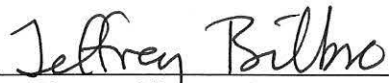


**Literacy in *The Book Thief*:
Complicated Matters of People, Witnessing, Death**

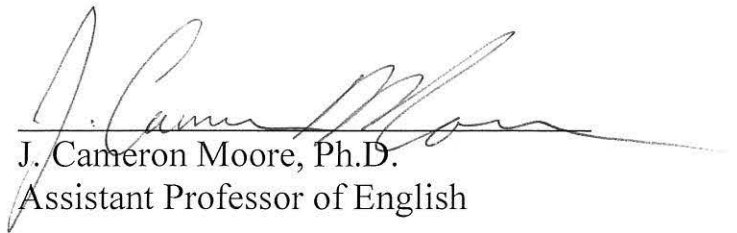
By
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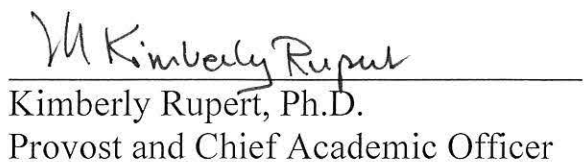
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Literacy in *The Book Thief*:

Complicated Matters of People, Witnessing, Death

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Dedicated to those who struggle and persevere with their research papers as I have

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Introduction to Holocaust Literature

Ever since Nazi Germany and its terrors, there have been many texts available to the world written by Holocaust survivors, and by the second generation of Holocaust survivors. Their writings are known as Holocaust literature, although the definition of Holocaust has expanded, as David Roskies and Naomi Diamant in their book, *Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry: Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*, define it as: “Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it” (Roskies and Diamant 2). Following Roskies and Diamant’s definition, most everyone in today’s world has read or watched something related to the Holocaust, even if the works have not been produced by those who experienced the Holocaust.

It seems it is not enough for just adults to know the horrors of the Holocaust, as middle and high school curriculum have Holocaust literature as part of the education system, and rightly so as the Holocaust is a huge part of world history. Although many of the Holocaust survivors’ texts are deemed too graphic for children and adolescents, there are some texts available for them to read and learn about the Holocaust, such as Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, and Hans Richter’s *Friedrich*.

David Russell in his essay “Reading the Shards and Fragments: Holocaust Literature for Young Readers” explores how Lowry, Richter, and Yolen’s texts “effectively highlight the horrors of the Holocaust for young adult readers” (Russell 1). Russell describes Lowry’s novel as a Resistance novel, “depicting the underground movements in which the Jews are typically helpless victims aided by ‘righteous Gentiles’” (Russell 1). *Number the Stars* focuses on a ten-year-old Danish girl, Annemarie, and the rescue of Danish Jews as Denmark resisted fiercely

against Nazi Germany. The novel follows how Annemarie matures as her family hides a Jewish family who are their friends and helps them escape Denmark to Sweden.

Richter's text, *Friedrich*, is a completely different story from Lowry's novel. Richter explores how Germans stood by and did not help the Jews at all during Nazi Germany. *Friedrich* looks into friendship between a Jew and a German, and how it progresses as Germany is ruled by the Nazis. The narrator, unnamed, grows up with another boy who is a Jew, and as their life goes on, the "oppression and injustice worsen" (Russell 3). The narrator becomes one of the complacent Germans who do not take any action to help and "lacks the courage of any conviction of right or wrong" (Russell 3). Near the end of the novel, the narrator's friend, Friedrich, dies in an air raid because his landlord denied any shelter for him, and nobody, not even the narrator who was his best friend from birth, offered him help.

