

Observing Humanity Through the Eyes of Death: The Omniscient Narrator in *The Book Thief*

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“When death has a story to tell, you listen,” reads the book cover. *The Book Thief* is a historical and young adult fiction novel written by the Australian author Markus Zusak, published in 2005. The story is set in World War II’s Nazi Germany. It follows the life of Liesel Meminger, an orphaned girl, and her loved ones living in the fictional Molching, close to Dachau, trying to survive and find beauty in life amid the omnipresent fear and terror caused by the war. Zusak writes about the Holocaust, the Nazi Party, the cruelty of the war, and the atrocities of the time, contrasting it with children’s games, the magic of literature, and the power of compassion, providing escapism to both the characters and the reader. However, the novel’s focalization is prominent from a literary perspective: Death tells the story as the omnipresent and omniscient narrator. Death provides a historically authentic setting and creates the novel’s emotional depth and eerie atmosphere, raising moral questions and presenting witty remarks, allowing the reader to emerge into one of the worst periods of human history. Despite the ever-present death and suffering, the novel succeeds in celebrating life. In this paper, I aim to analyze Death as the narrator, address his ‘otherness’ by demonstrating his human and monster qualities, and explore his narration techniques, including embedded narratives, prolepsis, analepsis, and focalizers. As most scholars, I will refer to Death both as a narrator and a character by the pronoun ‘he.’

At first, glance, using Death, the soul ripper, to tell the story of a young German girl might seem quite a strange choice. However, as an omnipresent being in historical fiction, he proves to be a credible messenger of the horrors of war. “I’m in most places at least once, and in 1943, I was just about everywhere” (Zusak). The presence of Death creates the eerie and almost absurd atmosphere of the novel; the narrator does not let the reader forget the brutality of the story. Death appears in the story as an unusual creature with an unidentifiable physique who communicates and senses like a human. Although his human features at times can make the reader forget that he is an ethereal creature, the presence of the unidentifiable monster lingers throughout the novel, creating alarming suspense. “Both the most important feature of the mythological monster and the modern monster is that it is different from the human scale, unclassifiable, alien” (Gyuris 41). The story is presented through his perspective, which is quite rare considering that it is usually the human perspective that is represented as opposed to the

monsters'. The most well-known example is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which a section is solely dedicated to the monster's perspective. In *The Book Thief*, Death appears as an extra-terrestrial, ethereal creature, stuck in the human world, cleaning up souls during the war. Death's narration is the outsider's description of humanity. It is quite different from the typical representation; we usually see the monsters through the eyes of humans, depicted in a disapproving light, viewing them as 'the other.' Yet, here, the point of view changes: Death serves as a bridge between the known and unknown, providing an unmatched perspective while demonstrating terrifying parts of what it means to be a human. While Death recurrently assures the reader that what is happening on Earth is far worse than what death could do to them, his supernatural presence also serves to "somewhat exorcise our inherent fear of it" (Domínguez-Rué 516).

In the collective consciousness, death is generally the most frightening threat to human life. Hence it is the most frightening monster humankind has ever known. Although it is mainly feared as an intangible concept, death is often personified in various cultures attempting to help grasp the unknown. In *The Book Thief*, Death addresses his common depiction:

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)

Such remarks reveal his bias: his formulated opinions and observations restrain him from being an impartial narrator. He also describes his appearance: he wears a robe in the cold. Therefore, he must have some physical body, though he does not specify any further.

Interestingly enough, he possesses human-like qualities and a physique that resembles the human body. In his esteemed essay, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey J. Cohen writes, "the monstrous body is pure culture" (4). Contrary to other bodiless, omnipresent narrators, other than having senses, Death also "[gives] clues about his own construction as a personified form" (Oliveira and Maggio 142). "Death as a narrator/ character in *The Book Thief* is a spiritual entity invisible to a man but having specific physical (a body) and psychical (thoughts, emotions) attributes of a person" (Kissova 60). However, Death is also aware of his rather inhuman characteristics when contrasting himself with humans, reminding us of his odd existence:

A human doesn't have a heart like mine. The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time. The consequence of this is that I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their

ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both. Still, they have one thing I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die. (Zusak)

We discover that Death envies death and the fleeting nature of human life. His reasoning suggests he presumably wishes to leave the war and die instead, not stay in the perpetual horror he is forced to witness.

