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ABSTRACT

“The Book Thief” by Markus Zusak is a novel narrating the story of a young girl while depicting the Nazi Germany. Even though its context has been the subject of many literary works, The Book Thief is recognizably different from all those. The major reason is its impressive choice of narrator, Death. Secondly, The Book Thief carves up a character who has several special and distinctive characteristic features. This extended essay explores the character development of the protagonist through the narration of Death in regard to the research question:

How does Death in Markus Zusak’s “The Book Thief” effectively reveal Liesel’s character through his own reflection?

The question is divided mainly in three sections. Since Death is an unusual and intriguing element of the novel, the first section investigates the impact it has on the structure of the novel, the contributions it makes which wouldn’t be possible if the narrator wasn’t that versed about humankind. Death’s perspective towards Liesel and humanity, related to his character is also explored. As a transition section, her encounter with death is taken into account, since those incidents build up the relationship between Death and her. Those incidents are also important in revealing hints about both of their characters. In the third section, Liesel’s character development is analyzed in detailed way. More importantly, the way Death reflects this character development is explored.

In conclusion, it is validated that Liesel has transformed from an abandoned, weak child to a teenager who is surrounded by her loved ones, just like her attitude towards the concept of death changes over time. And with his effective techniques,

such as intriguing metaphors; sudden facts, flashbacks and flash-forwards; and sympathetic tone, Death genuinely reflects that process.

Word count: 285

I. Introduction

1. Background of the Novel

Taking place between 1939 and 1943, in a fictional town of Munich, *The Book Thief* is another novel flashing on the Nazi Germany. *"I (...) hope that readers of any age will see another side of Nazi Germany (...). I wanted them to see people who were unwilling to fly the Nazi flag and the boys and girls who thought the Hitler Youth was boring and ridiculous. If nothing else, there's another side that lives beneath the propaganda reels that are still so effective decades later. Those were the pockets I was interested in."*¹ Favourable with the authors intentions, the novel gives the reader the chance to vividly witness the lives of the German citizens, who are not supporters of the current order when Nazi ideology shaped social, cultural, economic and political life of Germany. Despite the fact that the novel focuses on a child, it conveys the ideas and events of that era and also Liesel's life through a much broader perspective. The striking point about this novel is its unique choice of narrator, which is death. This enables the reader to pass beyond the boundaries of the current time and place by different methods; only one of them being a wide range of flashbacks and flash-forwards. More importantly, it enables us to witness the protagonist's character development from various aspects. Death reveals Liesel's character in such an intriguing way that no other narrator could create the same impact.

2. Concept of Death in Culture and Literature

Death is a powerful human concern. Grieving is a distressing process, and death is generally symbolized with the color black that is perceived as a depressing shade. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the ghost of Achilles tells Odysseus that he would rather

¹ Zusak, "A Reader's Guide" found in *The Book Thief*

be a poor serf on earth than lord of all the dead in the Underworld.² Even in Ancient Greece, after life was a shady environment and as the quotation indicates, it was perceived as a dark and unwanted place. The negative influence death has on humans is probably because it is the only form of existence we experience, and ending of this life is associated with pain, loss and the ambiguity of after life.

However, despite the fact that death is often considered amongst the darkest concepts for human beings, in the majority of cultures and religions, it isn't such a dreadful event. In Ancient Greece, Pythagoras believed in reincarnation and a happier existence in the realm of death where desires would be met and all good things experienced. In Japan, the natives try not to reveal their sorrow after the death of their loved ones because death, which is a passageway to afterlife in certain religions, should also be seen as a time of freedom and not desolation, as a result, one should be able to bear the situation with acceptance and strength. In the major religions of the world, such as Christianity and Islam, there is a belief in after life where human beings will be awarded for the good they have done in this world.

