

Death & All His Friends:
Narration in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

A Thesis in English

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Abstract

In Markus Zusak's 2006 novel *The Book Thief*, an embodied but inhuman Death tells the story of Liesel Meminger, a "book thief" who acquires language, forges her own morality, navigates adolescence and befriends Max Vandenburg, the struggling "Jewish fist-fighter" hiding in her basement (Zusak 302; 195). This thesis, entitled "Death & All His Friends: Narration in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*", analyzes the novel through the lenses of Holocaust, trauma and narrative theory. The first chapter, "Death & All His Friends", characterizes Death's unusual narrative style as well as his intimate relationship with the reader and relies on Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub's work with Holocaust survivors to frame Death's roles as both a wounded survivor of human cruelty and a witness able to make sense of human suffering. "Words Are Life," the second chapter, considers Liesel's literacy using Mikhail Bakhtin's model for the acquisition of language and compares and contrasts the book thief to other young, moral narrators including Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield in order to argue that individually inflected language serves as a powerful intermediary between the individual and society. The final chapter, "The Jewish Fist-Fighter," examines Max Vandenburg's imaginative understanding of grief and loss as presented through two stories he writes for Liesel and contends that these stories, along with an incident Death refers to as "The Swapping of Nightmares" (Zusak 228), constitute trauma scholar Kim van Kaam's concept of representation and help the Jewish man and marginalized girl to create their own identities. Collectively, this thesis, through the study of language and trauma, describes and explores the levels of narration provided by Death, Liesel and Max.

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Introduction

The most striking feature of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is the novel's unique narration. Liesel Meminger's story is told erratically, interrupted by sweeping subplots, abrupt shifts in narrative chronology, interludes of historical background and the occasional character assessment. Her story is narrated by an embodied but inhuman Death, who is sympathetic to the plight of humanity but ashamed of the great violence the human race has wrought. Many aspects of the novel are arresting: readers frequently praise the young girl's strength and perseverance in her struggle with words; Rudy's developing compassion; Max's artistic attempts and poetic soul. When I first encountered *The Book Thief* at sixteen, however, it was Death's speech which stuck with me. I could and did leave behind Mama's surprising kindness, Hans's gentle presence, and Ilsa's generosity, but Death's words remained, returning to me in the silence, in the setting sun, the sky. When it came time to write a senior thesis, to devote a year of my academic work to one topic in the world of literature, I toyed with other choices. I considered Shakespeare, London and *Peter Pan*. In the end, though, there was no other serious choice but Zusak, and no other starting point but Death.

In my literary experience, I have never encountered anything like his narration, which Zusak in an explanatory essay calls "unusual but oddly familiar" ("finding death").¹ His tone in the opening pages borders on uncomfortable, but after the prologue, the voice evolves into a poetic prose which emphasizes the beauty of the narrative while never glossing over the harrowing moments of the book thief's experience. At first, I was fascinated by the unconventional presentation of Death, a supernatural, omniscient but not omnipotent character who escorts human souls away from empty bodies but has no authority over the timing or

¹ All parenthetical citations of Zusak refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Book Thief*, unless (as in this case) otherwise specified.

circumstances which end their lives. Zusak's Death is sinister but sympathetic, and I wondered about the extent to which his personification relied on Western myth and legend. Death denies the Grim Reaper trope (Zusak 80), but I thought of tracing his connections to other, less obvious cultural antecedents, other narrators who shouldn't resonate with readers but do: Milton's Satan was first on my list of possibilities. Ultimately, I moved away from a cultural project and these comparisons because I found other, better ways of answering my questions about the surprising effectiveness of Death's narration.

It's worth mentioning here that in only one instance have I willfully ignored rather than explored the ambiguity which is such an important component of Zusak's narrator. Throughout this thesis, I refer to Death using masculine pronouns, though in the novel the narrator is never so conclusively gendered. I have three reasons for this. First, I discovered in my early cultural research that many (if not most) Western myths of Death describe a man, from the Greek god Thanatos to the Haitian voodoo spirit Papa Ghede. I felt that my readers might more easily accept masculine pronouns for this new and revolutionary personification of Death. Since I felt it was important for the coherence and clarity of my text to choose a single, consistent gender, I opted for the masculine pronoun I thought might be more familiar to my reader's preconceptions of what an embodied Death should be. Second, I thought that the use of these masculine pronouns would solidify and emphasize the paternal comparisons I have drawn between the narrator and Hans Hubermann, which form a central part of my first chapter. Finally, I considered the characters most frequently referenced in my thesis and the confusion which using feminine pronouns for Death might create in sentences featuring both the narrator and the title character. In order to clearly differentiate between the two most important narrative voices in the novel, I chose to have Death's masculine pronouns contrast with Liesel's feminine ones.

Once I had ruled out a cultural breakdown of Death's literary, mythic and legendary antecedents, I turned to scholarship on the novel itself. I quickly found that there was very little. I stumbled upon only a sparse review and a paper published in a children's literary journal, neither of which was appropriate or helpful for my project. In itself, this lack of academic scholarship was not surprising: *The Book Thief* was only published outside Zusak's native Australia in 2006 and is often marketed as young adult fiction. The novel is frequently assigned as required reading for high school and introductory college courses, but it has rarely been the subject of extended, academic scrutiny. At first, I found this lack of scholarship intimidating. I worried that it would be difficult to create a conversation around an untouched text, but after a few meetings with reference librarians, I began to find this blank canvas invigorating. I discovered that although it had not been considered academically, *The Book Thief* was a valuable addition to many conversations about Holocaust and trauma fiction.

Dr. Jody Caldwell recommended (along with several other useful articles) Hamilton Carroll's "'Like Nothing in This Life': September 11 and the Limits of Representation in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." I found Carroll's discussion of DeLillo's narrative strategies particularly helpful; his arguments about the merits of interrupted narrative chronology and the challenge of representing traumatic, cultural events added to my understanding of and vocabulary for Death's unusual narrative strategies. From Carroll, I moved into investigating other scholarly works about the representation of trauma, focusing particularly on fictional and nonfictional accounts of Holocaust survivors. Through Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg's anthology entitled *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, I discovered a new way to characterize Death's difficult relationship with humanity: using the work of a handful of trauma scholars, I argue that Death serves as both witness to and survivor of humanity's trauma. Geoffrey Hartman,

like Carroll, discussed chronology in relation to trauma. With her understanding of trauma as “impossible history”, Cathy Caruth provided context for my discussion of Death and Liesel as survivors (194). Dori Laub, using his own experiences with witness and psychoanalysis, argued that Caruth’s history was not impossible but the only historically accurate way to remember and represent trauma. By combining Caruth’s concept of “impossible history” and Laub’s theme of historical accuracy, I create my own vocabulary of “narrative truth” to describe the inaccurate but meaningful speech in the novel that was particularly evident in Liesel’s autobiography and Death’s narration.

I use this vocabulary and the roles of survivor and witness, borrowed from Holocaust and trauma theory, to characterize Death’s narration and his interactions with humanity. However, I still felt that one aspect of his narration had to be explained. Death is positioned as distant from, but also involved in, Liesel’s life and the lives of the humans around her. For the most part, Death only interacts with individual humans at the moment of their death, when he carries their souls away. With Liesel, Death makes an effort to transcend these ordinary boundaries. He reads the story of her life and associates with her friends, family and neighbors. Despite his attempts to distance himself from humanity, Death cares for the young girl, just as he cares for the reader. To explain these inconsistencies, I examine Death’s relationship with Liesel in terms of the other relationships in the novel. I stumbled upon the definition of trust, given during Liesel’s introduction to her new foster father and Himmel Street, as a combination of presence and gentleness. In my thesis, I apply this definition to the narrator’s relationship with Liesel and analyze his relationship with the reader through the lens of trust. I argue in this work that Death’s prologue serves as a textual contract, inviting the reader to accompany him and share the story of the book thief’s life and suffering.

My second chapter focuses on Liesel's life and her troubled relationship with words. In the early stages of my research, I mapped out Liesel's story. She arrives at Himmel Street as a young girl, adjusts to life with her new foster parents, Hans and Rosa, and befriends the gangly, well-meaning boy next door, Rudy Steiner. Together with Rudy, Liesel navigates the difficult world of wartime, poverty-stricken Germany, developing a complicated moral code which includes stealing from the library of the mayor's wife and concealing a Jewish family friend, Max Vandenburg, in the basement. Originally, I wanted to compare Liesel with other young but strikingly moral narrators. I considered Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, and Scout Finch before narrowing down my research question because I felt that such comparisons, like comparisons between *Death and Satan*, would neglect a crucial part of Zusak's narrative: in this case, Liesel's complicated struggle with literacy.

My advisor, Dr. Peggy Samuels, suggested I explore the works of Mikhail Bakhtin to better understand Liesel's linguistic difficulties. Two of Bakhtin's essays, "Discourse in the Novel" and "The Problem of Speech Genres," helped me to deconstruct Liesel's processes of acquiring language and learning to read. Using Bakhtin's model for the accumulation of language, I trace the associations and construction of Liesel's language through her conversations and encounters with Rudy, Max and Hans. In addition, I build upon Bakhtin's description of the difference between shared "unitary language" and the more subjective "personal language" ("Discourse in the Novel" 269). Unitary language consists of the dictionary meanings shared by all speakers of the same commonly accepted tongue, e.g. German; Bakhtin's concept of what I call "personal language" includes all personal associations attached to an individual word based on the previous literary and conversational situations where one has encountered it. For Bakhtin, the tension between these two languages creates social unrest. I

argue that for Liesel, this tension and social unrest manifests in her confusion about the word *Kommunist* and personal rebellion against the Führer.

The social tension in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provided an opening for introducing the two narrators I had researched, this time through the lens of Bakhtinian language. I focus on Huck's adoption of moral discourses and the unitary language of Southern Christianity as a way of connecting with his reader and framing his revolutionary moral narration. Holden, I argue, was isolated by his inability or unwillingness to adopt a similarly unitary form of language; instead, his cursing and caustic sarcasm symbolize a uniquely personal form of speech, which separates him from the phonies who surround him. The analysis of these three young narrators allowed me to consider language as an intermediary which not only permits but also shapes, limits and characterizes an individual's communication with society.

For my third chapter, I wanted to focus on Max Vandenburg's struggle to communicate with society, his relationship with Liesel and his attempts to represent trauma. I began by returning to his two stories, *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker*, both of which were given to Liesel as gifts and incorporated into Death's narration of the girl's life. During previous readings of the novel, I had considered Max's stories and illustrations, but never felt that I had adequately parsed their symbolism and meaning. This time around, I was able to frame Max's narratives using trauma theory and Bakhtin's theories on language. I understood *The Standover Man* as Max's attempt to recreate and thus distance himself from his guilt and the trauma of leaving his family. This understanding was influenced by the work of Kim van Kaam, a Dutch trauma scholar who relied on the work of Cathy Caruth to discuss the difficulty and importance of representing trauma in order to move past it. *The Standover Man* also introduced the young man's self-imposed identity as the Jewish fist-fighter. This epithet was originally derived from

teenage, neighborhood boxing matches, but eventually became a coping mechanism, allowing Max to imagine the Führer's cruel anti-Semitism in familiar, manageable terms. In the basement boxing matches with Hitler, Max tests his own strength and discovers that he can survive the prejudice of the German people just as he withstood the blows of larger, more experienced opponents.

Max also copes with his trauma through conversations with Liesel, which I frame using Caruth and Laub's vocabulary of witness. For Caruth and Laub, trauma can only be escaped by recounting the event to a listener who is able to make sense of its impossible history and provide context and perspective for the survivor. Using a passage Death calls "The Swapping of Nightmares" (Zusak 228), I argue that Liesel and Max act as each other's witness and listener: by comparing similar nightmares and the loneliness that results with the loss of a family, both ironically discover that they are not alone. Max briefly reflects on this aspect of their friendship in *The Standover Man* and uses the small book as another opportunity to confess his trauma to Liesel and, with her help, to make sense of his past.

His second handmade book, *The Word Shaker*, serves as a fable which inspires Liesel to claim unitary words and control of her own future. Liesel initially interprets this story as a promise of presence from a friend who has progressed to a new hiding place. However, when she meets Max again in the crowd of Jews marching to Dachau, Liesel realizes that his story has a deeper meaning. The word shaker in Max's story harvests and keeps words, refusing to share this linguistic source of power with the strange, small man; in a similar way, Liesel refuses to surrender the power of her words to Hitler and his propagandist speech. By repeating his moral and narrative truth, Liesel shows Max that she has understood his fable. *The Word Shaker* argues that because both the girl and the Führer have a claim to unitary language, both have equal

authority over individual words. This complicated authority creates societal tension, but also empowers Max and Liesel in their struggle against greater German society.

Max's life, Death suggests, is rife with such societal tension created from his appropriation of unitary words. The Jewish man paints *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker* over pages of *Mein Kampf*, symbolically claiming Hitler's propagandist language and materials to tell his own stories. In addition, Death's repeated references to Max as "The Struggler" reinforce complicated claims to specific words and phrases (Zusak 145). As Death mentions, Hitler has made use of the same word, naming his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, which translates as "My Struggle" (Zusak 166). By juxtaposing the Führer's struggle with Max's fear, hiding and starvation, Death suggests that despite the politician's prior claim, the words at least equally belong to the Jewish man.

My thesis concludes on this discussion of Max's stories and identities, which encompasses some of my earlier chapter's most central claims. *The Standover Man* explores Max's reaction to trauma and revisits the witness role introduced in my first chapter, while his identity as a fist-fighter reflects his identity as a survivor. Max's encouragement that Liesel embrace her identity as a word shaker echoes Bakhtin's model for the accumulation of language and the young girl's struggle to claim words and incorporate them into her personal language. My allusion to Death's emphasis on Max's identity as "The Struggler" recalls the earlier discussion of Death as an uninvolved but interested and sympathetic narrator who associates with characters in Liesel's life and convinces the reader to appreciate and trust him.

Chapter One

Death & All His Friends: Narration in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief

*****HERE IS A SMALL FACT*****

You are going to die.

(Zusak 13)²

Thus begins the reader's relationship with Death, the narrator of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. With ten small words, Zusak establishes a direct, unemotional narrator and sets a bleak tone for the novel. This frustrated, blunt, abrasive and cynical Death reappears several times throughout the novel, marveling at humanity's capacity for stupidity and violence. At the same time, Zusak's narrator also admires human strength and perseverance. Death struggles to reconcile and privilege human goodness over human cruelty. Immediately after reminding the reader of his or her mortality, Death apologizes. He assures the reader that he means no harm and begs him or her not to be afraid (Zusak 13), as though Death cares what the reader thinks of him. With a paragraph of playful, linguistic banter, the narrator convinces the reader that he can be approachable, witty, even amusing. Throughout the rest of the novel, Death involves the reader in the story in a similar way: through simple but clever wordplay, the frequent and precise use of second person address, a careful combination of high and low, bleak and beautiful language. In a passage which contrasts with his brusque opening remark, Zusak's narrator re-imagines the reader's foreshadowed death. He predicts,

You will know me well enough and soon enough [...] at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible.

Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away. (Zusak 14)

² All emphasis (bolding, italics, asterisks) original unless otherwise indicated.

This second scenario is much more developed and detailed than the “small fact” which served as an initial, blunt reminder of the reader’s mortality. In this second foreshadowing, Death uses poetic language (“A colour will be perched on my shoulder”) and establishes intimacy with the reader (“You will know me well enough”). His qualification that he will complete his task “as genially as possible” reflects the complicated responsibility he feels towards his work and his inability to counteract human tragedy and death. Though he depicts the same eventuality, Death has set an entirely different scene and continues his work, begun by the assertion that he means no harm, to soothe the reader’s mind and fears. This conflict between the light, amiable aspects of Death’s character and his more sinister qualities reflects his dual identity as both a wounded, involved survivor who lashes out at the humans responsible for his pain and a concerned witness who can observe human tragedy but is powerless to interfere. Death focuses on the events of Liesel’s life, forming emotional attachments and associations with her friends and using this involvement in her life to speak authoritatively about the book thief’s experience. His authority and involvement in turn encourage trust and a paternal, intermediary relationship with the reader. Paying particular attention to Holocaust, trauma and narrative theory, I will argue that these nuanced, contradictory aspects of Death’s personality afford him the perspective necessary to make sense of the book thief’s traumatic life and tale, while his narrative inconsistencies inspire an unusually intimate relationship with the reader.

Death is not simply bothered by human cruelty, he is “haunted” (Zusak 554) and harmed by humans. In Zusak’s novel, Death is not the instigator or the cause of death: he does not have the power to decide who lives and who dies. Instead, the narrator assigns blame for violent human death to human cruelty. He marvels at humanity’s capacity for destruction and understands humanity as impossibly divided between better and more sinister natures. Death

even develops a term for this phenomenon, referring to the “contradictory human being” who consists of “so much good, so much evil” (Zusak 171). Though Death struggles to notice and remember the good of humanity, he is constantly overwhelmed by human “brutality” (Zusak 554). The nature of his job forces Death to witness human violence and it is clear from his asides that he is traumatized by what he has seen.

Zusak’s Death is positioned as the perpetual survivor, a victim of human cruelty who cannot escape the knowledge and experience of human crimes and also cannot die. He repeatedly expresses frustration and weariness with his situation and responsibilities. During his introduction, the narrator explains that he consciously pursues distractions such as observing and collecting specific hues of the sky in order to “de-realise” the trauma he has seen (Zusak 357). De-realisation, for Death, involves distancing himself from the too-present, graphic reality of human pain and attempting to construct or derive meaning from human suffering. For this reason, he latches onto the story written by the novel’s young protagonist, Liesel Meminger. Liesel, too, endeavors to process her chaotic world and discovers meaning in the text she creates. When Death refers to her account, also titled *The Book Thief*, as “an attempt [...] to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (Zusak 24), he recognizes that Liesel’s story not only presents but also attempts to explain and justify human patterns of violence. In a similar way, Death’s emphasis in his narrative on the “contradictory human being” reflects his struggle to redeem the human race; despite the horrors he has witnessed, Death wants to believe that the human race is “worth it”. Like the young writer, Death uses words to grapple with and begin to understand the worth of humanity and to detach himself from the suffering he has experienced.

Through this struggle with words, narrative and meaning, Death embodies the trauma victim’s struggle to disassociate from his or her own traumatic experience in order to survive.

The narrator further describes his interactions with humanity by explaining that the dead or dying “keep triggering inside me. They harass my memory.” (Zusak 319). Specific phrases like “triggering” and “harass my memory” suggest a serious psychological wound and recall the technical vocabulary used to describe the psychological state of traumatic survivors. In fact, Zusak’s fictionalized Death meets several criteria the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders prescribes for the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder including a close proximity or exposure to death and “intrusive memories” (“DSM-5 Criteria for PTSD”). Thus, the narrator not only observes from a distance but also is directly involved in and negatively impacted by human traumatic experience.

This traumatic relationship more than accounts for Death’s statement that he is haunted by humans, though he also elaborates on the additional ways that humanity has harmed him. Death confesses in the prologue that it pains him to “witness the ones who are left behind” (Zusak 15). Though he will later admire the survivor’s strength, he consciously tries to distract himself from the bereft and grieving, with their “punctured hearts” and “beaten lungs” (Zusak 15). Using the example of Liesel, the titular book thief and a recurring survivor, Death suggests that he consciously distances himself from humanity to prevent himself from becoming painfully attached to such fragile, ephemeral beings. He describes his attachment to the girl as “the most elementary of mistakes”: “I wavered, I buckled, I became interested” (Zusak 17). This is a buckling, a wavering, and a defeat for Death because his attachment to Liesel necessarily involves acknowledging that he cannot help or approach but must only observe her. After her home has been bombed and her friends and family have been lost, Death expresses the futility of his emotional attachment to Liesel. He assures the reader that when he found the book thief in the midst of her life’s rubble, “I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say, ‘I’m sorry,

child” (Zusak 23). In this voiced and impossible desire, Death’s compassion is evident and striking. Zusak’s narrator does not shun humanity because he does not care enough but because he is afraid of caring too much. His compassion inspires Death to de-realise not only his own trauma but also the suffering of the humans he can neither ignore nor save.

His compassion also inspires Death to act as a witness for the hundreds of nameless victims whose traumatic deaths he witnesses and to glean meaning from their suffering. The narrator pities and frequently behaves tenderly towards human victims of human violence: when describing his first day at Auschwitz, Death recalls those who perished at the bottom of the “great cliff, when their escapes fell awfully awry” (Zusak 357). The narrator promises that he will “never forget” the failed escapees, and especially their “broken bodies and dead, sweet hearts” (Zusak 357). Death’s emphasis on “broken bodies” suggests his witness of the prisoners’ traumatic and violent deaths but his remembrance of their “dead, sweet hearts” goes further. By referencing the prisoners’ hearts, Death invokes the spiritual, human aspects of the victim. He has surpassed the involvement of an innocent, unengaged bystander and forged a connection with a large group of traumatic victims. He attempts to interpret and understand their deaths and lives as not only tragic, but also meaningful and “sweet.”

In addition to serving as a witness for multitudes of nameless traumatic victims, Death occasionally develops a relationship and is emotionally affected by an individual whose soul he carries. While carrying the soul of a dead girl through the bomb-leveled streets of Cologne, Death admits, “The last thing I wanted to do was look down at the stranded face of my teenager. A pretty girl. Her whole death was now ahead of her” (Zusak 346). Instead of looking at the girl, Death turns to the sky, where airplanes soar overhead and bombs continue to fall. In this way, Death’s conscious decision to stare at the sky instead of the dead girl represents his preference

for broad, impersonal, still-occurring trauma rather than individual suffering. His pity for and personal connection to this girl requires Death to de-realise or deny her trauma, even at the cost of acknowledging another form of violence.

Death forms even stronger emotional attachments to individual human characters whom, through Liesel's narrative or a series of near-death experiences, he has met multiple times. Occasionally he admires these characters. For example, he admits of boyish Max Vandenburg, "Personally, I quite like that. Such stupid gallantry. Yes. I like that a lot." (Zusak 197). This admission and its reluctant, choppy wording recognizes that the narrator has again failed to preempt a relationship with an individual. Max, along with Liesel, now has the power to hurt Death simply by suffering (as humans, Death is eager to remind us, so often do). Death's confessional, stilted tone not only betrays his unwillingness for another emotional attachment, but also creates a confidence between the narrator and the reader. Death trusts the reader by sharing his personal reaction to and approval of Max and allows the reader to glimpse his fallibility, emotional accessibility, and compassion.

These emotional connections which Death forges with individual humans cause him to suffer as a result of human misfortune, particularly in the cases of Liesel and her friends. Death is able to look away from the face of the dead teenage girl and distance himself from her trauma; he cannot so easily deny the traumatic events of Liesel's story, including the bombings of Himmel Street and deaths of so many of her neighbors. The death of Rudy, Liesel's childhood best friend, particularly affects Death who acknowledges the emotional attachment he feels to the boy and its effects: "He does something to me, that boy. Every time. It's his only detriment. He steps on my heart. He makes me cry" (Zusak 535). Rudy, though otherwise without detriment, is positioned as another problematic human attachment for the narrator. The pain Death feels and

his inability to either ignore that emotion or save the boy's life legitimize the narrator's desire to disconnect from the events, characters and trauma of Liesel's life. His compassion involves Death intimately in the lives and trauma of his human companions, inspiring his attempts to de-realise their trauma and making such de-realisation impossible.

Death not only suffers alongside, but also associates himself with specific figures in Liesel's life by acknowledging his similarities to them. Most notably, the narrator compares himself to Liesel's foster father, Hans Hubermann. Given Death's own preoccupation with colors, Hans' observation of the various hues scattered through the early morning (Zusak 93) is provocative. Death reacts by saying, "It's hard not to like a man who not only notices the colours but speaks them" (Zusak 93) and this statement indicates more than simple approval for Hans. For Death, the colors symbolize the beauty of humanity and nature, particularly in the face of overwhelming evidence of human depravity and the cruelty of circumstance. Therefore, Hans's similar fascination with colors marks him as another character determined to see and make good in a world that is so lacking. Death's words also reflect a conscious desire to associate himself with Liesel's foster father, one of the few unambiguously good human characters in the novel.

As the novel progresses, the comparison between Hans and Death's roles becomes clearer. Hans is drafted into the army and forced to take on Death-like responsibilities: Liesel's papa is tasked with collecting dead bodies and clearing rubble following the bombings of German cities. Like Death, Hans is helpless to counteract the violence he witnesses and instead must deal with the traumatic effects of the destruction others have wrought. In an especially powerful scene, Liesel's papa carries a dying man from a bomb-riddled building to the safety of the street, only to find that Death has carried the man's soul and life away (Zusak 441-2). His traumatic experience and particularly the "damaged people" he encounters deeply affect Hans

(Zusak 441) in the same way that the chaos and cruelty of humanity has harmed Death. Death's prediction that "Hans would need to perfect the art of forgetting" (Zusak 441) recalls the narrator's own need to "de-realise" the traumatic experiences of those around him.

By comparing himself to Hans, Death creates a paternal role for himself and positions himself as a father who cares for the reader and guides him or her through the traumatic adjustment to his or her new literary surroundings. Just as her foster father endeavored to make Liesel's unfamiliar home more welcoming, Death takes it upon himself to make the reader's transition as simple as possible. After spending most of the introduction assuaging the reader's fears and introducing both the threatening and amusing aspects of his personality, Death encourages the reader to continue with the narrative, witnessing the book thief's story alongside him. The prologue concludes with an invitation: "If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story. I'll show you something" (Zusak 24). If the reader chooses to accompany Death into the story, this invitation constitutes a textual contract between the untraditional narrator and the reader who chooses to trust him. This contract with the reader creates another problematic attachment for Death between his metaphysical world and the fragile, physical world of the humans he finds himself caring for despite his best intentions.

In order to fulfill the textual contract and accept Death as a paternal intermediary in the novel, the reader must first trust the narrator. Death makes this requirement explicit in the opening pages while introducing himself and assuring the reader that he means no harm: "Please, trust me. I most definitely *can* be cheerful" (Zusak 13). Death will return to this request again casually and colloquially throughout the course of his narrative, usually when providing small but important details about the unfolding story. When reflecting on Liesel's frustrations with language, Death predicts, "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” (Zusak 86). Through his later, numerous descriptions of what words come to mean to Liesel, Death fulfills this prediction and provides a specific example for the reader to trust him. When the reader encounters textual evidence of Liesel’s passionate, tumultuous relationship with words, he or she realizes that Death is reliable even in his small, honest predictions. Moreover, this particular prediction invokes the earlier, unspoken promise the reader has made to trust him by continuing with the story and builds a rapport between the narrator and his audience.

By referring back to the comparisons with Hans Hubermann, Death provides additional reasons for the reluctant reader to trust him, a trust which is necessary for the fulfillment of the textual contract and the progression of the story. When recounting the beginning of Liesel’s relationship with her foster father, Death explains, “Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man’s gentleness, his *thereness*. The girl knew [...] he would not leave” (Zusak 43). The narrator further defines “*Not-leaving*” as “an act of trust and love” (Zusak 43). According to Death, Liesel’s trust of her foster father stems from two distinct factors: her foster father’s “gentleness” and the simple act of his presence. Both Hans’ gentleness and his presence are important components of his personality and his relationship to Liesel; however, he is far from the only character in the book who possesses these traits. In similar ways, Liesel slowly begins to trust Max when Hans and Rosa encourage her to spend time with him and he emerges nightly from the freezing basement, thereby reminding her of his “thereness”. When Max writes Liesel the story of *The Standover Man*, she glimpses for the first time the gentle way he cares for and appreciates her. In addition to Max, Death himself exemplifies both “thereness” and “gentleness”. By positioning these as the primary requirements

of trust and imitating them in his own narrative, Death has arranged an opportunity for the reader to trust him.

We have already seen Death's gentleness, his genialness, in the second scenario depicting the reader's death. Like Papa, Death can be tender and he excels in carrying frightened children from their nightmarish beds to safety. We will glimpse Death's gentle tenderness again when he lifts Rudy's soul from his bed and carries the boy away. Death promises, "I'm not too great at that sort of comforting thing, especially when my hands are cold and the bed is warm. I carried him softly [...] With him I tried a little harder" (Zusak 535). Death may be obligated to escort Rudy's soul away from his lifeless body, but he is not obligated to do so with such care or gentleness. The great effort Death makes to ensure the boy's comfort mirrors Hans' attention to Liesel's discomfort and fear during her initial days on Himmel Street. Death's care and actions mark him as a paternal figure who, like Papa, understands what the child before him needs and strives to provide for him.

The second requirement of trust is "thereness" or presence, which Death supplies by his ubiquity and the attention he pays to Liesel's story. When explaining how he came to possess Liesel's book, Death muses, "It's lucky I was there. Then again, who am I kidding? I'm in most places at least once, and in 1943 I was just about everywhere" (Zusak 543). The nature of his job and responsibility require Death to be present for and witness death, one of the most traumatic moments of a person's life. He is required to witness death, but as he proves in the scene with Rudy above, Death chooses the extent to which he interacts with the dying person. Frequently, he is tired and becomes part of the scenery rather than interacting with the recently departed. He describes times when, overwhelmed by the dead and the dying, he was forced to carry "[f]ive

hundred souls [...] in my fingers, like suitcases” (Zusak 345). At times, Death’s presence is nothing more than a casual, necessary aspect of a traumatic moment.