Russell then goes on to outline Jane Yolen's novel *The Devil's Arithmetic*, which is a "time-shift fantasy, employing a story within a story" (Russell 4). Yolen's novel is described as the most graphic, as it follows the story of a Jewish girl, Hannah, who is transported back to Nazi Germany as a Jew known as Chaya. Hannah, as Chaya, experiences what the Jews have experienced in Nazi Germany. Because Hannah has learned about the history of the Holocaust, she tries to tell her new family and town about the dangers of the Nazi soldiers and the concentration camps, and nobody listens to her. Hannah herself has to go through and experience all the horrors of what the Jews had to go through, and she comes back to her present when she goes into the ovens. The significance of the story is not only the details of the Jewish experience of Nazi Germany, but also the "importance of remembering, which is at once our means of keeping the past alive and ensuring the continuity of our values into the future" (Russell 5).

Evidently adolescent Holocaust literature explores a variety of themes, such as coming of age during the time of Nazi Germany either as a Jew or as a Gentile helping Jews, the fact that there were Germans who had ties with Jews but did not take any action to help and stood by passively, and also the terrible experiences the Jews were suffering under the Nazi rule in concentration camps. The one theme adolescent Holocaust literature seems to fail to explore is how literacy helps those who are in Nazi Germany and the Jews. One such text that explores the theme of literacy and the power of literacy for Gentiles and Jews in Nazi Germany is *The Book Thief*.

How is *The Book Thief* Different?

In *The Book Thief*, there has been much focus on Death, the narrator by the reviewers of the book. Although Death as a narrator is fascinating because death is usually seen as an end to a story, not a beginning to a story, especially in the settings of World War II and Nazi Germany, it seems many other themes are overlooked, in particular, the theme of literacy. Literacy is a powerful, pervasive theme throughout the novel, especially in Liesel's life. One such instance when literacy demonstrates its power is when Liesel, her family, and her family friends are all hiding in the basement during an air raid. She opens up her book to read out loud as the basement begins to turn into a "warm chaos...swimming with humans" (Zusak 380). Reading out loud helps Liesel to keep her composure and detach herself from the chaos. Death states, "The book thief saw only the mechanics of the words—their bodies stranded on the paper, beaten down for her to walk on" (Zusak 381). Literacy provides Liesel comfort and consistency in the frenzy, as she is focused on just reading what the words are, rather than taking into account what the words mean. Although the language describing Liesel's act of reading out loud is violent, as the words

are “beaten down for her to walk on” it shows how Liesel is in control over the language. Thus, it demonstrates how Liesel and literacy have a relationship in which they influence each other, as literacy enables Liesel to read and gives her control, but at the same time Liesel is able to be in command of her own ability to read. Furthermore, Liesel’s act of reading out loud and composure catches the attention of others in the basement, and “By page three, everyone was silent but Liesel” (Zusak 381). Liesel’s reading gets to the point where “The youngest kids were soothed by her voice, and everyone else saw visions of the whistler running from the crime scene” (Zusak 381). In this moment, we see literacy is powerful as it enables Liesel to keep calm, and her calmness affects others to compose themselves as well in a time of catastrophe, to take their minds off of the idea of death and let their imagination run with the story they are listening to.

Nevertheless, literacy does far more than empowering Liesel to calm herself and in effect calm others down. Literacy transforms Liesel to become a circumstantial, or rhetorical, Jew, especially when seen in parallel with Max, a Jew by ethnicity and tradition. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “Jew” as “A person of Hebrew descent; one whose religion is Judaism; an Israelite” (“Jew, n.”)¹. Following the definition of “Jew” as given by the dictionary, then, Liesel is definitely not a Jew by ethnicity as neither her parents were Jews, nor did her family practice Judaism as a religion.

Another way to identify the term “Jew” is by looking towards history, specifically the Holocaust. Jews during Nazi Germany were “disenfranchised, then terrorized in anti-Jewish

¹ Although Jewish identity is hard to define, as Diamond states, “the questions of what constitutes identity in the case of Jews and what amounts to Jewishness are actually perplexing” (123), because *The Book Thief* is set in Nazi Germany, the definition of Jew, or Jewish identity, of the Holocaust, is followed throughout the essay.

riots...forced into the ghettos, their property seized, and finally were sent to concentration camps” (“Holocaust”). Liesel also does not go through the terror Jews had to go through, although her family is broken up by the Nazis due to her father having been a communist. Thus the question of how Liesel, who is not a Jew by ethnicity, nor does not experience what the Jews went through, becomes a rhetorical Jew, is raised.

