

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

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*RESEARCH QUESTION: How do the symbols function namely on the prominent characters  
and their relationships in the novel The Book Thief?*

## ABSTRACT

In this extended essay, I chose to analyze the use of symbols in the novel “The Book Thief” written by Markus Zusak. This essay is developed under the question “How do the symbols function namely on the prominent characters and their relationships in the novel The Book Thief?” with the help of some citations, examples and quotations from the novel in order to clarify the subject.

This essay examines the subject “The effect of symbols on the prominent characters in the novel “The Book Thief” by Markus Zusak” by analyzing symbols such as the accordion, colors and the effects of the books on Liesel, Hans, Max, Frau and Death. Dominant colors such as white, black and red; the ten most significant ones out of fourteen books presented in the novel and the accordion are the symbols, which are analyzed in depth in this essay.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel “The Book Thief” written by Markus Zusak is about a 10-year-old girl – Liesel Meminger- growing up in Nazi Germany during the holocaust. The story takes place in Molching, near Munich in Germany between 1939 and 1943. The girl’s story is narrated by Death.

The story begins with Liesel, suffering from the death of her younger brother and her separation from her mother to live with Hans and Rosa Hubermann. She does not know how to read when she first meets with her foster family the Hubermanns. Her father Hans Hubermann teaches her how to read and write. Hans has a significant role in Liesel’s development of her maturity. Her first book is The Gravedigger’s Handbook which is an instructional book is the starting point of her new life of how-to do things. As she learns how to read her curiosity increases and then there is nothing to stop her to continue.

Max, is another significant character in the story who is a young Jewish man trying to survive the holocaust. He is the son of Hans’s friend Erik who saves his life during the war. That’s why Hans and Rosa accept to hide him in their basement from Nazis as a favour in return.

In this book Markus Zusak’s style is mainly based on symbolism and its effects on the characters. Zusak uses symbolism not only to enhance the reader’s understanding of his story but also to further explore the bond between the characters with each other.

The accordion is one of the main symbols in the book which has different meanings for each of the main characters. It also symbolizes the relationship between each of main characters.

There are 14 different books mentioned within the whole story. Some are stolen by Liesel, some are written for her and the last but significant one is written by Liesel. Almost all the books have very important effects on Liesel's personal development. Each of them symbolize the different stages of Liesel's life and shows the reader how a young powerless girl becomes a very strong lady with the power of words.

Zusak also uses colors to define the atmosphere of the story as well as the personalities of the people with the exploration of their feelings.

## II. SYMBOLS

### i. THE ACCORDION

One of the main symbols in the book is the accordion, which stands for something different for each character.

For Hans, the accordion represents his debt to his Jewish friend Erik Vanderburg who indirectly saves Hans' life but unfortunately Vanderburg dies in the battle during World War II. It also represents his responsibility to live because Erik couldn't. Since the accordion survived it was given to Hans. It was the only contact with his dead friend.

After his friend Erik Vanderburg dies, Hans keeps the accordion with him until the war ends. Then, it is brought to Erik's wife and she tells Hans that he can keep the accordion. Hans learns how to play it after his friend's death in order to honor his memory.

Hans plays the accordion in the pubs of Molching to earn some money for himself and his family to keep them alive. Even after his death, the accordion is a savior in this circumstance since his dead friend Erik still helps Hans to make his living.

When Max first shows up at Hubermann's door, what he first asks is if he is still playing the accordion. This question even not openly stated, reminds Hans his debt to Erik. A question that strengthens the idea that he has to pay his debt to his friend by helping his son surviving from the Nazis. Hans's responsibility to pay his debt to Erik leads him to help Max by hiding him in his basement; the accordion now is a symbol for the possibility to survive for Erik's son. It is the main linkage between Hans Hubermann and Erik as it represents Hans's debt to his father, he can risk himself and his family to help Max. Hans feels the responsibility to take care of Erik's family in any way they need.

For Hans's wife Rosa, the accordion represents her husband himself, his gentle love for her. Hans does not bring his accordion with him when he leaves for war. Each night Rosa wears her husband's accordion and sits silently without playing any note, even not breathing. She identifies Hans with the accordion and feels his presence with it.

For Liesel the accordion represents hope and comfort. It gives her hope as the accordion was the first thing to make Liesel feel close to her papa. Their relationship starts as Hans plays the accordion to her, so it gives her hope that she can be happy in her new home and new life.

