

Trabajo Fin de Grado

‘The books and the words started not just to mean something, but everything’: The Restoring Power of Narrative in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*

Autora

Marta García Tizón

Directora

María Jesús Martínez Alfaro

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

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ABSTRACT

Set in Nazi Germany, *The Book Thief* (2005), by Australian author Markus Zusak, immerses the reader in the vibrant and tricky journey undertaken by a German girl, Liesel Meminger, towards trauma recovery. By portraying characters that go beyond the typical Jew victim –also present in the story– Zusak encourages readers to approach this Holocaust novel, narrated by Death himself, from a different perspective, which I relate in my analysis to the importance of listening to the perpetrator side of the story. From this point of departure, my dissertation focuses on how the healing power of narrative allows Liesel both to reconnect with the world and negotiate her traumatic past by transforming her experiences into narrative memory. Death's reflections highlight the dual function of words as they can save and destroy humanity simultaneously, and both Liesel and her context, marked by the rise of Nazism, are good proof of it. Drawing on this, my analysis traces Liesel's evolution from an abandoned, impoverished girl that can barely read to an empowered woman that gets strength from books and eventually writes her own story, using narrative as a weapon to restore her identity and to resist Nazi oppression and ideology.

RESUMEN

Ambientada en la Alemania nazi, *La ladrona de libros* (2005), escrita por el autor australiano Markus Zusak, sumerge al lector en un dinámico y delicado viaje emprendido por una niña alemana, Liesel Meminger, hacia la recuperación del trauma. A través de la presentación de personajes que van más allá de la típica víctima judía (también presente en la novela), Zusak anima al lector a abordar esta novela del Holocausto, narrada por la propia Muerte, de una manera diferente, lo cual relaciono en mi análisis con la importancia de escuchar la versión de la historia del perpetrador. Partiendo de ahí, mi análisis se centra en cómo el poder curativo de la narrativa permite a Liesel reconectar con el mundo, así como gestionar su pasado traumático a través de la transformación de sus vivencias en memoria narrativa. Los comentarios de la Muerte recalcan la doble funcionalidad de las palabras, ya que pueden salvar y destruir la humanidad al mismo tiempo, y tanto Liesel como su entorno, marcado por el ascenso del nazismo, son buena prueba de ello. Basándome en esto, mi análisis traza la evolución de Liesel desde una niña abandonada y sin recursos que apenas sabe leer a una mujer empoderada que obtiene fortaleza de los libros y que termina escribiendo su propia historia, utilizando la narrativa como un instrumento para restaurar su identidad y resistir a la opresión e ideología nazi.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1. THE NOTIONS OF MEMORY AND TRAUMA	4
1.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLOCAUST	5
1.3. THE TURN TO THE PERPETRATOR	7
2. FACING THE TRAUMATIC AND ANALYZING WAYS TO COPE WITH IT	8
2.1. TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN LIESEL'S CHILDHOOD	8
2.2. TRAUMA-RELATED SYMPTOMS IN LIESEL'S BEHAVIOUR	11
2.3. SAFETY AND EMPOWERMENT: TWO VITAL ELEMENTS IN TRAUMA RECOVERY	13
3. BOOKS AND WRITING: TWO POWERFUL CATALYSTS FOR LIESEL'S RECOVERY PROCESS	17
3.1. FINDING ESCAPE AND SOLACE IN BOOKS	17
3.2. THE HEALING POWER OF WRITING	19
4. CONCLUSION	22
WORKS CITED	25

1. INTRODUCTION

The Book Thief is an ambitious international bestseller by Markus Zusak, an Australian young adult writer. Published in 2005 and set in Nazi Germany, the novel follows the poignant story of a nine-year-old girl, Liesel Meminger, and all the appalling atrocities she must face as a consequence of the Second World War. The narrative opens in January 1939, and more specifically, on the day in which Liesel is being sent to the fictional town of Molching—the place where her foster parents are waiting for her. Liesel's childhood and innocence are filled by encounters with Death, who happens to be the narrator of the primary story. Belonging to the genre of Holocaust literature, *The Book Thief* presents a wide range of traumatic events taking Liesel as the main focalizer in order to make readers witness her suffering and recovery process in a way that makes her illustrative of the traumatic experience of those that lived through the Second World War and the Holocaust.

This novel has been acclaimed for offering a literary approach to the epistemology of trauma and its resolution. Five interconnected pillars serve as the basis of Zusak's narrative: an unusual treatment of the horrors of the Holocaust focusing on the issues of trauma and memory; the psychology of ordinary and Nazi Germans during the Second World War and their relationship with the Jews; the key role of the figure of the perpetrator; the curious use of Death as a narrator; and, last but not least, the focus on children and their position within this massively violent time, marked by all the abuses exerted by Nazi Germans. Bearing all this in mind, but narrowing the scope of my analysis, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the way in which Liesel, the main character in *The Book Thief*, is able to recover after her encounter with the traumatic experiences that marked so many lives. To do so, I will focus on the transformation of traumatic memories into a narrative account as an essential part of the healing of trauma,

and I will also deal with the different means Liesel uses as aids in this process. In what remains of this Introduction, though, I will provide some information on those aspects that help to frame the novel and my analysis of it.

1.1. THE NOTIONS OF MEMORY AND TRAUMA

The term “trauma” derives from the Greek term “τραῦμα” / “trauma”, which actually means “wound”. It was the nineteenth-century French psychologist Jean-Martin Charcot who started to consider the idea of the damage provoked by a traumatic experience, i.e., an overwhelming event that the mind of the individual cannot process. With the passing of time, the word “trauma” made its path into the psychological realm. For Freud, trauma is mainly the result of a broad rift in the ego’s protective shield, which fills the human mind with indomitable stimuli. This shield is what Freud refers to as a “stimulus barrier” (29) in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), a defense mechanism that is activated against the presence of excessive external-world stimuli. Traumatic events break that protective barrier and later haunt the individual, since the mind is not able to cope with and integrate those experiences successfully.