However, there is more to the Jewish identity during the Holocaust than having been victimized by the Nazi regime. Language and literacy have always been a significant part of Jewish identity, especially as they are known as “people of the book.” Moshe Halbertal states in his book *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*, “The Jews became the ‘people of the book’ after a long history that defined the relationship of the community toward the canonized texts and established the diverse functions of texts” (Halbertal 10). After the Holocaust, the Jews’ relationship to literacy changed from being a way to connect with their canonized texts. Literacy became a significant tool as it enabled, and still continues to enable, the Holocaust Jews to stand as witnesses to their experiences and reconnect to the past, as “many Holocaust survivors also give testimony to the world, express their grief over lost ones, and attempt to restore singular identities of victims through names and personal voices” (Schindler) through writing. Not only did Holocaust survivors write, but Jews going through the Holocaust wrote as well. The Jewish identity is preserved and continued because of witnessing and remembering through literacy, as Zoe Waxman in *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* claims Jews did not want to be remembered only as passive victims, but also “for their attempts to document their experiences” (Waxman 31); thus literacy is significant to the Jews because it gives them a way to define the places they were in, who they are and cope with their traumas.

In the same way literacy plays a significant role in the definition of a Jew during and after the Holocaust by giving the Jews a way to speak, to resist against the Nazis, and a way to remember, literacy in *The Book Thief* gives those who are suppressed and powerless a way to stand for themselves and against the culture of Nazi Germany. Literacy's power to enable is exemplified by the way it affects Liesel's perspective on place, her coping with her emotional trauma, and defying Nazi culture during her short years in Molching. Lastly, literacy empowers Liesel to share her narratives, giving her a voice to witness against the culture of Nazi Germany. Thus, literacy transforms Liesel to become a rhetorical Jew as it gives her a way to stand up for herself when she is powerless and suppressed, especially when we see her circumstances in parallel with Max's circumstances.

Literacy's Creation of Communal Place

The effect of literacy on relationship to place is significant for characters such as Liesel and Max who have to relocate and are suppressed because they are not able to freely stand on their own until they know they have a safe place; they are at a loss of connection to a sanctuary, or a safe environment. Literacy does not have much influence for those who already have an established community because they already are in a place where they can be free to be themselves. A notable example is Hans. Hans is directly under the influence of literacy as he teaches Liesel how to read and write; however, we see no impact on his perspective of place due to his ability to read and write. When Hans teaches Liesel in the basement, the basement is just a place underground where he stores paint, with no significant meaning. Even when the basement becomes a hiding place for Max, Hans's perspective on the basement maybe changes because of the implications of hiding a Jew, rather than because of literacy. Hans is in a position in which he

already has an established community and a place in the community. He has a home, family, and is also known in the town. Hans does not need literacy in order to define who he is and where he is in relation to place.

In comparison to Hans, Liesel and Max have to make an effort to establish a relationship with the place they are in, especially because they had to move and are suppressed, Max as a Jew, and Liesel as an abandoned girl with nothing to her identity. Because Liesel and Max are suppressed and powerless, there is no true home or sanctuary for them, until literacy impacts their perspective of the place they are in. Max had to leave his home to hide in an empty storeroom, where he lived with fear and apprehension for two years. Then he moves to the Hubermanns' basement when his friend, Walter, who hid him, joins the army.

