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"Pain, Death, and Nazis: The Surprisingly Beautiful Function Death Plays as Narrator in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*,"

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"Pain, Death, and Nazis: The Surprisingly Beautiful Function Death Plays as Narrator in
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Introduction

Writers often reveal diverse aspects of humanity through symbols. For example, Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind* employs a train ride to Moscow to demonstrate the journey into adulthood while Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* uses glass to illustrate the fragility of the familial unit. Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*, however, uses more innovative symbols to demonstrate varying aspects of humanity. In particular, Zusak employs the symbol of death to explore an integral human experience—pain.

The Book Thief tells the poignant story of Liesel Meminger, a young, German girl coming of age in Nazi Germany. Curiously, the narrator of *The Book Thief* is an exhausted, overworked being who identifies himself as Death. Because Death resides as an eternal outsider looking into humanity, personified death possesses an outside viewpoint on human suffering. Through both Death's personal experiences and the event of death, Zusak exposes unique and surprising truths about pain. Death reveals three truths about humanity's anguish: pain exists universally; life, not death, causes this suffering; and agony ultimately brings strength.

Death proves that pain is a universal and essential characteristic of humanity through the idea of leftover humans, the death of Liesel's brother, Werner; the suffering Liesel's Jewish friend, Max; and Frau Ilsa Hermann's pain. Furthermore, through Jew parades and the suicide of Michael Holtzapfel, Death demonstrates that living, not death, causes pain. Moreover, despite the tragedy of suffering, Death also proves that pain ultimately makes one stronger by exploring Liesel's rejection of suffering; the death of Rudy, Liesel's best friend; and the death of Hans Hubermann, Liesel's beloved foster father. Zusak's use of death creates a rich and intriguing portrait that exposes humanity at its core and reveals one of the most innate experiences of being human—pain.

Pain is a Universal and Omnipresent Element of Living

THE LEFTOVER HUMANS

Death proves that suffering is an integral part of humanity. When Death speaks of leftover people, he demonstrates his complete knowledge of pain. One of the worst components of Death's job of carrying souls from their bodies is seeing "...the leftover humans, the survivors. They're the ones [he] can't stand to look at... (5)" because "they have punctured hearts... [and] beaten lungs" (5). Leftover connotes loneliness, desertion, and neglect. Most people will assume that the dead are the lonely ones. However, Death disputes that thought. Because the living have no alleviation from their suffering, the people who survive are actually the lonely, neglected ones. Ironically, the punctured lungs and broken hearts indicate death because punctured lungs cannot breathe and broken hearts cannot pump. When hearts and lungs are not working properly, the pain is unimaginable. Because all who live have these broken parts, every human shares this pain. Therefore, Death proves that because the living universally share brokenness and loneliness, suffering is an integral part of humanity.

THE DEATH OF WERNER

The death of Werner, Liesel's brother, further cements Death's belief that pain is an unavoidable part of living. Liesel's younger brother dies as a result of frigid temperatures on the train journey to their new foster parents' home in Molching, Germany. Every night, the pain of her brother's death causes Liesel to "wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets" (36) from a nightmare about her brother's death. Swimming while drowning symbolizes life—a painful struggle that ultimately ends with death. Liesel's dream further demonstrates this innateness of human suffering because Werner's death haunts only the living Liesel. Werner does not share the agony because he is not living, and therefore, not required to experience suffering.

Liesel's mother also carries the pain of Werner with her. Immediately after Werner's burial, "...[Liesel's] mother carried the memory of him, slung on her shoulder. She dropped him. She saw his feet and legs and body slap the platform...She picked him up and continued walking..." (25). Death's poignant description of a painful memory indicates that the living carry burdens of horrible memories that they sometimes forget but always remember eventually. Contrary to humanity's perceived distaste for pain, Liesel's mother actually wants to remember, despite any suffering that comes from remembrance. She immediately remembers after she forgets because she loved her son and feels a duty to honor him. Her continued walking demonstrates that Liesel's mother will carry the burden and anguish of Werner's death forever. As one can clearly see, the death of Werner shows the ever-present nature of pain in human lives.