Death often refers to his senses in the novel to describe scenes or situations, which further complicates the determination of his humanness or monstrosity. One of the senses he repeatedly mentions is listening:

The ability Death has of listening to the suffering souls is explored throughout the narrative, which increases the dramatic effect of the story, especially because the narrator, as focalizer, focuses only [on] the inner voices of those he considers the victims of the war, be them Jews, poor German citizens or soldiers who die in the name of an unfair political regime. (Oliveira and Maggio 141)

His hearing is a sense that helps him notice the “sound of approaching bombs or gunshots, for example, but also to detect thoughts from souls that call him” (Oliveira and Maggio 141). Thus, he becomes the perfect messenger to deliver the thoughts of the dying.

Nevertheless, not every sense of his is so developed and anthropomorphic. Death regularly mixes up how human senses work and what one feels, creating a cacophonous poetry of senses, further highlighting his un-humanness and otherness (Oliveira and Maggio 141). Naturally, one starts to wonder whether he possesses these senses or simply guesses how emotions operate based on the book thief’s account. Alternatively, perhaps, he might be just craving to experience such sensations. Zusak, the author of the novel, explains the narrative choice behind the senses: “I wanted Death to talk in a way that humans don’t speak” (Oliveira and Maggio 141), which is demonstrated in the following passage:

You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I’ll hear later that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps. The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying? 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 or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge of the stress. It helps me relax. (Zusak)

He also seems to be overwhelmed by all the colors surrounding him: “So many humans. So many colors. They keep triggering inside me. They harass my memory” (Zusak). In his narration, he often uses short sentences, economizing on a few but painful words to “indicate the brutal simplicity of Death’s truth” (Johnson 3). His narration is agonizing at times, inescapable. It has a magnetic effect with its calmness, pragmatism, and devastation.

Additionally, he narrates from a first-person perspective, providing his peculiar personal description: “For me, the sky was the color of Jews.” (Zusak)

How Death treats the death of children in the novel is also noteworthy, as it differs from adults’ deaths. Although he can carry adult souls without becoming too emotionally attached, collecting children’s souls is a difficult task, even for him: “It was only children I carried in my arms” (Zusak). He is touched by the young lives that ended too early, expressing his human-like sorrow. According to Maria Kissova, Death’s sorrowfulness over children’s death is significant for highlighting “that children belong not only to their families, but also represent the future of society. Times when children and young people die en masse threaten the fundamental mechanism by which societies as well as individuals reproduce themselves.” (63) This is a symbolical indication of the death of a future that those children could have shaped. Those still pure and guiltless died innocently, in contrast with the older generations, whom the novel blames for the mass destruction. The most heart-wrenching example of that is when Himmel Street is bombed. Everyone dies, except for Liesel, who is saved by the power of words and writing, while Death has to collect Rudy’s soul:

I carried him softly through the broken street, with one salty eye and a heavy, deathly heart. [...] I saw him hip-deep in some icy water chasing a book, and I saw a boy lying in bed, imagining how a kiss would taste from his glorious next-door neighbour. He does something to me, that boy. Every time. It’s his only detriment. He steps on my heart. He makes me cry. [...] Where was Rudy’s comfort? Where was someone to alleviate this robbery of his life? Who was there to soothe him as life’s rug was snatched from under his sleeping feet? No one. There was only me. (Zusak)

His emotional state signals to the reader just how devastating is Rudy’s early death; even Death must cry and mourn the child, the innocent victim of the war. “It kills me sometimes, how people die.” (Zusak)