In the beginning of his new life at the Hubermanns', Max regards the Hubermanns' basement as a hiding place rather than a home. Max first rationalizes the basement as "the only place for him as far as he was concerned. Forget the cold and loneliness. He was a Jew, and if there was one place he was destined to exist, it was a basement or any other such hidden venue..." (Zusak 207). Max's thoughts demonstrate that as a Jew, any place for him to live is a place to hide and live as less than human. However, literacy changes his perspective on the basement and transforms it into a sanctuary. Susan Koprince outlines how the basement has changed for Max from a hiding place to a place of self-expression and almost a home in her article "Words from the Basement: Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*." Koprince elaborates how the concept of a basement changes due to the power of words. She opposes the "archetypal image of the cellar" which "Bachelard argues that this underground space embodies humanity's deepest fears and in some cases represents 'buried madness, walled-in tragedy' (20)" (Koprince 1). Koprince outlines how the basement, normally viewed as a dark, isolated place, transforms into somewhat of a

home for Max when he begins to write. She claims, “Max’s underground writings—which include personal reminiscences, political commentaries, illustrated stories, and disturbing drawings—serve as his deepest form of self-expression and a means of surviving his ordeal. Indeed, for Max, the basement ultimately becomes a kind of writer’s den or artist’s studio” (Koprince 1). Because of literacy, Max is able to creatively change the basement into a sanctuary where he can express himself freely by writing without life-threatening consequences.

Similar to the way Max’s perspective on the basement transforms because of his ability to read and write, literacy changes Liesel’s view of place, and for her too, specifically the basement. Literacy enters Liesel’s life when she picks up *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*. She picks it up not because she is entirely interested in the topic, but because it is linked to her brother’s death. The irony is she does not know how to read or write until Hans begins to teach her when he discovers the book by accident. The quest for Liesel’s literacy takes place everywhere—her bedroom, outside by the river, the kitchen, and finally the basement. Just like how the basement transforms for Max because of literacy, the basement transforms to become some sort of classroom once Hans begins to teach Liesel how to read and write on the walls of the basement with the oversupply of paint. Death describes how the basement wall “is recoated. A fresh cement page” (Zusak 72) with the different letters Liesel begins to write. The word “page” to describe the wall of the basement suggests how the basement for Liesel has changed to become a part of a book, or a story. Death’s description of how the basement wall has become a page demonstrates how powerful literacy is in transforming place for Liesel.

Furthermore, through both Liesel and Max’s abilities to read, the basement becomes a safe place of community for both Max and Liesel. Death describes how “Liesel would usually sit on some drop sheets. She would read while Max completed those crosswords...Max and Liesel

were held together by the quiet gathering of words” (Zusak 248). It seems the basement becomes a library for both Max and Liesel as “there was really only the noise of turning pages” (Zusak 248). Literacy plays a significant role in transforming the basement into a place of community where both Liesel and Max engage in activities that require reading and writing.

Coping Through Literacy

Not only does literacy transform the basement for Max and Liesel, giving them a safe place for their voices, literacy also helps them acknowledge and cope with their emotional traumas. Coping with emotional trauma is important as both Max and Liesel’s traumas disrupt their sleep and hold them back from acknowledging, reconnecting, and accepting their past. An important example of what happens to one who does not have literacy to cope with trauma is Michael Holtzapfel. When Michael comes back from Russia, he is clearly traumatized as he witnessed people around him die, his brother die, and was injured himself, shot in the ribs and lost three of his fingers. Although it seems Michael wants to continue to be strong for his mother who goes through the shock of having lost her other son, he decides to commit suicide. Liesel explains through her narrative *The Book Thief*, “that in the end, Michael Holtzapfel was worn down not by his damaged hand or any other injury, but by the guilt of living” (Zusak 503). There are no instances in which Michael ever goes in-depth as he talks about his experience in Stalingrad. For those who ask him for details, he gives them facts about what happened, but not about his thoughts or feelings. If Michael had shared more about his experience, whether orally or through writing, perhaps he may have been able to cope and overcome his trauma, because literacy would have given him a voice and a way to witness.