MAX

Death also demonstrates how living comes with omnipresent pain through the example of Max. Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster parents, secretly hide a young Jew, Max, in their basement. In order to survive, Max had to leave his entire family and has no idea where they are or if they are alive. When Max expresses to Liesel the pain of losing his family, Death bluntly states Max's condition: "Living was living. The price was guilt and shame" (208). The use of the word "price" and short sentences indicate the brutal simplicity of Death's truth. Life has a cost, and pain and guilt are the price. Death's straightforwardness also implies that Death does not believe that life is worth the agony of guilt and shame. Humans assume that the pain of life is better than the mystery of death; however, the ever constant nature of suffering resides only in the living.

As Liesel and Max talk about their suffering and loss of loved ones, a particularly emotional dialogue occurs:

"...The Jew: '...I see myself turning around 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 her, on the way.'

The girl and the Jew, together: 'Ja—yes'" (220)

These short sentences in the dialogue indicate a plainness and unity that pain brings to each living being. The use of the girl and the Jew, rather than Liesel and Max, indicates

the universality of pain where all people embark on a journey where inescapable suffering and grief will ultimately occur.

FRAU ILSA HERMANN

Another character that possesses great, innate grief because of the death of a loved one is Frau Ilsa Hermann. Frau Hermann's son, Johann, died during World War One "parceled up in barbed wire like a giant crown of thorns" (145). In the use of the crown of thorns, Zusak makes Johann a type of Christ, a martyr who takes away pain. However, in a perverse reversal, Johann becomes a martyr who brings pain, especially to his mother. This ironic reversal demonstrates Death's rejection that life is innately happy. Death further states, "I untangled [Johann] and carried him out" (145). Death untangles this suffering man from the pain of not only his physical ailments, but also the pain associated with life. Frau Ilsa Hermann, however, cannot unravel herself from the pain of life like Death disentangled Johann. In fact, the death of Johann eternally haunts Ilsa. In order to perversely pay for the death of Johann, Ilsa purposely leaves the window of her library open every day to the cold air to induce self-suffering. This vicious attempt to bring outside pain to veil her original suffering clearly demonstrates that the whole of humanity must cope with anguish every day. Obviously, though the pain of living leaves through death, those that death affects but does not kill feel even more agony.

Frau Hermann also becomes a symbol for the way that constant pain can affect the living. Liesel, when she first sees Ilsa Hermann, says that Ilsa was "a woman with startled eyes, hair like fluff, and the posture of defeat" (42). Those who experience horrible suffering and lack strength to endure it are scared, feeble, and broken. Liesel later describes Ilsa as "transparent...but there" (368). This imagery creates a woman almost deathly in nature. This skeleton-like woman creates a skewed notion of death and life. Those, like Ilsa, who let pain rule them lose life's vitality and become death-like. Paradoxically, the constant agony of life makes one like a corpse. As one can clearly see, through leftover humans, the death and loss of family, and the deathlike nature of Ilsa Hermann, the symbol of death demonstrates that pain is a universal and omnipresent element of living.

Life, Not Death, Causes Pain

THE JEW PARADES

In addition to the fact that pain is an innate part of living, Death also reveals a further truth. Contrary to common sense, which creates death as bad and life as good, life, not death, is responsible for human suffering. One of the most poignant episodes to illustrate the kindness of death and the cruelty of humans occurs during a "Jew parade," a march of Jews through a town to a concentration camp. Death describes those marching in the parade: "...[T]he Jews [came] down like a catalog of colors....They would greet me like their last true friend, with bones like smoke and their souls trailing behind" (391). The idea of a catalog of colors for death gives a sort of mournful individuality to the dying Jews, as if they are important to Death. To the Nazi's, however, these Jews are worth nothing. The Jews greet Death like a true friend, which shows Death's ultimate kindness toward each of the newly deceased. The bones of smoke represent the last of the Jews' life that death has almost extinguished and the

ephemerality of life. The souls trailing behind indicate that the Jews have accepted the great possibility of death and exist now in a state between life and death.