At other moments, however, the narrator chooses to become actively involved in the situation at hand and to interact with the souls he collects. When describing these moments, Death frequently mingles both aspects of trust and emphasizes both his gentleness and his presence. For example, he describes his interaction with Parisian Jews by beginning with an entreaty to his audience:

Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their French words. I watched their love-visions and freed them from their fear. I took them all away, and if there ever was a time I needed distraction, this was it. (Zusak 358)

Death’s entreaty that the reader “believe” him recalls the narrator’s desire for the reader to trust him and suggests that he values the reader’s opinion of him. The details with which he describes the Parisians he carried are paternal, particularly his focus on the “newly born”, and the care he displays emphasizes his gentleness and emotional vulnerability. He is characterized as an active participant in the deaths he witnesses, but presents himself as a powerful, freeing force rather than a destructive, deadly one. Other humans have given these Parisians their “weary, poisoned cheeks”; unusually, it is Death who manages to soothe and free them from the human cruelty which inspires “their fear”. His final admission about his need for distraction reminds the reader of the harmful consequences of his presence and emotional availability: by connecting so

strongly with the human souls he carries and rescues, Death suffers along with them. However, even when he suffers as a result of his emotional attachment, Death never compromises his presence or gentleness and constantly provides opportunities and reasons for the reader to trust him.

This emotional availability is only one component of Death's "thereness". His problematic attachment to Liesel leads him to invest in another form of "thereness": physical presence. Immediately following his buckling and budding interest in the book thief, Death admits, "I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed" (Zusak 17). True to his promise, Death accompanies mother and young girl to the cemetery where they bury her younger brother and, in the process, the narrator witnesses Liesel's first act of book theft. Death understands that the girl will neither notice him nor appreciate this gesture of companionship. He is not able to physically interact with or speak to her, but still Death remains with the cold, scared girl and stands witness at the edge of her brother's grave. He even waves, though he knows that no one will wave back (Zusak 32). In this example, Death exemplifies presence, despite Liesel's inability to notice or appreciate him.

There are no such restrictions on Death's relationship with the reader. He begins by introducing himself plainly and directly: throughout the course of the introduction, he describes his various aspects and concludes by inviting the reader to accompany him for a story. This invitation not only offers a story in exchange for the reader's attention and trust; it also guarantees a companion to journey through the story alongside him or her. The prepositional phrase "with me" can and should be read as a promise of presence, of "thereness": by the end of his initial introduction, Death promises that the reader will not encounter the trauma of the book thief's account and life alone.

One of the ways Death integrates himself into both Liesel's story and the reader's experience of it is through the narrator's involvement of the reader in his associative relationship with Hans and his admiration of Rudy. When the narrator appreciates the way Hans jokes with Rudy, Death allows, "You had to love Liesel's papa" (Zusak 351). His statement represents not only a hyperbolic appreciation of Hans but also, because of the obligatory nature of "had", serves as a recommendation to the reader. Death encourages and requires the reader to form a positive relationship with Hans which mirrors his own. Earlier in the novel, Death also encourages the reader to forge a relationship with Rudy. As Rudy waits patiently for Liesel to stop crying, "he put his arm around her, best-buddy style, and they walked on. There was no request for a kiss. Nothing like that. You can love Rudy for that, if you like" (Zusak 85). Though this suggestion is less forceful, Death again directs the reader not only through the events of Liesel's life, but also through the cast of her characters. By singling out specific likeable characters to endorse, Death becomes an emotionally invested narrator whom the reader can relate to, rely on, and appreciate.

If the reader trusts and appreciates Death as the narrator, Death is able to accompany and assist him or her on the journey through Liesel's story, a journey complicated by Death's frequent narrative inconsistencies. Perhaps most troublingly, Death pays little attention to narrative time, instead flashing forward and back to narrate interesting or relevant sections of the story regardless of chronological order. For example, the chapter "The Floating Book (*Part I*)" begins with a winter-1941 incident concerning Rudy, a book and the Amper River before flashing even further forward to the boy's death in 1943. At the start of the next chapter, before returning to the spring of 1941, the narrator acknowledges his jumbling of narrative time, allowing,

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. It chokes me. I know what happens and so do you. It's the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest and astound me. There are many things to think of. There is much story. (Zusak 253)

In this passage, Death not only acknowledges the traditional responsibilities of a narrator but also explains why he has neglected these responsibilities. His explanation is childish ("mystery bores me") and tends toward unconvincing. Death's protest that "I know what happens and so do you" must ring untrue because the reader has just been unsettled by his "rude" "spoiling" of key plot events: by juxtaposing a living, loving boy and his bomb-riddled corpse in the space of two small pages, Death has informed his reader that Rudy will die.

It is possible that Death feels obligated to dispense with chronological narrative because it does not reflect the traumatic truth of the story he tells. The literary theorist Geoffrey H. Hartman, in an essay entitled "Language and Culture After the Holocaust" argues that "Dating subverts narrative time, even while making it possible" (314). Thus Hartman argues that although dating is necessary to make sense of an event, it also "subverts" or compromises our understanding of narrative or recounted, remembered time. Dating makes Death's story possible because the dates he provides allow him to place Rudy's adventure in the Amper and his death within the larger narrative of Liesel's story and the political and cultural moment of the Second World War. Details like Rudy's participation in Hitler Youth and both children's starving families would make little sense outside of 1940s Germany, which requires Death to rely to some

extent on the narrative context provided by dates. However, the dates of Rudy's life also subvert recounted events by confining the pivotal moments of his life to strict, chronological progression. Instead, Death attempts to create truth by juxtaposing important and thematically related events in Rudy's life. The incident in the Amper and Rudy's death are connected and can be understood as a question and an answer, as a problem and its solution: standing in the Amper, Rudy asks Liesel for a kiss and as he lies dead on Himmel Street, she gives it to him. By compressing the narrative and veering from strict chronology, Death develops human meaning and emphasizes themes and truth not available in historical accounts of the war and Liesel's life.

Scholar Hamilton Carroll argues that when representing a traumatic event, particularly a cultural moment like the Holocaust, World War II or September 11, historical chronology does not allow room for narrative freedom and fictional representation. In his article "Like Nothing in This Life: September 11 and the Limits of Representation in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*", Carroll posits that widespread awareness and media coverage of a tragedy like the September 11 attacks create a problematic familiarity for any reader who approaches DeLillo's novel: DeLillo is then tasked with representing "an event that is at once too known and unrepresentable" (111). In order to engage the reader in a fictitious account of the traumatic event without engaging preconceived notions or known historical details, DeLillo must somehow de-familiarize the subject of his narration. Carroll argues that DeLillo accomplishes this de-familiarization in part by creating a novel which is "temporally complex" and "moves backwards and forwards in time" (111). Because the reader cannot establish a strict chronology within DeLillo's novel, the author successfully divorces his depiction of the September 11 attacks from their real-life counterpart. In this way, Carroll suggests *Falling Man* becomes "not a novel about September 11 so much as

a novel about what the events which go by that name might mean for those who survived them” (110).

In a similar way, Death creates a “temporally complex” narrative which allows him to reference and fictionalize events taking place in the historically familiar landscape of Nazi Germany and to interpret the meaning of those events for their victims and survivors. Because these tragedies are so familiar and culturally poignant, Death is able to invoke them through the use of sparse, specific detail. For example, Death compares Liesel’s neighbors in the bomb shelter with concentration camp prisoners and observes, “The Germans in the basement were pitiable, surely, but at least they had a chance. That basement was not a washroom. They were not sent there for a shower. For those people, life was still achievable” (Zusak 384). This passage evokes a powerful traumatic moment without ever directly mentioning historic details such as the name of a particular camp or even fully depicting the traumatic victims. Death’s bleak, almost dismissive tone, replicates for the reader the shock and horror which must have accompanied initial reports and the unfolding tragedies of the Holocaust. Most readers presumably have at least a basic knowledge of the Holocaust, but Death’s abrupt introduction of Jewish prisoners to the unfamiliar landscape of a German bomb shelter allows him to de-familiarize and represent the well-known trauma on his own terms.

In addition, juxtaposing survivors of the bombing and casualties of the Nazi genocide allows the narrator to illustrate again the violent nature of human beings. Death’s comparison of two relatively simultaneous but geographically distinct traumatic occurrences suggests that history should view both traumas as related events. He removes the bombings and gas chambers from their respective, relevant chronologies and ignores historical causes in order to analyze the effect of both traumas on their survivors and, in the case of the concentration camps, cultural

descendants. His allusion to the concentration camp washroom not only challenges and undermines but also legitimizes the suffering of the people crammed into the Himmel Street bomb shelter. Through this narrative aside and unusual comparison, Death complicates the traditional account of Jewish suffering and introduces another, less familiar account of the traumatic war: the experience of the oppressed and fearful German people.

It is possible that this jumbling of events may also be a symptom of Death's traumatic experience. Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth suggests that psychological disorders such as PTSD should be understood not as a "symptom of the [individual] unconscious", but rather as "a symptom of history" (194). According to Caruth, a traumatic experience compromises an individual's understanding of history because the experience represents a dramatic break with the accepted and acceptable course of history and truth (194). For the traumatized person, trauma represents an "impossible history" which they must reconcile with the past and continuing trajectory of their own lives and which they "cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 194).

Death, like the traumatic survivor, cannot entirely possess the history of his human encounters: he can neither help the Germans in the bomb shelter nor the Jews in the concentration camp, but is forced to comply with and suffer human violence. His tendency to muddle and disregard human chronological history may reflect his inability to make sense of the "impossible," contradictory and irreconcilable histories he has witnessed. Death himself suggests another motivation for his jumbling of narrative time: "Again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps it's to soften the blow for later, or to better prepare *myself* for the telling" (Zusak 501). In this explanation, Death implies that his temporal complexity stems not only from his inability to counteract or understand his own trauma, but also from his attempts to protect both the reader and himself from the traumatic events yet to come.

Death not only ignores and reinterprets the historical progression of time in order to represent “unrepresentable” traumatic events; on occasion, he also foreshadows future events by placing them within his own chronologies. He frequently prepares the reader for an upcoming traumatic event and scatters the story with less developed but equally anticipatory phrases, establishing deadlines for the accomplishment of a particular action. For example, he speaks of a Rudy who “was a month from his death” and warns that Liesel will have only three more contented, peaceful months, although her story lasts for six (Zusak 522; 498). Despite his assertion that mystery bores him, Death’s anticipations create suspense. In addition, these instances establish and reinforce a chronology for Liesel’s story: by predicting and referencing the future, Death both invokes it in and separates it from the present. Death’s “temporally complex” plot and commentary create expectations for the reader and, through the confiding of future details and events, intimately involve him or her in the act and progression of Death’s narration. By so abruptly and unorthodoxly divulging his narrative chronology, Death invites the reader into a full and nuanced understanding of the events he narrates and their significance.

Interestingly and very rarely, Death sometimes edits and contradicts the narrative timelines he has devised. When Liesel is on the cusp of stealing her second book, Death predicts, “After another ten minutes, the gates of thievery would open just a crack, and Liesel Meminger would widen them a little further and squeeze through” (Zusak 122). This prediction continues Death’s recurring anticipation of the second incident of Liesel’s book thievery and, like his other anticipations, creates suspense and advances the plot. On the following page, however, Death subverts the temporal expectations he has created and amends, “Actually. Forget the ten minutes. The gates open now” (Zusak 123). This revision of his own anticipation has moved beyond the creation of suspense and instead makes the action of the book thief’s life (and in this case, her

thievery) present and immediate to the reader. By addressing the reader with the imperative, Death reaches beyond the action of the story to involve the reader in currently unfolding events. His use of the same present tense in his imperative (“Forget”) and his depiction of the book thief’s opportunity compresses the present action of reading with the girl’s past theft.

Death’s compression and subversion of time may be less a conscious narrative decision and more a reflection of the way the events unfolded for his young protagonist. At several points throughout the story, Death provides the reader with not a factual, historical rendering of events as they happened, but instead a retelling of the way Liesel felt and experienced the world around her. It may be the girl, and not the narrator, who understands this moment as a slim opportunity. As the novel and the book thief’s “illustrious career” (Zusak 36) progress, Liesel will return to this idea of opportunity as a crucial component of theft, refusing to steal from Ilsa Hermann’s library when the window is closed despite the minimal effort required to open it. Given her later preoccupation with opportunity, it seems reasonable to assume it is the book thief and not absent Death, who conceives of this moment first and foremost as an opportunity and one of limited, or rushed, time. If Death takes the motif of the gates from Liesel’s imagination and is simply recreating the hurried act of stealing for the audience, his subversion of narrative time can be understood as an attempt to present and honor Liesel’s “impossible history” over the chronology he attempted to impose.

Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and scholar of the Holocaust, provides more specific vocabulary which may be used to discuss and understand Death’s adoption and privileging of Liesel’s story. When recounting the testimony of a woman who witnessed a chimney exploding at Auschwitz, Laub distinguishes between an account which is “accurate” and one which produces “historical truth” (223;225). According to Laub, “historical truth” involves the

experience, including factual inaccuracies and emotional reactions, of the person testifying about a specific moment rather than data, facts or strict representation. For Laub, Caruth's "impossible history" becomes not a break with historical chronology, but the only fair way to understand and represent history: Laub understands the traumatic survivor's "impossible history" as "historical truth".

Death takes Laub's "historical truth" one step further. Laub defines truth as the actual if inaccurate experience and memories of the survivor. His truth, though shaped and filtered by the survivor's perception and knowledge, nonetheless must represent what the survivor believes to be true (Laub 224). Death, on the other hand, does not limit his account to what Liesel believes to be true or accurate. Instead, he occasionally privileges and represents accounts which Liesel recognizes display her emotional and figurative understanding of what happened rather than the literal progression of events. Liesel describes this disconnect between accurate description and narrative during an argument with Rudy. She insists, "What someone says and what happened are usually two different things" (Zusak 433). However, this recognition does not prevent the book thief from creating a narrative account of her young life which makes sense of her own experiences in lyrical prose. Liesel's prose shares important elements with Laub's "historical truth": both represent a survivor's attempts to understand, process and derive meaning from his or her individual trauma. At the same time, because Liesel recognizes that her prose is factually inaccurate, it cannot be understood as historically true in Laub's sense of the term. Rather, bearing in mind Liesel's method of arriving at truth through verbally arranging and retelling her experience, I will refer to Liesel's account as her narrative truth.

Death often privileges Liesel's narrative truth over accuracy, choosing to represent the events of Liesel's life as she understands them. For example, he describes the effect of Liesel's

angry words on the mayor's wife, Ilsa Hermann: "She was battered and beaten up [...] Liesel could see it on her face. Blood leaked from her nose and licked at her lips [...] All from the words. From Liesel's words." (Zusak 273) This description reflects both Liesel's guilt at having spoken so to the wounded, kindly woman and the powerful effect even unintentional words can have. The passage represents Liesel's growing understanding of "the brutality of words" (Zusak 272), even as it fails to represent the literal implications of her tirade. In this way, Death narrates Liesel's personal meaning, her narrative rather than her historically accurate truth.

