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Characterization of Death in *The Book Thief*

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I . Introduction

Teenagers know how to read, but sometimes they still barely want to. What if you are almost illiterate but are still eager to read a book? That is exactly how things are going on to Liesel Meminger, our protagonist in *The Book Thief*. Since this ten-year-old girl is enlightened by her first stolen book named *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, she is invited to the world of words. By every book she has stolen, she survives the suffering of real life, accidentally helping many other people who are also in adversity. The setting of the book is the tragic time in Germany during the World War II, but there are still a lot of cordial things around. I can vividly picture the beauty and sadness in this era through the main character Liesel's eye. However, it is the narrator of this book that I find the most interesting. This is a story told by Death, the most human-like Death that I have ever encountered in books.

Death is not only a narrator but also a main character that can predict the future and perceive the present. He is ubiquitous, but he doesn't harm people or show up on Halloweens. In most cultures, spirits or ghosts have usually been described as a cruel, devious or miserable role. It comes along with tragedies, bringing nothing but depression to the living. For example, "Catherine" in *Wuthering Heights* appears to be waving shadows of leaves in stormy nights or creepy sounds pounding on windowsills and doors, which leaves Heathcliff with recurring fears and curses. Other popular cases of spirits include Professor Binns and Moaning Myrtle in *Harry Potter*, who have been already dead and have chosen to stay at Hogwarts, having no contact with normal people outside the wizard school. That is, those ghostly characters mentioned above appear to lighten up plots, but Death in *The Book Thief* outweighs all of them with his characteristics.

In *The Book Thief*, the narrator-character Death is actually a sole core of the plot development due to his characterization. Cruel and detached as Death is imagined in most stories or fables, Death in *The Book Thief* has a sense of humor and even sounds friendly sometimes. According to Death's confessions, he even has a bumping heart in the deepest, darkest side of himself. In other words, Death is somehow able to understand human beings, and he analyzes and predicts things in a very creative way. Most importantly, Death reveals the complexity of human nature by reflecting and questioning the causes for all the tragedies. Throughout the story, Death is always around all the other characters, even though he hardly speaks with them. Death is presented in such an unconventional way that I would like to explore this unique

character with further textual analysis.

II. Thesis

1. Summary

The whole story unfolds as Liesel Meminger's train traveling to meet Hans Hubermann, her foster father in Munich, Germany. Liesel notices her little brother's death on the train, and she then experiences all the partings and sorrow on this journey. She is not willing to enter the Hubermann's house on Himmel Street, where she is going to stay for a long time. She goes through homesickness and the terror of war eventually, and she even befriends a neighboring boy named Rudy Steiner and learns how to read with the help of her foster father.

Now that Liesel can read and write, she starts to write letters to her mother, becoming more sensitive to the things that happen around her. Unluckily, her mother never replies. Liesel then connects all the celebrations and book burning on Hitler's birthday with her mother's disappearance because she realizes the führer, namely, Adolf Hitler is the instigator for her mother's death. Moreover, the Nazi dogmas make her disgusted. She begins to hate the führer.

It is in the Hubermann's house that Liesel first meets Max Vandenburg, a desperate Jewish who is running away from the Gestapo. Since Hans has been saved by Max's father in World War I, her foster parents decide to hide the dying Max in their dark basement regardless of all the risks. Seeing the similarity between Max and herself, Liesel is concerned about him all the time. She delivers foods, watches him over bed, and reads stories to him when he is seriously ill. They make great company. Max then gives Liesel two books hand-written by himself named *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker*, which help Liesel to ponder how the power of words could both change and poison people. Empowered by words, she is no longer the weak little girl caught in the strong cogitation of "heil Hitler" (saluting Hitler).

Hans is forced to join the army (conscripted), as punishment for giving a Jewish man bread. Max is taken to the concentration camp. Liesel starts to write her life journals entitled *The Book Thief*, after losing Hans and Max. While the city is being bombarded, Liesel is in the basement writing her story. Himmel Street is razed, and she is the only survivor. After the huge disaster, Liesel does her best to get over her traumas, and manages to form a happy family. On the other hand, Max survives the

concentration camp and reunites with Liesel at the end of the war. Finally, Death takes Liesel away, feeling relieved. He gladly gives back her book, *The Book Thief*, which is picked up by him from the bombarding debris. The story ends as Death reflectively claims that he is haunted by the ambivalent sides of human goodness and evil.