To further prove that life causes pain, Death uses images of life to show the Jews' withering states. He says, "The dirt was molded to them.... Stars of David were plastered to their shirts and misery was attached to them as if assigned. 'Don't forget your misery...' In some cases it grew on them like a vine" (392). Dirt and vines, both signs of life, actually choke out the living, which suggests that death does not destroy these people; the living do. The dirt decays the Jews. Furthermore, the Stars of David, once symbols of pride, now symbolize vines of shame that entangle, and suffocate the Jews. Obviously, life causes the pain and suffering, not death.

To further demonstrate that pain comes through life, Death describes an incident during the Jew parade. As the Jews walk, one man falls. Liesel believes he is dead. Suddenly Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster-father, runs to him, "[holds] his hand out and [presents] a piece of bread, like magic" (394). The juxtaposition of a simple piece of bread to the extravagance of magic indicates how cruelly life has treated this man. The Jew's gratitude, however, is short-lived. Nazi soldiers whip the Jew six times; Hans, four times. Death assesses this situation: "If nothing else, the old man would die like a human. Or at least with the thought that he was a human. Me? I'm not so sure if that's such a good thing" (395). Clearly, people like the Nazis are what Death loathes most about humans. When Death demonstrates his mixed-feelings about humanity, one can see from an external standpoint how cruel life—especially human life—can be.

Furthermore, during another parade of Jews, Death again expounds that life causes suffering. After Max leaves the Hubermann's house out of fear that the Nazis will find him and punish not only himself but also the Hubermann's, Liesel sees him during a Jew Parade. She runs into the crowd of Jews to find him despite the soldiers' attempts to keep her away. In a heartbreaking moment during their brief and chaotic meeting Max looks at Liesel and thinks to himself: "A great day to die. A great day to die, like this" (512). When Max's painful burdens lessen because he sees Liesel again, Max feels that it is his time to die because his suffering is gone. Max has suffered much in his life, and he obviously believes that one more small glimpse of happiness will be enough to make his life complete. He now feels ready to die. Undoubtedly, the life Max leads is full of human-caused pain and he feels his escape from pain will be death.

Furthermore, although Death admires Max and Liesel's love and gratitude for each other, Death is not as enamored with other humans because they make life painful. Death describes the bystanders who watch Max and Liesel's exchange as "statues with beating hearts. Perhaps bystanders in the latter stages of a marathon" (515). Death's utter tone of distaste for these humans who only watch others suffer proves that Death's esteem for Liesel and her friends and family are the exception, not the rule. Like these average people who do not help those in need, no one watching a marathon actually helps the exhausted marathon runners. Death's distaste for most humans stems from the fact that these people are alive and can do something in their life, but they choose to do nothing. These "statues with beating hearts" are not living according to Death because humans seem to not take advantage of their living. People often do nothing for others despite the hardships of life. Because they do nothing, life becomes hard and painful.

MICHAEL HOLTZAPFEL

Another way the living cause the pain while Death eliminates the pain occurs when Michael Holtzapfel commits suicide. Michael returns from Stalingrad after injuring his arm and witnessing the death of his brother, Robert. According to Death, Robert's "...legs were blown off at the shins and he died with his brother watching in a cold, stench-filled hospital" (459). The fact that the legs were blown off rather than another body part indicates a lack of movement and journey. Just as Robert cannot walk and eventually dies, Michael never can move past the fact that he lived while Robert did not and eventually kills himself from the guilt of living. Michael suffers because he is lives.

