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PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF LEISEL MEMINGER IN
THE BOOK THIEF

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ABSTRACT

Brown and Bigler illustrates how discrimination that may be both perceived and not perceived affect children's developmental outcomes and argue that the effects of discrimination and racism must be dealt with to understand the normative development in children. This paper will deal with how discrimination plays a role in shaping the characters of children, particularly Leisel Meminger, as portrayed in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.

Whether positive or negative, the effects of discrimination deeply affect children during their formative years. This is a discussion on how child characters are affected and traumatised by discrimination and prejudices and how they come to shape characters in the novel.

As Peter A. Levine quotes, "The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect."

Keywords: Discrimination, Children, Psychological and Moral Development, Trauma, Anxiety

Introduction

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a novel that has acquired a wide readership and has sold over two million copies in the United States. The novel is a New York Times bestseller and winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book and the Michael L. Printz Honour award. It was also adapted into a movie in November, 2013. *The Book Thief* takes place in Molching, a fictional German town, during World War II. It is narrated by Death, who is searching for distractions from the "survivors" of war. Death "can't stand to look" at the survivors, the "ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair, and surprise" (5) without diversions because they are too staggering.

Death finds a source of distraction in a journal written by the novel's protagonist, Liesel Meminger. In the novel, Death tells the story of Liesel, constantly traumatised throughout the story, first by the death of her brother, and again when she is abandoned by her mother. The accounts in the novel show the grim situation of the society in that period.

Adrienne Kertzer finds it noteworthy that the novel "employs the world-weary and all-knowing voice of Death rather than the traumatised voice of a child to narrate" ("What Good are the Words?" 30), for it allows

the novel to rely on a child's memoir, but "in a manner that acknowledges the limitations of basing Holocaust understanding on one child's account". (29)

As the novel progresses, Leisel grows from an innocent child to an experienced lady. Zusak points to the growing experiences and knowledge of children during the World War II, affected by the Holocaust, from being clueless to witnessing bitter events more than any adult.

Leisel begins to discover the gruesome reality of people treated like animals, barely receiving food and eating stale bread. Both Leisel and Rudy come to be known as "bread givers" from "fruit stealers" as they once were. "In years to come, he would be a giver of bread, not a stealer - proof again of the contradictory human being. So much good, so much evil. Just add water."

Duality is a life led by the Hubbermanns. Not only Hans and Rosa, who are harbouring a Jew in their basement, living a life of seeming-hatred towards the Jews on the outside, but expressing their love and care in a subversive and secretive manner in the confines of their home. At a time of oppression and difficult political climate of Nazi-Germany, they are forced to live this life of pretence. Rudy on one occasion, paints his face black wanting to be Jesse Owens innocently, and reprimanded for it by his father for doing so. This overshadowing theme of discrimination has stripped Rudy and Leisel off their innocence. Rather than having a normal childhood, they are forced to learn to live this dual life of living in pretence and lies.

Leisel's abandonment, loss of family, witnessing of injured war veterans, air raids, all play a role in the shaping of her thoughts and character as the novel progresses. According to Daniel Cook and John Wall, "In the disruption and destruction of the lives of children, their families and communities, childhood itself transforms and takes shape." All these factors evidently help Leisel grow into maturity, despite her traumatic childhood, which are dealt with in detail in this paper.

Recurring dreams and the loss of family

In *The Book Thief*, Leisel's dreams are mostly distressing and traumatising, which ultimately act as a means of gaining mastery over her miseries. The loss of her family takes a huge toll on Leisel. First, through the loss of her brother, her body stiffens and her mind receives an "onslaught of thoughts" such as "This isn't happening. This isn't happening" (21). When Werner is buried, Liesel finds it impossible to leave and exhibits psychological distress. Liesel stays by her brother's grave as she stares in "disbelief", telling herself over and over "He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't--" (23). Liesel's hands are covered in "frozen blood" (23) from the digging into snow and ice. She must be "dragged away" with a "warm scream" (24) filling inside her. For Liesel, "everything had happened" (25) and Werner's death means everything to Liesel, throwing her world into chaos. Her mother's eventual "abandonment" disrupts Liesel's life left abandoned, alone, and confused:

If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else's doorstep. Why? Why? Why? . . . No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment. Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone. (32)

Separation from her family causes her endless distress. "No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment."

Leisel's nightmares following the loss of her family left her helpless:

She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boat-like in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. This vision didn't help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped. (36)

Freud's theory of the symbolic nature of dreams argues that they do "not consist entirely of situations, but also include disconnected fragments of visual images, speeches and even bits of unmodified thoughts" ("On dreams" 147). He also argues that dreams are a kind of substitute for thought processes, full of meaning and emotions.

Leisel repeatedly dreams of her brother for two years that reveals the state of her mental and emotional fear and anxiety that she was facing. Freud argues that through the compulsion to repeat the child “make[s] [himself] master of the situation” (Pleasure Principle 16).

Freud argues that through anxiety dreams, patients are able “to master the stimulus [trauma] retrospectively” in their “obedience to the compulsion to repeat . . . to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed” (37). Leisel’s recurring dreams are probably unconscious compulsions to repeat to understand and overcome her anxieties. Leisel’s screams lead to “a moment of bed-wetting hysteria” (62), which she remembers years later as “the trauma of wetting the bed” (64). The physical reaction shows her inability to accept Werner’s death and continues to experience trauma through her nightmares. Further, when Liesel reaches for Werner’s face in the dream it becomes Max’s face (331). It perhaps reveals the fears she has of losing her new-found brother in Max.