In addition, Death repeatedly emphasizes and legitimizes the personal nature of Liesel's narrative truth by comparing her situation and emotional state to the turmoil of the larger world. Following a football injury, Rudy follows Liesel home and asks, "*Alles gut, Saumensch?*" (Zusak 356). In the mouths of Zusak's characters, the expletive "*Saumensch*" becomes a term of teasing endearment. Profanity aside, Rudy's sentence translates as "All good?" and according to Liesel, it is. At the same time, Death takes pains to warn that outside Liesel's consciousness, the world is far from good. As he explains, "It was June. It was Germany. Things were on the verge of decay." (Zusak 356). However, Death does not contradict Liesel when she assures Rudy that everything is good; instead, he elaborates on her personal situation to show how such a statement is warranted. Death explains that Liesel's efforts and secrecy have temporarily ensured the safety of her foster parents and Jewish friend, Max Vandenburg, who is hiding in her basement. In this way, Death both legitimizes Liesel's personal, narrative truth and recognizes that such a truth is divorced from the global reality.

Occasionally, Liesel's narrative truth also differs from the reality of the trauma she has experienced personally. Early in the novel, Death describes one instance when Liesel struggles to reconcile an event as she knows it happened with her own memory of it:

Had it been dark, she realized, that tear would have been black.
 ‘But it *was* dark,’ she told herself. No matter how many times
 she tried to imagine that scene with the light that she knew had
 been there, she had to struggle to visualise it. She was beaten in
 the dark [...] The dark, the light. What was the difference? (Zusak 106)

The difference, as Death’s presentation of both contrasting representations and Liesel’s “struggle” make clear, is crucial. The first account of the dark room represents Liesel’s understanding of the beating and her emotions about it; the second, of the “light she knew had been there” is an accurate retelling of the event as it unfolded. Only with reflection and narrative insight does Liesel decide that the room where she was beaten could not have contained light, because light contradicts her understanding of this experience. Thus, the dark room epitomizes Liesel’s narrative truth. Death’s inclusion of both the inaccurate darkness and the book thief’s struggle to make sense of her own memories are characteristic of his narrative style and priorities.

To better understand Death’s choice to rely on Liesel’s narrative truth rather than accuracy, we must view it alongside Liesel’s decision to do the same for Rudy. Shortly after his father is drafted for disobedience, Rudy wanders the streets with Liesel, claiming he is going to “kill the Führer” (Zusak 431-2). Of course, this is a fantasy, which Liesel is quick to criticize: Hitler is not wandering the streets of Molching (a small German suburb) and though he is angry, it seems unlikely that Rudy would kill the Führer even if he were. Instead, the children spend the afternoon wandering the streets of their city, discussing the effect the loss of their fathers has created in both of their families. Through conversation, the friends purge their anger. They do not arrive at an understanding until they return home and their mothers demand to know where

they have been. “Liesel answered for him. ‘He was killing the Führer,’ she said” (Zusak 434). By accepting his unrealistic account of their afternoon despite her previous protests, Liesel aligns herself with Rudy’s narrative truth. She understands and validates his emotional response to the loss of his father. She privileges and represents his narrative explanation for their afternoon, even as she recognizes that it is inaccurate and foolish.

Rudy’s response to Liesel’s assertion that he has been killing the Führer is equally important. Death tells us that the boy “looked genuinely happy for a long enough moment to please her” (Zusak 434). Rudy is not just amused by the lie she has told their parents; he recognizes that Liesel has accepted his narrative truth and in this novel, that acceptance is a mark of friendship. Such a scene is repeated through the story Max creates for Liesel. A short fable called *The Word Shaker*, Max’s book imagines the girl as a “word shaker” who climbs trees, harvests words like fruit and alone stands against the “strange, small man” who is Hitler (Zusak 451-6). At first, Liesel accepts it as a simple story, but her words to Max when he is being marched through Molching to the concentration camp prove that she comprehends the lesson, the meaning, in his fiction. She reminds him, “*There once was a strange, small man [...] But there was a word shaker, too*” (Zusak 515). This reminder is a promise that the girl understands the power of her words, even against the speeches, rhetorical power and propaganda of a dictator like Hitler. Max’s reaction, like Rudy’s, proves that he understands the meaning of Liesel’s narrative gesture: he cries and kisses her (Zusak 516).

In the same way, Death adopts Liesel’s narrative truth as a gesture of friendship, not necessarily because he believes her account, but because he admires and values her story. The juxtaposition of “*Alles gut*” and Germany’s decay indicates that Death understands there is a greater, contradictory world which lies beyond Liesel’s understanding. His presentation of the

light and darkness in the room where she was beaten represents his understanding of a contradiction within her account and memory. However, as he explains, Death feels a strong admiration for Liesel Meminger and admits that when he collected her soul, he had “been waiting [...] for a long time” to formally meet her (Zusak 553). Death brings the book thief’s soul to a park, where they can discuss her story, and he admits that her life is one of the “moments” which supports his belief in humanity, even when he must “attend the greatest disasters and work for the greatest villains” (Zusak 553). If Death, like Liesel, may be understood as a traumatic survivor, perhaps he privileges and accepts Liesel’s narrative truth because he appreciates her attempts to create meaning from her traumatic past.

Liesel’s written account ends with the bombing of Himmel Street, when the book falls out of her hands and into Death’s. However, Death is not content to leave the story there; he repeats his invitation and asks the reader to accompany him for one last, quick section of the story. Again he asks, “Come with me and I’ll tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (Zusak 548). This time, the invitation is not conditional; it is an encouragement from a narrator who understands that he has won the reader’s trust and attention. This invitation comes from a partner in and witness to the reader’s traumatic encounter of Liesel’s life, tragedy and text. This time, Death does not make any attempt to keep his distance from the book thief, but instead narrates the gaps between the end of Liesel’s story and their final meeting at the moment of her death. The novel concludes with the narrator attempting to explain to the book thief his complicated, admiring and fearful relationship with humans. This relationship is a result of Death’s suffering at human hands and his bearing witness to their greatness and reflects his unique ability to observe the grand scope of contradictory, human events.

Chapter Two

“Words Are Life”³: Liesel Meminger and Bakhtinian Language

*“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 86, emphasis mine)

Liesel Meminger is a reluctant narrator. In fact, it’s somewhat misleading to discuss her narration at all: Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* is not a novel narrated from multiple perspectives, but instead is told almost entirely through the point of view of personified and yet inhuman Death. Death tells the story of Liesel’s adoption into the Himmel Street community, life with her foster parents, and good-natured thievery. Death witnesses personally and recounts for the reader some of the most traumatic moments of Liesel’s life. He encounters the young girl three times when escorting the souls of her loved ones from their ruined bodies to the afterlife. These momentary encounters were enough to pique Death’s fascination in and admiration for the child, but not enough for him to create a narrative featuring intimate details of her daily life.

For those personal thoughts and childish perceptions, the narrator relied on another book, a journal of sorts in which Liesel recorded the events of her life and her own impressions of them. Liesel also titles her clumsy autobiography *The Book Thief* and, luckily for the reader, it falls into Death’s hands. He confesses that the book thief’s autobiography inspires him: it is one of the few narratives he has stumbled upon which manages “to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (Zusak 24). In this way, *The Book Thief* provides a distraction from Death’s depressing and exhausting work. He repeats the book thief’s life like a mantra, to

³ This phrase serves as the tagline for the recently released feature film based on Zusak’s novel.

preserve her story even as the physical pages fade from decades of use and wear. “What did we say earlier? Say something enough times and you never forget it” (Zusak 533). Death also confesses an additional motivation for speaking the book thief’s story aloud; in his introduction, he makes this purpose clear while establishing his contract with the reader. “I have kept her story to retell”, he confides (Zusak 24) and for most of the novel, he does.

Death is so determined to tell the girl’s story that he adopts her own terms and whenever possible, faithfully represents her emotional state, thoughts and understanding, which I have referred to in the previous chapter as her narrative truth. This faithfulness can be understood through the narrative technique of free indirect discourse. Gerald Prince’s *A Dictionary of Narratology* defines free indirect discourse as any narration which “manifests at least some of the character’s enunciation” and which “contain[s] mixed within it markers of two discourse events (a narrator’s and a character’s)” (34). Using free indirect discourse, Death’s narration maintains Liesel’s childish, unusually perceptive voice while at the same time providing context to the events of her life. Death ruminates on and often condemns or praises human existence as a whole; he relies on the girl’s autobiography for specific, nuanced details.

The first and most sustained example of Death’s reliance on Liesel’s autobiography concerns her struggles with literacy. Because of her unconventional *Kommunist* upbringing, Liesel “hadn’t learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school” (Zusak 28). This inexperience with words and language makes Liesel a subject of bullying, so she resolves to learn to read on her own, using a book stolen from a gravedigger in the cemetery where her brother was buried. Her plan is discovered by her foster father, Hans, who gives her literacy lessons in the basement, the only quiet, usable space in the Hubermanns’ small home.

With his encouragement and instruction, Liesel begins a tumultuous relationship with words and writing.

Together, father and daughter work their way through the alphabet, writing a list of words on the basement walls. They collect one word beginning with each of the German letters, accumulating a personal lexicon of words common to them both. The goal of this new lexicon is to organize a vocabulary of words which Liesel can learn to recognize and understand when she encounters them on the page. Philologist Mikhail M. Bakhtin would recognize this practice of organizing familiar words as a physical manifestation of the appropriation of what he calls “unitary language” (“Discourse in the Novel” 269).

According to Bakhtin, commonly recognized, societally spoken languages like English or German are “unitary” languages. Unitary languages are defined as one half of the system of language which all humans speak; the other half of the lingual system Bakhtin discusses is a personal form of the unitary language. This personal form of the unitary language, which I will term “personal language”, consists of the words an individual has understood, interpreted and employed throughout his or her experience. The personal language is founded upon the assumption that individuals retain the initial impressions, assumptions and connotations which they attach to a newly encountered word. For this reason, no two individual’s personal languages will be the same, regardless of whether or not they share the same unitary language.

Bakhtin would recognize Hans and Liesel’s first alphabet exercise as an attempt to create a communal but personal language: while father and daughter cannot completely share a single personal language, they can work together to identify and adopt words, shifting them from the unitary of German to Hans and Liesel’s personal languages. Bakhtin suggests that there is a

specific, three-stage process which leads to a word's assimilation into a personal language. In the first stage, the word is "a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody" ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 88). After the word has been encountered but not necessarily understood, it transitions to the stage of "an other's word" which exists "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 88; "Discourse in the Novel" 294). The words on the page which Liesel struggles to read fit into this second category: she is aware of their existence and may be able to parse their meaning, but she cannot fully understand them. Perhaps more than any other narrator, Liesel recognizes and acknowledges the unfamiliarity of others' words, struggling to reconcile her understanding with meanings devised by strangers.

Specifically, Liesel struggles with the word "*Kommunist*", a vaguely derogatory term others have attached to her mother but which she has never fully understood. Death relates for the reader the girl's initial impression of the word:

*****A Strange Word*****

Kommunist

She'd heard it several times in the past few years. There were boarding houses crammed with people, rooms filled with questions. And that word. That strange word was always there somewhere, standing in the corner, watching from the dark. It wore suits, uniforms. No matter where they went, there it was [...] When she asked her mother what it meant, she was told it wasn't important (Zusak 38)

The word *Kommunist*, for Liesel, represents her muddled past and her remaining questions about the whereabouts of both biological parents. The word is personified and granted agency: it wears official, imposing clothing and observes her distantly (from the corner, in the dark). The girl's memory of and associations with this single word express her intimidation by it. Particularly because the term *Kommunist* is not explained and cannot be comprehended, it holds power over the ignorant girl.

Liesel rebels against this powerlessness by claiming words with her foster father. "Papa would say a word and the girl would have to spell it aloud and then paint it on the wall, as long as she got it right" (Zusak 77). The qualification "as long as she got it right" emphasizes the importance of understanding and interpreting the words of her new vocabulary, as well as the difficulty with which the girl has acquired them. Liesel "spoke those words with a grim kind of ownership" (Zusak 77). This sense of ownership is strikingly similar to Bakhtin's instructions for transitioning a word from unitary to personal language: "one must take the word and make it one's own" ("Discourse in the Novel" 294). By inscribing her words on the wall, Liesel creates a visual representation of her personal language, a memorial of the words she has conquered and collected.

A few months after her exercises in fledgling literacy, Liesel reflects on her newly discovered power of words. Standing before the bonfire of blazing books, the young girl recognizes for the first time that the juggernaut of Nazi propaganda is all founded on the strength of their rhetoric. She begins to realize that Hitler's political power stems from his ability to craft and shape words. Days later, Death reflects on the similarities between the young girl standing awestruck in a library and the dictator and observes:

Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now [...] she felt an innate sense of power. It happened every time she deciphered a new word or pieced together a sentence. She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. How fitting that she was discovering the power of words.
(Zusak 154)

Through Death's observations, the reader is able to appreciate the trajectory of Liesel's relationship with words. Whereas the activity of reading used to make the girl feel trapped and inadequate, she now equates that very same activity to feelings of agency and power.

Liesel is so emboldened by her new relationship with words that she dares to challenge their unitary, socially accepted meanings. In the section of *The Book Thief* named for a popular German-language lexicon, Liesel organizes the experiences of her life around the new words she has discovered in *The Duden Dictionary*. These words help her to understand and process the events of her life as she learns and uses un-ironically words like “*zufriedenheit*” (happiness), “*verzeihung*” (forgiveness) and “*angst*” (fear) to describe her emotions (Zusak 366; 376; 383). Only once does Liesel disagree with a *Duden Dictionary* definition: following the departure of her Jewish friend Max Vandenburg, the young girl learns the meaning of *schweigen* (silence). The dictionary defines *schweigen* as “the absence of sound or noise” and lists related words like “quiet, calmness, [and] peace” (Zusak 404). Liesel, however, equates the silence in her house with the absence of her friend and disagrees with the German language on the proper interpretation of *schweigen*. “[T]he *Duden Dictionary* was completely and utterly mistaken [...] Silence was not quiet or calm, and it was not peace” (Zusak 405). This disagreement provides a vivid example of Liesel's personal language and her hard-won ownership over rigid German words.

This ownership is frequently symbolized by the impossible, physical transfer of words. Liesel is not a selfish book thief: instead, she is generous with the words she has fought so hard to acquire. During frequent bomb raids, the residents of Himmel Street crowd into a basement shelter and Liesel discovers that reading aloud both passes the time and calms her frightened neighbors. The girl understands this activity as therapeutic, useful and artistic by comparing it to her papa playing the accordion (Zusak 389). Death, however, understands her reading in a different way: “For at least twenty minutes, she handed out the story” (Zusak 389). His interpretation recalls Bakhtin’s theories about the ownership and transfer of words. Without owning the words herself, Liesel could not give them to others. By handing out the words, she transitions them from unitary, neutral components of language to familiar, encountered speech.