In contrast with Michael, Max and Liesel have literacy and are able to cope with their emotional stress. Although Max cannot fully overcome the suffering of the dehumanization of Jews by the Nazis, literacy enables him to acknowledge the trauma and find a piece of his humanity when he shares his story with Liesel. Liesel asks Max to share his story when she finally finds the courage to ask him if *Mein Kampf* is a good book. Keeping his anger in check, Max explains how the book saved his life. Liesel asks for more details, and Max begins to tell her his story, finding his voice, literally, as Death states Max had been a “voiceless human. The Jewish rat” (Zusak 215). Before, Max had been less than a human, as the word “rat” indicates an unwanted, dirty animal. Because of Liesel’s simple question for more details, Max is able to find his voice. Although Max still is affected by his terrible experiences as he has to continue hiding, he is able to acknowledge and able to cope some with his emotional trauma as he goes through his memories to share.

Leah Bradshaw in her essay “Narrative in Dark Times” explores how sharing stories is a cathartic activity, especially for Holocaust survivors and the second generation of Holocaust survivors. She claims, “What storytelling does attempt, even in the darkest of times, is to recover a public that is imperative for the discerning of meaning” (Bradshaw 22). Max’s storytelling helps him overcome his trauma because Liesel (and Hans) is there to listen to him, and even remember his story. Death states,

When Liesel looked back on the events of her life, those nights in the living room were some of the clearest memories she had. She could see the burning light on Max’s eggshell face and even taste the human flavor of his words (Zusk 218).

Liesel remembering Max as a human is significant as Jews were treated as less than human; furthermore, Liesel is standing as a witness for Max, someone who carries on his life stories by preserving them in memory.

Similar to Max, Liesel is also significantly disturbed. Although the trauma is different from Max's, she is nevertheless very much affected by her witness of her brother's death, and her mother's abandonment. Just like how Max somehow copes with his trauma through literacy, Liesel copes with hers by learning how to read the book linked to her brother's death. Jean Webb in her article "Reading as Protection and Enlightenment in Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*" claims, "Learning to read and reading are presented as modes of emancipation from emotional trauma" (Webb 1), and finishing *The Grave Digger's Handbook* does somewhat release Liesel from the weight of her brother's death as she recalls his name for the first time after finishing the handbook. As Death narrates, "Liesel still held the book...On one of the rooftops, she could see a small boy, sitting, looking at the sky. 'His name was Werner,' she mentioned. The words trotted out, involuntarily" (Zusak 87). Liesel did not have to force herself to say her brother's name out loud; rather, his name just came out of her mouth, "involuntarily" (Zusak 87), which suggests she is finding some freedom from the effects of her disturbing experiences. Not only is Liesel able to let go of some of her trauma, but she also becomes open to a deeper and more intimate community as Webb states, "The act of learning to read bring[s] together the traumatized child and her somewhat awkward, hen-pecked foster father" (Webb 4), demonstrating how coping with literacy is somewhat of a success for her.

Another way Liesel copes with her trauma is by seeing how Max also has nightmares and by sharing the contents of the nightmares with each other. Death points out how both Liesel and Max have nightmares. For example, "In their separate rooms, they would dream their nightmares

and wake up, one with a scream in drowning sheets, the other with a gasp for air next to a smoking fire” (Zusak 219). Once Hans makes this observation to Liesel, she goes over to Max and they share a little of what their nightmares are about. Although the nightmares continue even after sharing, Liesel is still able to overcome her trauma some, as she tells Hans “she should be old enough now to cope on her own with the dreams” (Zusak 220). Even though Liesel is not able to fully overcome and cope with her dreams, she is able to make the step to face the nightmares on her own, rather than have Hans come over to help her because of the exchange of dreams with Max through language.

Literacy as a Means to Resist

Similar to how literacy empowers Max and Liesel to stand up against and face their emotional traumas, it also helps them resist the Nazi culture. There are many moments in which the Hubermanns defy the Nazi authorities. However, their moments of resistance without literacy are short-lived. For example, Hans gives bread to an old Jewish man who is on the way to Dachau with the rest of the prisoners. Although Hans’s action is a very brave act of defiance in the public of Nazi Germany, the consequences are the Nazis could come and search the Hubermanns’ home, and Max has to relocate again because the chances of being found out have increased.