Since death is an inevitable element of our lives, it is possible to see its reflection as characters in literary works. These characters bear different features depending on the interpretation of the concept of death. For example, in Donald Justice's poem *Incident in a Rose Garden*, Death is depicted with its most common image. "*Thin as a scythe he stood there. / I knew him by his pictures. / He had his*

² ““*think not death a theme
Of consolation; I had rather live
The servile hind for hire, and eat the bread
Of some man scantily himself sustain'd,
Than sov'reign empire hold o'er all the shades.*”

Excerpt From: Homer. "The Odyssey of Homer." iBooks. <https://itun.es/tr/9frDE.l>

black coat on, / Black gloves, a broad black hat."³ Additional to his physical appearance, even though it isn't clearly explained in the poem, the reason for Death's arrival seems to be to take away the soul of the master, who is, obviously, about to die. In Peter S. Beagle's short story *Come Lady Death*, Death, who is female, has a more successful relationship with humans. Even though people are scared of her in the first place, as the story proceeds, they embrace her. However, Death is depicted not as evil, but as a cold and emotionless character. This is why Lady Neville, a blasé old woman, is found to be the perfect match to replace current Death. "*Death has a heart, but it is forever an empty heart, and I think Lady Neville, that your heart is like a dry riverbed, like a seashell. You will be very content as Death*"⁴ On the other hand, Death in *The Book Thief* is an empathetic and humorous character. His physical features are never defined, but it's possible to discover his personality through his statements and reflection of feelings. He is a character with emotions. Throughout the novel, whenever an innocent person is in danger it's possible to observe the pity and sympathy. He can be considered as a transitional character. By definition, a transitional character is one who, in a single generation, changes the entire course of a lineage.⁵ They make conscious choices to break the negative patterns. Death in *The Book Thief* breaks the general opinions in readers' minds about the darkness of the concept of death.

³ Donald Justice, *Incident in a Rose Garden*

⁴ Beagle, *Come Lady Death*

⁵ Burr, Day and Bahr, *Family Science*

II. The Function of Death as a Narrator

1. Impact of Death on the Structure of the Novel

Death is an unusual choice of narrator. Readers are not used to this character, they are only used to the concept of death, which is generally gloomy and grim. Death is depicted as a compatible character. His intimate and conversational tone makes it easy and enjoyable to follow the story.

As he himself states, he sees colours first and throughout the novel Death uses colors to express his thoughts and feelings. They don't vividly reveal Death's thoughts and feelings, but with the interpretation of the reader, it is possible to extract their hidden meanings. Using colours softens and simplifies the serious and tense atmosphere of the novel. He begins telling his first encounter with Liesel with the sentence, "*First up is something white.*"⁶ He mentions this blinding kind of whiteness because everywhere was surrounded by snow. He uses the color gray as an adjective for Europe: "*The day was gray, the colour of Europe.*"⁷ Grey might be picked because of the vague situation in Europe. "*I watched the sky as it turned from silver to grey to the colour of rain.*"⁸ Because as it's in the quotation, grey is a transition colour between two other two colors, just like the period Europe's been going through. When the war will be over, Europe will gain stability again.

Death narrates the story in a sincere way, which enables him to bond with the reader. In several places, Death directly addresses to the reader, which adds warmth to the narration. "*It's not the Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus, as you might be expecting.*"⁹ He makes estimations about humans, proving that he is not a stranger. He

⁶ Zusak, 16

⁷ Zusak, 34

⁸ Zusak, 358

⁹ Zusak, 373

knows how we think, how we behave. He strengthens the idea of the inseparable and not so dark relationship between death and humans.

Another positive impact of using Death as the narrator is his wisdom and credibility. *“I was still getting over Stalin, in Russia. [...] Then came Hitler.”*¹⁰ As the quotation indicates, Death had existed since the very existence of humans and he has witnessed large numbers of important incidents in human history. He has the ability to judge and compare. He is wise, his statements are reliable. He also has his own ways of descriptions, *“Five hundred souls. I carried them in my fingers, like suitcases.”*¹¹ (...) *Together, they watched the humans disappear. They watched them dissolve, like moving tablets in humid air.”*¹² It isn't possible for an ordinary human being to associate deaths of people with suitcases or tablets in humid air.