Furthermore, Death appears as a likable character, an amusing narrator, partly because he is portrayed as a good servant instead of a terrible monster. Generally, monsters are feared for their destructiveness, both to individuals and society. Yet, Death here is humanized and appears merely as a servant of Hitler, continuously “cleaning up” after the Nazis. He regards sarcastically: “It’s probably fair to say that in all the years of Hitler’s reign, no person was able to serve the *Führer* as loyally as me” (Zusak). Domínguez-Rué notes: “Death is divested from the harshness and cruelty commonly associated with it and is instead portrayed as sympathetic and intensely thoughtful, thus challenging our preconceptions and, by extension, our expectations about its role in the novel” (515). Although the story is filled with casualties of war, Death is purposefully depicted as a “positive character responsible only for ‘good deaths’

as a natural part of life and in accordance with accepted laws of biology and who thus cannot be blamed for the ‘bad dying’ of violent deaths” (Kissova 61). Due to this, it is further highlighted how humans are to blame for the millions of ‘bad deaths’, while Death is virtually portrayed as “an employee, like a person complaining about work he hates but as a worker has to do” (Kissova 60-61). Because he acts and thinks like a human, “we trust this merciful Death who feels pity for the dying” (Kissova 61), who can express what everyone felt at the time but was not allowed to say. Somehow even he is vulnerable to Hitler’s malignancy.

Then came Hitler. They say that war is death’s best friend, but I must offer you a different point of view on that one. 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)

Most importantly, in *The Book Thief*, the roles are reserved: Hitler is the cruelest monster, serving as a foil to Death. This suggests that Hitler possesses Godlike powers that transcend through heaven, earth, and hell and force Death to assist him. The function of monsters is generally to “warn, point out some danger — or direct our attention to dangerous forbidden desires. Their form of appearance and expression is a demonstration, i.e., they make visible what fears or desires they embody” (Limpár 5) (my translation). I would argue that although Death could have fit the literary monster trope, Zusak intentionally made Death a likable, sympathetic character, so Hitler’s monstrosity would be further highlighted as a foil to him. Death points out that the biggest menace for society is Hitler, as he exemplifies that humans are the biggest threat to humanity.

Death is not simply an ‘employee’ of Hitler, but he also conforms to the social norms of how people must act at the time: showing only minor signs of quiet rebellion to keep at least a small part of their humanity. Death is not subject to human criticism as he is invisible in the novel, contrary to the typical depiction of monsters. Thus, there is no confrontation with humans, no chance to judge him as a monster and highlight his otherness. It is instead of him who subjects humans to his criticism. When the bombs hit Himmel Street, and the poorer part of town is destroyed, Hitler’s framed photograph is thrown to the floor in the Aryan shopkeeper’s, Frau Diller’s shop. Death narrates: “The man was positively mugged and beaten to a glass-shattering pulp. I stepped on him on my way out” (Zusak). Throughout the novel, Death expresses his sympathy for the dying Jews, being the first-responder to their suffering and death. Although the story barely discusses the Jewish suffering and death in the camps (Domínguez-Rué 516), Death empathizes with them by becoming the spokesman for the unfairness of the situation. He also “lets people fight him, and some people are strong enough

to succeed in the fight” (Kissova 63). Max, the Jewish fist-fighter hiding at the Hubermanns’, is one of the novel’s most prominent fighters against death. “He hates Hitler and would do anything to revenge the life tragedy he has to experience.” (Kissova 62) When Max is ill, Death visits him. Yet, he is surprised by Max’s strength: “with so much work ahead of me, it was nice to be fought off in that dark little room” (Zusak). Max’s unyielding will to live helps him through the terror of the war, both in his hiding and the concentration camp, in a world that constantly questions his existence and wishes him dead. Death admires Max’s strength, his rebellion against death. He also examines the role of the innocent German civilians in allowing what happened, not resisting hard enough. His dissatisfaction with the absence of resistance against the Nazis reflects the 21st century’s standpoint on the Holocaust.

