

FACING DEATH IN *THE BOOK THIEF*: CONFRONTING THE REAL OF THE
HOLOCAUST AND MORTALITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the personification of Death in *The Book Thief* and its impact on young adult readers using Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the Real and Hayden White's discussion of how history and its representations in historical fiction shape the present. I argue that Death's complexity as a character enables him to escort young adult readers from one understanding of reality into a deeper, more complex reality by forcing them to confront their mortality and the Holocaust. In confronting readers with these realities, *The Book Thief*, through the character of Death, shapes how young readers conceptualize mortality and the Holocaust.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Doug and Tammy, for encouraging and inspiring me. I am so grateful for the many conversations over morning coffee, phone calls, and the very practical advice and support that you provided throughout my education. I could not have done this without you both!

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INTRODUCTION

Personifications of death frequently appear in children's and young adult's literature. These characters, in embodying the final event in a person's life, are powerful mediums for introducing young readers to challenging topics such as human nature, suffering, and death. Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), a novel that has acquired a wide readership and has sold over two million copies in the United States, is one of many works that incorporates this character. The novel is a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book and the Michael L. Printz Honor award. It was also adapted into a relatively well-received movie in November, 2013. In the novel, Death tells the story of Liesel Meminger, a young German girl living in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Liesel is repeatedly traumatized throughout the novel, first by the death of her brother, and again when she is abandoned by her mother. As the plot progresses, Liesel also faces the loss of various friends and adopted family. As he tells Liesel's story, Death frequently interrupts the narrative to offer insights about himself, the characters in the novel, and about humanity in general.

A number of reviewers have observed that the use of Death as a narrator in *The Book Thief* is an original approach to Holocaust fiction. These reviewers, including Marianne Brace (2006) in the *Independent* and Philip Ardagh (2007) in *The Guardian*, also suggest that the narrator is one of the more noteworthy elements in the novel. However, in spite of the impact of this figure on *The Book Thief's* readers, Death as a character has received little attention from literary critics. Additionally, while many scholars identify literature as a valuable resource for helping children and young adults work through death and grieving, scholarship has not delved

into this particular recurring literary device nor into its potential impact on readers.¹ I argue that Death is a key figure in *The Book Thief* because of his dual nature, which enables him to simultaneously expose and shield young adult readers from the difficult truth of the Holocaust and mortality. In the same way that Death escorts characters within the novel from one life into the next, he also escorts young adult readers from one understanding of reality into another deeper and more complicated reality.

I focus on young adult readers in my analysis as the novel is typically designated for that audience. Additionally, the experience of older readers would vary from that of the younger audience due to the formers' potential proximity to the Holocaust. It is more likely that older adults would have parents who had experienced the Holocaust; it is also possible that older readers may have lived through the event themselves. Because their reality is already influenced by the recent memory of this events, Death's narration would not have the same impact on the older audience as it has on the younger.

Death's duality manifests as two sets of opposing characteristics. On the one hand, he is blunt and cold while on the other he is a gentle healer of souls. Upon introducing himself to the reader, he explains, "nice has nothing to do with me" (Zusak 3). However, although he is not necessarily "nice," he insists that he can be "cheerful" and that he is "fair" (Zusak 3-4). Through his description of himself, Death informs the reader that he is impartial and will carry souls away regardless of the preferences of those still living. His explanation seems cruel and blunt; however, he also acknowledges that the souls he carries away are cared for and are healed,

¹ See Corr (2004), Poling & Hupp (2008), and Lerer (2006) for analyses of how literature helps children and young adults cope with death and grieving. While scholarship provides general support for the possibility that death-related literature is beneficial to young readers, it does not go into depth on the impact of that literature.

thereby alleviating the anxiety that may follow the realization of one's mortality. It is this duality and the impact it has on young adult readers that I will analyze in more detail throughout the remainder of this paper.

I use the work of two theorists in my analysis of Death's character and his impact on both characters in the novel and young readers. In *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek (1992) uses the metaphor of a car window to describe a person's experience in the world. Žižek suggests that our interpretation of the world is mediated by language and ideologies that are so deeply ingrained in our thinking that their influence is subconscious (14). Language and ideology are the window through which we see the world. Rolling down the window or peeling away these mediating elements would leave a person with "the pulsing of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality," a substance that Žižek identifies as "the Real" (14-15). Žižek goes on to explain that our interpretation of reality is sometimes disrupted by the Real. The presymbolic substance intrudes on the symbolic order, momentarily forcing individuals to recognize the insubstantiality of the ideologies that shape their reality. I argue that Zusak uses the personification of death to confront young readers with the Real of mortality and the Holocaust. In confronting them with these experiences, *The Book Thief* upsets the nature of realities previously undisturbed by such detailed descriptions of mortality and the horrors of the Holocaust. While these readers likely know that the Holocaust occurred and know that death is inevitable, *The Book Thief* bridges the gap of time and space, forcing the reader to consider the significance of these events for the present time.

Žižek develops his concept of the Real further in a later book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (2002), suggesting that after the initial intrusion of the Real, individuals are left with the difficult task of coping with the newly realized fragility of their interpretation of reality (23-

24). While Death does confront young readers with the Real, he also shields them from it. Death personified does not symbolize the end of life, but a transition from one life into another. In conceptualizing death as an escort rather than an end, young readers' exposure to the Real is mitigated and their symbolic order partially repaired. The finality and horror of mortality and the Holocaust are distanced somewhat by the closure offered at the end of the novel in which the souls of the deceased are healed and carried into a new life. While this conceptualization of death and the closure it offers by the end of the novel alleviate the impact of the Real, both the Holocaust and mortality will continue to haunt the reader after the novel has been set aside.

There is a link between Žižek and my second theorist, Hayden White, who suggests that practices and ideologies from previous centuries follow us into the present until we are able to critically analyze and thereby distance ourselves from them. Similarly, Žižek suggests that the Real, when repressed, will also continue to haunt us. White (2010) argues in "The 'Nineteenth Century' Chronotope," that "the 'nineteenth century' is still alive in our own age, in the form of residues of institutional practices and dogmas that are causes of as well as impediments to the resolution of problems unique to our age" (246). He adds that, "by our criticism, of both their nineteenth century original and their twentieth century copies, the distancing in the historical consciousness of our culture that must precede the practical work of finally releasing them to 'our' past" occurs (White 246). The same might be said of the tragic events in the twentieth century and their twenty-first century iterations. Zusak brings young readers back to the events of the Holocaust, a moment in history that still haunts humanity. As history, and especially moments like the Holocaust, haunt the present, so Death, in representing the Real of mortality and the Holocaust, will continue to haunt young readers. The hauntings of both history and the Real forces individuals to persist in grappling with these issues and ensure that they are never

forgotten. In the case of the Holocaust, ideally such haunting will ensure the event is also never repeated.