He constantly uses flash-forwards, jumps to instants from future. *“If he'd intervened, it might have changed everything. Three possibilities: 1. Alex Steiner wouldn't have suffered the same punishment as Hans Hubermann. 2. Rudy would have gone away to school. 3. And just maybe, he would have lived.”*¹³ They surprise the reader either in a positive or negative way, and with this staggering effect, add effectiveness to the novel. Death uses them for a purpose rather than letting them be spoilers. *“Of course I'm being rude. I'm spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me.”*¹⁴

¹⁰ Zusak, 319

¹¹ Zusak, 345

¹² Zusak, 519

¹³ Zusak, 416

¹⁴ Zusak, 253

2. Death's Perspective Towards Humanity and Liesel

2.1. Empathy and Sympathy

The general attitude of Death towards humans is sympathetic and even humorous. This positive approach of Death towards humans is clearly observable in his actions towards certain characters. However, this behavior of mercy and empathy is not Death's attitude towards all human beings. Death treats some with great compassion whereas he treats the others with less attentiveness. Death has its own way of judgment. He cares for the innocent and therefore, blames the ones who are responsible for the death of the innocent *"Was it fate? Misfortune? Is that what glued them down like that? Of course not. Let's not be stupid. It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds."*¹⁵ He is realistic, and criticizes the general attitude of humans towards the concept of death. People tend to blame fate rather than realizing that they murder each other. *"You see? Even Death has a heart."*¹⁶ Death is aware of the general opinion about him, which presents him as dreadful and cruel. By saying "even" in a satiric tone, he addresses the ones who think this way and emphasizes the fact that humans are responsible from death. Death isn't killing anybody; he's the collector of souls. Human beings kill one another and it's useless to blame Death.

*"Five hundred souls. I carried them in my fingers, like suitcases. [...] It was only the children I carried in my arms."*¹⁷ The quotation proves that he pays special attention to children. He compares carrying souls of adults to carrying suitcases as if this is a more ordinary process. This difference is probably because children are the naïve ones. As Liesel herself states, children are too small for experiencing such

¹⁵ Zusak, 22-23

¹⁶ Zusak, 252

¹⁷ Zusak, 345

serious and painful events. As a character with a caring personality, this situation discomferts Death. It's also possible to see his interest in children in his narrations of Liesel and Rudy's relationship. "*All was dark-skied and hazy, and small chips of rain were starting to fall. The track was muddier than it looked. Both competitors were set.*"¹⁸ If the narrator were an ordinary adult, it would be impossible to feel Liesel's and Rudy's enthusiasm. Death's sympathy and compassion for children enables him to share their pure and joyful feelings, and also reveal these for the reader.

Death spends time in this world because of his job but he doesn't actually belong there. However, he easily empathizes with humans. "*They'll come now. They'll come. Oh Christ, oh, crucified Christ. [...] 'Oh my God, Liesel, what have I done?' Yes. I must agree. What had Papa done?*"¹⁹ At that moment, Hans Hubermann is facing a dangerous situation. Since helping a Jew is a serious crime at that time, he will be punished because of his action. Both Liesel and her Papa are in panic and Death shares their feelings. He doesn't see Hans Hubermann as an ordinary soul to carry. On the contrary, he simultaneously feels their fear and worries for Papa.

2.2. Death and Sarcasm

First of all, using Death, who feels sorry for the dead, to narrate one of the bloodiest times of human history is the most sarcastic element of the book. However, other than the obvious, Death bears many ironic features within his character. Telling the story of Liesel is one of them. "*It's the leftover humans. The survivors. They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although I still fail.*"²⁰ Death has tenderness, which enables him to pity the ones who face unfairly difficult situations. Liesel is such an

¹⁸ Zusak, 60

¹⁹ Zusak, 402-403

²⁰ Zusak, 15

example. Her condition afflicts Death and he doesn't want to watch her suffer. He can't resist looking at her but somehow, ends up narrating her complete story.

Death's tone and attitude towards humans are usually sardonic as well. "*Still, they have one thing that I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die.*"²¹ Throughout the novel, we witness that on the contrary of his name, Death doesn't want humans to die. Therefore, approving men who brutally kill one another is not an act of Death. However, he doesn't only congratulate humans for having "a" good sense to die, he states that they have "the" good sense, indicating that humans are superior than any other kind in the field of death. "*England and France had made their declaration on Germany. To steal the phrase from Hans Hubermann: The fun begins.*"²² Similarly, in this quote he is again being sarcastic. In *Death's Diary*²³, he complains about the situation. He states he needs a holiday, indicating that a lot of people are dying during that time and he is uncomfortable about that situation. And with the phrase "the fun begins", he is satirically complaining about the vicious times that are about to come.