For the people of Himmel Street, those words would always bear the mark of Liesel’s reading. Bakhtin argues that although words “can enter our speech from others’ individual utterances”, every word in our personal language preserves “to a greater or lesser degree the tones and echoes of individual utterances” (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 88). As mentioned above, an individual’s personal language is composed of the impressions and connotations which they have attached to particular words, including the circumstances and contexts in which those words have been encountered. In this way, Liesel’s words are not only understood through their neutral, unitary, *Duden Dictionary* definitions. Neither are they confined to oppressive, unintelligible impressions she collects for words like *Kommunist*. Instead, words enter Liesel’s speech by transitioning from her friends’ vocabulary and use. Although she gains ownership of these new words and uses them in her own speech and thoughts, she still associates them with their original speaker. Even when they are no longer “an other’s words”, the words of Liesel’s personal language retain the marks of others’ voices (“Discourse in the Novel” 294).

In several instances, Death's narration provides enough detail for the reader to trace Liesel's encounters, acquisition and associations with individual words. For example, the girl does not create the title of her autobiography; instead, she acquires the phrase directly from Rudy's speech. At the close of one of their thieving missions, he bids her goodnight:

‘Goodbye, *Saumensch*’. He laughed. ‘Goodnight, book thief.’

It was the first time Liesel had been branded with her title, and she couldn't hide the fact that she liked it very much. As we're both aware, she'd stolen books previously, but in late October 1941, it became official. That night, Liesel Meminger truly became the book thief. (Zusak 302)

Death's focus on Liesel's "official" adoption of the title emphasizes Rudy's role in the creation of Liesel's new identity. As the narrator reminds us, this is not the first time Liesel has stolen a book and she must have an understanding of the individual words "book" and "thief" to be able to understand and process Rudy's phrase. However, it is her best friend's mischievous goodbye which inspires her to internalize the epithet. When Liesel begins her autobiography, she opens with the words, "**The Book Thief, a small story by Liesel Meminger**" (Zusak 529). It is unsurprising that when Liesel "made herself remember" (Zusak 528) the events of her life and painstakingly put them to words, she begins with two words borrowed from her best friend.

The girl also inherits meaningful words from Max Vandenburg. Before departing Himmel Street, her Jewish friend composes and illustrates a book for her, a small parable which he titles *The Word Shaker*. *The Word Shaker* echoes Death's imagination of words as physical objects: it tells the story of a Liesel figure, a young, nameless girl known as the word shaker who

is talented enough to gather words but refuses to hand them over to the Führer, described as a “strange, small man” who exploits the words’ worth (Zusak 451-2). Eventually, with the help of an exhausted, seemingly insignificant “young man” who stands in for Vandenburg, the word shaker claims the words as her own and escapes the Führer’s harsh demands (Zusak 453-6). After reading the parable, Liesel dreams that she knows where Max is and interprets the story as a promise that he is with her, present in the omnipresence of the words they shared. As Death observes when recounting the unfolding of their friendship, “Max and Liesel were held together by the quiet gathering of words” (Zusak 258).

Liesel reinterprets the meaning of *The Word Shaker* when she next comes face to face with her friend. After he leaves Himmel Street, Liesel searches everywhere for Max and finds him finally in the parade of Jews forced to march through Molching on their way to Dachau. The girl fights her way through the crowds, crying out and weaving through the marching Jews to embrace him. She is caught and tossed from the street by a soldier, at which point Max tries to ignore her in the hopes that the soldiers will do the same. Liesel refuses to be ignored. Like Death and Max, she imagines the physical manifestation of words she speaks, but she also personifies them⁴: “inside her were the souls of the words. They climbed out and stood beside her” (Zusak 515). Her last attempt at physical contact having been answered with Nazi violence, Liesel reaches out with words. “‘Max,’ she said [...] ‘*There was once a strange, small man [...]* *But there was a word shaker, too*’” (Zusak 515).

Zusak’s italics suggest that Liesel is speaking in direct quotations from *The Word Shaker*, but in fact she only appropriates two phrases (“strange, small man” and “word shaker”) from Max’s language. She has borrowed his concepts, his words, in order to show her friend that she

⁴ Cf. her similar, but more imposing personification of *Kommunist*.

understands his meaning. Liesel reinterprets *The Word Shaker* not as a promise of presence, but as a powerful argument for the strength and importance of words, particularly in the hands of powerless people. This adoption of Max's meaning parallels Liesel's acceptance of Rudy's narrative truth when he claims to be killing the Führer. In both instances, Liesel's use of borrowed words should be understood as a gesture of friendship. Liesel's appropriation of *The Word Shaker* is even more significant: by adopting, adapting and recognizing the power of Max's words, Liesel demonstrates the strength she has derived from his story and embodies his narrative truth.

The inheritance of words in this way, from personal conversations and relationships as well as official sources suggests a tension between unitary and personal languages. Bakhtin argues that the agreed-upon definition and even our impressions of a particular word are less important than "what matters [...] the actual and always self-interested *use* to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker" ("Discourse in the Novel" 401). Words are not defined primarily by our connotations, although those connotations are important for our understanding, interpretation and eventual use of individual words. Communication between individuals is fundamentally flawed, complicated by the differences in the participant's languages. For this reason, Bakhtin argues that the precise context of a word's use, by a specific speaker, is crucial. Without this context, it would be impossible to define any word in meaningful, useful, unitary terms.

This contextual basis of meaning, combined with the complexities and nuances of personal language, creates confusion and conflict in social discourses. On one hand, meaning cannot be entirely contextual, or communication in a unitary language would be impossible. At the same time, Bakhtin is right to emphasize an individual's personal relationship with and

complicated use of specific words. Differing, sometimes contradictory understandings of the same word, based in personal languages, obfuscate unitary meaning and present communicative challenges. We have seen how the word *Kommunist* presents linguistic challenges for Liesel because of society's insistence on its negative and dangerous connotations. In a similar way, one imagines that a word like "Jew" or "German" would have different meanings to Max Vandenburg and the Führer, although Bakhtin's model allows both to have ownership over the same unitary words. The conflict in *The Word Shaker* and in Liesel's personal struggles with literacy and empowerment result from these social tensions over the power and correct use of words in German society.

Other writers have also explored the tension between personal and unitary language in their characters' respective cultures. Perhaps the most striking American example of this disconnect can be found in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Like Liesel, Huck inherits words from others, though his accumulated words tend to be less positive and empowering. Huck's acquired words include moral terms like "the bad place" (Miss Watson's euphemism for hell) and "everlasting fire" (Twain 3; 216). Because his words are morally charged, Huck internalizes not only others' words, but others' religious and moral discourses. Thus, the societal tension in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* stems from the narrator's attempts to reconcile words he has inherited from others with his own budding, revolutionary morality.

Twain scholars like Tom Quirk, in his article entitled "Huckleberry Finn's Heirs", argue that Huck's moral ignorance creates a unique narrative opportunity for Twain. His ignorance inspires and allows the moral narrative of Twain's novel: "To appropriate the narrative device of telling a story from the point of view of someone who does not fully comprehend [...] the

gravity of his experience, but who is nonetheless able to suggest some indefinite dis-ease about that world, opens up innumerable possibilities for the novelist” (Quirk 116). Huck’s moral ignorance allows him to report the actions, prejudices and beliefs of those around him without bias. In addition, the boy’s limited understanding and in some cases, misunderstanding, of moral and religious terminology leads him to question and explore contemporary moral vocabulary and attitudes. Huck’s estrangement from the adult, moral codes espoused by the didactic Miss Watson, the merciful if stiff Widow Douglas or even his friend Jim provides an opportunity for the boy to examine and critique their versions of morality.

Throughout the novel, Huck struggles with the consequences others have told him will result from his actions. Even when he manages to internalize and re-interpret moral concepts, he can’t get rid of the marks of other’s voices. After running away with Jim, he fears that “people that act as I’d been acting [...] goes to the everlasting fire” (Twain 216). It would be easy to dismiss Huck’s moral concerns by recalling the way he scorns Miss Watson’s religion, reflecting early in the novel that if Heaven welcomes Miss Watson, he would rather go to hell (Twain 3). However, critics have emphasized the need to distinguish between a boy’s brash words and his deep-seated fears and loneliness.

Huck certainly does not choose to be a social outcast: early in the novel, he confesses “I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead” (Twain 3). In the case of hellfire, Michael Patrick Hearn argues that Huck’s “honest fear should not be underestimated” (342). Despite his moral ignorance, Huck is at least in his religious superstitions, “a child of the society in which he was raised [...] at this point in his education, he believes (and fears) only what he has been taught to be the truth” (Hearn 343). Although he escapes to the river and exhibits linguistic curiosity, Huck cannot divorce himself from the social constructs or the moral vocabulary which inspire

him to fear eternal punishment for his actions. Thus, though he attempts to distance himself from the oppressive morality of his society, Huck cannot keep from internalizing phrases like “everlasting fire”. Despite his protests and intentions, the terms of Miss Watson’s religion become part of the boy’s personal language.

Huck has been celebrated as not just a literary but a moral hero because he manages to rebel against just those oppressive moral discourses and societal constructs. The novel hinges on Huck’s decision to reject societal morality and his resolution that he will literally go to hell rather than betray his friend. The boy writes a letter to Jim’s owner outlining how to find her slave and at first, he “felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time” (Twain 217). It is important to note that Huck discusses his socially approved act of betrayal using the unitary language of Christianity, imagining his letter as a sort of baptism: his choice of words suggests the extent to which the boy speaks in the moral discourse of his society. These same morals have eaten at Huck until finally he succumbs and agrees to betray his friend, but the boy escapes cruel religious morality because of what he does next: he reflects on their time on the river and remembers what a good friend Jim has been (Twain 217-8). Huck realizes he “was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he’s got now” and recognizes that he must “decide, forever, betwixt two things” (Twain 217-8). Because he cannot desert Jim, Huck resolves, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (Twain 218).

This resolution makes Huck a moral hero and the extent of his sacrifice should not be underestimated. Writing about Huck’s conflicted conscience, Ralph Ellison suggests that “Huck has struggled with the problem posed by the clash between property rights and human rights [...] He has made his decision on the side of humanity” (quoted in Hearn 344). His epiphany is possible because Huck moves beyond traditional, religious morality and, as Hearn suggests,

“realizes that there is indeed a morality higher than that of social approval” (344). Huck’s new morality belongs to him alone, forged independent of and contrary to everything he has been taught. The impetus for Huck’s new morality is his loyalty to Jim: as Hearn explains, “In vowing to help a slave escape, Huck denies his people, his country, and his God” (345).

Liesel makes a similar sacrifice when resolving to do everything she can to protect her Jewish friend Max Vandenburg. Unlike Huck, Liesel is not alone in her social transgression; not only the girl but both of her foster parents and, to a lesser extent, her best friend Rudy join together to contest Nazi rule and practices. By sheltering Max in their basement, the Hubermanns risk their safety, security and social position. Hans makes the potential consequences very clear to his daughter when he explains:

‘Liesel, if you tell anyone about the man up there, we will all be in big trouble. [...] At the very least, Mama and I will be taken away.’ [...] Hans Hubermann looked at Liesel Meminger and made certain she was focused. He gave her a list of consequences. ‘If you tell anyone about that man...’ Her teacher. Rudy. It didn’t matter whom. What mattered was that all were punishable. [...] ‘They’ll drag that man up there away, and maybe Mama and me, too—and we will never, ever come back.’ (Zusak 210-11)

Liesel does not face Huck’s hellfire; instead, she stands to lose her family and finds herself suddenly responsible for the physical safety of everyone she knows. Unlike Huck, Liesel does not have to create her own version of morality, independent of any adult help: when the girl commits socially unacceptable actions including deceiving Nazi officials about Max’s hiding

place, those actions are sanctioned by Hans Hubermann. As established in the previous chapter, Liesel trusts her foster father, who is consistently presented as an Atticus Finch-like figure who serves as his daughter's moral compass and, I argue, serves as an intermediary who attempts to protect Liesel from the trauma she experiences. Through this sheltering of Max, her foster father also functions as an intermediary between greater German society and his daughter, between traditional prejudice and the new moral code he and the girl create together.

While she risks isolation from her larger community, Liesel does not risk complete isolation in the same way that Huck must. Her foster father explains the danger which would result from Liesel's failure to accept the new form of morality and her acquiescence to the old rules. She must break social rules and German guidelines in order to remain with her family; if she follows those rules and reports the Jew hiding in her basement, she understands that her new mama and papa will be taken away. For Huck, the option to return to traditional Missouri values, betray Jim and leave behind the ambiguous world of the river and whatever tenuous morality he has made for himself always exists and occasionally is seriously considered. Liesel never has a safe option: either morality she chooses would result in risk to herself and to her family.

Like Huck, Liesel faces a dangerous test of her personal morality when it conflicts with the socially approved moral code. While Liesel plays with Rudy and the other neighborhood children on Himmel Street, she notices that members of the Nazi Party are knocking on doors, checking the depth of basements to determine whether they are appropriate to be used as bomb shelters. Liesel perceives the immediate threat to her friend's hiding place and by extension, to her family and acts quickly, intentionally cutting her knee so she will have an excuse to go home and warn Hans of the impending inspection (Zusak 348-51). Liesel is spared Huck's moral

conflict, but not his fear; although she does not question the morality of her actions, she is seized by terror and conscious of the danger that remains while the inspector is in the house (Zusak 353). It is only after the Nazis have left that Liesel realizes the outcome of her actions. When Rudy inquires about her injury and asks, “*Alles gut, Saumensch?*”, Liesel reflects (Zusak 356). She realizes that “the Jew in her basement had not been revealed” and “[h]er foster parents were not taken away” (Zusak 356). She understands that “[s]he herself had contributed greatly to both accomplishments” and answers, “Everything’s good” (Zusak 356). With Liesel’s help, the Nazi officials are deceived and Max, like Jim, escapes.

For Liesel, the main consequence of sheltering Max Vandenburg is fear, though she does experience limited social isolation as a result of the secret she must keep. Like Huck, Liesel begins the book as an isolated character: her brother has just died in front of her, her *Kommunist* mother abandons her to the foster system, and she is separated from the older children in school because she is unable to read. The sheltering of Max, therefore, does not drastically divorce Liesel from her community in the same way that helping Jim to escape isolates Huck. Apart from her relationships with Hans, Rosa and Rudy, Liesel was never particularly invested in the Molching community. Liesel’s relationship with her foster parents does not suffer: if anything, it deepens under the burden of this shared secret. Her relationship with Rudy is temporarily strained by the secret and by the fears which Liesel cannot share. However, after she reveals that Max had been staying in the basement and since has left Himmel Street, Rudy does not criticize Liesel’s version of morality or question her decision to keep the secret from him and seems flattered that she mentioned him to Max (Zusak 520-2). In this way, Liesel’s personal relationships either do not change or improve as a result of her rebellious morality and she does not share Huck Finn’s isolation.