One final researcher that I build on directly is Jenni Adams (2010) and her analysis of the personification of Death in her article “‘Into Eternity’s Certain Breadth’: Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*.” Adams argues that *The Book Thief* “functions simultaneously to confront its readers with a knowledge of historical horror and to protect them from it” (232). Adams further suggests that there are multiple places within the novel where the reader is directly confronted with the reality of death, suffering, and physical decay, but also shielded from it by the personification of death. As an example, Adams observes that Death bluntly references the reader’s mortality, but also presents a “compassionate and quasi-parental image” (224). Ultimately, this character “stands between the reader and the reality of death as an ambivalent figure, both agent and alleviator of the incomprehensible threat” (Adams 224). I build on Adams’ discussion of Death’s nature primarily through connecting it to Žižek’s discussion of the Real and the haunting of the repressed and White’s parallel concept of history’s capacity to haunt the present. Death’s nature is significant not only because it facilitates the young readers’ simultaneous exposure to and protection from historical horrors, but also because it brings about the haunting of these realities and ensures they are remembered.

I will begin by investigating how *The Book Thief* disrupts and then repairs the symbolic order of both characters in the novel and young readers and how this process leads to the uncanny return of the repressed. I will then analyze Death’s complex nature, arguing that it is key to facilitating the disruption and repair of the reader’s symbolic order. Additionally, I will discuss Death’s complexity as he both symbolizes a Real experience, but also represents a fantasy. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the ambiguous elements in the novel’s

conclusion, arguing that this ambiguity is necessary to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust remains with the reader even after the novel itself has been set aside.

INTRUSION OF THE REAL

Žižek describe the Real as: “This ‘grey formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life,’” and continuing, “what is it if not the Lacanian real, the pulsing of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality?” (*Looking Awry* 14-15). There is an element of horror to the idea that, after the symbols that mediate, order and limit our perception of the Real fall away, individuals are left with a formless, pulsing substance. However, as long as the Real is mediated by the symbolic order, individuals are sheltered from the horror. Within *The Book Thief*, this relationship between the Real and the symbolic is enacted on multiple levels, both for characters within the text and for the reader experiencing the events of the Holocaust through Death’s eyes.

The Real intrudes into the lives of Liesel and Max, the Jew hiding in Liesel’s basement, as both are exposed to loss and suffering throughout the novel. These experiences force Liesel to face her own mortality and the mortality of her biological and adopted family. They also force Max to acknowledge the fragility of his status as a being with dignity and agency. For young readers, the Real erupts into the symbolic order as they are confronted with loss, suffering, and the uncomfortable possibility that, in the face of suffering, observers may adopt attitudes of indifference or helplessness rather than intervene during a tragic event. Young readers and protagonists thus occupy parallel positions as, after initial disruptions to their respective symbolic orders by the Real, each is constantly assaulted by uncanny reminders of those disruptions.

The Holocaust erupts into the symbolic order of all characters in *The Book Thief*, but the narrator emphasizes the experiences of Liesel and Max. Liesel’s first direct experience with the horrors of her time is the death of her little brother as she and her mother are on the train traveling to the home of Liesel’s future foster family. Observing Liesel’s reaction to the loss of

her brother, Death narrates: “For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Es stimmt nicht*. This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening” (Zusak 21). Liesel’s shock and panic upon the intrusion of loss into her life manifest as disbelief. However, once death has slipped into Liesel’s experience, she is unable to ignore him. Instead, she must find a way to bring that brush with the Real into her own symbolic order, adapting her perception of reality to fit the new experience. This instance is not the first time the Holocaust and World War II have touched Liesel’s life, as she later recalls her mother frequently being questioned by Nazis and realizes that the reason she is with a foster family is because the Nazis have taken her mother (Zusak 115). However, these realizations do not occur to her until after her brother’s death, suggesting that the knowledge of loss does not actually touch her until this moment.

Already a Jew in hiding and the embodiment of suffering and fear, the disruption of Max’s symbolic order occurs outside of the novel’s timeline. However, his memories and the stories he shares with Liesel reveal both when the disruption takes place and the nature of that disruption. Through the experience, Max is forced to recognize that he lacks control over his own life and that his status as a human with agency and dignity can easily be taken away. The disruption occurs at the deathbed of Max’s uncle. Death narrates the moment:

Somehow, between the sadness and loss, Max Vandenburg...was also a little disappointed. Even disgruntled. As he watched his uncle sink slowly into the bed, he decided that he would never allow himself to die like that...Where’s the fight? he [Max] wondered. Where’s the will to hold on? (Zusak 188-189)

At this moment, Max is unable to accept that his uncle cannot resist death and decides instead that he is simply too resigned to that fate. However, while Max is unable to accept humanity’s

lack of control over death, he does recognize that his uncle has lost agency in the moment that he dies. Max's discomfort with the moment suggest that he is aware of the potential for his own will and agency to be stolen in a similar manner. However, he determines to resist rather than give in as his uncle did. He declares: "'When death captures me... he will feel my fist in his face'... From that moment on, he started to fight [other children] with greater regularity" (Zusak 189). Although he might lose, the fights still give Max the opportunity to hold onto his agency. They embody the hope that even though others may endeavor to steal Max's agency, he has the option to fight rather than simply hand it over.

Finally, the disruption of the symbolic order also occurs for readers who are simultaneously reminded of their own mortality while also being required to confront the suffering that lurks behind the word "holocaust." The first line of the novel begins with that reminder as Death bluntly states: "You are going to die" (Zusak 3). He familiarizes the reader with the awfulness of the experience as he proceeds to describe it: "At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find a people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that is my own breathing" (Zusak 4). Death, he assures the reader, will come to everyone and there is an element of grotesqueness to the experience. The idea of being "caked" in a body is both cringe-worthy and "Real." Death, the narrator, also confronts readers with the reality of suffering, imploring that they "try not to look away" as he proceeds to describe Max's suffering as he is in hiding (Zusak 138). Death depicts Max's experience, observing that even eating brought with it a form of suffering: "Then the carrots.... The noise was astounding. Surely, the *Führer* himself could hear the sound of the orange crush in his mouth. It broke his teeth with every bite. When he drank, he was quite positive that he was swallowing them" (Zusak 140-141). During this

scene, there is a sliver of the Real that comes from the potential for significant suffering by the simple disassociation of human dignity and value from subjects originally considered to be signified by the word “human.” The frailty of the status as a living, valuable human being with agency is the sliver of Real that interrupts the symbolic order of both characters in the novel and the reader.

UNCANNY REMINDERS

Throughout the novel, both protagonists and readers are faced with the challenge of repairing their respective symbolic orders. In describing the relationship between perceived reality and the true Real, Žižek discusses *Woman in the Window* by Fritz Lang, a novel in which a professor dreams that he has murdered somebody, but, before facing the consequences for his crime, he wakes up (*Looking Awry* 16). Žižek posits that in this novel, “we do not have a quiet, kind, decent, bourgeois professor dreaming for a moment that he is a murderer; what we have is, on the contrary, a murderer dreaming in his everyday life, that he is just a decent bourgeois professor” (*Looking Awry* 16-17). This example suggests that to cope with the Real, a person might relegate their experience with the Real to a dream. However, ultimately, the professor truly is a murderer, even if he represses that element of his character in his day-to-day life. In *The Book Thief*, this idea plays out in the lives of Liesel and Max as well as in the relationship between Death and the reader. In all cases, there is an effort to turn away from the Real. However, as in the instance of the professor’s dream, the Real will reemerge in spite of efforts to suppress it. Freud, in an article entitled “The ‘Uncanny,’” (1964) explains this reappearance of the Real as the “uncanny,” a moment when “something repressed which *recurs*” (13). In spite of efforts to turn away from the Real, Liesel, Max, and the reader all continue to be haunted by it as the novel progresses.