In contrast, Max and Liesel are qualified to resist the Nazi culture in a lasting way as traces of Max’s existence remain through writing. The Nazis aimed at exterminating anything, or any trace related to Jews. Knowing this, not only did Holocaust survivors write, but Jews going through the Holocaust wrote as well. Waxman claims one compelling reason to write during Nazi Germany was “writing in the ghettos consciously defied the Nazis’ intention to leave no

trace of Jewish existence” (7). Max resists the Nazi culture by writing a piece of his story as a birthday gift for Liesel. Death states, “There were the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned” (Zusak 237). Hitler’s own narrative “gagging” and “suffocating” under Max’s narrative demonstrates how powerful the resistance of Nazi culture through writing is, especially when the writing is related to one’s own story which people have tried to erase. Max’s resistance against Nazi Germany is made complete by the fact that Liesel is there to read and know his story, and share a relationship with him. Webb states, “Books by Jews had been forbidden and Liesel is the reader of one such book: a statement of defiance and refusal to be downtrodden by both Max and his reader” (Webb 6).

In the same way Max is empowered to resist Nazi culture through literacy, so is Liesel, although she is able to resist more actively due to her freedom. One instance in which Liesel defies Nazi Germany is when she steals a Jewish book from the book burning she witnesses. By the time Liesel steals a book from the book burning, she is able to read, and her love of reading compels her to steal the book:

As with her previous urge to see the mound’s ignition, she could not look away. All alone, she didn’t have the discipline to keep a safe distance. It sucked her toward it and she began to wake her around... The heat was still strong enough to warm her when she stood at the foot of the ash heap. When she reached her hand in, she was bitten, but on the second attempt, she made sure she was fast enough... (Zusak 119-20).

Liesel cannot look away from the burning pile and sees several books. She reaches out to the fire to grab one of them, even though there is the possibility of getting in much trouble. Liesel’s theft not only demonstrates her love for books, but also her Jewishness. Nicholas DeLange in *An*

Introduction to Judaism state, “Jews have tended to show an extraordinary respect for books, and there is no hint of the chaining, censorship or even burning of books as practiced in the past by other religions” (DeLange 43). Liesel directly practices the tendency to show the respect for books the Jews demonstrate.

Another way she unknowingly resists the Nazi culture is by directing her own learning and inviting Max to become her teacher, albeit a small role, in her quest for words. For example, “Liesel would close her eyes and ask Max to quiz her on the words she was continually getting wrong” (Zusak 548). Where Hans had been the person to teach Liesel how to read, Max becomes the person to continue her literacy. Asking Max to help strengthen her literacy skills is an act of resistance as “Jewish education” is being continued in some way. John Roth in his essay “Rethinking the Holocaust” claims, “Resistance also could and did involve what the Jewish tradition calls ‘sanctification of life,’ which in the context of the Holocaust included efforts such as educating children” (Roth 440). Education is an act of resistance as it offers hope against the annihilation of anything Jewish, because the children could survive and continue the Jewish tradition since they have been educated and know what it means to be a Jew. Liesel becomes a rhetorical Jew as she asks Max to further educate her, unknowingly using one resistance technique used by the Jews.

A climactic moment in which Max and Liesel directly defy the Nazis together is when Liesel interacts with Max when she finds him in the parade of Jews walking over to Dachau, and when Max stops to listen to Liesel recite *The Word Shaker* to him. Death claims Max “stood absolutely still as the others swerved morosely around him, leaving him completely alone” (Zusak 512). Max stopping in the parade is a direct act of resistance as he is a prisoner of the Nazis going to Dachau. Liesel is also a part of the resistance as literacy enables her to stop Max

by reciting *The Word Shaker*, meddling in the plans of the Nazis. Moreover, Liesel's recitation of *The Word Shaker* does more than just stopping Max in the parade. Max's narrative is, in some way, used as "evidence of the nature and existence of Jewish life" (Waxman 17).