As a narrator, while his straightforwardness and insensitivity are alarming and remind us of his otherness, his observations also serve as comic reliefs, with his witty and whimsical thoughts. When Nazis arrive in Molching, as if he was a passer-by in the crowd, he wonders:

Many jocular comments followed, as did another onslaught of “heil Hitlering.” You know, it actually makes me wonder if anyone ever lost an eye or injured a hand or wrist with all of that. You’d only need to be facing the wrong way at the wrong time or stand marginally too close to another person. Perhaps people did get injured. Personally, I can only tell you that no one died from it, or at least, not physically. There was, of course, the matter of forty million people I picked up by the time the whole thing was finished, but that’s getting all metaphoric. (Zusak)

His sarcastic and ironic remarks and peculiar pondering imitates absurdism. When talking about the name of Himmel Street, he addresses it in a casual tone: “Himmel = Heaven [...] 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.” (Zusak) He implies the street was a haven from the horror of war, that it was the place of goodness, a rarity in WWII. In the end, Himmel Street falls, as well as heaven; humans and their bombs destroy it. With the added humor and cynicism of his narrative technique, he appeals to the reader, although the crudity highlights his otherness simultaneously.

In *The Book Thief*, the narrator is also a character, fulfilling the role of a peripheral narrator. As an omnipresent narrator with a panchronic view, Death concurrently exists in the past, present, and future (Oliveira and Maggio 141). “As he is Death personified, his vision is unlimited, allowing him to see beyond the frontiers of human eyes and perception” (Oliveira and Maggio 140). His omniscient narration provides an essential, convincing historical background on the destruction of the war: “The beginning of September. It was a cool day in Molching when the war began and my workload increased” (Zusak). He references historical

events, such as the bombing of Hamburg or the 1936 Summer Olympics, however, these historical events primarily serve as a backdrop to Liesel's story, typically mixed with Death's own reflections:

SOME FACTS ABOUT STALINGRAD 1. In 1942 and early '43, in that city, the sky was bleached bedsheet-white each morning. 2. All day long, as I carried the souls across it, that sheet was splashed with blood, until it was full and bulging to the earth. 3. In the evening, it would be wrung out and bleached again, ready for the next dawn. 4. And that was when the fighting was only during the day. (Zusak)

In the passage above, he plays with color and senses again to describe the devastation, pain, and mercilessness of WWII.

The novel's suspense is due to its most powerful techniques: prolepsis and analepsis, generally known as foreshadowing and flashbacks in popular culture. Essentially the novel is told in analepsis, as Death finds Liesel's book meeting her, and after re-reading her book numerous times, he decides to share her story (Oliveira 90). Moreover, Death jumps to and fro in time, sometimes revisiting characters' pasts or foreshadowing their fate. "Death as an omniscient narrator knows who will die and when, and he mercilessly informs us about several deaths before they occur in the story" (Kissova 65). The death of Rudy has probably the most powerful foreshadowing. At the beginning of the chapter "The Floating Book" (Part I), when Rudy asks Liesel for a kiss for saving her book from the river, Death interrupts the narrative: "A SMALL ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT RUDY STEINER He didn't deserve to die the way he did" (Zusak). Returning to the present, Rudy adds: "One day, Liesel, [...] you'll be dying to kiss me," which then proves to be true after Himmel Street's bombing. Due to prolepsis, characters' deaths are often established in advance and evident to the reader. However, contrary to one's expectations, the gained awareness adds to the reader's curiosity. In general, death is handled naturally; it does not matter how or when or who dies, suggesting that no one is unaffected by it. This creates an unsettling feeling, as the reader is aware of the beloved characters' death yet remains helpless. The loss of the characters, due to this sense of helplessness, makes the reader an accomplice; from Death's perspective, all of humanity should be guilty by association for causing such atrocities, for the fall of countless innocent lives.