For Liesel, the uncanny takes multiple forms, appearing both in nightmares and in her bedroom, where traces from the initial encounter with the reality of loss and death continue to haunt her. That Liesel endeavors to repress the memory of her brother’s death is first apparent in her denial. After her brother’s burial, Liesel attempts to dig him up, thinking “he couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t be dead” (Zusak 23). She initially cannot accept that her brother is truly gone.

Ultimately, rather than reconciling with his absence, Liesel must distract herself with another presence, her new father Hans Hubermann, in order to momentarily forget the loss of her brother. Unlike her brother and her mother, Liesel knows Hans “would not leave” (Zusak 37). In this way, Liesel endeavors to repress the memory of loss.

However, as much as Liesel attempts to forget her loss, it continues to haunt her. Her nightmares are one instance of the uncanny. Death observes that Liesel is watching him as he arrives to take her brother’s soul; she witnesses the exact moment her brother dies (Zusak 21). Later, it is her brother’s face that forms part of the substance of her nightmares (Zusak 36). The moment when he dies, “his blue eyes stared at the floor. Seeing nothing” is the moment that feeds Liesel’s nightmares and her own uncanny experiences (Zusak 22). The bed that was supposed to be for her brother also takes on an uncanny aspect for Liesel. Death describes it, giving us a glimpse into Liesel’s own perception: “On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boatlike in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor” (Zusak 36). The bed, as a reminder of her brother’s death, takes on an uncanny, supernatural aspect that terrifies Liesel. “Floating” and “boatlike,” it is suggestive both of ghosts and of a grave. The repressed Real reemerges as the uncanny, the sense that the inanimate object is more than just a bed because it is attached to the death of Liesel’s brother.

By contrast, Max’s own uncanny experience is embodied by “the standover man,” a symbol representing all of the men who steal Max’s agency. He attempts to repress the memory of the loss of his uncle and his realization that his agency can be stolen through fights with other children, which enable him momentarily to reclaim the agency that his uncle relinquishes (Zusak 189). Through the fistfights, Max experiences, “the bittersweetness of uncertainty” (Zusak 189).

In those moments, Max is able to exercise agency by virtue of the uncertain. It is never clear until the end of the fight who the victor will be, and in those moments of uncertainty, Max is able to choose when to keep fighting and when to surrender. The agency acquired during the fights, however, reflect Max's own discomfort with the fact that Death has no regard for individual agency and will come whether or not his victims believe they are ready. During the fistfights, this is an uncomfortable truth that Max endeavors to suppress.

However, Max's anxiety regarding his own agency is only temporarily relieved by his fights with other children. The standover men appear repeatedly both in Max's life and in his nightmares. He admits to Liesel in the story that he writes for her that "all my life, I've been scared of men standing over me" (Zusak 224). The realization that he is helpless in the face of various standover men—including the children who beat him during fistfights, Hitler and Death—is the part of the Real that he is unable to incorporate into his symbolic order. That Max attempts and fails to repress this knowledge of powerlessness can also be seen symbolically in the fact that even as he paints over the words in his copy of *Mein Kampf* to make room for the stories he writes for Liesel, the outline of the original words is still visible beneath the white paint and Max's own words (Zusak 224). Like the palimpsest he creates for Liesel, Max is unable to fully blot out his memories of the Real; they continue to haunt him as various standover men appear, both in reality and in his nightmares (Zusak 222), to forcefully remove Max's agency. Although experiences of the Real take different forms for both Max and Liesel, each faces and tries to repress the knowledge of their own mortality or lack of agency. As a result, both also contend with nightmares and the uncanny return of the repressed.

Finally, the reader may also experience the uncanny as Zusak makes deliberate nods to experiences in the Holocaust that form part of our present understanding and fear regarding the

causation of this tragedy. Freud, in an effort to explain the uncanniness that occurs when witnessing epilepsy or madness, writes, “The ordinary person sees in them [a person who is mad or epileptic] the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his own being” (Freud 14). In other words, being surprised by a particular, startling behavior in another individual is an uncanny experience because it reflects a behavior that individuals fear is present in themselves as well. Throughout *The Book Thief*, Death frequently references his own need for distraction as he proceeds to describe events that may have occurred because others looked away from the suffering. One of the traits that may have been a contributing factor to the Holocaust’s occurrence is simultaneously present in Death and feared to be present in ourselves.² Death, mimicking this behavior, insists that he needs to constantly have access to some sort of distraction, explaining “I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair, and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs” (Zusak 5). He witnesses the suffering of others, but also insists that he cannot intervene. Therefore, he needs something to distract himself from the suffering. It is an uncanny repetition—the idea that Death possesses the same terrifying traits that may or may not reside in the readers.

The idea of distraction as a means of facilitating acceptance of suffering is reiterated as Death witnesses Liesel’s reaction to the loss of her brother. He insists that he pities Liesel and he wishes he could have alleviated her suffering. Speaking to his reader, he asks, “Please, again, I ask you to believe me. I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say: ‘I’m sorry child’”

² See Staub (1985) and Esquith (2013) for analysis of bystanders and their psychology. Both Staub and Esquith espouse concern regarding bystander’s tendency to watch horrific events unfold without taking upon themselves any responsibility for ending those events.

(Zusak 13). Death places himself in the role of an observer, unable to impact what occurs in the world; he can only clean up the mess by taking care of the souls as they leave the bodies. However, at another point in the novel, he demonstrates that he can indeed intervene when he stops to pick up the book that Liesel had written and left on Himmel Street after the bombing: “There was much work to be done, and with a collection of other materials, *The Book Thief* [Liesel’s book] was stepped on several times. . . . I climbed quickly up and took it in my hand. It’s lucky I was there” (Zusak 539). Death’s assertions that he is helpless and his defensiveness regarding that helplessness, invite the reader to doubt his claims as they gradually become suggestive of guilt. His later demonstration of his ability to influence events increase the possibility that Death is somewhat guilty for choosing not to step in to intervene. Although he asserts that intervention is “not allowed” (Zusak 13), his defensiveness about his own character and his need for distraction alongside his occasional reminders that readers themselves avoid “looking away,” encourage readers to confront the possibility that this trait that appears in Death’s character may also be present in themselves or in those around them.

Ultimately, in the midst of the intrusion of several elements of the Real such as mortality, the lack of control when a “standover man” recategorizes his victim as something other than human, or the realization of unpleasant traits that may exist in human nature but are more comfortable to repress, are all elements that Death forces readers to face as he tells the book thief’s story. Readers are urged not to look away from the pictures of suffering that Death paints, nor from the other unpleasant glimpses of the Real that are experienced vicariously through Liesel and Max. However, *The Book Thief* does not leave readers to grapple with the questions posed within the story. As noted previously, Adams asserts that this novel confronts and shields readers from the horror of the Holocaust (232). I argue that the Death insists that young readers

confront slivers of the Real as it erupts into their symbolic order. He does this by exposing them to the fact that the dignity and value associated with the concept of “human” can be forcibly removed. He also challenges the idea that each individual has some degree of control over their own length and quality of life. However, Death’s dual nature also works to heal the breach caused by that eruption of the Real into the symbolic order. As Adams suggests, he is both a tool for confronting readers and a tool for protecting them.