Only once does Liesel truly long to share her secret: during the parade of Jewish prisoners, Liesel wants to confide the depth and sincerity of her sorrow. She wishes she could tell them about Max: “I have one of you in my basement! she wanted to say. We built a snowman together! I gave him thirteen presents when he was sick!” (Zusak 399). Although she keeps silent, Liesel’s desire to speak to the Jewish prisoners is crucial. Ultimately, she decides not to speak because she believes these small facts would be “worthless” to the marching Jews (Zusak 399). And yet, her desire to confess these details proves that Liesel wants these people to know that she, like Huck and unlike their Nazi captors, has decided “on the side of humanity” (Hearn 344). Liesel wants to share her understanding of the new morality she and her foster parents have created because she believes that her morality, although not socially acceptable, is superior to the Nazi-enforced prejudices. In this moment, Liesel realizes that these Jews on the street, along with Max in the basement, share her humanity.

This realization is particularly important because only a few lines before, the narration refuses to acknowledge Jewish humanity. Death describes the marching prisoners by saying “a man or woman—no, they were not men and women, they were Jews” (Zusak 399). The dismissive remark could be read as bluntly anti-Semitic, but that reading contradicts Death’s previously discussed sympathy and compassion for Jewish survivors and victims. Instead, Death appears to be speaking facetiously, pointedly presenting the commonly-held, socially acceptable racism and adopting through free indirect discourse the unitary language of Nazi-era Germany. By doing so, Death more emphatically highlights Liesel’s subsequently expressed and contradictory view: through the contrast, Death emphasizes the revolutionary nature of Liesel’s morality within her own society. As a child with two strong, adult, upstanding role models, Liesel does not possess the worldliness to understand, reflect upon and express the extreme

nature of her rebellious belief in simple, shared humanity. Death, on the other hand, has glimpsed the best and worst of the contradictory human race and consequently understands the value and rareness of Liesel's socially unacceptable morality.

Quirk argues that it is just this moral naiveté which allows narrators like Huckleberry and his literary heirs⁵ to effectively and powerfully relate moral narratives. Just as Huck was able to convey a general sense of “dis-ease” (Quirk 116), Liesel manages to relay several troubling instances which color her childhood, despite being “unaware” of how troubling they are⁶ (Zusak 356). It is precisely Liesel's lack of awareness, Quirk would argue, which makes her a valuable narrator. Quirk writes that Huck, as a “child who never had a childhood”, “cannot fully understand” the “laughable and contemptible world” of the adults around him; instead, the boy's “youthful point of view supplies a perspective that is more mature than the adult world” (123). His lack of awareness, both of how the adult world works and how he is expected to fit into it, allows Huck to act as an uninvolved observer, accurately and comically presenting the world to the reader while unconsciously distancing himself from and, Quirk would argue, rising above it. In this way, the “sound heart in an ignorant boy [...] defeats the powerful claims of civilized society” (Quirk 134).

In the same way, Liesel manages to represent faithfully and without bias the adult world, even as her lack of understanding prevents her from appropriately participating in it. Her heart is similarly ignorant and she does not understand the powerful claims of society or the benefits of submitting to such claims. For years without consequence, Liesel has watched her foster father transgress traditional societal boundaries, repeatedly painting over anti-Jewish slurs and

⁵ To whose numbers I submit Liesel Meminger

⁶ E.g., her vague understanding of the derogatory nature of “*Kommunist*”

providing free painting services to poor families who need dark blinds to protect them from bombings and air raids. Hans even resists joining the Nazi Party, and yet he is not excluded from the larger neighborhood community, of which he remains an active and fairly respected member. (Zusak 68; 110) Conscious of her father's example, Liesel can reasonably ignore society's expectations and, like Huckleberry, is able to defeat them. As a child, the book thief does not fully understand the ramifications of her life's events, but instead effortlessly leaves room for the reader to interpret and analyze the ways she separates herself from the adult world and its morality.

Crucially, neither Liesel nor Huck initially dismisses the racist prejudices of their societies, perhaps because they do not understand their societies well enough to realize that these prejudices are morally wrong despite being socially acceptable. Both children, on the other hand, must encounter physical, personal examples of racially-targeted groups in order to understand why abstract racism is wrong. Huck learns through his friendship with Jim, and Liesel through her relationship with Max, that the racist attitudes of their respective societies are morally reprehensible. Neither child is represented as unambiguously, precociously good: they must personally encounter prejudice before learning how to respond to it. In this way, Jim and Max are presented as intermediaries who necessitate the child protagonists' rejection of socially accepted discourses and morality. Because of their encounters with Jim and Max, Huck and Liesel learn to be "better than the conditions of their existence" (Quirk 144). Quirk suggests that "As good as Huck is, he is not so very good; he is only better than he ought to be" (144). The same could be said of Liesel: both young narrators, through their innocence and ignorance, become better than the societies to which they belong.

Language also serves an intermediary in both novels, particularly between characters who subscribe to conflicting social and personal moral codes. In *The Book Thief*, intermediary language exists primarily in Liesel's autobiography and *The Word Shaker*, both of which persuade the reader to embrace the absent author's ideological position. Liesel's book functions as an intermediary between the girl and Death, convincing the narrator to believe in the strength and good of humanity. In a similar way, the words of *The Word Shaker* make Max's meaning clear to Liesel: his parable helps Liesel to understand the dangers of participating in Hitler's socially sanctioned morality and emphasizes the revolutionary power of words as a persuasive, transformative intermediary that can bridge the gaps in personal languages. Her absent friend encourages Liesel's newly forged, private moral code even as he recognizes and applauds its contradictions to socially accepted morality. Thus, Max manages to negotiate the divide between traditional German society and Liesel's conscience using only his words, while Liesel reinforces for Death the positive aspects of humanity's contradictory nature.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain employs language as a different kind of intermediary, bridging the gap between his childish and revolutionary narrator and the presumably more conservative reader. Whereas Liesel and Max embraced unitary language as a site of rebellion against Nazi propaganda, Huck acquires social discourses which allow him to express his revolutionary moral code. Huck embraces the grammatical imperfections of Missouri speech so enthusiastically that Twain includes an author's note explaining his use of clunky, at times nearly unintelligible dialects. The author insists that the dialects have been adopted "painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Twain vi). The author's note implies that to certain (probably Northern) readers, Huck's words were unfamiliar and too strongly asserted their identity as "an

other's words" ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 88). At the same time, Twain's dedication to accurately representing specific dialects and less than unitary languages suggests an aspiration to authenticity: perhaps he hoped that by speaking in a personal language which overlapped significantly with Southern vocabularies, Huck would win the trust of his readers.

Just as trust in Death is important to a reader of *The Book Thief*'s traumatic tale, trust in Huck would allow Twain to tell a more challenging, socially transgressive narrative, which might not only question reader's morality, but might influence his or her personal language. Moral terminology including the concepts of heaven and hell would be necessarily compromised by Huck's discussion and (mis)understanding of them. For contemporary and subsequent readers, these terms would forever bear the mark of Huck's voice, just as the Himmel Street residents in the bomb shelter would not be able to separate the act of Liesel's reading from the words she handed out. Instead, readers would accumulate Huck's words into their personal language and adjust the associations already attached to familiar words in order to account for the narrator's childish speech and insightful if unconventional morality. By speaking in a familiar language, Huck Finn becomes a moral hero his own society can recognize, even and perhaps especially if they are unable to accept him.

If Huck Finn uses language as an intermediary to present his controversial morality to society, Holden Caulfield uses deeply personal, alienating language to express his disgust with society's lack of morality. Holden often speaks in unusual insults, frequently referring to those around him as "crooks" or "phonies" (Salinger 4; 13). His repetition of these derogatory terms emphasizes the distance the narrator's personal language creates between him and the rest of society: Holden would rather not be associated with the phonies he believes completely surround and outnumber him, so he endeavors to talk so completely unlike everyone else that his speech is

almost unrecognizable. While Twain allowed Huck Finn to speak in recognizable moral and social discourses in order to emphasize the boy's moral insights, Holden is marked as an outsider by his very refusal to speak in his own unitary language.

According to Charles Kaplan in "Huck and Holden: Odysseys of Youth", both boys have "a deep concern with ethical valuation" despite their complicated, often contradictory, moral codes and, especially in Holden's case, outspoken rejection of societal hypocrisy (77). Holden's morality, unlike Huck and Liesel's, faces no crucial test and is founded on his judgments of others' actions. Holden Caulfield is not a moral narrator because of anything he does, but becomes a moral hero because of his struggle to find a spark of morality in the world he inhabits, and his repeated, violent denunciation of the immorality he finds.

Despite Huck's attempts to speak in familiar language, neither Huck nor Holden are comfortable members of their respective societies. Arvin R. Wells suggests in the article "Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield: The Situation of the Hero" that "both Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield are in some sense pariahs in the society to which they belong by birth—outsiders uncertain about the necessity and desirability of becoming insiders" (50). Huck's uncertainty stems from the distance his ignorance necessitates and the personal loyalty he feels for Jim, which inspires him to break from the rest of his Southern community. Holden, a far less forthcoming narrator, presents his uncertainty as the result of his disgust for the phonies who run and inhabit the world of adulthood. He is isolated by his preference for his own personal, caustic language over unitary, acceptable language. As Wells explains, "Whereas Huck's instinctive moral goodness leads him to fearfully violate the mores of his particular time and place, Holden's leads him to reject adulthood itself because in his time and place adulthood seems to imply a falling away into phoniness and insensitivity" (55).

However, this explanation only points to one aspect of Huck and Holden's struggle: Wells elaborates on the desirability of becoming insiders, but fails to assess adequately the necessity of complying with societal expectations. Despite his previously discussed loneliness, at the end of his novel, it seems Huck has an escape: he plans to "light out for the Territory" and find freedom in the West (Twain 296). For a young adventurer eager to escape Aunt Sally and the civilization she represents, Huck's plans appear attractive and attainable. Holden Caulfield's plans and prospects, on the other hand, are neither desirable nor realistic. The narrator begins his story from a mental institution, and the story he tells appears to be an account of a young boy losing his way, hope and expectations of a respectable future. As Holden is expelled from Pencey Prep and wanders the streets of Manhattan, he seems to be searching not only for a place to fit in, but a place to stay: he cannot stomach returning to school. He confesses to his sister Phoebe that "if [he] had [his] goddam choice", the "only thing" he'd want to be is the catcher in the rye: a mythic protector of childish innocence who saves children like him from losing their way (Salinger 173).

However, as Jonathan Baumbach points out in "The Saint as a Young Man: A Reappraisal of *The Catcher in the Rye*", this aspiration is not only implausible, it's paradoxical: Holden "must leave innocence to protect innocence" and "must find another catcher in the rye to show him how it is done" (56). Perhaps because he understands that a desire to be the catcher in the rye is unachievable, Holden also fantasizes about running away: "I decided I'd never go home again [...] I'd start hitchhiking my way out West [...] I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes [...] Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone" (Salinger 198-9). Wells points out that this second, hermit fantasy mirrors Huck's desire to light out West (55-56), but it is no more realistic than Holden's desire to be the catcher in the rye.

Instead, like Huck, Holden feels isolated from society but unlike him, he is unable to find a reasonable alternative. As a result of this isolation and his inability to imagine a plausible alternative, Holden Caulfield responds to the world around him with anger, frustration, depression and disgust. Baumbach summarizes the boy's predicament: "Obliquely searching for good in the adult world, or at least something to mitigate his despair, Holden is continually confronted with the absence of good" (69).

Liesel similarly struggles to find good in an unjust world and reacts with frustration and dejection when she fails to find it. In one of the most poignant moments of Zusak's novel, the book thief sneaks into Ilsa Hermann's library and sits recklessly on the floor, seemingly unconcerned with being caught. Death observes, "The girl simply didn't care any more" (Zusak 524). On the following page, however, the reader realizes that the narrator has inaccurately summarized Liesel's emotional state. We are able to glimpse Liesel's thoughts directly and she is not apathetic, but angry:

[S]he eyed the pages full to the brims of their bellies with paragraphs and words. You bastards, she thought. You lovely bastards. Don't make me happy. Please don't fill me up and let me think that something good can come of any of this [...]
I don't want to hope for anything any more. I don't want to pray that Max is alive and safe. Or Alex Steiner. Because the world does not deserve them. (Zusak 525)

Liesel's thoughts would not seem out of place in Holden's head: like the young, cynical narrator, she has scoured the adult world for any evidence of good and has only found its absence, and she

too reacts with frustration, anger and despair. She blames “[t]he words” for all of the violence and hurt in her world, recognizing “[w]ithout words, the Führer was nothing” (Zusak 525). Like Holden, she is disillusioned, realizing that the lovely bastards of words which have succeeded in making her happy can also bring disaster.

However, for Liesel unlike for Holden, these thoughts indicate a momentary shift in her perspective rather than a consistently dismal outlook on life. Despite the great traumas Liesel experiences, her voice remains hopeful and fair. Like Death in his fascination with the contradictory human being, Liesel always acknowledges human good, despite her experiences with human cruelty. When she stands in the wreckage of Himmel Street and says goodbye to the bodies of her closest friends and family, Liesel remembers them by eulogizing the kindness they have shown her. She recognizes Rudy as “Jesse Owens”, referring to his idolization of the black, American athlete and the boy’s total ignorance of prejudice and refusal to understand racism (Zusak 539; 62-6). She moves next to her Mama and whispers of the ostensibly hard woman’s softness, of the generous way she took in Max and Liesel without question and of the love she felt and hid for her husband (Zusak 541). It is in her eulogy of Papa, however, that Liesel most clearly acknowledges the good she has found: “Goodbye Papa. You saved me. You taught me to read” (Zusak 542). In their final moments together, Liesel recognizes the importance of Hans’ role as the intermediary who led her from the darkness of her past and taught her to manage and escape her trauma with three simple words: “You saved me”. She juxtaposes this deceptively simple realization with another short sentence. The girl’s inclusion of this last, seemingly extraneous detail (“You taught me to read”) not only explains how Hans saved her, but also recalls her anger at the words and paragraphs in Ilsa Hermann’s library. It recognizes their linguistic efforts and his part in the accumulation of Liesel’s personal language. If Liesel has

found a world of hurt, anger and hatred in the propagandist words of the Führer, then in the words of Hans Hubermann she has found a world of life.

Baumbach argues that Holden, despite *The Catcher in the Rye*'s ostensibly bleak resolution, is similarly "saved" (73). For Baumbach, Holden's salvation lies in watching his sister Phoebe on the merry-go-round and in realizing that she has forgiven him: "a ten-year old girl saves him—becomes his catcher" (63). Phoebe runs over to the bench and impulsively kisses Holden, who takes the gesture as a sign of her pure love and wholehearted forgiveness for the crimes and cruelty he has committed over the past two days (Baumbach 63). Interestingly, Baumbach fails to comment on the action Phoebe takes next, which Holden admits "damn near killed me": she takes his red hunting hat, the symbol of his childish innocence, from the boy's pocket and places it back on his head (Salinger 212). This action, even more than the kiss of forgiveness, seems to redeem Holden in his own eyes. By wearing the red hunting hat, Holden realizes that he has not permanently lost his innocence and can rejoin the community he scorns throughout the novel but whose acceptance he desperately craves.