Her nightmares, however, lead her to strengthen the bond with her foster father, Hans: “Possibly the only good to come out of these nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubbermann her papa, into the room to soothe, to love her” (36). Perhaps this is the relationship that Leisel needed to recover from the loss of her own family to overcome her fears. Hans teaches Leisel to read and write during the countless sleepless nights following her nightmares which spanned for over two years evidently helped her heal from her misery: “Papa, you saved me. You taught me to read” (538). Liesel decides on her 12th birthday that “she should be old enough now to cope on her own with the dreams” (220). Leisel begins to show a transition from depending on Hans to herself to help cope with her own dreams. She finally is able to accept the death of Werner and “it was with great sadness that she realised that her brother would be six forever” (473). Following this acceptance, “her brother never climbed into her sleep again. . . . and the boy only came before she closed her eyes” (473).

Adrienne Kertzer notably tells “stories whose delicate and sensitive language persuades us that, despite the Holocaust, human values remain the same. The Holocaust was a blip; our humanistic values remain strong” (“Do You Know,” 54).

Of stealing books and the power of words

Liesel’s book thievery, both the act of stealing and the many hours spent learning to read, can be seen as a type of play providing Liesel with the space to cope with loss, loneliness and achieve a certain kind of autonomy. Liesel is unable to accept the separation from her mother and brother, which is extremely distressing. Being able to read when once “words had rendered Liesel useless” (147) now fills her with an “innate sense of power. It happened every time she deciphered a new word or pieced together a sentence” (147).

The first book that she steals is *The Gravediggers Handbook* from the snowy graveyard that serves as the only tangible reminder of her brother. This marks the beginning of her journey into her passion of reading and discovering the goodness of words. The book represents great loss, sorrow and abandonment, marking the end of one and the beginning of another phase of her life. Having no control over Werner’s death, Liesel steals the book lodged in the snow, in order to gain agency during this harrowing experience.

Like *The Grave Digger*, the three unburned books act as possible substitutes for her lost family members. Powerless to save her family from Nazi Germany, Liesel senses an opportunity to save a book as compensation and Death tells readers “it was anger and dark hatred that had fuelled her desire to steal it” (84).

The Shoulder Shrug is stolen when Liesel realises that Hitler is responsible for the destruction of her family, and stealing allows Liesel to exercise her agency over what gets consumed in Hitler’s fires. Like the first stolen book, it is anger that motivates Liesel to steal.

The Standover Man and *The Word Shaker* teaches Leisel the power of words to combat the wrong with the right, hate with kindness. She learns about friendship, love and the power of words to make a difference in others’ lives. Although it does not prevent her family and loved ones from dying in bomb blasts, it pushes her forward to be courageous.

The Dream Carrier is an important book that reveals the nightmares she has been facing every night ever since the death of her brother on the train. However, she is finally able to reach a deeper level of psychological maturity after years despite this trauma.

Her love for books and the crime of stealing them enables her to find a foothold in recovering from her traumatic experiences of loss and abandonment, prejudices and injustice around her. It not only helped her heal but "...soon a quietness started bleeding through the crowded basement. By page three, everyone was silent but Leisel (...) the youngest kids were soothed by her voice". (381)

From stealing books to learning to read and write, it eventually led to her own survival during the air raids that hit Himmel Street. "She survived because she was sitting in the basement reading through the story of her own life". (498) Max and Liesel act as listeners to one another in the face of their own hardships, fears and anxieties of sorts. The sharing of experiences lead to their healing and recovery from the traumas.

Reading and writing become the escape for both Max and Leisel to find solace and their eventual healing and strengthening their bond with one another. Max paints over *Mein Kampf* and writes the story of their friendship for Leisel on her birthday. This act of destruction of Hitler's words is a powerful imagery of choking the hateful words thereby transforming and replacing them with beautiful words of love and friendship. Words literally and metaphorically saves Leisel though it does not erase her excruciating journey and memories of sadness and despair she faced right from childhood. Max's overwriting on *Mein Kampf* is an act of defiance and sign of overcoming fears.

Conclusion

Liesel's trauma of losing her family, her community of trauma with Max, her attempts to regain control through stealing books, and her active resistance through writing is neatly portrayed in *The Book Thief*. By educating and creating a sense of awareness on the effects of World War II and the Holocaust that affected emotions and psychology of the people, Zusak presents these atrocities to warn his readers of the injustice that must not be tolerated. His book ends on a positive note, of proving characters can find solace and healing despite such traumatic events of the past.

Leisel's portrayal of the struggles she goes thorough emotionally and psychologically as a child is used to remind the readers to challenge and be intolerant to further vices that human nature is capable of repeating.

Leisel is a book-lover who finds comfort in books. Books are an escape from the outside world that provides a safe space for her, teaching her to read and find comfort in the midst of chaos. Her criminal act of stealing books fulfils the purpose of allowing her to grow and mature.

After the bombings settle on Himmel Street, Leisel re-lives the loss and trauma through her writings. (546). Zusak in his novel attempts to create a consciousness and empathise with the Holocaust.

Leisel and her friendship with Max defines her character in many ways. It helps her to become a sympathetic person, while also helping her see and discern the right from wrong.

Her strength of character and ability to carry on forward evidently portrays her psychological and moral growth despite going through traumatic events in her childhood. She may not have understood the war and its atrocities, but progresses from innocence to maturity very evidently.

Death tells the reader that "there was no recovery from what had happened" on Himmel Street, but goes on to reveal Liesel does recover, though "That would take decades; it would take a long life" (545). The epilogue of the novel shows the readers that Leisel finds happiness and a goes on to live a full life with "her three children, her grandchildren, her husband" (544) later on.

Leisel's childhood may not have been an easy one, but life has certainly shaped her to who she becomes. It carves her into a person filled with knowledge and character. She also teaches Death that human race is worth living for.

I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality. But what could I tell her about those things that she didn't already know? I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race-that rarely do I ever simply estimate it. 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.

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