DEATH'S DUAL NATURE

As a narrator, Death's nature and the outlook he provides on the Holocaust are significant because they facilitate the disruption of the reader's symbolic order, the subsequent repair of the order and the haunting of the Real. This process influences both the readers' conception of death and their memory of the Holocaust. In her book, *Reading the Holocaust*, Inga Clendinnen (1999), expresses concern that Holocaust literature runs the risk of trivializing the event (164).

Clendinnen explains:

The poetry which came during the decade after the ending of World War I distilled and certified a transformation in generations' understanding of what war, peace and politics mean. No comparable distillation of meanings has come out of the Holocaust....It continues to defy assimilation. (164).

As Clendinnen observes, the sensitive nature of the Holocaust makes it a difficult subject to represent effectively in literature. However, in his article, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality," Hayden White (2005) points to the importance of literature for historical memory. He suggests, "a simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times, and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what 'reality' consists of" (White 147). White suggests, "the real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could *possibly* be" (White 147). In other words, a documentary or list of happenings do not provide the whole picture of a historical moment. However, historical fiction coupled with a timeline or a map detailing the events of a particular time and place complement each other, providing a fuller sense of that moment in history.

Zusak's work contributes to the continued remembrance of the Holocaust by presenting one possible experience. Because it is relayed through the personification of Death, who facilitates a non-human, outsider perspective on the issue, Zusak can approach the Holocaust in a manner that maintains the enormity of both the physical and emotional suffering during that time period. In addition to not belittling the emotional toll of the event, relaying the story from Death's perspective also allows the narrator to bridge the gap between the reader and the Holocaust. Death relays the Holocaust, but he also relays the questions that it sparks for him. Like the reader, Death does not wholly understand the event. As a result, he can ask and propose answers to the questions that young readers, whose distance from the event means that they too are outsiders, might also ask. Additionally, Death's perspective is valuable because of its complexity. Death is at times sadistic and callously inquisitive about human suffering, and at other times gentle and concerned. Adams explains his nature as both "[evoking] a powerful sense of abjection, effectively confronting the reader with both the terror of death and the extent to which it defies straightforward depiction" while also presenting a "compassionate and quasi-parental image" (224). Death's complexity serves a purpose beyond its entertainment value—as a complex character able to supply vivid depictions of suffering, he has the capacity to draw readers in. All of the elements in Death's nature also facilitate the readers growth through the disruption and the repair that he himself brings about.

Death's ability to approach the Holocaust as an outsider is one of his primary values. Like the reader, Death himself is somewhat distant from the event. His primary purpose is to collect souls after death, and not to linger too long near living humans. He explains that upon observing Liesel when he comes to collect her brother's soul that, "stupidly, I stayed. I watched" (Zusak 24). Stopping to observe a living human is not part of his job; it is a mistake—a

distraction he does not have time for. As Death pauses to watch Liesel, the reader too is invited to pause in their own busyness to listen to Death's "small story" (Zusak 5). Through the story, both Death and the reader will be learning. Death's primary advantage is his ability to offer insights into the minds of those he observes. However, both he and the reader are left with the challenge of making sense of the story. In putting the narrator and the reader in some sense on this equal footing, the reader is encouraged to reflect on Death's questions as much as Death himself reflects on them. Death's questions do not always come in the form of a literal inquiry, but in a series of descriptions. Each description aims to touch on what a subject in the story experiences, but the repetition of different descriptions suggest that Death can only attempt to convey it in words. When Liesel wakes up the moment her brother dies, Death attempts to describe her reaction. He asks: "Why do they always shake them? Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud" (Zusak 21). Here, Death does preface his effort to understand with a question. Frequently, however, he launches into phrase after phrase of description in an effort both to convey the same reality to the reader that the subject of the story experiences. However, Death himself also seems to be struggling to put himself within the victim's perspective through his own insufficient words.

Two other elements of Death's nature, his sadism and callous curiosity regarding humanity, are also key to the experience of reading *The Book Thief* as it is these elements that enable Death to confront readers with the Real as well as bring to life this moment in history. As noted previously, he tells readers almost immediately that they will die and proceeds to describe the ugly decay that will follow (Zusak 4). Death's blunt declaration followed by the close description of the aftereffects of the reader's inevitable demise are initially disturbing and

suggest Death takes perverse pleasure in the discomfort of his readers. As the novel progresses, Death continues to casually and irreverently reference the death of others in the novel. He asserts, “it’s lucky I’m somewhat miraculous. No one else could carry close to forty-five thousand people in such a short amount of time. Not in a million years” (Zusak 506). In using the death of forty-five thousand individuals as an example of his own miraculous ability, Death seems to trivialize their loss of life. Finally, Death’s apparent sadism also appears in one of his descriptions of Liesel’s reaction to the death of her brother. Death describes the scene:

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands. Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white....A warm scream filled her throat. (Zusak 23-24)

Again, the description is vivid and unrelenting as Death endeavors to ensure the reader’s picture of suffering is clear and tangible.

Death’s narrative, however, is not motivated by a sadistic interest in describing suffering for its own sake. Instead, Death suggests at another point in the novel that the reader needs to observe the characters’ grief and suffering (Zusak 138). The implication is that this knowledge is important because it enables the reader to sympathize with those characters. In addition to encouraging the reader to sympathize with *The Book Thief’s* protagonists, Death’s purpose in confronting the reader with their own mortality and also in describing the deaths of others later on in the narrative is to introduce himself and explain his own nature. He explains, “I am in all truthfulness trying to be cheerful about the whole topic” (Zusak 3). He is not trying to disturb the reader by his casual descriptions of himself, but in order to help the reader understand his own nature, he must introduce the concepts of death and mortality. They are as much a part of his nature as they are a part of the readers’. Although Death’s apparent sadism has practical sources,

it also serves the larger purpose of the novel. This trait is necessary in order for the novel to confront the reader with the Real of the Holocaust and mortality. Death is the perfect medium. In reading a story Death narrates, the reader will inevitably have to acknowledge their own mortality.

Death also frequently approaches humanity with a disinterested curiosity that is initially as callous as his apparent sadism. At the outset, Death downplays the events of the narrative and the fact of death and suffering. He describes the first few deaths in the novel in a matter-of-fact tone. Death begins Liesel's story at the death of her brother: "A Spectacularly Tragic Moment. A train was moving quickly. It was packed with humans. A six-year-old boy died in the third carriage" (Zusak 19). Liesel's brother remains unnamed and undescribed, suggesting his death is insignificant to Death himself. It is simply one event in a series of similar events; one death that will soon be followed by many more. Death's description reads like a newspaper headline; a story that aims to shock and inform, but not necessarily to sympathize. At this moment, Death and the reader are both disinterested and distant from the Holocaust itself. As the novel progresses, however, Death becomes closer to the characters. By the conclusion, Death's descriptions of life's end take into consideration the individuality of each person. He describes the death of Liesel's adopted parents, Hans and Rosa:

He [Hans] was tall in the bed and I could see the silver through his eyelids. His soul sat up. It met me. Those kinds of souls always do.... Yes, I truly think I picked her [Rosa] up midsnore, for her mouth was open and her papery pink lips were still in the act of moving. If she'd seen me, I'm sure she would have called me a *Saukerl*, though I would not have taken it badly. (Zusak 532)

Both characters are described in detail, suggesting that Death has grown attached to them. They are more than an event; they have become individuals. The reader is encouraged to take this journey with Death. As each individual member of Liesel's family becomes more real to Death, the Holocaust too should become more than a historical event for the reader. The reader is encouraged to empathize with the diverse victims of that time, and see the individual experiences that may have populated that event rather than perceiving it as a moment of mass suffering. This more individualized memory brings the reader into a more tangible understanding of the Real of the Holocaust.