2. Characterization of Death

The Book Thief is told by a concisely registered first-person narrator who identifies himself as Death. John M. Formy-Duval mentions that the telling of the story is done simply, but there is nothing simple about the novel. It is “complex and many-layered” (Formy-Duval, p. 1). In addition to narrating, I think Death is one of the most important characters in the book, who devotes himself to carrying bodies around the world and tells the story to readers at the same time. In my opinion, Death serves as a fair-minded third party who watches, describes, and monologues. Throughout the novel, Death often delivers humorous, informative, or reflective asides. As Sparknotes editors emphasize, Death is presented as a singular, almost-human narrator, he is all-knowing and all-seeing, which on the one hand enables him to describe scenes and emotions he wouldn’t have knowledge of, while at the same time giving him a distinct personality and a human-like point of view on the other.

In the following paragraphs, I am going to analyze the personality and characterization of Death. First, Death is sensitive and humorous. He uses simple words to manifest black humor and unique insight. What he says or does has shaped a sarcastic characteristic so that he makes solemn issues such as war easy to understand. Second, Death is creative. He is like a talented painter using colors to visualize various aspects of the war; he also serves as a skilled story-reteller, using metaphors to enrich his entire narration. Finally, Death is reflective and questioning. It seems that no other characters ever communicate with Death until he or she is dead. In fact, however, Death interacts with all of them by the act of self-reflecting and questioning, which is thought of as the most complicated, yet the most precious quality that belongs to human beings.

A. Death is sensitive and humorous.

Death is sensitive and he speaks in a lighthearted way, yet what he says reveals cruel reality of the war. We readers first experience the death of Liesel’s brother in a frosty cemetery in a desolate atmosphere. After Death sees Liesel secretly pick up *The*

Grave Digger's Handbook, Liesel and her mother hold hands, ready to leave. Unexpectedly, Death sends his little greeting to Liesel and her mom. "As for me, I remained a few moments longer. I waved. No one waved back." (Zusak, 2006, p. 24). Death is showing a friendly gesture, but clearly there is no response intended. By saying so, he is also conveying the condolences to the little boy, who has a young and sick soul. Death can cure his pain, but unfortunately he can't pacify those grieving people who are still alive. They collapse, heart-broken, and Death can do nothing about it.

Death's humor is obvious in his confession that he has a heart like human beings. He reveals Rudy's tragic end when he seems to mock Rudy, whose expectation is to kiss Liesel. "In the darkness of my dark-beating heart, I know. He'd have loved it, all right. You see? Even Death has a heart." (Zusak, 2006, p. 242) Death has a heart, and is thus capable of understanding the trust and love between the two young lives. In addition, his saying "taking a boy like Rudy is robbery" sounds somewhat like funny ridicule that indicates another cruelty of life. That is, the life of youth is snatched away so violently especially in the war time.

In addition, he listens to the longing for love of all the dead and releases them from fear. He faces the most terrible killing in gas chamber, but explains the whole event in a humorous tone:

At that second place, as time wore on, I also picked them up from the bottom of the great cliff, when their escapes fall awfully awry. There were broken bodies and dead, sweet hearts. Still, it was better than the gas. Some of them I caught when they were only halfway down. Saved you, I'd think. (Zusak, 2006, p. 349)

Those escapers would rather struggle to live although they know there is barely any chance to survive. Death believes that they are the most miserable individuals in the world, and he washes their pain away, saving the sufferers from torment. Literally, he "caught" and "saved" those people by bringing them to the realm of death, though conventionally Death's job is to kill rather than to save. He remains a casual tone and practices his humor even in such a grieving situation, which otherwise reveals the brutal nature of the war without any reservation.

B. Death is creative.

Death is creative just like a talented painter. We can see the distinctive

personality of the Death when he depicts a scene with colors, to which he is extraordinary sensitive. Hence, Death's descriptions are usually full of colorful visual effects, and every gorgeous color used by Death uncovers significant details of the story.

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see-- the whole spectrum. A billion of flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax. (Zusak, 2006, p. 4)

The dark chocolate sky relaxes Death when he is doing his regular job, which means there are still survivors. When Death depicts the devastating bombing, he says, "The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness." (Zusak, 2006, p. 12) With red and black, we readers seem to see the blood that fills the street and the burned remains scattered around.

Death is creative in describing himself with the metaphor of mirror and one's reflection in it:

I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it's cold. And I don't have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look like? I'll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue. (Zusak, 2006, p. 307)

Death has his own comments on his appearance, which are very playful and "unconventional" (Adams, 148). First, he implies that everyone judges each other (including Death) by appearance without doubt. Secondly, Death claims that people who mistrust, suspect, or kill each other are the "real murderers". His creative application of mirror reflects the true face of human brutality. That's why Death's face doesn't look like a skull; it is human beings that serve as the horrible killer.

Death is not only a painter but also a versatile reader and story-teller. All the way through the end of the book, he devotes himself to finding the goodness among people. He picks some stories of each soul into his pocket to forget the boredom and fatigue of collecting dead bodies.