The suffering from living, however, is only half the reason for Michael Holtzapfel's suicide. The other reason Michael wants an escape from life's agony occurs during an air raid soon after he returns to Molching. Still mourning the loss of Robert, Frau Holtzapfel, Michael and Robert's mother, refuses to move from her house to the bomb shelter after she hears the air raid sirens. Michael hesitates to move to the bomb shelter because he does not want to leave his mother, but eventually departs from his home to seek shelter. Ashamed of abandoning his mother, Michael whispers to himself over and over again "I should have stayed..." (487). This repetition indicates that he not only should have stayed with his mother, but that he also feels he should have died with Robert. Death states, "[Michael's] voice was close to noiseless, but his eyes were louder than ever. They beat furiously in their sockets" (487). The reversal of different sensory organs indicates the chaos of Michael's mind. He wants to switch places with his dead brother and his broken mother in order to take their pain, just as the eyes took the place of the mouth; however, this reversal is a perversion of the body. Michael asks Rosa Hubermann his dire question: "Tell me, Rosa, how [my mother] can sit there ready to die while I still want to live?'... 'Why do I want to live? I shouldn't want to, but I do'" (487). This dire questioning demonstrates Michael's true suffering and pain. He does not hurt because he wants to die. He hurts because he wants to live. The irony of this statement shows the true nature of life's suffering. Pain comes in the most unexpected ways for the most horrible and ironic reasons. Even though his mother survived the air raid, Michael's want to live, rather than the want to die, drives him to his grave.

Death describes the suicide. "He was hanging from one of the rafters in a laundry....Another human pendulum....Michael Holtzapfel jumped from the chair as if it were a cliff" (502). The comparison from a body swinging from the rafters to a human pendulum demonstrates the pain of living. Oftentimes, life swings from pain to happiness. This constant switching of emotions for Michael from happiness that he lived to guilt that he survived ultimately drove Michael to suicide. The simile of a chair to a cliff shows the finality of his situation, his feeling that nothing can be done to save him, and, surprisingly, his courage for jumping from what seemed to him a cliff. Life and the want to live were the true reasons Michael killed himself. As one can clearly see from the Jew parades and Michael Holtzapfel's suicide, life, not death, causes suffering.

Pain Ultimately Makes One Stronger

MAX'S STRUGGLE

As much as Death explores the pain of living as being completely terrible, Death ultimately admires the strength that comes from human suffering. During a particularly

harsh winter, Max, who lives in the basement, becomes deathly ill. Death, when he comes to take Max's life, feels "an immense struggle against [his] weight" (318) as Max attempts to fight Death. Recalling that instance, Death says, "I withdrew, and with so much work ahead of me, it was nice to be fought off in that dark little room. I even managed a short, closed-eyed pause of serenity before I made my way out" (318). Max has to suffer not only through this illness, but also throughout his entire life and this pain gives him strength to live and endure more pain. Though ironic that Death enjoys allowing Max to live, Death obviously admires humanity's strength. Clearly, Max demonstrates that strength comes through suffering.

LIESEL REJECTS SUFFERING

Moreover, through Liesel's ultimate rejection of pain, Zusak proves that pain's purpose is to provide people power. When Liesel visits Isla, Liesel often has visions of Werner. The pain that comes from the deaths of Werner and Johann bind the two book-lovers together and thus open a more sensitive awareness of Werner for Liesel. After several months of reading in Frau Hermann's library, Ilsa suddenly cancels the washing service that Rosa Hubermann, Liesel's foster mother, provides for the mayor each week. Furious at Frau Hermann, Liesel screams, "It's about time you faced the fact that your son is dead...He's dead and it's pathetic that you sit here shivering in your own house to suffer for it. You think you're the only one?" (262). Painfully, Liesel thrusts her frustration, suffering, and grief about her dead brother onto Ilsa. Finally becoming tenacious through her suffering, Liesel realizes that one can grow from pain and that Ilsa Hermann is wrong to make herself suffer. Suddenly, Liesel has a vision that Werner is beside her: "Her brother was next to her. He whispered for her to stop [screaming], but he...was dead, and not worth listening to....She shoved the boy down the steps, making him fall" (263). This vivid vision of her dead brother demonstrates how vicious and alive grief becomes, but also how powerful Liesel is. She is able to push away her agony like she pushes the vision of Werner down the steps of Ilsa's home. Liesel's rejection of Werner, suggests that she has become stronger than Ilsa, who always embraces her pain. Werner could rule Liesel's world as Johann rules Frau Hermann, but Liesel refuses to let her pain, however innate and constant, dominate her life. Liesel realizes that she has experienced this pain in order to make her strong. Now that the suffering has fulfilled its purpose, she can move forward with her life. Even though Liesel undoubtedly still feels the pain, it has no control over her anymore. Clearly suffering makes one stronger.