During her first nights in Himmel Street she sees nightmares and cannot fall into sleep. Her foster father Hans, sits near her and plays the accordion till she sleeps. When she wakes up in the morning she finds him still sitting near her with his accordion in his hand. Also while she tries to read, he again stays with her playing his accordion.

The sound of the accordion is the melody of safety for Liesel. Whenever she hears the melody of the accordion she feels safe because it means that Hans is also around who can protect her no matter what happens.

Liesel identifies the accordion with her Papa because it represents the memories with her father.

When she writes her first book in the basement after Max's departure, Hans has always played the accordion which she remembers as inseparable from him. In her book she describes it as;

*"The accordion breathes. There are lines on his cheeks. They look drawn on, and for some reason, when I see them, I want to cry. It is not for any sadness or pride. I just like the way they move and change. Sometimes I think my papa is an accordion. When he looks at me and smiles and breathes, I hear the notes."* (P531)

During the bomb attacks while Liesel reads in the shelter to her neighbors she feels like she gives people comfort and hope, the same feelings that her foster father had given to her while he played the accordion. Reading out loud is her way of playing the accordion as they both have the same impact on people.

After Hans' death, Liesel finds the accordion in the ruins of their house. The accordion becomes the reminder of her father. It reminds Liesel, her big loss of her papa as well as many good memories that she had with Hans. Every time she looks at the accordion, she becomes sad because she misses her Papa, Hans. At the same time, she feels tranquility by remembering all the good memories she had with him about the times.

It again gives her hope as it survived from the bombing in Himmel Street along with Liesel. It is the only remaining object from her past life. It is a reminder, symbol of hope and a good memory that she never forgets.

## ii. COLORS

Colors are used by the narrator -Death in the novel to describe the moments and souls of the people when he comes to take their spirits away. The colors help to create the atmosphere of the story. It also contributes in creating pictures in the reader's mind to make the reader understand the events, sense the atmosphere in the world during that time and representing the personality of the person that Death is taking away and what Death is experiencing and feeling for each of them.

The first line of the novel starts with the colors as "*First the colors, Then the humans. That's usually how I see things. Or at least, how I try*" (P139) showing the significance of the colors to the readers.

Death doesn't like his taking the lives of people and is trying to get out of the stress of it finding relief with the many colors the world is offering.

*"..however I try to to enjoy every color I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax. (p14)*

The narrator uses these colors in order to avoid being involved in the lives of those people watching others die, the leftovers.

*"it's the leftover humans. The survivors. They are the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them..."(P15)*



There are many colors that the Death uses while telling us the story of Liesel. But the most important ones are white, black and red, which stand for the Nazi flag, designed by Adolf Hitler.

*“When I recollect her, I see a long list of colours, but it’s the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. .. that was I see them formulate. RED rectangle, WHITE circle & BLACK Swastika. They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red” (P24)*

The first color that death uses for an event is white. Death is describing this color when it comes for Liesel’s younger brother Werner. The color white symbolizes the innocence of the soul that he has taken and the innocence of the sister that watched her brother die.

*“Yes, it was white. It felt like the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a jumper. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their sins. Trees wore blanket of ice. As you might expect, someone had died” (P16)*

As always, Death tries to distract himself from the environment and concentrates on his job by thinking about the color white around him, but this time he fails to his curiosity and stays there to learn more about the girl.

The second color is black. As Death describes *“Darkest moment before the dawn”* (p19), The color black is deep and depressing, usually representing death. Death describes the moment as

black when Liesel and Rudy witness the plane crash and the death of the pilot. This time Death arrives early and watches as the 24 years old young pilot dies.

The last color is Red, which is used for the bombing of Himmel Street.

*“the last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.” (pg. 22)*

Red; which is the color of blood symbolizes the violence of bombs and war. Lots of people dies because of the bombs so, red is one of the dominant colors in the novel.

*“within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.” (P22)*

There are also other colors describing the mood and the personalities of the characters;

While Liesel is on her way to meet her foster parents, Death describes the mood of the girl as *“The day was gray, the color of Europe.” (P34)*

Gray often symbolizes depression, vagueness, which are probably the exact feelings that Liesel feels while preparing herself for her encounter with her new parents. Gray also symbolizes sadness, which Liesel feels because her little brother just died and she had to leave her mom and live with the people she has never met before.