Death's gentleness also contributes to the novel's overall impact in that it plays a role in shielding the reader from the Real. In "Mediation Matters: Archetypes of Transference," Graham Nicol Forst (2017) argues that literature, along with philosophy and religion, tends to point to "universal awareness of this brokenness, this 'gap' . . . because we feel this 'split,' we may try to deal with the break by avoiding it . . . or, more bravely, by trying to bridge or 'heal' the break" (2). Forst essentially suggests that literature as a whole, along with other disciplines, tends to draw out feelings of brokenness or incompleteness that already exist within the individual. In the case of *The Book Thief*, this particular break is the division between the Real and perceived reality. As Forst suggests, *The Book Thief* also has the capacity to alleviate the shock of being confronted with that split through Death. Although Death does not entirely heal the reader, returning them to a sense of completeness, the gentler aspect of his nature does alleviate the tension that grows out of the readers' confrontation with the Real.

As much as Death must expose the reader to the Real of suffering and mortality because these topics are essentially all he knows, his nature is also shown to be protective and comforting. After telling the reader that they will die, Death endeavors repeatedly throughout the

first chapters to alleviate the impact of that startling revelation. He assures the reader: “I can be amiable” (Zusak 3). He later adds, “I am all bluster—I am not violent. I am not malicious. I am a result” (Zusak 6). Again, although Death is inevitable, he insists that he is not intrinsically evil. This revelation aims to encourage the reader, reassuring them that in spite of its inevitability and the grotesqueness of physical decay, death is not comprehensively horrific. Death also explains that he takes care of souls after a person dies. As he arrives to carry away the souls of those who died during the bombing of Liesel’s street, he pauses to appreciate each person’s individuality. He explains, “Frau Holtzapfel appears to be waiting for me in the kitchen...her face seemed to ask just what in the hell had taken me so long” (Zusak 530). Visiting the home of Liesel’s friend, Rudy, Death relates: “At the Steiners, I ran my fingers through Barbara’s lovely combed hair, I took the serious look from Kurt’s serious sleeping face, and one by one, I kissed the smaller ones good night” (Zusak 530). All of Death’s apparent sadism and grotesque descriptions are absent in this moment as he cleans up after the bombing. His parental care of the deceased suggests that the experience of death itself is not grotesque, even if the subsequent physical decay is. The idea has the potential to be comforting to readers who must reconcile themselves not only to the tragedy outlined in the novel as a whole, but also to their own mortality.

Ultimately, through the complexity of his nature, Death is the primary means by which Zusak confronts readers with the Real. By giving him a voice, the reader is forced to acknowledge their own mortality. Additionally, as Death witnesses all of the catastrophes in human history, he is able to confront readers with a unique perspective on the Holocaust that will bring readers into close contact with the Real of that event. In “Against Historical Realism,” White (2007) suggests in an analysis of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* that Tolstoy “wanted to bring the past to life, to convey what it felt like to fight in a battle, to be wounded, march beyond

exhaustion....Tolstoy gives us the ‘feel’ of war rather than the logistics of campaigns and battles” (108). Similarly, although *The Book Thief* is fiction, it nonetheless brings to life a moment in history that a listing of historical events could not. Death goes beyond simply relaying the events, but endeavors, through his attempts at vivid description, to assure that the reader can feel the death of the Holocaust victims as tangibly as they can feel their own.

However, Death also aims to protect the children and young adult readers from the full impact of that experience by offering some consolation in his own nature. He will take care of the victims after they are gone. Although it does not erase the impact of the Holocaust, it does stand between the reader and the Holocaust and suggests that, after all of the suffering, there was peace.

STABILIZING THE READER'S REALITY THROUGH FANTASY

By exposing readers to the Real of death, physical decay, and the human proclivity for evil, the narrator potentially confronts readers with the void that is the Real. Žižek describes the Real that exists behind the barrier of the symbolic order in a myriad of ways, all of which have negative connotations. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, the Real is described as having “extreme violence” (Žižek 6) and being a “destructive Void” (Žižek 12). In *Looking Awry*, Žižek describes it as “abhorrent vitality” and a “pulsing substance” (15). The intrusion of the Real into the symbolic order has the potential to be psychologically destructive. Žižek asserts that “precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive nature, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition” (*Welcome to the Desert* 19). Individuals are unable to cope with the explosion of the Real into the symbolic world because it exposes the instability of that symbolic order. While Death in *The Book Thief* introduces readers to the Real through vivid descriptions of death and the Holocaust, he also, through his own dual nature, becomes the fiction that facilitates the reader’s ability to cope with the Real.

Žižek elaborates on his analysis of the relationship between the Real and fiction by suggesting that individuals are in constant danger of mixing up the two. Specifically, he suggests that humans have the capacity to present the truth as fiction (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 20). Further, “much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in ‘real’ reality” (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 19). In other words, while it may be difficult to recognize the fiction in interpretations of reality, it is even more difficult to recognize the Real that has been portrayed as fiction. This rationale plays out in *The Book Thief* as the narrator develops a relationship with readers and mixes elements of the

fictional and the Real together throughout the narrative. While Death embodies the Real of physical decay and loss, he also represents the possibility that death is a sympathetic person. He is also a constant reminder to the reader that, while the Holocaust did occur, this particular story is only a story. The mixing of the Real and fiction produces what Žižek refers to as the “aesthetic of the Real,” or the use of elements of the Real to create an effect that is “deprived of substance” (*Welcome to the Desert* 11). The novel exposes readers to the Real, but the exposure is mitigated through the combination of the Real of historical events, mortality and loss with Death’s fictional nature and the distance maintained between the reader and these experiences.

Death provides a myriad of compelling descriptions of all that precedes and follows the moment of death, offering not only the possibility of watching the event, but also of experiencing it. His descriptions make the experiences, such as the reader’s inevitable death and the suffering of characters in *The Book Thief*, tangible. In the “guided tour” of Max’s suffering that Death offers, he describes “itchy feet,” “the irritation of half awakesness,” and “sleep, starving sleep” (Zusak 139). These moments are vivid because the word choice itself is descriptive, but also because it builds on potentially shared experiences. To a smaller degree, the reader may be familiar with that “half awakesness” that comes after an illness, or the nagging discomfort of an “itchy foot.” The combined weight of these shared experiences, which Max faces while also locked in a dark basement and starving, foster an almost tangible experience as the reader can remember their own moments of discomfort and imagine how they would be compounded if occurring in a situation such as the one Max finds himself in. Readers are also encouraged to empathize with Liesel, feeling what she feels. Liesel is frequently not only cold, but miserably so. Snow “[carves] into her skin” (Zusak 23) and memories of the dead “slung over” shoulders, evoke the image of cold, heavy corpses (Zusak 25). Death, the inevitable finisher of all suffering,

can only treat readers to experiences that entail suffering and death. His preoccupation with decay and pain highlight the fact that these are aspects of his character. He exists on the border between one life and the next; as a symbol, he represents both the suffering and eventual cessation of consciousness implied by the word “dying,” and also the decay that follows. It is this aspect of Death’s nature that is Real.