By becoming Holden's catcher in the rye, Phoebe acts as an intermediary between her brother and the society he cannot survive without. Baumbach posits that "the protagonist is saved because he realizes that if there is any love at all in the world—even the love of one child—Love exists" (64). Through the kiss of forgiveness and the re-appropriation of the red hunting hat, Holden finally encounters an instance of Love, of acceptance, which he cannot ignore. Holden's redemption by Phoebe mirrors Liesel's redemption by Hans and both young protagonists are saved because they experience an instance, an embodiment, of Good in their lives. If any good at all exists, then the world cannot be as depraved as they previously believed.

However, these moments of redemption are not where either story ends. Many critics have observed that despite Phoebe's intercession, Holden's disgust remains largely unanswered at the novel's ambiguous conclusion. The final chapter is bleak: the narrator confesses to be "sick" and existentially confused (Salinger 213). When his brother D.B. asks, Holden answers, "I don't *know* what I think" of "this stuff I just finished telling you about" (Salinger 213-4). In the penultimate sentence, he advises the reader, "Don't tell anybody anything" (Salinger 214). Holden falls just short of regretting his narrative: he has clearly been affected by his reflection and by the human cruelty and falsity he has witnessed.

In this way, the ending summarizes Holden's attitudes throughout most of the novel, particularly his bold denunciations of the hypocrisy he perceives in the world around him. Wells writes that "As Holden tells his story, [his] language [...] expresses more [...] defiance and conflict than he can possibly know" (51). The narrator uses language to lash out against the phoniness of adults, children's necessary loss of innocence, sexuality and almost everyone he meets. Holden does not know that his words are the most important expressive, communicative intermediary he possesses; as a result, he uses speech primarily to frequently, repeatedly and uncreatively swear at his surroundings and to weave a bitterly sarcastic inner monologue, speaking in a caustic personal language with little or no regard for his reader's concerns, sensitivity or understanding.

As Bakhtin argues, an acknowledgement of context is crucial to our understanding of Huck, Holden and Liesel's narration. Holden's ignorance of or apathy towards his audience shapes the substance and tone of his story: one imagines he would have attempted to employ more unitary language if he hoped to be understood by an audience of phonies. Several critics have argued that this apparent apathy towards the opinions and desires of his reader make

Holden an unfailingly and unprecedentedly honest narrator. Baumbach observes that even in small instances like that of a man picking his nose, Holden is constantly “passing what amounts to a moral judgment” (58). Baumbach further attributes Holden’s honesty to his youth by arguing, “Whereas the adult observer, no matter how scrupulous, censors his irreverent or unpleasant responses because he is ashamed of them, the child (Holden is sixteen) tells all” (58). Holden’s lack of censorship could then be attributed not to any artlessness on his part, but to his youth which has not yet learned to be ashamed of an (or any) honest opinion.

Like Holden, Huck Finn has been praised for his blunt, unaffected speech. The boy speaks in clumsy, colloquial English which establishes both his young age and lack of education. In addition, critics have argued that his simple, direct narration makes Huck not only memorable, but revolutionary. Quirk writes that although Huck “sought to tell his own story plainly and directly”, his “ignorance of literary observance and accepted tradition” resulted in a narration “so profound that it amounts to a form of rebellion” (111). It was Huck’s very ignorance, Quirk suggests, which affords him the freedom to present his story so simply and directly: he cannot feel pressured by a narrative tradition he doesn’t know exists. With that narrative freedom achieved through the appropriation of a young, naïve innocent’s voice, Twain manages to tell a morally complex story in a simple, direct and uncomplicated way. This, along with Huck’s appropriation of Southern dialects, makes his moral message more likely to be understood and positively received by a contemporary audience.

Liesel similarly speaks out of a well of ignorance concerning literary tradition. Unlike Huck and Holden, who seem conscious if not always considerate of their audiences, Liesel writes

her own story with only herself in mind⁷. When writing in the basement, Liesel expresses her motivation for recreating her friend Max Vandenburg's drawings; she wanted "to tell the story exactly as she remembered it" (Zusak 531). Death explains that to this end, "she made herself remember, and [...] she did not look away" (Zusak 528). Death's words suggest that the private nature of Liesel's account prevented her from censoring her words and recollections. While Huck, even at his most simple and direct, anticipates and addresses his expected reader, Liesel's narrative remains unencumbered by the expectation of an audience. Her narration is arguably as plain as Huck's, but her lack of self-consciousness allows the girl to record her life more honestly and emotionally.

Both Liesel and Huck conclude their books candidly: Huck by laying out his future intentions and Liesel by summarizing her writing process and life philosophy. Huck, in his final paragraph, admits, "there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what trouble it was to make a book, I wouldn't a tackled it and I ain't a going to no more" (Twain 296). Huck's admission of effort argues for his honesty; one imagines a prouder boy like Tom Sawyer would have feigned effortless expertise at any endeavor, at least when retelling the story for an audience. Huck's characteristically blunt conclusion, on the other hand, suggests the great effort the boy has spent composing this story and stops just short of regretting telling it. The "trouble" Huck has encountered should not be taken lightly; whether the young narrator intended to tell his story as "plainly and directly" as Quirk believes, the telling has not been easy (111). Critics have admired "the pained artlessness" of Huck's narration, which some believe forces the reader to attend more closely to the moral progression of his story (Quirk 119),

⁷ Though she agrees that one day she might show Ilsa Hermann the things she has written, in the basement where she writes there is room only for Liesel, her recollections, and the personal language she collected with her papa on the painted walls.

but the trouble he has taken implies that Huck's art is not effortless. Thus, Huck's conclusion, like the story which preceded it, suggests both an artless honesty and the art behind it.

Liesel's last lines ignore all implication of art, and instead emphasize the personal struggle with words which has shaped and saved her life. It is Death who supplies the poetry and most of the striking imagery which interrupts Zusak's prose; Liesel's words are efficient and she employs figurative language only when it achieves accuracy which literal language cannot match. When Hans sits with Liesel as she writes, she slips a description of her father into the story: "There are lines on his cheeks [...] 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" (Zusak 531). In describing her father, Liesel speaks in her personal language, associating him with the accordion music she loves to hear him play and expressing her narrative truth. The image of her father as an accordion only accompanies her autobiographical, chronological narrative because it lends insight to the girl's emotional experience; the sparse explanation is just enough so that an older Liesel will be able to understand and follow the thoughts of her younger self.

When Liesel is given the blank book by Frau Hermann, Death suggests that the older woman "not only gave Liesel Meminger a book that day" but also reminded the girl "that words had also brought her to life" (Zusak 528). The final words of Liesel's story, then, are fitting: without flowery words or too much of Huck's frustration, she writes simply, "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right" (Zusak 532). If her literary ignorance and artlessness have made it difficult for Liesel to tell her story in the mode of more experienced narrators, she has made an admirable effort to tell her story not well but right.

Together, the three young narrators emphasize the importance of language as an intermediary. While Holden Caulfield uses foul personal language to denounce and distance himself from the wrongs of the phonies who surround him, Liesel Meminger uses her hard-won words to capture both the beauty and the brutality of the contradictory human race. Huck Finn speaks in the social discourse of his Southern society, in order to make his moral message clear and accessible; the book thief appropriates German words as a way to empower and understand her new and revolutionary morality. Thus language serves as a way for Huck, Holden and Liesel to situate themselves in relationship to their own societies and to explain and articulate their objections to the morals of those societies.

Chapter Three

The Jewish Fist-Fighter:

the Trauma and Representation of Max Vandenburg

In a chapter called “Enter, the Struggler,” Death presents the reader with a first, fragmented glimpse of Max Vandenburg:

*****A Guided Tour of Suffering*****

**To your left, perhaps your right,
perhaps even straight ahead,
you find a small black room.**

In it sits a Jew.

He is scum. He is starving.

He is afraid.

Please—try not to look away.

(Zusak 145)

Max’s first appearance is problematic, not only because Death adopts the unitary German, Nazi language and dismisses the young man as “scum”. Max is deprived of his own name and referred to only as “a Jew” or “he” for the better part of two pages. Death presents the suffering man as a spectacle, encouraging the reader to notice his suffering, starvation and deprivation while ignoring his humanity. He fails to invite the reader to share Max’s life as effectively as the narrator has integrated himself and the reader into Liesel’s. He does not invite associations with Max in the same way that he has encouraged readers to form relationships with Hans and Rudy. Instead, Death invokes the reader’s horror and pity without establishing Max as a complex, fully developed character.

Death begins to explore the nuances of Max's character when recounting the young man's personal history and trauma several chapters later in a narrative aside entitled "A Short History of the Jewish Fist-Fighter" (Zusak 195-204). This epithet ("Jewish fist-fighter") sparks appreciation in the narrator: by envisioning Max's struggle as a series of metaphoric boxing matches against not only neighborhood aggressors but the Führer-led, anti-Semitic German people, Death is able to contextualize the major traumas of Max's life and appreciate a crucial aspect of his identity. Death remembers encountering the young boy at his dying uncle's bedside. At the time, Max swore, "When death captures me [...] he will feel my fist on his face" (Zusak 197). The narrator is impressed by such "stupid gallantry" (Zusak 197), but this promise is more than an offhand remark or boastful vow. Concealed by his boyish expression are two of Max Vandenburg's most valuable coping mechanisms: an imaginative understanding of grief and loss and childish pugnacity. Death's narration of his past makes clear that Max is much more than the nameless Jew starving in a dark room. He is a scrappy, German-Jewish struggler who faces oppressors with boyish bravado, guilt and self-doubt but still manages, with Liesel Meminger's help, to claim ownership and control over his traumatic experience.

He remains a fist-fighter even and perhaps, especially when confined to the Hubermann's basement. Lacking an audience and opponent, Max imagines both and provides his own commentary on the match. He calls himself "the Jewish, rat-faced challenger" facing "the champion of the world, the Aryan masterpiece—the Führer" (Zusak 261). Max's fantasy is intricately detailed and strangely realistic: he envisions physical components of the space, like the ring, the ropes and the noise of the crowd. Max never wins his matches; instead, he serves as "the punching-bag Jew" whose success is ignored and losses are cheered by an exultant, pro-Führer crowd (Zusak 263). When Hitler begins to lose, he invites the German people to assist

him. His rhetoric wins the German people over and convinces the official to allow millions of participants into the ring. Death explains that this resolution reflects the narrative truth of Max's suffering:

In the basement of 33 Himmel Street, Max Vandenburg could feel the fists of an entire nation. One by one, they climbed into the ring and beat him down. They made him bleed. They let him suffer. Millions of them—until one last time, when he gathered himself to his feet... (Zusak 265)

This is Max's small triumph. He cannot deny the wounds he has received or the intense suffering he has experienced. His boxing bouts in the Hubermann's basement do not provide a vicarious victory: even in his imagination, he is not able to defeat the prejudices of a nation. However, in fist-fighting unlike in his everyday life, Max Vandenburg has a choice. He meets his persecution with endurance and persistence. He is roped in by the confines of the ring and unable to escape, but through his visions in the Hubermann's basement, Max discovers that he can survive.

The match is interrupted by Liesel Meminger, who wanders down into the basement and helps him to return to reality. Because Max understands that the girl would never step into the ring against him, her presence dissolves the vision. This return to reality is an important component of the relationship between the hiding Jew and his young friend: together, they manage to escape from the too-present, unmanageable history of their own traumas. They are linked by similar suffering, including the loss of their homes and families. In addition, both have been excluded from German society: Max because of his Jewish faith and Liesel because of her

parents' political beliefs. Hans recognizes another similarity between them; he tells Liesel of Max, "[h]e dreams like you" (Zusak 227).

Her foster father is referring to the girl's recurring nightmares, which he has been guarding against. In my first chapter, I discussed the trust that accumulated between father and daughter and the way Hans, through his presence and gentleness, helped Liesel to escape the terror of her nightmares. Perhaps inspired by his help, the girl sits by the dying fire and leads Max out of his recurring dream. Death refers to this exchange as "**The Swapping of Nightmares**", and presents the dialogue as follows:

The Girl: 'Tell me. What do you see
when you dream like that?'

The Jew: '...I see myself turning
round, and waving goodbye.'

The Girl: 'I also have nightmares.'

The Jew: 'What do you see?'

The Girl: 'A train, and my dead brother.'

The Jew: 'Your brother?'

The Girl: 'He died when I moved
here, on the way.'

The Girl and the Jew, together: 'Ja—Yes.'

(Zusak 228)

Max and Liesel's exchange is not a repeated occurrence: they discuss their nightmares only this once, in seemingly insignificant terms. Yet, in a handful of short sentences and sparse words,

they reach an understanding which no other character in the novel shares. As she makes her way from her bedroom to Max's place by the fire, Liesel remembers her Papa's words and "had a good idea of what [Max] saw in those dreams" (Zusak 227). Of course, Liesel and Max's dreams are different in substance. In his dreams, Max recalls the guilt he felt when compelled to leave his family, while the girl remembers the horrifying, sudden loss of her younger brother, Werner. However, their dreams are united by a similar theme: the traumatic memories of the dreamer's loss. Because Liesel, too, has lost her family, she understands the helplessness of Max's grief. Death refers to the swapping of nightmares as a "small breakthrough" and informs the reader that both Liesel and Max "dreamed their bad visions again" (Zusak 228). However, after her conversation with Max, Liesel tells her father that "she should be old enough now to cope on her own with the dreams" (Zusak 228). Liesel is lying; she does not deal with her dreams alone. Instead, the girl refuses Hans' help because she has a new, more effective partner who helps her to recover from the nightly reminder of her trauma. Though Liesel continues to trust Hans, Max has become her witness.

Trauma scholars Kim van Kaam, Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub provide vocabulary and context for this new aspect of Max and Liesel's relationship. Van Kaam argues that trauma, by definition, must be possessive and at least partially rooted in the unconscious. Often, as van Kaam contends in her article "This is So Not Happening to Me: Places of the Holocaust and the Problems of Traumatic Representation", "The traumatised person suffers from compulsive, involuntary repetitions of the traumatic event" (220). This theory fits both Max and Liesel's nightmares. Both recurring dreams feature traumatic events from the dreamer's past, and their nightly repetition prevents the dreamer from escaping the trauma's emotional implications: Max is unable to escape his guilt and Liesel cannot move past her grief. The unconscious nature of

their dreams suggests how deeply traumatic the events have been and how difficult it must be to escape their ramifications.