Han’s eyes are described as silver; The color silver symbolizes reliability, security, and also calmness; these are the main traits that Liesel found in her foster father.

### iii. BOOKS

During the story, Liesel has contact with 14 books which have a huge impact on her development; some given as a gift to her and some stolen, but her story is mainly made up of 10 of them.

Liesel's development from a powerless small girl to a powerful young girl is symbolized by her relationship with the books. It is not the books themselves that are symbolic, but her relationship with each of them.

*The Gravedigger's Handbook* is the first book Liesel stole

*"She has stolen the book from the graveyard after her brother was buried on January 1939.*

*The Book's meaning; 1.The last time she saw her brother. 2. The last time she saw her mother." (P45)*

It is actually a guide for cemetery employees which describes in detail how to dig graves properly, put the coffins in, and also giving instructions about maintaining gravesites and cemetery, but for Liesel it is more than that. It's the only remaining memory of her mother and brother. She keeps her brother's photograph in that book and it reminds Liesel her brother and is also the last piece that connects her to her past. It represents the new start in her life and end of a phase with her family. The book represents grief, loss and leaving behind her life.

Liesel does not know how to read when she steals her first book. She learns how to read firstly with this book and with the patient support of her foster father. This book strengthens her relationship with Hans.

*The Shoulder Shrug* is the second book Liesel steals. The book is written by a Jew and his story.

Liesel takes the book from a bonfire made to destroy the books against the Nazi party philosophy on Hitler's birthday. Only 3 books survive and *The Shoulder Shrug* is one of them. The fact that the three books survived from being burnt is a symbol of Hitler's extermination of ideas will though persevere. For the Nazis, the destruction of the books about Jews symbolizes their ultimate goal to destruct the Jewish people and culture.

This book gives Liesel inner peace – a respite from nightmares

*“the Shoulder Shrug, she decided was excellent. Each night when she calmed herself from the nightmare, she was soon pleased that she was awake, and able to read.”* (p150)

Through its Jewish content, the book also symbolizes Max. As it is survived from being burnt, it also represents the survival of not only Liesel but also Max with the help of the Hubermans.

The third book is *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) written by Hitler in prison in which he describes his political ideology and his future plans for Germany. Liesel does not steal this book. When Hans goes to the Nazi party's office to become a member, it is given to him. It is ironic that the book is used to help Hans and Max who are against Hitler; it helps Hans to show himself as a supporter of Hitler to protect his family and himself from German troops. It also helps Max to survive. When Hans is asked to help Max he hides the key inside the book and sends it to Max. During his travel by train Max shows himself to be reading the book. As *Mein Kampf* is a strong symbol of conformity to Nazi ideology, reading it shows strong commitment to Nazi authority and Hitler.

Max uses it to avoid suspicion while he runs away from Nazis. During his first times in Hubermann's home Max reads it repeatedly. Then he paints all the pages of *Mein Kampf* in white and writes two stories for Liesel on these pages; the first one is *Standover Man* which is about himself and then the second one is *The Word Shaker* which is about Liesel. It is like writing his own story over the Nazi ideology .

The fourth book is *The Standover Man* – it is a book with pictures which is drawn and written by Max over the painted pages of *Mein Kampf*, and given to Liesel as a late birthday present for her twelfth birthday. It is a story about him. Reading the book helps Liesel to understand Max better. As Liesel once told her father that “*his hair is like feathers*” Max hears it; then represents himself as a bird. In the book Max tells the story about his struggle against the Nazi regime, his journey to the Hubermann's house, and also his relationship with Liesel. At the end of the book Max states “...*the best standover man I've ever known is not a man at all.*” (P244) by referring it to Liesel. As it is written over Hitler's book, it also symbolizes gaining power against Hitler.

The fifth book is *The Whistler*. It is about a murderer running away from the police. It is the first book that she steals from the Mayor's library. Liesel reads *The Whistler* every time she goes to the library in the Mayor's house and Frau Hermann, his wife, gives the book to her as a present just before she informs Liesel that they will not give laundry work to her mama anymore as compensation. Although she wants the book so much she refuses it. Later on, she decides that she wants the book but only if she can steal it from the Mayor's library. Rudy, her friend helps her to steal the book which gives her a title as “book thief”. Rudy saves the book from disappearing in cold water of Amper River. It symbolizes Rudy's devotion and love to Liesel, the trust and friendship between them. As she steals it, *The Whistler* becomes her favorite book. During the bomb attacks, Liesel reads this book to their neighbors as to give courage to them.