²¹ Zusak, 496

²² Zusak, 79

²³ Zusak, 317

III. The Effect of the Encounter with Death on the Main Character

The first feature to be noticed about Liesel Meminger would be her general powerless and desperate condition. One of the most important reasons of this situation is doubtlessly death. The high ratio of death at that time affects the psychologies of people and changes the general social atmosphere. Her brother's and possibly her parents' death add up to this situation and affect her approach to the concept death.

In *The Book Thief*, Liesel's introduced to the reader at the incident when her brother's dying. In this case, Liesel is going through one of those desolate situations: her brother's dead, she's being delivering to a foster home. She's about to commence a life without her parents, which is a difficult task for a nine-year-old. "*Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone.*"²⁴ When she first steps into her new life she sees herself as a powerless little child. Emphasizing on her loneliness and abandonment creates sympathy for Liesel both on the reader and Death.

The special point about Liesel is her interest in words. Her passion for books is the main reason of her becoming the book thief. Words mean a lot more to Liesel than they do to a common person. "*In darkness, Liesel kept her eyes open. She was watching the words.*"²⁵ It isn't normally possible to see the words at dark, yet Liesel's still able to "watch" them because of the excitement since she is finally going to be able to read the book she stole from her brother's funeral. A significant feature of *The Gravediggers Handbook* is its relevance with her brother's death. Therefore, it can be concluded that death was the first impulse for Liesel's desire to read.

²⁴ Zusak, 39

²⁵ Zusak, 73

Liesel's a character without self-obsession. After her encounter with death, she becomes aware of the fact that in a world filled with misery and loss, vanity and desire aren't important at all. When they take shelter in the Fiedlers' basement, she reads to calm everyone. Again, when they leave home for the shelter, she worries about Max rather than focusing only on saving her own life. *"If the bombs ever landed on Himmel Street, not only did Max have less chance of survival than everyone else, but he would die completely alone."*²⁶ Death, who she meets at a very young age, makes her wise beyond her age. *"Amongst it all, her thoughts couldn't help turning towards her mother [...] Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat. She'd be eating her nails, waiting for the train."*²⁷ Any other child would be frustrated because of being abandoned. But Liesel firstly thinks about her mother rather than being selfish, and even feels sorry for her when she regards the hardships she would have to bear.

²⁶ Zusak, 391

²⁷ Zusak, 34

IV. Death's Reflection of Liesel's Character Development

Death's like a companion to Liesel throughout the novel and seems to know her very well. In many cases, from the simplest one, such as a game played with Ruby to the most important moments of her life, when she learns how to read, or when Himmel Street is bombed, Death understands her state of mind "*Everything was new and apocalyptic. Why was the sky red? How could it be snowing? And why did the snowflakes burn her arms?*"²⁸ For the LSE men, Liesel's just a girl in shock, but Death knows all that's running across her mind.

Throughout the book, it's apparent that Liesel is strongly bonded to books; she even 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.*"²⁹ This quote is the description of the pile of books waiting to be burned in the bonfire arranged for Hitler's birthday. The phrase "mound of guilt" is addresses the books. It may mean Liesel's personal guilt for stealing books or the shame of a nation who burns these valuable sources. Moreover, the way the books were thrown, waiting to be lit, not having anyone to save them reminds Liesel of herself. This is the state of mind she starts her new life in Himmel Street; abandoned and weak.