However, trauma scholar Cathy Caruth discusses the only effective method for escaping the possessive aspect of traumatic memory: the witness of another, uninvolved, compassionate individual. Caruth writes that “the history of a trauma [...] can only take place through the listening of another” (197). According to Caruth, the possessive nature of trauma prevents the traumatic sufferer from making sense of the traumatic experience. If trauma represents a break in a person’s history and expectations, it would be unreasonable to expect that person to contextualize and understand their trauma in an objective way. Instead, a witness is needed to listen to the traumatized individual’s story and help him or her to reconcile that event with their expectations and history. Only a witness can situate the traumatic event in the past, thereby assisting the traumatized person in moving past what van Kaam has called its “compulsive, involuntary repetition”. Laub takes Caruth’s idea of a listener or witness one step further: he argues that the listener is an active participant in the creation of a trauma account. For Laub, the listener is “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (221). In this way, his listener is even more involved than Caruth’s; while Caruth’s witness helps to provide context and closure, Laub’s listener is vital to the development of the victim’s own understanding and account of his or her trauma.

Max and Liesel’s swapping of nightmares constitutes Caruth and Laub’s listening, the verbal confession and analysis of their traumatic pasts. This is the first time either has confessed the contents of their nightmares and together the young man and the girl reach an understanding about the traumatic resonance of their loss. The final word of their conversation, “*Ja*” (Yes), represents a validation by each of the other’s trauma and a recognition of the similarities in their

situations. Max and Liesel exchange not only the details of each other's dreams, but the acknowledgment of each other's loss. This acknowledgment allows Liesel to cope with, if not entirely escape, her traumatic experience.

Interestingly, van Kaam disagrees with Laub and Caruth's understanding of verbal expression and witness as the only effective method of escaping possession by traumatic events. Van Kaam acknowledges that witness is effective, but warns that words alone will never be capable of fully expressing traumatic experience (221). Instead, van Kaam argues that "[f]or trauma to be resolved, it seems to need representation" (219). Although she is concerned with faithful, rather than fictional representation, van Kaam agrees with Hamilton Carroll about the difficulty and importance involved in the representation of trauma. She concedes that "trauma, in being an event at the limits of human existence and imagination, resists representation" (van Kaam 219). However, she maintains that representation is the most effective way of breaking the control traumatic events often exercise over the lives of traumatized individuals.

For van Kaam, representation can take many forms and overlaps significantly with Laub and Caruth's understandings of listening. "To represent [trauma] means to attach coherence to the event, make it into a story, integrate the traumatic event into one's past and detach it from one's present life" (van Kaam 219). Thus, van Kaam's representation incorporates Caruth's emphasis on the importance of situating trauma firmly in the past and divorcing traumatic experience from the survivor's present reality. Van Kaam also includes in her notion of representation the importance of transforming the traumatic event from a historical, personal event into a story. The inclusion of "story" in van Kaam's definition should not be understood as an encouragement to fictionalize experience; instead, van Kaam uses the term "story" similarly to Laub's use of "historical truth". The story of trauma consists of the survivor's understanding

and memory of traumatic events, expressed in his or her own words. By narrating traumatic events, individuals gain control over the fundamentally uncontrollable suffering in their lives: they achieve necessary distance and closure by confining their trauma with the bounds of a story.

For Max Vandenburg, this narration takes the form of a story, written and illustrated to explain his trauma to Liesel Meminger. The first of Max's books, *The Standover Man*, represents Max's concept of his own identity, his guilt at leaving his family and his personal experience in language and images simple enough for the girl to read and understand. Max's prose is both abrupt and impressionistic, relying on Liesel's previous knowledge of his personal history. He begins with the loss of his father at a young age: "All my life, I've been scared of men standing over me. I suppose my first standover man was my father, but he vanished before I could remember him" (Zusak 233-4). Next, Max delves into his history as a Jewish fist-fighter, imagining the boys who beat him as subsequent standover men (Zusak 235). He explains the fear of hiding and summarizes his journey to Himmel Street. He remembers that in his exhaustion he collapsed and woke to find "[n]ot a man, but someone else, standing over me" (Zusak 239).

He is referring to Liesel, whom he depicts curiously watching over him while he slept. From this first, subtle introduction, Max explores his understanding of their relationship. "[T]he girl and I realized we had things in common [...] Now I think we are friends, this girl and me" (Zusak 240; 244). He remembers and represents the swapping of their nightmares: "One night, after my usual nightmare, a shadow stood above me. She said, 'Tell me what you dream of'. So I did. In return, she explained what her own dreams were made of" (Zusak 242-3). This incident leads Max to believe that "the best standover man I've ever known is not a man at all..." (Zusak 245).

Max frames his life and its major traumas including the loss of his father, his family and his home through the metaphor of standover men. These men looming over Max represent his helplessness in the face of trauma: even when he escapes the men themselves, he is unable to lose the fear of them and imagines that they will be looming over him while he sleeps. When he wakes to find Liesel standing over him, he initially understands her in the terms of the vaguely threatening strangers who have preceded her. Through their conversation and resulting friendship, however, Max comes to understand Liesel as a different kind of standover man altogether. Like the girl, he realizes that the swapping of their nightmares has helped him to manage and resolve his trauma. Liesel thus becomes a standover man in the model of Hans Hubermann: a kind stranger who proves he or she can be trusted through his or her gentleness and presence. Max remains unable to escape his traumatic past alone, but at least he has found a standover man willing to bear witness.

The Standover Man is remarkable not only for its representation of Max's understanding of trauma and witness, but also for its artistic qualities. Death explains that although Max "was educated well enough to get by [...] he was certainly no writer, and no artist" (Zusak 231). He also lacks ample supplies, and paints the story for Liesel using repurposed pages from the only book he owns, a copy of *Mein Kampf* in which Hans Hubermann hid a key to the house on Himmel Street and a ticket for the train to Molching. Liesel had asked to read Hitler's book before and Max refused: "there was no way he'd give such propaganda to a young German girl" (Zusak 229). Instead, he appropriates the physical materials of the book, paints over Hitler's words with white paint and scribbles his own words and images in black.

The white paint is somewhat ineffective; in places, the words of *Mein Kampf* bleed through. In this way, even the story of Max's life bears the mark of others' voices. In an essay on

Max's books within the novel, Markus Zusak explains the motivation for the inclusion of Max's stories. He writes, "I liked the idea of having books within the book, because it paralleled the theme of personal history within world history" ("the illustrations"). The physical inscription of Max's words over the Fuhrer's partially obscured propaganda serves the same purpose: it illustrates the interplay between personal language and world, or unitary language. In the previous chapter, I discussed the difficult process of gaining ownership over unitary words and the problematic associations they retain even after they have been transitioned into an individual's personal language. Max's story and the partially obscured words of *Mein Kampf* suggest that the same is true of personal history and trauma: even as he struggles to tell his own story, Max is unable to escape the influence of German government and prejudice. Even secluded in the Hubermann's basement, world history colors Max's life and influences the representation of his personal trauma.

The thoughts and perceptions of others influence not only Max's story and the physical materials of his books, but also his illustrations. Throughout his story, Max draws himself as a bird, in stark contrast to the human figures of Liesel and his own family. In only one panel does Max depict himself as human and even then his reflection in the bathroom mirror is a bird. He explains his bird figure with the caption on the mirror illustration. He writes, "there is one strange thing. The girl says I look like something else" (Zusak 241). His explanation relates to one of Liesel's repeated observations: when confronted with the stranger, she notices that "[h]is hair is like feathers" (Zusak 224). Liesel's observation becomes a part of Max's identity: he allows her perception of him to change his own understanding of himself. Her childish observation is as formative as the German unitary language of *Mein Kampf*, albeit for a different

reason. Max willingly accepts Liesel's characterization of him, demonstrating her narrative truth as a sign of friendship.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Liesel demonstrates her friendship with Max not only through the swapping of nightmares, but also through her adoption of the themes of Max's second story, *The Word Shaker*. This fable demonstrates the power of words and encourages the young girl to claim them as her own in order to rebel against the Führer's rhetoric. Max briefly imagines Hitler's beginnings and envisions the Führer realizing that "he would rule the world with words" (Zusak 451). He casts Liesel, "a small, skinny girl", as one of a legion of word shakers, people "employed to climb the trees and throw the words down to those below" (Zusak 452). In *The Word Shaker*, Max offers Liesel a new identity, in the same way that she transformed him into a bird. By embracing her characterization as a word shaker, Liesel values her hard-won mastery of language, appreciating words for their worth and power. Liesel accepts Max's narrative truth and in the process, denies the prejudices of the world around her. Together, the powerless girl and marginalized man create themselves.

However, even this identity creation does not, cannot occur in a void; each of Max and Liesel's identities comes with the mark of other's voices. Max's first epithet, "the Jewish fist-fighter", evolves from his relationships and boxing matches with other neighborhood teenagers. Zusak suggests that Liesel's imagination of Max as a bird is formed not only from her comparison between feathers and his hair, but also from his relationship to the rest of society: "I had described Max as a caged bird from the moment he arrived on Himmel Street" ("the illustrations"). Thus, Max envisioning himself as a bird is influenced not only by Liesel's perception of him, but also by the necessity of his hiding. The mirror illustration suggests society's impact on Max's identity: although he believes he is human, his own perception of

himself is changed by what others think of him. Even Liesel's positive understanding of her power as a word shaker is shaped by Max's encouragement.

Liesel's very acceptance of her identity as a word shaker highlights the flaws in Max's model. Word shakers are supposed to operate as an official branch of the government, acquiring untouched words to be employed in the Führer's rhetoric. However, this characterization of words as natural and untainted ignores the influence of others' speech on an individual's own thoughts and language. The mutability and complicated ownership of words serve Max's eventual point in the story: every word must belong to both the unitary and personal language. No one individual, not even the Führer, can claim complete authority over a single word.

Death reinforces this lesson with his own sobriquet for Max. From his first introduction, even before Death recognizes Max by name, the narrator refers to him as "The Struggler" (Zusak 145). This designation seems particularly appropriate for the hiding, starving Jew, whose struggle should not be underestimated. Instead, Death repeatedly mentions Max as "The Struggler" and calls his dangerous train journey to Molching "a cold night struggle" (Zusak 175; 177; 164). Death juxtaposes Max's difficult passage with the book which concealed his key and ticket, and provided his disguise on the train:

He read from the copy of *Mein Kampf*. His savior. [...] he made his way through the book, trying never to look up.

The words lolled about in his mouth. Strangely, as he turned the pages and progressed through the chapters, it was only two words he ever tasted. *Mein Kampf*. My struggle. (Zusak 164-6)

The literal translation of *Mein Kampf* is “My Struggle” and Death’s emphasis on the importance of this book in securing Max’s escape reinforces the notion that the Jewish man owns the phrase at least as much as the Führer. Though most of the words in Hitler’s autobiography remain other peoples’ words, Max “tastes” and understands the meaning of its title.

Describing Max leaving the storeroom where he’s been hiding, Death says, “he had walked out of that building a new man. In fact, he had walked out German. Hang on a second, he *was* German. Or more to the point, he *had* been” (Zusak 166). Death’s use of the imperfect and pluperfect tenses highlights the public aspect of identity formation, similar to the social construction of language. Once Hitler declares that Jews like Max should no longer be considered German, that association enters the unitary language and national consciousness. That assertion, no matter how ridiculous, influences Max’s identity and compromises his claim to Germanness.

However, Death argues through his appropriation of the term “struggler” that identity is not solely decided by society. If identity cannot be decided independently, it can be created through conversation with input from individuals who lend their personal language and associations to individual terms and epithets. Together, Max and Liesel decide their own identities through the assumption of unitary, even propagandist language. With Death’s associations and Liesel’s witness, Max claims his struggle, manages his trauma, and forges his own identity.

Conclusion

In the final section of the novel, Death recounts what Liesel could not include in her version of *The Book Thief*. He invites the reader beyond the bombing in whose rubble Liesel lost her little book. He tells the reader of Liesel's reaction to the trauma of losing her best friend, her parents and all her neighbors: "It would have been easy to say nothing, but Liesel had the opposite reaction to her devastation. She sat in the exquisite spare room of the mayor's house and spoke and spoke—to herself—well into the night" (Zusak 549). This linguistic processing of her trauma recalls Liesel's swapping of nightmares with Max. Although she lacks a witness, Liesel understands that, as Caruth, Laub and van Kaam suggest, the only way to escape her trauma is to verbally represent it. Her words mark a transition from the life which exploded around her to the safety, prosperity and loneliness which characterize her adoption into the mayor's house. When she arrived on Himmel Street, Liesel lacked the language necessary to preserve her old experiences and navigate her new surroundings. With Max and Hans's help, she has discovered words and their ability, through narrative, to heal the wounds left by previous traumas. From the books she stole, including some snatched from the library downstairs, Liesel has created a complicated relationship with language which culminated in her Holden Caulfield-esque outburst in the library. I imagine that sitting in the mayor's guest bedroom, Liesel told her story in her personal language, understanding that she needed to use her linguistic and narrative skill to make sense of her own impossible history and to represent in that strange room the people she had lost. To say nothing would be to remain trapped in the moment of Himmel Street's destruction: the book thief, because she understands both the healing and transformative power of words, escapes.

The resolution of Max's story comes next. The struggler lives and Liesel attempts to find him, walking to Dachau with Rudy's father, only to be turned back by American soldiers. This reference to Dachau recalls the last time Liesel met her friend, the violent ejection of the girl from the parade of Jews by German soldiers, and her acknowledgement of the revolutionary power of words. Like the young man in the *Word Shaker*, Max must find Liesel himself. He arrives in Alex Steiner's tailor shop and asks after the girl; when she emerges from the back, "They hugged and cried and fell to the floor" (Zusak 552). Their tears parallel the single tear the word shaker sheds as she cares for the ailing young man, a detail which she later uses to establish his identity (Zusak 452-5). Through these tears, they witness and validate each other's suffering. In addition, while their collapse to the floor can be read as an emotional reaction to their reunion, the gesture may also symbolize a conclusion to Max's inescapable trauma. Because Liesel falls with him, there is no one to act as the standover man. No trauma looms over them and Max, like Liesel, escapes.

In the final chapter, Death adopts and alters Max's sobriquet, calling himself "The Handover Man" (Zusak 553), a nickname which suggests his position as an intermediary figure who bridges the distance between characters and the reader, between life and death. The narrator concludes the novel by recounting his last meeting with Liesel Meminger. Many years after the bombing of Himmel Street, he arrives to collect the old woman's soul and takes a quick detour to give them an opportunity to discuss her incredible story. During their conversation, Death "wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality" (Zusak 554). This desire reflects both the horrors and great strength of humanity which he has been forced to witness. In the silence, the narrator struggles with his complicated relationship with humanity and his understanding of the contradictory human being. With his penultimate sentence, Death reflects

on his relationship to Liesel and recalls his unusual relationship with the reader: “I said it to the book thief and I say it now to you” (Zusak 554). In his final words, Death summarizes his complicated responsibilities and traumatic experience.

*****A Last Note From Your Narrator*****

I am haunted by humans.

(Zusak 554)

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