

## **Conflict in Context:**

### **Power, Place and Resistance in Zusak's *The Book Thief*.**

**Keira Watson**

Nottingham Trent University

English (BA) Hons

N1309416@my.ntu.ac.uk

#### **Abstract:**

The chosen text is *The Book Thief*, set in Nazi Germany. The book explores themes of conflict, mortality, and the power of words, set against the backdrop of World War II. The main character, Lisel, is travelling to Munich to be sent to live with foster parents while the war is ongoing. The book is narrated by Death, which offers a different perspective on the story, providing a philosophical view on the morality of human life and the tragedies that lead to these conflicts. The theme of conflict and the control of a place arises when a situation can only be managed through conflict. This could involve conflicts among people, such as wars or other forms of struggle. The text perfectly describes the conflicts of inner human life and how conflict can hold a place in the narrative throughout the novel, creating that power.

#### **Keywords:**

Power of words, Morality, Duality, Power, Control

## **Research:**

The control that the narrator has over the place of Nazi Germany sets the novel in place. While exploring the ideas of Nazi Germany and Lisel gaining power from the knowledge she learns and gains, which then creates conflict during the war, the control is directed to the morality of human life in World War II. The morality of the book is doing the right thing while a war is going on, so in the face of danger, it shows that control can be helpful and save lives; control in a place can be a powerful thing that can be used throughout each character and through the narrator of death. Control can lead to resistance. One example of the book doing this is the resistance of knowledge and refusing to learn and grow; that type of control leads to a war. Usually, when control is written in novels, it links to power, money and class. In this case, the power is more based on literature and the power of words used throughout the book and how this encourages the characters' decisions and actions, especially through the character of Lisel. The words she learns through books make her feel in control of who she is. The idea that literature can make someone be in so much control shows the lessons that the war cannot teach the characters.

The events that happened during the book were written based on around the history that was happening in the world, one key event to me that stands out is the Nazi's burning the books and this links to Lisel learning how to write for the first time and reading books, she finds herself because of these choices, but during history Hitler wanted to burn the books this shows that control can be used for the danger of others to cause harm and destruction. These events are told through stories from the author's parents to himself as a child, the use of these stories from the past shaping history to the Book Thief being written and published in 2005 further implicates the theme of the power of words in the novel, using it for harm or using it for knowledge, it is demonstrated in the tales of history that got taught and passed on through the

use of storytelling. This use of words creates control not only in Nazi Germany in the novel, but also the use of every novel written in history.

Control in Nazi Germany, and more specifically, the town of Munich, is showing that to be in control of a whole place, it creates conflict within human connections that the narrator comments on and creates a conflict of a situation that arises, in this novel, it is WWII, and many people are dying. The conflict leads to the morality of so many people's lives and what it means for them to die as a symbol of power.

Mark Zusak has used the narrator of death to provide a philosophical view on the novel and the character, especially Lisel. The narrator is an important person in the events that happened, focusing on how the narrator has power, and he explains his idea of human connection and how he views them as the person of death. He provides a unique and empathetic viewpoint as someone who is deeply affected by the events in the novel. He has a fascination with humanity's duality of human kindness and destruction. 'I'm always finding humans at their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both', (p.491) he finds the idea of human connection as a duality of life, he tells Lisel's story as a way of understanding humans as both destructive and full of beauty, he focuses on her thoughts and feelings of her being the book thief which is the conflict in Nazi Germany. Death as a narrator was the author's choice to get the narrator to haunt the narrative, as he is death, and 'he finds us at our weakest, and our worst,' said the author. They were a struggle about the narrative being death, but these choices mirrored death's own evolution in the novel, being observer of human souls, the revelation that humanity's beauty and selflessness could haunt death, which links to the conflict of human morality and power from situations such as the war, he goes through each chapter, paralleling his own thoughts of the human race, and how he goes from hating humans to wanting to help Lisel with how brutal the world is and guide her ' 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?' The use of a third-person narrative stands as a testament to the boundless possibilities of storytelling. It reminds us of the power of words, which is the reason why this book was written, and can unfold even in the most unexpected places.