However, readers’ inability to cope with the Real necessitates that Death come to represent more than just the Real. Žižek suggests, “the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish, unreal spectre” (*Welcome to the Desert* 19). Žižek suggests that this occurs as artists use “the thrill of the Real” in their work because it is considered the “ultimate ‘effect’” (12). Like the artists that Žižek describes, Zusak also helps the reader relegate the Real initially represented by Death to “nightmarish spectre” by adding layers to this character. As the reader gets to know Death, he comes to symbolize more than decay. The fact that Death’s nature evolves as the reader learns more about him suggest that the initial conception is fiction while the more complex understanding of Death appears to be Real. As Death as a character and as a symbol develops complexity, the Holocaust and the suffering of the characters also becomes relegated to nightmarish history, a process also facilitated by Death’s growing complexity.

As much as Death enables the reader to experience decay and suffering, he also is the means by which readers can escape the void of the Real. Death is pictured throughout *The Book Thief* as the caretaker of souls. Death becomes, therefore, more than the simple absence of life. He also embodies the potential for an afterlife characterized by healing. When he takes Liesel’s brother, “he started melting in my [Death’s] arms. Then warming up completely. Healing” (Zusak 21). Death is not only decay, but also recovery and immortality. Of the two

characteristics that Zusak attributes to Death, one is grounded in the Real. It is known that bodies decay after death. The other is grounded in imagination; it is comforting to think that Death cares for immortal souls. However, as the novel progresses, the redefining of Death as an escort from one life into the next rather than a reference to the cessation of existence becomes increasingly prevalent. This reconstruction has the potential to comfort readers and to alleviate the tension caused by the confrontation with the Real. The Real of decay after death remains with the reader, but its weight is diminished by the possibility that it is not part of the experience of the deceased. Rather, the corpse decays after the soul has been carried away by Death. Although the afterlife is never explicitly mentioned within *The Book Thief*, the fact that Death picks up souls in his arms and heals them suggests that they still have a future. If death were the cessation of consciousness, there would be no soul to heal. Through this alternate conceptualization of death, a lasting sense of void and hopelessness is evaded.

Another means by which the impact of the Real is mitigated is through distancing the reader somewhat from the full experience through Death's narration. References to the reader's mortality are made frequently throughout the novel's initial chapters. Death's description of "the sound of the smell of my steps" (Zusak 5) alludes to the smell accompanying decomposition; the reader is reminded that after Death, decay will follow. However, after this initial confrontation, attention shifts to the characters in the novel. Readers are not directly reminded again of mortality, except as it relates to the characters in the novel. Compelling descriptions of the Real encourage readers to briefly experience it as characters in the book experience it, but it is brief and mediated first by Death's descriptions. The symbols between the experience and the thing itself are one means by which they are distanced. Readers are also distanced by the fact that Death is telling a story about other characters. It is not a firsthand account, but a description from

a distance, a story within a story. Again, the distance serves to dull the potential impact of the Real. A momentary impression is conjured up by the descriptions of starvation so extreme that food “[scales] its way down” and efforts to swallow “tear” at the throat (Zusak 140). While the descriptions do conjure up the horror of the Real, however, the reader knows that it is not part of the present reality. That knowledge is reinforced as Death occasionally pauses to remind the reader of this fact. He tells the reader towards the end of the novel: “Come with men and I’ll tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (Zusak 544). The descriptions of suffering mimic the Real by introducing kernels of truth, but couched in a story told by a personification of death, the horror described does not have the same impact as a brush with the Real in actual life. The description occurs, and then fades as the novel progresses.

Finally, a sense of the Real is also conjured by the introduction, or reintroduction, of the Holocaust into readers’ minds. Throughout the narrative, readers may grow attached to the characters. Death makes efforts to render even the rough and slightly abusive Rosa Hubermann kind and, therefore, pitiable in the readers’ eyes. She welcomes Max, the Jew in need of a place to hide, into her home. Beyond her willingness to help, however, Death describes the change that comes over Rosa with the new guest in the house:

What shocked Liesel most was the change in her mama. Whether it was the calculated way in which she divided the food, or the considerable muzzling of her notorious mouth, or even the gentler expression on her cardboard face, one thing was becoming clear....She was a good woman for a crisis. (Zusak 211).

Although she has beaten Liesel, and verbally abused both Liesel and her husband, Hans, Rosa’s initial harsh character is balanced by her later gentleness and capacity to cope with the various challenges that accompany harboring Max. As the novel progresses, both Liesel and readers get

to know Rosa better, recognizing both her negative and her positive qualities. Readers see her humanity, reminiscent of those they may know in real life who possess good and bad qualities, but who are still loved. As a result, when Himmel Street is bombed, readers experience more deeply the death of each character. The knowledge that the story is based on circumstances of the Holocaust, even if not real characters, brings to life the horrors of a past event. A momentary void follows in which readers may acutely feel the loss of the characters. Additionally, there is a sense of helplessness in the finality of the Holocaust—readers cannot go back in time and change what has occurred. However, even this possible sting is alleviated by the fact that Death assures readers that he takes care of the souls. Readers are brought along as Death visits each street that was bombed in the final few chapters and picks up each soul that has been lost (Zusak 530). Beyond caring for the souls, however, Death also offers brief eulogies of each character. He reminisces about the Hubermanns: “the ones who rise up and say ‘I know who you are and I am ready. Not that I want to go, of course, but I will come’” (Zusak 532). The eulogies combined with the possibility that the souls are cared for offers the closure needed to alleviate the impact of these deaths.

As much as Zusak’s piece reminisces about the Holocaust and forces readers to relive this horrific period in time, Zusak also protects readers from the Real in order to facilitate the reader’s growth. Although readers will not likely reemerge from *The Book Thief* believing that Death is a person who roams the Earth collecting souls, the fantasy that this character offers—the possibility of immortality and the possibility that there is someone compassionate and caring who will accompany the deceased as they journey from one life into the next—will likely remain. Žižek problematizes the aesthetic of the Real as it is conjured up in novels, suggesting that it is the prime way to avoid actually encountering the Real. He argues: “the problem with the

twentieth-century ‘passion for the Real’ was not that it was passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*” (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 24). Žižek suggests that in recreating the aesthetic of the Real in novels, such as *The Book Thief*, readers are able to ultimately avoid confronting the Real. When the Real becomes the substance of novels, readers can dismiss it as fictional. However, Zusak’s use of the aesthetic is more productive because the events that take place are more than pure fiction. *The Book Thief* is based in a historical moment and touches on the reader’s own experiences to make the experiences of the characters tangible. Even though Liesel and Max are fictional, they represent a true experience. White’s analysis of another work, Primo Levi’s autobiography in which Levi describes his time at Auschwitz, can shed light on the effect of *The Book Thief*’s use of fictional characters to represent actual experiences. White argues:

Levi’s book is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi’s poetic prose is ‘faithful’ as well as being ‘true’ to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation... The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information. (149)

While Levi’s autobiography is not at all fictional, the idea that art and information together are necessary for conjuring the past relates to *The Book Thief*’s use of art, or the aesthetic of the Real, to conjure up the Real. The mixing of fictional and the Real of historical and personal tragedy with the reader’s own perceived reality does force the reader to confront the Real. Both elements are necessary for achieving that effect.