Although he deeply cares about some human character, he is primarily invested in Liesel and her story. I would argue that Liesel is the foil for Death. Liesel is lovable, strong, intelligent, beautiful, innocent, but she is full of life above all. The reader mostly gets acquainted with her through her relationship with others: "her friendship with Rudy Steiner, her taking care of the Jew Max Vandenburg hiding in the Hubermanns' cellar and Liesel's all-embracing love for life

strongly contrast with the war-destroyed, cold and devilish Nazi [German] regime” (Kissova 60).

Embedded narration is a primary literary technique used by Death. The narrative contains Death’s diary entries, dictionary definitions, Max’s book, illustrations, and Liesel’s story called *The Book Thief*. Essentially, the novel consists of “Max and Liesel’s fictional memoirs” (Domínguez-Rué 515). In typical fashion to historical fiction, *The Book Thief* subverts conventional understanding of WWII and the Holocaust by presenting the period’s untold narratives, focusing on a German civilian girl’s perspective and a young Jewish man’s tragic life trajectory. “In *The Book Thief*, the primary narrator-focalizer (the one who tells the main story) normally shifts from character-bound or internal focalization to an external one” (Oliveira and Maggio 136). By shifting between internal and external focalization, thus reading characters’ minds, Death proves his omniscient narrative power to the reader (Oliveira and Maggio 135). Liesel is the main focalized object of the narration; hence the story follows the most important people in her life. “The only characters who receive such attention in *The Book Thief* are her foster father Hans, her Jewish friend Max and her best friend Rudy, although not to the same deep degree as Liesel’s” (Oliveira and Maggio 136).

Although Death asserts he knows Liesel’s thoughts, characters such as Rosa, Liesel’s foster mother, cannot be evaluated based on their thinking but instead on their actions or inactions (Oliveira and Maggio 136-137). “The way he chooses to focalize things shows the narratee whom he needs to consider the victims and the villains of Nazism” (Oliveira and Maggio 142). Moreover, Death alters Liesel’s feelings and experiences by adding his opinions and impressions, creating a layered narrative. Although Death appears to be emotionally close to Liesel, “the narratee does not have access to what Liesel thinks and sees, but to what Death thinks of what Liesel thinks and sees” (Oliveira and Maggio 137). Liesel rarely receives focalization. However, Death hands over the narrative control in Max’s embedded narratives, changing the focalizer to him in his boxing match with Hitler and the fictional story *The Standover Man*.

Such a long shift on focalization might be justified by the empathy Death feels towards the suffering of the Jews, whose inner voices he hears every time he goes to concentration camps or any other site where Jews are being killed. Nevertheless, Death assumes a neutral position in relation to this vision and refrains from making any kind of comment before, during or later this vision. (Oliveira and Maggio 139)

Max’s embedded stories are significant in this respect. He presents a book within the book, with his sketchbook titled “The Word Shaker,” having different page numbers from the rest of the novel. Max’s key to the Hubermann house lies in a copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Max paints

its pages over to make a present for Liesel, signifying that despite Hitler's hateful words' power, the creativity and the need for human expression are more vital. "Max's artistic creations attempt to account for his life story, while at the same time contesting the Nazi discourse by using the very book that deprived him of his former identity as a German and which now identifies him as an enemy of the nation" (Domínguez-Rué 521).

