

CONCEPT ANALYSIS

THE BOOK THIEF BY MARKUS ZUSAK



PURPOSE: The purpose of this strategy is to give teachers a guideline so that they may effectively teach and understand: (1) the purpose of the author, (2) examination of new ideas, (3) analyzing of problems and possible solutions, (4) agreement or disagreement with the arguments presented, and (5) identification of major teaching themes and central messages within *The Book Thief*. The concept analysis utilizes a teacher's problem solving and decision making skills, allows them to consider how to approach a text from varying perspectives, how to create interest in a story situation, and how to connect the text to student lives, priorities and values.

ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS: *The Book Thief* is split into eleven sections: a prologue, nine parts (which are further split into chapters) and an epilogue. And although Death narrates the entire book, he only mentions himself when he interacts in some way with Liesel Meminger, the Book Thief. Death narrates the story, but part of the organization that is set up is that occasionally Death jumps in (always set off by asterisks and bold lettering) and makes an observation or tells us the future outcome of the action at present. This commentary from Death, once understood, can be used as a great tool for foreshadowing and prediction. The narrative isn't told in a complete linear fashion; it starts with the future and flashes back for most of the story—although it occasionally bounces back to the present that Death is in.

Teach students how to navigate with Death's narration—consider the prologue, Death's inserted comments throughout the narration, and the timeline that flashes between the storyline of Liesel's life and the present time that Death is in.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

THEMES

THE IMPORTANCE AND POWER OF WORDS: At the burial of her brother, Liesel finds *The Gravedigger's Handbook* in the snow and picks it up—it is her first real interaction with a book, and her first act of thievery. As Liesel begins to learn to read she quickly develops a hunger for more books. As she acquires these books, through the process of stealing them and the process of developing reading skills, Liesel learns the power that words can have with influencing people and persuading people to follow you. In school she learns how you are treated when you don't know how to read, and in the bomb shelter basement she learns the effect words can have on others—for good or bad. Finally, Liesel learns the incredible power of words when she understands the impact of the words of one man, Adolf Hitler, and his book, *Mein Kampf*.

ABANDONMENT VS. LOVE: Liesel feels abandoned by her mother and by the death of her brother. She doesn't understand why her mother had to give her

away and why her brother had to leave her at such a crucial time. She fights to not abandon Max even after he had to go away—she shows this by marching beside him through town. Yet, there is a discrepancy of when the abandonment is out of love and necessity, or out of disdain. Leisel struggles with this as she tries to contact her mother through letters and as she fights the guilt of relief after Max leaves and the Gestapo don't come.

GUILT: There is an incredible amount of guilt in this novel. It trails Hans throughout his life because his life was spared in France during World War I and Erik Vandenburg was killed instead. Hans feels guilty because of this and tries to channel his guilt into helping others. Max feels constantly guilty about the danger he puts the Hubermann family in. And Leisel feels guilty after Rudy dies for some of the ways she treated him. This guilt is a powerful emotion—leading the characters to doing things they wouldn't otherwise do.

DEATH: Death is the narrator. The world is at war for a second time and there are millions of deaths all over Europe. Death is extremely close to Leisel throughout the novel: through her brother, Max and Rudy. And death seems to be following Max very closely as Hitler attempts to wipe out all of the Jews. Death, as narrator and as an action, permeates the book from all sides—forcing its characters to deal with and try to understand what is it and why it's there.

MOTIFS

COLORS: The presence of color is significant throughout the book. Death paints vibrant pictures with colors of red and blue and black and grey—everything to him shows a color. Every time someone dies there is color that he describes—somehow giving more meaning to how the person died or the attitude they were in when they died.

SETTING: The novel takes place in Molching, Germany (a town on the outskirts of Munich)—more specifically on Himmel Street. Himmel translates into Heaven and “whoever named Himmel Street certainly had a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure as hell wasn't heaven, either” (26). Himmel street is where the Hubermanns live—along with Leisel—and pretty much all of the story takes place on or around this street. The story begins at the beginning of World War II and continues through the entire war, following the progress of the war through Leisel's and Death's point of view. The Hubermanns are poor, but they scrape by: just the same as their neighbors—it's a hard time for everyone.



FORSHADOWING:

****A SMALL ANNOUNCEMENT***
ABOUT RUDY STEINER

He didn't deserve to die the way he did." (241)

All of the foreshadowing in this novel comes from the side comments of the narrator, Death. As he tells the story he inserts little comments that either tell us directly what is going to happen (but not how it will get to that point), or he gives comments that turn out to have significant foreshadowing that you don't realize until you reach the point he was referencing.