I attend the greatest disasters and work for the greatest villains. But then there

are other moments. There's a multitude of stories (a mere handful, as I have previously suggested) that I allow to distract me as I work, just as the colors do. I pick them up in the unluckiest, unlikeliest places and I make sure to remember them as I go about my work. *The Book Thief* is one such book. (Zusak, 2006, p. 549)

Death reads Liesel's story and marks the lines where they intersect, marveling at what she has been through. Death is creating his own story by "retelling" Liesel's. He weaves himself into the "human" narration at the same time, which transforms him from a "narrator" to a "creator", a story-reteller of *The Book Thief*. In this perspective, *The Book Thief* is not written by Liesel but by Death.

C. Death is reflective and questioning.

Toward the end of final bombing, it is the last time Death sees Liesel. Himmel Street is destroyed into pieces. Death feels sorry for Liesel that the bombing has wrecked her by demolishing everything in a flash, but his job is to clean up the dead, not to comfort the living. On witnessing the catastrophe, Death remarks:

The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood. They were glued down, every last of them. A packet of souls. Was it fate? Misfortune? Is that what glued them down like that? Of course not. Let's not be stupid. It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds. (Zusak, 2006, p. 12)

Instead of doing his duty mechanically, Death reflects upon the tragedy, which is the outcome of stupidity and cruelty of human beings. The "thinking", which is believed to be unique to human beings, is also a significant attribute of Death.

On the other hand, Death introspects much about negative human nature of having bias toward others. When death appears in the concentration camp in Auschwitz and encounters some French Jews, he says, "They were French, they were Jews, and they were you." (Zusak, 2006, p. 350) For Death, people of all races are apparently the same. The suffering of the Jews should be empathized. The Jews don't choose to be Jews. It is Hitler that magnifies the differences among races and it all matters as racial identities switch. Death questions why the different races of mankind have to be separated and why they keep killing each other.

To further demonstrate negative side of human beings, Death criticizes the value of his job. Although there is no one to replace him, he does his best to accomplish his hard work assigned. “To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible. He stands over your shoulder repeating one thing, incessantly: “Get it done, get it done.” So you work harder. You get the job done. The boss, however, does not thank you. He asks for more.” (Zusak, 2006, p. 309) As Janet Maslin has suggested in her *New York Times* post, the book's narrator is sorry for what he has to do and campaigns to win readers' approval. We can see that war is personified by Death, and turns out to be a chief, taking everything under control. He also tells us he is working for the world, which is a factory where humans make their own rules. Without doubt, Death's questioning toward his job and his “boss” shows disapproval of another human nature – aggression.

Finally, Death comes and picks Liesel away when she grows old, having gone through all the ups and downs. Liesel then asks him if he understands *The Book Thief*. Instead of answering, Death is not sure about the essence of human nature that is full of unexplainable “extreme duality” (Sparknotes). Death wonders, “I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality... I wanted to ask her, how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant.” (Zusak, 2006, p.550) War, the most difficult environment, destroys the best of humanity, but shows the human dignity simultaneously. The Study Guide on the GradeSaver website suggests that Death is concluded to be someone “unable to reconcile humanity's capacity for evil with humanity's capacity for good.” However, I would like to emphasize that Death neither blames nor praises human beings, yet his question to Liesel actually invites all of us to look into the complexity of human nature. Death continues, “I am haunted by humans.” (Zusak, 2006, p.550) Life or death, good or evil, right or wrong—these are exactly the ambiguity of human existence, contradictory but inevitable. This is what Jenni Adams calls “double ambivalence” toward humanity that influences Death himself (Adams, p.147). At the end of the book, Death is not in the position to intervene what people have done to one another, as he states, “None of those things, however, came out of my mouth” (Zusak, 2006, p.550), which also implies that people, not Death (fate), are the one who accounts for the complexity of human nature.

III. Conclusion

Death is not only an omniscient narrator but also a fascinating role in *The Book*

Thief. Sometimes, he is humorous. His descriptions of the characters are very simple, yet laden with light heartedness and solemnness at the same time. More importantly, in a jocular tone, Death always points out all the cruel facts that people are afraid to admit when he witnesses all the worst disasters. Moreover, he is not a dull, traditional black robed character. Instead, he creatively uses the mixture of many colors to forecast casualties of war. Regarding subtle facts about life and death, he is good at metaphors and story-telling techniques as well. Last but not least, Death is reflective and curious. He never lectures. He shows up after catastrophes in order to question human behaviors and point out the consequences that must be taken on. Thanks to his job, he is given a chance to perceive the fundamental nature of human beings. To conclude, the human-like characterization of Death unravels the sweet-bitter stories of Liesel, and enables Death to retell the story in a different perspective, leading us to dispel fear toward fate and contemplate on the intricacy of human nature instead.

IV. References

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