To contrast to Liesel's new-found power, Ilsa becomes a foil to Liesel that shows the effects of pain on someone who does not desire strength to endure. Still angry at Ilsa for cancelling the laundry service and ruining their friendship, Liesel throws Frau Hermann's parting gift, a book called *The Whistler*, at the door of Ilsa's mansion. In response to the bitter gesture, "after a miscarried pause, the mayor's wife edged forward and picked up the book. She was battered and beaten up....Blood leaked from her nose and licked at her lips. Her eyes had blackened" (253). Miscarried connotes a death before life, a mistake or a mishap that leads to pain, suffering, and death. Liesel and Frau Hermann share much in common because both of their loved ones die prematurely and the women constantly suffer for it. Liesel can defeat Ilsa because Liesel has grown strong from her suffering, and she can finally see Ilsa for who she truly is—a

broken woman who lets pain rule her life. Obviously, Liesel proves that pain, if one can rise above it and not give it control, can ultimately make one stronger.

RUDY

Rudy's death further instills the fact that pain ultimately causes strength. Rudy, Liesel's best friend and romantic prospect, dies in a silent air raid. Liesel falls asleep while writing in the basement the night of the air raid that kills Rudy. Because she sleeps in the basement that night, and bombs cannot penetrate deep enough to hurt her, she is one of the only survivors of the air raid on her street. When Liesel emerges from the rubble, the first person she notices dead is Rudy. Unable to accept that Rudy is dead, she cries, "Rudy, please, wake up, Goddamn it, wake up, I love you. Come on, Rudy, come on...don't you know I love you, wake up, wake up, wake up" (535). Clearly, Liesel feels immense pain at the loss of her best friend. The repetition of wake up indicates her constant love for Rudy. This pain at finding the boy she loved dead might have destroyed Liesel, but Liesel's acclimation to pain keeps her strong. Death speaks in awe of Liesel's strength when finding Rudy: "...she was able to tear herself from the ground. It amazes me what humans can do, even when streams are flowing down their faces and they stagger on, coughing, and searching, and finding" (536). Humanity seems always to be discovering even if the findings bring pain. Liesel is an example of the best humans—strong beings who forever endure. Liesel's strength comes from her pain and the consistency of it. Thus, Liesel's reaction to Rudy's death proves that pain makes one strong.

HANS HUBERMANN

Perhaps the most poignant expression of the power pain ultimately gives humans is Hans Hubermann's death. Hans dies in his bed in the same air raid that kills Rudy. Hans has experienced great pain throughout his life such as his broken relationship with his son, his suffering while fighting in the war, his poverty, and his worry about his family's and Max's safety. However, Hans's struggles in life make him a wiser, stronger individual. Death remarks about Hans passing: "He was tall in the bed and I could see the silver through his eye-lids. His soul sat up. It met me. Those kinds of souls always do—the best ones....Those souls are always light because more of them have been put out" (531, 532). Because Hans sits up tall to meet Death, Hans clearly possesses strength and pride in who he is and how he has lived his life. The silver in his eyes symbolizes Hans's value and goodness. Furthermore, Death's tone in this passage indicates his admiration and respect for Hans. Clearly, Hans demonstrates his strength by meeting Death as an equal. Hans has no fear of death because he has become powerful through his suffering. As one can clearly see, pain ultimately becomes strength.

Conclusion

While examining the question, "To what effect does Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* use death to explore human pain?" one can see that Death provides a viewpoint to discover certain truths about human suffering. Using various authorial techniques, death in *The Book Thief* proves that pain is an integral and constant element in humans; people, not death, cause the pain; and pain ultimately makes people stronger. Death sums up human suffering perfectly when he says, "That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or

comprehend—what humans are capable of” (25). Perhaps one will never truly know the complete nature and purpose of pain, but a completely foreign perception helps one discover truth about suffering and ultimately allows one to change pain into a crucial necessity for humanity—strength.

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