This moment of Max and Liesel's interaction, the moment of defiance, is possible because of their abilities to read and write. Max wrote *The Word Shaker* which involves writing, and it is also a means of defiance for Max. Max's *The Word Shaker* is full of symbols and metaphors for acts of resistance against the Nazis through literacy. Max defines "word shakers" as people who maintained the trees which grew with words by climbing on them and throwing the words to the people below. He narrates, in the story, "THE BEST word shakers were the ones who understood the true power of words. They were the ones who could climb the highest" (Zusak 446). He continues, "One such word shaker was a small, skinny girl, she was renowned as the best word shaker of her region because she knew how powerless a person could be WITHOUT words" (Zusak 446). In the story, the one girl who is one of the best word shakers becomes friends with someone "who was despised by her homeland, even though he was born in it" (Zusak 446).

The Word Shaker continues on to follow the little girl who protects the tree grown out of her friend's teardrop which turned into a seed. The little girl stays with the tree, which becomes one of the biggest, and does not come down until her friend comes back. Max describes how the Fuhrer and other people try to chop down the little girl's tree of words, but with no success, which can be seen as defiance against the Nazi regime. Later on, the girl's friend comes back, and once they are done talking together up on the tree, they come back down and the tree falls. Max narrates, "The word shaker's tree, in all of its miles and miles of height, slowly began to tip... The world shook, and when everything finally settled, the tree was laid out among the rest

of the forest. It could never destroy all of it, but if nothing else, a different-colored path was carved through it” (Zusak 450). The way the tree paves a new path demonstrates defiance against the Nazi regime and hope for a new, better walk in life.

Liesel takes Max’s story and act of resistance a little further. By reading *The Word Shaker* to the point she memorizes it, Liesel is able to recite her and Max’s story in the crowd. Liesel bringing some of Max’s narrative out in the public rather than just keeping it in herself, is a testimony to the world of Jewish existence and an assurance Jewish existence will continue. The moment also solidifies Liesel’s identity as a rhetorical Jew as she walks with Max in the parade, holding onto his arm, and is later whipped with Max when she recites *The Word Shaker*.

Sharing Narratives

Throughout *The Book Thief*, all the characters except for Liesel and Max have the freedom to share their narratives freely; there is no need for the other characters to share their narratives because everyone already knows each other, and they have no need to think back on the past and witness to anything because others in the community are their witnesses. However, both Max and Liesel must be empowered to share their narratives without the constraints put on them because they are suppressed, Max as a Jew, and Liesel as a traumatized girl, and what empowers them to share is literacy.

Literacy enables Max and Liesel to witness their experiences and share their narratives. Like Max who writes to share his narrative, Liesel writes her own narrative near the end of the novel. Liesel’s endeavor to write her own story makes her a rhetorical Jew, as her writing helps her reconnect to her past, witnessing to her brother’s death, life with the Hubermanns, life with Max, and even some parts of Max’s life. Holocaust literature not only helps the world know what

has happened in Nazi Germany, but also helps the survivors themselves connect to the past as they bring up memories of not just what they had gone through, but the memories of the community they had been a part of. Alvin Rosenfeld claims in *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, “The writing, everywhere embattled and often close to exhaustion or expiration, gives testimony to the dead, even as it declares that the places where they died are already receding from memory” (Rosenfeld 186-7). Liesel, like a Jew, reconnects to her past and witnesses to her brother’s death by reading the book linked to her brother’s death, and by writing about him in her narrative.