In some ways the reader is protected from the full experience of the Real by Death's own mediating presence. However, Žižek notes that confrontations with the Real expose individuals to the void that exists behind our ideologies and that void has a negative toll on the psychology of those who observe it (*Welcome to the Desert* 12). As a result, in order to productively confront the Real, it is necessary that the reader also be protected from it. Zusak's piece sheds more light on the suffering of a dark time, and in so doing, facilitates the remembrance of that event. However, in protecting readers from the full horror that the confrontation with the Real provides, readers can remember the event productively. They can reflect on the Holocaust, the suffering, and continue to grapple with questions regarding how and why such an event could have taken place. It might cause them to question human nature as well in an effort to understand what Death refers to as something that is "so ugly and so glorious" (Zusak 550). The questions ultimately cannot be answered, and it is the ability to resolve the dissonances that *The Book Thief* raises that will ensure productive remembrance of the Holocaust.

HAUNTED BY THE REAL: AMBIGUITIES IN *THE BOOK THIEF*

Haunting is a pervasive theme throughout *The Book Thief*, as Death asserts that he is haunted by humans (Zusak 550) and humans themselves are shown to be haunted by Death, the Holocaust, and by questions about human nature. In relaying a story about the Holocaust, Zusak ushers readers into a deeper and more complicated reality by exposing them to the Real and the haunting of those realities in the form of unresolvable questions. White suggests that “history is not something that one understands, it is something one endures—if one is lucky” (“Against Historical Realism,” 110). Similarly, *The Book Thief*, through the use of an inquisitive narrator, asks readers to endure the literary recreation of a painful moment in history and urges them to grapple with questions revolving around the Holocaust in a manner that is productive to both their growth as individuals and their understanding of historical tragedies. *The Book Thief’s* conclusion has additional weight as, in adding to the discourse surrounding the Holocaust, it influences how this event is remembered.

While *The Book Thief* facilitates remembrance of the Holocaust and of mortality, it goes beyond simply recounting the story and the horrors associated with these two realities. Some previous researchers of Holocaust fiction, such as James Farnham (1992) in “What is the Value of Teaching the Holocaust?” suggest that simply remembering a past tragedy is insufficient (21-22). Instead, a more engaged interaction with the past is necessary in order for remembrance to have a potentially positive impact (Farnham 22). Applying Žižek’s discussion of the Real to *The Book Thief* and Death’s nature reveals how the novel facilitates a complex and lasting understanding of difficult truths. As noted in the previous section, repression of the Real as facilitated by Death’s character reduces the Real to “nightmarish hallucination” (Žižek 19). This nightmarish hallucination continues to haunt the readers in a manner that assures they will never

fully forget the disruption of the Real, even if they fail to understand it fully. One way in which the nature of the haunting prompted by *The Book Thief* can be seen in the unresolved questions that remain at the end of the novel. In “Against All Odds,” Gertrud Koch (1997) suggests that closure at the end of a novel often serves to return the reader to reality—the regular day-to-day existence that preceded the moment of storytelling (398-399). The final closure can serve to upend reality, what Žižek refers to as the symbolic order, or reinstate it. *The Book Thief* draws attention to what Žižek describes in *Looking Awry* as a fragile illusion that our nature is that of “kind-hearted, decent people” (17). *The Book Thief* complicates this illusion through ambiguous conclusions about human nature, the Holocaust, and death that color the conclusion of the novel.

One such ambiguity exists in the memory of the Holocaust and how that memory influences Liesel. As readers follow the story through to Liesel’s final moments, they are encouraged to contemplate the Holocaust’s impact on memory and the future as Liesel herself is directly impacted. Death implies that Liesel’s story came to a happy conclusion as she lived a long life, married, and had children and grandchildren (Zusak 543-544). However, other elements in the final chapters contradict this possibility. After the bombing of Himmel Street, Liesel reacts initially by refusing to bathe. As a result, “people who were at the service of Hans and Rosa Hubermann always talked about the girl who stood there wearing a pretty dress and a layer of Himmel Street dirt” (Zusak 546). Liesel symbolizes the next generation; the one to survive into the era after the Holocaust. Like the readers who will one day be “caked” in their own body (Zusak 4), Liesel too is “caked” in dirt from the Himmel Street bombing, carrying the memory of that tragedy into the future. A metaphor for history, as the dirt coats Liesel for days, so does the history of the Holocaust cling to the present. Death further explains that Liesel also tried to recover from the event through her writing, though “it would have been easy to say

nothing” (Zusak 548). However, Death adds that “there was no recovery from what had happened. That would take decades; it would take a long life” (546). Zusak provides hints as to the nature of Liesel’s fate and whether she is able to recover from the tragedies in her life. However, the final interpretation of those events are left in the reader’s hands to work through. In leaving Liesel’s fate somewhat open, Zusak encourages readers to continue to contemplate the impact of the Holocaust. Questions of how and why the Holocaust impacts those who come after are fostered by the ambiguous conclusion to Liesel’s story. In this sense, readers are haunted by Liesel and by the question of how the Holocaust does and should influence the future.

Another ambiguity contained in *The Book Thief*’s conclusion is an understanding of humanity. Death’s aim throughout much of the novel is to understand human nature, but the issue is complex. The novel begins with Death admitting: “It’s the leftover humans. The Survivors. They’re the ones I can’t stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail” (Zusak 5). The leftover humans distract Death, and take his attention away from his work. As the novel progresses, Death slips in helpful notes about various characters in the novel, displaying either that he is extremely perceptive or that he can see into each person’s mind. Ultimately, however, in spite of his many insights, he is unable to make sense of humanity as a whole. After World War II and the Holocaust, Death observes in a moment sitting beside Liesel that: “A few cars drove by, each way. Their drivers were Hitlers and Hubermanns, and Maxes, killers, Dillers, and Steiners....I wanted to ask her [Liesel] how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant” (Zusak 550). Death hints at a capacity for good and evil and the capacity to exonerate and implicate ourselves in horrors through the stories we tell and live out. However, even with this explanation of historical tragedies, Death concludes: “the only truth I truly know....I am haunted by humans” (Zusak 550). Death is not

able to understand how the Holocaust and other tragedies could exist beside genuinely kind individuals such as Liesel. As Death grapples, and fails to resolve, this particular concept, the reader too is faced with the question that remains unanswered. It is another ambiguity that assures Liesel's story will haunt readers even after the novel has been set aside.

Finally, ambiguity appears in the nature of Death himself. As much as Death endeavors to make sense of humanity, he also struggles to define himself for the reader. He is immediately aware of the need to explain himself and dismantle whatever conceptions of death holds the reader. He begins the novel by listing off all of his positive qualities: "Amiable. Agreeable. Affable" (Zusak 3). He also has the capacity for curiosity (7). In the context of the Holocaust especially, death might be perceived as an "amiable" release from suffering. At the same time, however, he asserts: "I am a result" (Zusak 5). He further admits: "I attend the greatest disasters and work for the greatest villains" (Zusak 549). Death follows on the heels of tragedy; as much as he might be a release, he is nonetheless linked to historical disasters. Again, readers are faced with the Real in the form of another ambiguity. Death is a "Real" occurrence that may either appear "amiable" or monstrous. When confronted with the "Real" of their own death, readers are also faced with the question of the nature of death. What will it be like? While Death is a kinder and gentler figure in this work than in others, readers must still contend with the question of what and when the actual experience will be. The unsettled nature of Death coupled with the certainty that he will inevitably visit everyone is a final ambiguity that also haunts the reader at the end of the novel.