Conflict in place around wars and trauma can lead to psychological problems. Lisel and Max are resisting the war and the culture of Germany, and from this, they gained trauma of being abandoned and going through the war or being a Jew in the war. This created conflict with other people in Munich. Trauma is common for people who live around war, go to war, and Lisel is growing up around the war, so it's no surprise. There have been many studies after WWII that show that people develop trauma and other psychological problems due to the circumstances they are put in. Lisel's trauma is seen through death, she copes with her trauma through reading books which is how she is named the book thief as she steals them, many people see this as a healing trauma, psychological studies can show that Lisel reads books to help her forget her past. 'how literature provides solace, empowerment and sense of control amidst chaos and devastation' the way she reads books shapes her understanding of the world which makes the reader and the narrative perspective understand her trauma.

The trauma theories affect the entire self of a person's character, Lisel's self has been changed due to the war and things she witnesses, these theories have worked on a more methodological approach where they use close analysis of the novel and the character of Lisel by focusing on the narrative's perspective of her and her responses to the trauma she endures, and the personal development she does after the war has finished, this theory also considers the social and historical context especially the impact that the WWII had on people. By applying these specific theories about trauma, it emphasises the exploration of how literature in conflict can be transformative through the power of storytelling these characters, such as Lisel. One specific theory is the literary trauma theory, and this is used to analyse the impact of traumatic events on individuals and society. It is influential in literary criticism, it makes readers understand the

complexities of human experiences that are represented in all types of literature, and it still uses research, such as that of psychologists.

A specific psychologist named Stef Carps has contributed to the literary trauma theory. Carps' research with Lucy Bond reflects the ethical nature of trauma studies; he focuses more on the historical relevance. History has a lot of traumas within it; in his book, he calls this trauma theory in the global age. This can be based on different factors, such as catastrophic events in history, such as the Nazi Genocide of the European Jews. When you think of trauma you think of causes from events that have caused pain, it had a physical definition of someone in pain and this has been the same through history, but as literature has grown, trauma has become a psychological mental disorder that affects the person's mind and behaviour, writers have acknowledged this and wrote many ideas and explored how trauma can affect a person, Farrell notes the understanding of trauma as he recognises that trauma is 'psychocultural' it is defined as what society sees it as, he writes in the research for Stef Carps 'trauma is both a clinical syndrome and a trope something like the Renaissance figure of the world as a stage: a strategic fiction that a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control'. As Farrell notes that trauma has become a trope in literature; it's been used as a narrative to show the cultural transformation of how trauma has been written about since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only is trauma theory used as a literature technique or a research study in novels, the way it is stylistically written is also important and can explain lots about the writer and the novel itself, *The Book Thief* does this well in my opinion, when they include descriptive language, an internal monologue, flashbacks and the structure of the narrative these are all the stylistic choices of writing trauma, some could say that most literature novels have the idea to be trauma written, with the use of the descriptive language but it has to be done right such as *The Book Thief* where the clear trauma perspective comes from the narrative of death and there inner

monologue, and the way Markus Zusak uses place as a place to hold the trauma such as setting the book in Munich or using more compressed places for Liesel and Max, the basement shows the loss of connection to the environment they are in due to the trauma they both have, it shows that they have to suppress themselves because they don't feel safe, the trauma are both trapping them from disconnecting from the conflict, the connection that Liesel gains from books is her connection to another world, trauma means to be a resistance of what they have endured.

Liesel is a victim of the war and the losses she has endured. Marcus Zusak not only delves into the victims' perspective of the war and indulges in Liesel's mind with the use of the narrative of death and how he sees Liesel's thoughts, but the narrative also explores the other perspective of the war through the character of Hans Hubermann, who is a Nazi soldier, so this is the perpetrator's trauma, due to how the trauma of each person is connected due to the one event in the book, the narrative interconnects the traumas so the argument in some cases is whose trauma is it actually? And how after events such as this, the healing of the trauma can create new directions in how people narrate their own trauma and the many perspectives it can take, many authors would not use a narrative that isn't directly in the story with a purpose, they would like most narratives be a first person, due to how much trauma they experience, the idea of using death as a narrative makes it more impactful as death is not a direct character in the story, he is almost omniscient, he is linked to the conflict of the war, not only is he the narrator, he ironically deals with death and human connections.

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