Furthermore, similar to the way Liesel invites Max to write his story, Liesel is invited by the mayor’s wife to write her own. The invitation for Liesel to write her own narrative characterizes her as a rhetorical Jew because Max also had to be invited and encouraged to share his stories, as he did not have the power to put the responsibility on himself to do so. Bradshaw brings up how her friend Jack Veffler, a Holocaust orphan, was encouraged to write his memoirs. He “joined a therapy group with other Jewish Holocaust orphans, and from his association with these people, Jack has been encouraged to write his memoirs” (Bradshaw 9). Although for Jack it has been hard to face the painful memories and write about them, “writing his story has been a great catharsis for him” (Bradshaw 9). The invitation to share narratives is significant because it demonstrates to the invited there is someone who cares to listen, or to read, and remember the stories.

However, Liesel and Max’s written narratives seem pointless because everything—Liesel’s family, her friends, and her stories—is lost when Molching is bombed, even though writing her story still helped Liesel remember and process the events from the past, going through a somewhat therapeutic process. Death claims, “She made herself remember” (Zusak

525) and she tells herself to start writing. Liesel, through writing, faces her past, and she is compelled to remember as much as she can, because “There was so much to consider, so many things in danger of being left out” (Zusak 527). Liesel demonstrates herself to be a good witness because she realizes the weight of her narrative is a testimony to everything she has experienced. She realizes there is much to write, but she must think through carefully and write well, without leaving important details out. Nevertheless, once Liesel is done writing, Molching is bombed, and Liesel loses her written story. Liesel’s book itself seems pointless, even though the process of writing was helpful for her, because through her distress from the loss of her loved ones, she drops her story and forgets about it.

Conclusion

The catastrophe Liesel experiences makes the ending bleak, as the entire story seems to culminate in a traumatic ending. However, Death’s title for Liesel, “the book thief,” fits her well because not only does Liesel steal books, but she also steals her life back from death itself. Although death is usually associated with endings and nothingness—especially for Jews who were being exterminated for the very fact that their deaths will contribute to the Nazis trying to get rid of anything Jewish—Death in *The Book Thief* helps Liesel and Max’s narratives to go on by saving Liesel’s written narrative. Death states:

There was much work to be done, and with a collection of other materials, *The Book Thief* was stepped on several times and eventually picked up without even a glance and thrown aboard a garbage truck. Just before the truck left, I climbed quickly up and took it in my hand...(Zusak 539)

Death picking up and reading Liesel's narrative, and sharing her story, shows Liesel and Max's adventure in writing were not pointless after all; Death also shows how literacy is powerful in that it goes beyond death, or a complete end, and continues to keep memories and stories alive as the written word endures for the witnessing to be passed on. Their testimony could have been cut short by death or loss, such as through the bombing happening throughout Germany. Ironically, however, Death helps carry on the witnessing and their stories as Death picks up Liesel's written story, which demonstrates literacy's power as it goes on beyond death because it is only through literacy Liesel and Max are able to testify to their experiences. Literacy's influence on Liesel, Max, and even Death, thus demonstrates how literacy should not be a theme that pales in contrast to Death as a narrator. Rather, it is ultimately literacy which helps Death narrate the story *The Book Thief*.

Through taking into account the significance of literacy in the Jewish identity and looking at the parallels of literacy's impact on Max and Liesel, Liesel can be characterized as a circumstantial Jew. Literacy empowers her in the same way literacy empowers Max. Similar to how literacy influences Max's perspective on the basement from a hiding place to a home, Liesel is able to define the basement as a classroom and sanctuary because of words. Just like how Max copes with his emotional trauma through literacy, Liesel is able to cope with her own through reading *The Grave Digger's Handbook* and exchanging nightmare stories. Liesel, like Max, is able to resist the culture of Nazi Germany by continuing the traces of Jewish existence through literacy. Lastly, as she writes her own narrative, she stands as a witness to everything she has experienced and seen, similar to how literacy enables Holocaust Jews to stand as a witness through writing. Literacy proves itself powerful as it goes beyond death, helping narratives endure through time as Death itself is a part of preserving Liesel's narrative, rather than ending it.

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