Another reference Death makes to what is to take place in the book is about him coming to visit the people of Munich. You must remember that he is Death:

"Yes, the boss was at my shoulder.

"Get it done, get it done."

The bombs were coming—and so was I." (335)

Death is an omniscient narrator who is telling the story from his memory—of this small girl, deemed as a 'book thief,' who he seemed to come into contact with often and whose actions intrigued him. Death's inserted foreshadowing keeps a lot of the suspense in the novel. Comments such as the above about Rudy's death come at the most unexpected times and keeps the reader eager to find out what happens in the rest of the book.

Death gives us an unbiased view on many characters and shows us how many of the events that take place relate to or cause future events—helping us make the connections we need to understand the complete story of the book thief.

POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE:



As mentioned before, this novel is narrated by Death himself and is told from his point of view. Death spends his time collection humans as they die: this puts him in some very interesting situations sometimes. Wars are busy times for him and he continues to say that he doesn't understand how humans handle the disappointments of life or why they do the things they do to each other. Death struggles to understand humans and is disgusted with how they behave a lot of the time—so selfish, uncaring and mean. This is one reason why the Book Thief stands out to him so much—she, because of the tragic experiences of her life, is different from a lot of humans.

Death starts out by describing who he is and he introduces the main character, the book thief: Leisel Meminger. He narrates what is going on in the world at that time and the story unfolds as we follow Leisel throughout her childhood years. Death is usually uninvolved with the story—but he highlights the times that he remembers coming into some sort of contact with Leisel throughout her childhood.

TONE/VOICE: Despite the troubled times that Leisel is growing up in during WWII in Munich, Germany, the tone of the novel is, for the most basic part, simply a narrative of a girl's life. Often, at the more climatic parts, there is an overall nervous tone. This results from hiding the Jew in the Hubermann's basement, the bomb raids, Papa and Rudy being drafted into the war, and the other nervous events surrounding Nazi Germany. Everything is cautious and troubled—adding to a suspenseful feeling that pervades the novel. The matter-of-fact voice that Death maintains—not allowing emotion to obstruct the story he has to tell—allows more of the feeling of what it was like during this time to enter the novel: cautious, nervous, and filled with a sense of duty (but 'duty to whom?' seems to be a continuing question).

IRONY: The personality portrayed by death in the novel is ironic. We often see Death as a scary character, perhaps an unreliable narrator; but in this novel Death is simply someone who is doing the job appointed to him. He is not someone to fear and he is certainly reliable in his narration of the story.

Another source of irony in the novel comes from the numerous bombing raids that happen throughout the book—where it turns out they were simply warnings. Yet the one time it really counted, there was no warning—and Leisel was kept safe in the basement of her house, which was deemed too shallow to use in the first place.

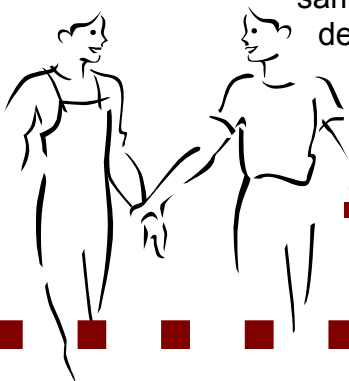
Another source of irony in the book revolves around Leisel's stealing of books. The first book she steals has an ironic title: *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. And the subsequent books that she steals have something to do with rising up against the people that rule over you. Lastly, Leisel's own attempt to write a book is what saves her life.



AFFECTIVE ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK: The book takes place during WWII—something all of the students should have studied (or at least hear of) by this point. As there is with any war, there is a lot of death. Death is something that all people will have some sort of experience with in their lives. You can discuss how:

- The issue of death: The student's opinion of death is affected by having a character of Death as the narrator. Does it cause them to look at death the same? Differently? What has shaped our view and opinion of death? Is it culture? Experience?

- The issue of beauty: How do we find beauty during hard times? How does Leisel find beauty? How does this affect her happiness despite such hard times? Can beauty always be found?



- The issue of friendship: In the book we see amazing friendships. Hans Hubermann's life was saved by a good friend in WWI. He continued to be a good friend by hiding this man's son, Max, in his basement—ultimately saving his life. Leisel and Rudy have a strong friendship throughout the story—helping each other through some very hard times. Leisel is an amazing friend to Max—caring for him in ways that no one else was able to. How are can we be friends like this? What instances in our lives do we need friends like that? Or be friends like that? What sort of difference can the friends you chose make in your life?