The sixth book is *The Dream Carrier*, the second book stolen from the Mayor's library. *It is a book about an abandoned child who wants to become a priest* (P339). The book is more related to Liesel's relationship with Max. When she first sees it in the library the title reminds Liesel her dreams for him since he is in coma. Liesel does everything that she can to awaken him; she prays, brings small gifts and reads to him while he is in coma. She feels guilty about his illness since she has brought snow to the basement; they played together, built a snowman but right after that Max becomes ill. As she spends all her free time with Max and reads the book, her dreams also get affected. In one of her recurring nightmares, her brother Werner's face and body is replaced with Max's.

The seventh book is *The Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*. The Mayor's wife leaves the book on the library window for her to steal. While taking it Liesel sees her watching inside the house. This book represents the relationship between Frau Hermann and Liesel which begins through books and words. It is a tool given to Liesel. Liesel also finds a letter written to her inside the book. It also shows how much Frau Hermann relies on her relationship with Liesel for her own recovery after her son's death. This dictionary is a very important step in Liesel's journey with books. It gives Liesel more independence. As she has more words now she does not need Hans's help anymore for new words. It gives her more power and control while she is writing and reading. She uses it when she writes the most difficult parts of her story.

The eighth book is *The Wordshaker*, the second book written for Liesel by Max. It represents the power of words and how they can be used to control people. The book includes many stories from Max. *The Word Shaker* is one of them. It is about words transformed into seeds, which are used by Hitler to create a forest of word trees that fills people with his ideology.

*“The Führer decided that he would rule the world with words his first plan of attack is to plant the words in as many areas of his homeland as possible... He watched them grow,*

*until eventually, great forests of words had risen throughout Germany. It was a nation of farmed thoughts” (P451)*

The people climbing up to the trees throwing the words down to the people are called “word shakers”. The ones who understand the power of words are the best word shakers. One of them is a girl and her friend who gives her a seed which she plants to grow her own word tree and does not let anyone to chop it down. The story dramatizes the way Liesel uses her words and books against Nazi regime.

The ninth book is *The Last Human Stranger* – The last book that Liesel steals from the Mayor’s library. In fact, it is not really stolen as Frau Hermann leaves the window open and leaves some biscuits for her.

*“There were people everywhere on the city street, but the stranger could not have been more alone if it had been empty.” (P479)*

We do not have much information about the book but the title itself and the sentence above symbolizes a lot. It symbolizes how Liesel feels after Max and Hans leave and Liesel at the end of the story, as everybody around her dies and the only one to survive. The sentence from the book reminds us Jewish people marching to Dachau. Liesel also sees Max among them after being captured. Although they move together, each of them are alone in their own world.

The tenth book is *The Book Thief*; Liesel writes this herself. Frau Hermann gives her a blank book so that Liesel can display her own power.

*“...Ilsa Hermann not only gave Liesel Meminger a book that day. She also gave her a reason to spend time in the basement...She gave her a reason to write her own words, to remind her that words had also brought her to life” (P528)*

In the middle of the first page she writes;

“ *THE BOOK THIEF*

*a small story by Lisa Meminger” (P529)*

Her life starts from a certain point of her life as if she had never lived; the time when she started a new beginning with the Hubermans which when her life makes meaning.

She is in the basement reading her own story which she has just finished during the bomb attack in which she lost all her loved ones. So in a way the book - her own life story - saved her life.

She loses her book during the bomb attack. And Death –the narrator of the story finds it, the book stays with him and he gives it back to Liesel at the end of her life.

The survival of the book about her life story symbolizes her survival during the

war. Her book ends with the sentence;

“ *I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right” (P532)*

Her book symbolizes her life, so in a way words also symbolize Liesel’s life. She has many memories, some are bad and some are nice. That is why she says she both hated and loved the words. Hope to make words right, she also means that Liesel hopes to have made her living right.



## I. CONCLUSION

Markus Zusak powerfully uses symbols in his book- in order to explore the relationships with the significant characters. There are many symbols but the most important ones are the accordion, colors and the books that belong to Liesel or the ones she steals which all have different meanings for each character. The symbols Zusak uses are mostly the representation of the characters' developments making their life meaningful in such way with the power of them. In this essay those symbols' relations with characters and their impacts on them were further explained.

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