were falling on the Himmel Street, she would die along with everybody else. Ilsa Hermann saves Liesel's life by encouraging her to write. She compliments her writing. She wants Liesel to utilize her own words for good, not to avoid from them as we can see in the following quote. *“I thought if you're not going to read any more of my books, you might like to write one instead.”* (...) *‘You can certainly write. You write well.’*” (Zusak 556). The following quote illustrates how words are responsible for saving Liesel's life. *“She was still clutching the book. She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life.”* (Zusak 530).

As well as being talented, Liesel has a story that should be told thereby she begins writing her life story in the basement and it is the book that Death finds and those are the words that establish the emotional connection Death has with Liesel.

### **Conclusion**

Our words have great power. They are not simply just sounds or letters. We put them together and they become thoughts. They do whatever we want them to do. They can hurt, they can heal, they can inspire, they can destroy or they can motivate. Positively or negatively. It is our choice.

Overall in the essay, I wanted to show the power of the words through examining how the words affected the characters and how they determined the direction of their relationships and lives throughout the novel.

The novel takes place in a time where words are the power and the author Markus Zusak shows how important they are overall in the novel many times. Hitler rules and destroys with his angry and hateful words and forms a nation by using these words. In this way, words become dangerous weapons of control like the Nazi propaganda. On the other hand, a small girl keeps people alive by reading the words from a stolen book during bombs and thereby words become a gift to save lives. Moreover, words hold miracle when they save Liesel's life while she is writing her own story by her own words during the bombing. By using the words, Liesel, somehow, steals her life back from Hitler who already has taken from her by his words. Words, writing and reading provides liberation to Liesel.

*“There is hardly any doubt that words are extremely powerful tools (...) Words, language, are the strongest weapon if used properly since they have the power to influence, manipulate & control people and situation situations.”* ("Words More Powerful"). This quote also emphasizes that words have the power to do bad or to do good. They have the potential to separate communities or bring them together. They can create a Hitler or allow a Liesel Meminger, a Hans Hubermann, an Ilsa Hermann and a Max Vandenburg to exist.

In short, words rule the world.

### **Works Cited**

Beckwith, Sandra. "Words matter." *Build Book Buzz*, 1 Mar. 2017, [buildbookbuzz.com/words-matter/](http://buildbookbuzz.com/words-matter/). Accessed 11 Sept 2022.

- Fletcher, Melissa. "Words are powerful – What is your Word?" *Argus Leader*, 10 Jan. 2020, [argusleader.com/story/news/dell-rapids/2020/01/10/words-powerful-whats-your-word/4432847002/](https://argusleader.com/story/news/dell-rapids/2020/01/10/words-powerful-whats-your-word/4432847002/). Accessed: 31 Aug. 2022.
- Martin, Rev. J. *The Power of Words*. Narrated by Scott R. Smith, audiobook, unabridged edition, Forever Young, 14 Oct. 2016. *Audible.com*, [www.audible.com/pd/The-Power-of-Words-Audiobook/B01MEDF199/](https://www.audible.com/pd/The-Power-of-Words-Audiobook/B01MEDF199/) (Accessed: 20 Sept. 2022).
- Schwarz-Friesel, Monika. (2015) "Using Language as a Weapon: Verbal Manifestations of Contemporary Anti-Semitism" In: Schulze, R., Pishwa, H. (eds) *The Exercise of Power in Communication*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.  
[doi.org/10.1057/9781137478382\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137478382_6)
- Sharma, Robin [@RobinSharma]. "Words can inspire. And words can destroy. Choose yours well." *Twitter*, 28 Sept. 2012, 08:16 p.m.,  
[twitter.com/robinsharma/status/251732082957631489](https://twitter.com/robinsharma/status/251732082957631489)
- "Word." *Oxfordlearnersdictionaries*,  
[www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/word\\_1?q=word](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/word_1?q=word). Accessed 5 Sept. 2022
- "Word." *Britannica*, Nov. 2022, [www.britannica.com/dictionary/word](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/word). Accessed 5 Sept. 2022
- "Words More Powerful Than We Think English Language Essay." *UKEssays*, [ukessays.com](https://ukessays.com), November 2018. [www.ukessays.com/essays/english-language/words-more-powerful-than-we-think-english-language-essay.php?vref=1](https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-language/words-more-powerful-than-we-think-english-language-essay.php?vref=1)>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2022.
- Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2016