Max's sketchbook resembles a palimpsest; the white paint and Hitler's words are still somewhat visible under the illustration. The visual narrative, with illustrations and the palimpsest approach, further enriches the storytelling. "These embedded narratives [...] give detail not solely of dramatic events, but they also contribute to [expanding] the understanding of the primary narrative" (Oliveira 97). Domínguez-Rué reflects on the palimpsest: "while being the personal memoirs of a few characters, the multi-layered quality of their accounts makes the novel a complex narrative that becomes embedded with historical texts and recovers the stories and voices of those silenced and victimized by WWI" (524). Using the book that promotes superiority between races and destroys millions of lives, Max creates "the most beautiful pages of [Liesel's] life" (Zusak), and Liesel survives the bombing of Himmel Street only because she sleeps in the basement to write her story. The novel exemplifies the power of literature and words. Kissova observes: "The Book Thief presents Art as a powerful means to escape from harsh and cruel reality; it provides people with mental strength, unites them, and makes them feel safer as well" (Kissova 64). However, Death regards this somewhat cynically: "She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. How fitting that she was discovering the power of words." (Zusak) Since Death lacks a human perspective on art and experiences the war the most extensively out of every character, he associates words with the destruction he witnessed: "The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this. Without words, the Führer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or wordly tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words?" (Zusak). He is appalled by the workings of humans, as he cannot understand the need to create in a time of crisis. "Death is often haunted by the acts of love and hatred that humans are capable of, an unpredictability that is described as both appalling and fascinating" (Domínguez-Rué 51).

It is not a coincidence that Zusak chose the soul ripper as his narrator. "The monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (Cohen 4). Death provides a fresh yet intimate perspective on humanity, examining the most shameful part of its history. His presence begs the question: how come an unearthly monster, an outsider, recognizes the inhumanity displayed before him, yet humans cannot? In

The Book Thief, the monster is helpless, unthreatening to existing political or cultural hierarchies. Monsters generally “ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 20). However, here Death asks the reader how humanity could create such monsters as Hitler and Nazis. He comments: “That’s the sort of thing I’ll never know, or comprehend – what humans are capable of” (Zusak). It is almost as if a higher power made the decision; it is not specified whether it was God or Hitler.

The way Death describes himself as an omnipresent being, seeing “humans at their best and worst” sounds bizarrely similar to how various religions, especially the Christian religion, would describe their Gods. An eternal being, always watching over humanity, incomprehensively powerful and wise. The idea of Death replacing God is a recurring intimation in the novel. At one point, when Death goes to the concentration camp in Auschwitz for the first time, picking up souls, he finds himself questioning and looking for God as well:

God. I always say that name when I think of it. God. Twice, I speak it. I say His name in a futile attempt to understand. “But it’s not your job to understand.” That’s me who answers. God never says anything. You think you’re the only one he never answers?” (Zusak)

His internal monologues suggest that he believes there is only him and humanity left on Earth. Although the story is told by Death, there is no mention of the afterlife, God, resurrection, or redemption. “Omitting God’s voice, heaven and hell [have] a specific purpose in the narrative because it stresses the thematic concept of man’s responsibility for the tragedy” (Kissova 62). Observing humanity through Death’s eyes, “three truths [are revealed] about humanity’s anguish: pain exists universally; life, not death, causes this suffering; and agony ultimately brings strength” (Johnson 2). Death is utterly disgusted by humans who make life about suffering and pain, whereas he “admires the strength that comes from human suffering” (Johnson 5-6). He also observes that in war, staying alive is associated with guilt and shame. “Living was living. The price was guilt and shame” (Zusak). Additionally, he is shocked by the humans’ will to live. Micheal Holtzapfel, one of Frau Holtzapfel’s two sons, who survived the war and saw his brother dying, expresses this conflicting sentiment inherent to humans: “Tell me, Rosa, how [my mother] can sit there ready to die while I still want to live? ...Why do I want to live? I shouldn’t want to, but I do” (Zusak).

In conclusion, I examined *The Book Thief*’s narrator and his ‘otherness’ by demonstrating his human and monster qualities and surveyed his narration techniques, including embedded narratives, prolepsis, analepsis, and focalizers. *The Book Thief* is a critically acclaimed work of historical fiction that explores humanity’s brutality contrasted with

the power of love and the importance of art. Through the omniscient, monstrous narrator, Zusak reflects modern society's remorseful disapproval over Hitler's reign. Meanwhile, Liesel and those close to her provide an alternative account of history, adding color to humanity's darkest era.

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