"For the first time ever, the kitchen and Mama were dormant. It was kind of bemused, inaugural silence. To Liesel's relief, it lasted only a few minutes. [...] 'Is that

²⁸ Zusak. 537

²⁹ Zusak, 115

*clear, Saumensch?’ That was better.”*³⁰ Liesel has a constant feeling of discomfort. Because of her previous experiences, she’s fragile and even a small problem makes her anxious. But despite her vulnerable character, she also has a very strong side, which impresses Death. *“How could she walk? How could she move? That’s the sort of thing I’ll never know, or comprehend about what humans are capable of.”*³¹ As the quotation shows, she has that strength inside her from the beginning. As the novel proceeds and Liesel solves her problems adapting and building up confidence, this strength becomes more evident. She easily adjusts hiding a Jew in the basement and embraces this mission. During air raids, she comforts scared adults by reading to them. As the quotation above shows, even Death, who has witnessed both the best and the worst moments of human history, is amazed by Liesel’s strength.

Liesel’s attitude towards death is another important element of her character development. It’s doubtless that death has an important place in her life and her approach to death changes through time. She is young when she first witnesses death, and this being her brother makes the situation stiffer for her. A long period of time needs to pass for her to overcome the devastating incident. She sees nightmares for weeks, has several bed wetting accidents. Since it’s the only solid object related to her brother’s death, the night she reads *The Gravedigger’s Handbook* can be interpreted as her first real confrontation with death.

Throughout the book, the concept of death is always around her, it’s only her attitude that changes. She used to be frightened, but as she grows up, she accepts the facts and embraces the situation. *“Each night, Liesel would step outside, wipe the door*

³⁰ Zusak, 208-209

³¹ Zusak, 33

*and watch the sky. Usually it was like spillage – cold and heavy, slippery and grey – but once in a while some stars had the nerve to rise and glow, if only for a few minutes. On those nights, she would stay a little longer and wait. ‘Hello stars.’”*³² Grey is the color that depicts Europe; therefore the sky may symbolize the current atmosphere in Germany. It is dark, stifling and dangerous. Cold, heavy and slippery support these qualities as well. War is definitely not associated with a warm atmosphere, and is a heavy incident, especially for a child to deal with. Slippery fits the current situation of Germany; it’s in a risky position with an unclear fate. The shiny spots may refer to Liesel’s brother. He was an innocent child beaten and lost in this dangerous, intense environment. There is also the personification of the stars that have the ability of ‘having the nerve’, strengthening the relation between the stars and Liesel’s brother. *“On one of the rooftops, she could see a small boy, sitting, looking at the sky. ‘His name was Werner’, she said.”*³³ After months, Liesel again has a moment about her brother and the sky. This time, the relation is more obvious since she tells her brother’s name out loud. Liesel’s approach towards death is complicated, since it isn’t possible to determine whether she accepts or denies it. It is seen that her reaction to her brother’s death eases off as time passes, that she learns to live with it. However, she associates the stars with her brother, and talks to herself as if she is communicating with him.

Death and Liesel have a connection from the moment they meet, because Liesel was the only one noticing Death entering. *“I entered the train. [...] No-one noticed. [...] Except for the girl.”*³⁴ From the very beginning of the novel, Death has the idea that Liesel is different than the rest of ordinary human beings. She feels what other

³² Zusak, 51

³³ Zusak, 93

³⁴ Zusak, 28

people don't realize. "*In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it - the safety, the home of it, but she could not move.*"³⁵ And like wisely, at the end of the novel, when Himmel Street is bombed only Death notices what she desperately seeks for.

³⁵ Zusak, 23

V. Conclusion

Despite the fact that it is a novel focusing on a child during World War II, *The Book Thief* is a distinct piece. Death, an inevitable and horrifying element of our lives, is the narrator. He has a great knowledge about humanity, a broad perspective and a caring personality. Even though he is “death”, he lessens the frightfulness of the environment when war and death is everywhere through his sympathetic tone. Moreover, in this chaotic atmosphere, he bonds with a girl, and reveals her character.

At the beginning, Liesel is weak, lonely and emotionally injured due to her encounter with death, but she begins to get rid of her fears and abandonment as the Hubermann family embraces her. She gains friendships and a passion. She grows up, and being surrounded by people who care about her, she builds up a character. Death’s by her side throughout that process, because he’s impressed by Liesel. She’s fragile and strong at the same time. She’s injured, but is still benevolent for the others. Death reveals her hidden thoughts and moments in a very sincere way that wouldn’t be possible by any other narrator. After all, other than Death, who else could’ve been so closely around her all the time between 1939 and 1943?

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