VOCABULARY ISSUES: There are some passages in this book where the vocabulary does get a bit complex. Words are so crucial to the message of this novel—so the vocabulary of the novel often carries a heavy load with it. The language is incredibly effective in its descriptions. The best way to scaffold the language of this book is to point out the importance of the description in the language—appreciating this helps the fluency and makes the language come easier.

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BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: One of the biggest things that need to be scaffolded to help students understand the deeper parts of the novel is to help them understand the effect Hitler had on Germany. They need to understand the importance and influence of words. They need to understand what Hitler was doing in Germany and what WWII was all about.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY: There may be circumstances with students in your class where you need to be sensitive to experiences they've had in their life (especially with death). However, the issue regarding friendship: everyone needs friends, and they need good friends. That discussion can be very crucial to helping those in your classes who: a) maybe aren't hanging out with the



Butler, BYU, 2008

best crowd or b) need friends in the classroom. Hopefully a more accepting environment can be created by the understanding that everyone needs people to help them through life.

This is an issue that many students will relate to and understand as you approach *The Book Thief*.

GENDER ISSUES: The Holocaust dealt with a lot of stereotypical issues of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc...so it will be important to talk about those issues and scaffold understanding of why Hitler did what he did and how we don't do things like that. But in relation to gender issues present in *The Book Thief*, the book generally casts gender roles with the classic responsibilities. Many of the characters follow their classic gender roles, however, in the Hubermann family, although Hans is the head, Rosa is technically in charge. With her loud voice and commanding personality she pulls the family through some of the most difficult times. Talk with the students about the role and strength of Rosa Hubermann and how essential her personality is to their survival. As Death puts it, "One thing about Rosa Hubermann: She's the right woman for a crisis."

CENTRAL QUESTION: Markus Zusak presents the issue of how humans can do the most appalling and beautiful things and he shows this through Death's eyes. So Zusak's pervading question is: What are humans capable of? And why do they do what they do?

RESEARCH ISSUES/PROJECT IDEAS:

Book Reviews ~ As an alternative to a traditional book report students can write a book review. Have them read reviews from others first (either about *The Book Thief* or about another book just to get the style down) so they can get a feel for the style of a book review. An good example review is:

Stealing to Settle a Score With Life, by Janet Maslin. New York Times:
March 27, 2006

Write Your Own Book ~ Throughout the book Max and Liesel each write a book about their experiences. These books contain some of the most powerful messages of the text. Have the students remember a time when the power of someone else suppressed them or the powerful language of another threatened their freedom. It could be a bully or an older sibling. Or maybe it was a friend who blackmailed them. The memory doesn't have to be negative though. They could think of a time that the kind words of another helped life them up or when they said something nice to another—anything that they can write about that will display the role of powerful words in their own life. Then have the students imitate the books written in *The Book Thief*. They may illustrate and bind them however they like. Have them share their books with the class and collect them to make one larger class book that you keep in the class.

History Lesson ~ This book obviously brings up many issues about the Holocaust that students should understand to get a complete grasp on the novel. Have students get into groups and each group take an aspect of the Holocaust, whether it be Hitler's road to power, who was persecuted and how, or following the timeline of WWII. Have the students spend time researching what happened. Then make time for a memorial day where the students will present their findings and reflect on what happened. Have them come together and present a way that we can avoid having this happen in the future.

INFORMATION/FUNCTIONAL TEXTS:



Interview with the Author ~ Read interviews with the author to see what he has to say about the book and how he wrote it. The reader's guide (attached to the end of paperback edition of *The Book Thief*) contains an interview with Markus Zusak that reveals where is inspiration for Liesel came from and what he hopes readers will take away from his book.

A Reader's Guide: The Book Thief by Markus Zusak ~ In this reader's guide (found at the end of the book) there is a section with discussion questions that really focus your attention on the issues and themes of the text. Just by reading the questions your understanding and overall focus on the message of the text is greatly enhanced.

Other Related Titles and Sources:

In My Hands: Memoirs of a Holocaust Rescuer by Irene Gut Opdyke, with Jennifer Armstrong.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum www.ushmm.org

Jewish Virtual Library www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

Provides a Jewish encyclopedia with articles about the different events in the book (book burnings, marches, etc...)

Although these aren't necessarily informational (they're fiction), they give addition perspectives on the issues of the book:

Milkweed by Jerry Spinelli

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas by John Boyne

Tunes for Bears to Dance To by Robert Cormier

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl



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