The ambiguous resolution of *The Book Thief* works to ensure that the story will remain with the reader. Questions are posed throughout the novel and rather than resolving them at the conclusion, they are implied to be unresolvable. If Death, a nearly omniscient narrator hovering

over the events is unable to make sense of human nature or of the Holocaust, the reader will also struggle to make sense of these ideas. However, Žižek conveys that the hauntings of the “Real” inevitably follow disruption and repression of the “Real” (17). The Real exists outside the symbolic order and any brush with it will destabilize the society and interpretations of the world that are built on that order. *The Book Thief* destabilizes the symbolic order by problematizing the assumption that the majority of humanity is basically kind and socially acceptable (Žižek 17). This destabilization is caused by the intrusion of the Real of death and historical tragedies, such as the Holocaust. Beyond disrupting the order, however, Zusak also assures that the Holocaust and mortality remain partially unresolved by refusing to offer stable interpretations of the significance of each event. Instead, Zusak hints at possible means of understanding both Death and the Holocaust. He suggests that Death may be kind, that there may be an afterlife, and that victims can potentially recover from the Holocaust. However, a final, stable interpretation of these two realities is not provided. Žižek suggests, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, that in order to cope with intrusions of the Real, one strategy is to reduce those intrusions to “nightmarish hallucination” (Žižek 19). Zusak, in maintaining the incomprehensibility of these events assures that they remain monstrous and unnatural to humanity while also assuring that they are not forgotten.

CONCLUSION

After the dust from the Himmel Street bombing settles, Liesel is left with the question of how to reconcile herself to the tragedy and move on with her life. However, rather than moving past the event, Liesel's response is to continue grappling with it. Liesel wears the dust from the Himmel Street bombing for several days and relives the misfortune and loss through her writing (Zusak 546). Liesel's response suggests that the only way to face this tragedy is to spend time in that memory. Her approach mirrors that which is outlined by Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi (2004) in "The Foundations of Posttraumatic Growth: New Considerations." Calhoun and Tedeschi argue that rumination is one possible means of posttraumatic growth (101), and Liesel herself relies on this method as a means of confronting the loss of her adopted family and friends. Like Liesel, young adult readers are encouraged to continue to grapple with mortality as illuminated by the Holocaust. Zusak does not resolve the issue of the Holocaust or mortality in the novel. Instead, he uses Death's voice to pose questions throughout the narrative that encourage the reader to confront complexities in human nature and the causation of the Holocaust. These are dark messages to convey in a novel geared primarily toward teens and young adults, but in the darkness of the narrative, Death is the guide that illuminates the obscurity of these events. He accomplishes this purpose by sympathizing with the reader and characters in the novel, and by endeavoring to help the reader understand the nature of death. He also attempts to understand humanity himself; his own perplexity regarding human nature creates solidarity between Death and the reader as both endeavor to engage with the complexities of the Holocaust and mortality. However, Death accomplishes more than solidarity with reader in this dark narrative. His personality and interests as the narrator frame the reader's understanding of

the novel. The complexity of Death's characterization suggests that the intended impact on the reader is equally complex.

Analysis of *The Book Thief* using Žižek arguments about the Real and White's analysis of the relationship between history and the present begins a discussion of the impact of personifications of death in young adult's literature. Both are strong tools for analyzing Liesel's response to the tragedy and Death's role in helping readers, particularly young adults, confront mortality and the Holocaust. Žižek's theory supports an analysis of the composition and disruption of realities for *The Book Thief's* characters and readers. At the same time, White's parallel analysis of history's relationship to the present emphasizes the critical importance of Zusak's depiction of the Holocaust. The Holocaust's portrayal in literature influences cultural memory; literature offers an array of perspectives and encourages readers to analyze and empathize with the experience of this particular time and place. In "Bearing Witness: Second Generation Literature of the 'Shoah,'" Alan Berger (1990) argues that "The Holocaust remains a deep and impenetrable mystery, the source of much pain and uncertainty....Second generation writings reflect...not only the fact that the Holocaust happened, but that its effects continue to be felt" (59-60). While Berger speaks within the context of Jewish literature on the Holocaust and he is referencing how that Holocaust continues to shape Jewish identities, his argument is relevant in the relationship between *The Book Thief* and its readers as well. While literary representations of the Holocaust continue to influence Jewish identities, they also have the potential to shape other readers by depicting this event from various perspectives. Literary portrayals of the Holocaust also have the potential to impact readers by encouraging them to analyze Holocaust causation. Although, as Berger suggests, the Holocaust does and should remain "mysterious" (59) and beyond reconciliation, it nonetheless requires critical thought.

The Book Thief offers a portrayal of death and the Holocaust that encourages readers to continue to grapple with these two events. It directly exposes readers to problematic, frequently repressed truths as Death abruptly asserts that the reader will die and graphically depicts the death and suffering caused by the Holocaust. *The Book Thief's* illumination of problematic truths embedded in culture prompts questions regarding how the introduction (or reintroduction) of these truths influence the reader. Both Žižek and White lend themselves to the analysis as both examine how reality is constructed, disrupted and how that disruption haunts present reality. Žižek writes in *Welcome to the Desert* that “the ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (5-6). The world as we perceive it (what Žižek calls “reality”) is fragile and can be destabilized by intrusions of the Real (the pre-symbolic, pre-ideological void). When the Real intrudes, individuals must determine how to respond to the frightening dissonance. Death guides readers’ responses to this disruption. Analyzing Death’s characterization provides insights into the reality that evolves after the intrusion of the Real. Death both shapes readers’ conceptualization of death and the collective memory of the Holocaust.

Death personified is a frequent literary tool, appearing throughout time in novels such as George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911), and a variety of other works. However, in spite of its frequency, it receives relatively little attention from literary critics. This device demands additional attention because it symbolizes a major element of human existence. Zusak’s own incorporation of this literary device is particularly significant as it is tied to the historical tragedy of the Holocaust. How Death frames this tragedy will influence how the reader remembers it. Through his narration, Death confronts the reader

with a series of problematic truths: the Holocaust, mortality, and the thread of evil that winds through history and seems to be sewn into human nature. Analyzing this device in other contexts will provide insights into how such personifications impact readers and influence their realities.

The Book Thief exposes readers to elements of the Real that are uncomfortable, but ultimately also enables the reader to transition into a new and deeper reality. This transition is facilitated by the mediating figure of Death. More than a plot device to carry the story forward, more than a tool for relaying the most grotesque moments of suffering during the Holocaust, Death in *The Book Thief* is a tool for promoting personal growth. Within the novel, readers face the monstrous Real of suffering, decay, mortality and the complexity of human nature as it appears in this moment in history. However, through Death, readers' realities are reconstructed in a manner that fosters growth. The novel does not attempt to remove the monstrous elements of the Real—it does not try to help the reader understand or reconcile with them or with this historical moment. However, it does encourage readers to continue grappling with them. These elements of the Real are not forgotten because they are made uncomfortable for the readers who are encouraged to engage with the darker, repressed truths of human existence.

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