At the beginning, “trauma” was something exclusively related to military pathologies: after the First World War, soldiers were the ones that most suffered the consequences of traumatic experiences in the battleground. When the Second World War came to an end, substantial traumatic symptoms could be clearly perceived among civilians too. It was in 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association formally incorporated the concept of the traumatic syndrome and coined the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was first introduced in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*. After that, trauma entered the humanities too, becoming the subject of many literary works published in the last decades. One clear example connected with Holocaust trauma is Zusak’s novel but it must be

pointed out that, here, victimization and perpetration as connected with memory are two key elements, since Liesel witnesses both German and Jewish trauma. In *The Book Thief*, Liesel, together with some other characters, tends to avoid traumatic memories most of the time, which “leads to stagnation in the recovery process, while approaching them too precipitately leads to a fruitless and damaging reliving of the trauma” (Herman 176). And yet, though conveying the difficulty of the task, the novel also deals with mechanisms for working through trauma at different levels and sides of the events.

The Book Thief has been acclaimed for its careful attempt to provide its readers with a better understanding of both sides of collective traumatic experience: this novel brings together the figures of the victim and the perpetrator under one single but multisided trauma narrative. Such claim automatically leads us to this challenging question: can the perpetrator, and those on the perpetrator side of the conflict, become traumatized regardless of their connection with what causes trauma? One of Zusak’s purposes is to compel readers to face the complexities of trauma by using Liesel’s story and her encounters with different traumatic experiences. In fact, readers are not only exposed to individual trauma but also to collective trauma, since Liesel’s trauma is inevitably connected to the traumas affecting the inhabitants of Molching, representative of so many real German villages and real Germans during and after the war.

1.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLOCAUST

Critics such as Sicher tend to use the “Holocaust genre” label to make reference to the extensive variety of “fictional, semi-fictional or autobiographical works representing the Holocaust” (71). Zusak’s novel belongs to this category. Just as *The Book Thief* can be said to have trapped many readers and critics from the very first line due to its impressive depiction of human suffering throughout the Second World War, the work has also succeeded in its attempt to confront the effects of Holocaust memory and German

perpetrator trauma. The Holocaust did not only affect the Jewish community, threatened with extermination, but also the political opponents of the Nazis (like Liesel's father in the novel), as well as other ethnic groups that are often disregarded: homosexuals, gypsies, mentally-ill people, and those who were physically or psychically disabled (Martínez-Alfaro 12). In addition to that, the Holocaust can also be approached from the perspective of those who caused it or, more broadly speaking, from a German perspective.

Sometimes, though not necessarily, the authors of Holocaust novels have a personal connection with the events. In the case of *The Book Thief*, this novel uses as its basis the memories of Zusak's parents, a German mother and an Austrian father that emigrated to Australia in the 1950s. Zusak is then a second-generation writer who tries to come to terms with their parents' heritage of pain and guilt. Trauma may survive beyond one generation and others in Zusak's position have been affected by transgenerational transmission of trauma, i.e., "generations which have never been exposed to a traumatic event [that] can inherit the trauma of their ancestors" (Kolář 11). In line with this, one way in which traumatic memories, and their effects on succeeding generations, can be confronted is through writing about the Holocaust, even if writers like Zusak did not live through those traumatic events and consequently have no direct memories of them. Works like *The Book Thief* can thus be approached from the perspective of "post-memory", coined by Hirsch to refer to a connection with the past "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (9). Therefore, the Holocaust transcends personal experience as it can affect succeeding generations and has also become an integral part of our collective memory: the singularity of the Holocaust has left us a legacy in the form of a collective response to it.

1.3. THE TURN TO THE PERPETRATOR

As part of the developing canon of Holocaust literature, *The Book Thief* provides its readers with the depiction of a Germany that was drastically affected by the effects of the Holocaust, the Second World War and its aftermath. This may raise some controversy because, as mentioned above, this novel takes a less conventional approach to trauma due to its focus on the perpetrator's side of the story. However, as Christine Berberich explains, "[German engagement] is not only necessary, it is crucial for a variety of reasons, starting with collective acknowledgement of past crimes and moving towards individual engagement with personal repercussions of the past" (232, qtd. in Buráková 4). Writing about the perpetrators is vital, then, to get a wider picture of what happened, but also necessary for Germans to negotiate their past.

This may account for a relatively recent trend in Holocaust literature that Froma Zeitlin (2006) labelled "imaginary tales in the land of the perpetrators", i.e., fictional stories that mainly deal with the victimizers rather than with the victims, and also with the heritage and consequences of the Nazi regime on ordinary Germans. Thus, what Zusak does in *The Book Thief* is to present the perpetrators as ordinary people, to focus on the average German man, woman and child, and explore their humanity and emotions, rather than portray characters in tune with the traditional stereotype of the Nazi German as malevolent and sadistic. This approach could be related to the concept coined by Hannah Arendt and her discussion of "the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*" (257, italics in the original). As she suggests, ordinary people can be capable of terrible actions, even if what Zusak tries to do is also to show the possibility of benevolence and suffering for the German people.

Considering all this, the focus on the perpetrator inevitably forces readers to be aware of the human capacity for evil and, at the same time, to be conscious that being

German is not synonymous with being evil, even if Germans will be forever connected with the atrocities of the Holocaust. All this results in our asking ourselves some ethical questions like: How could it have happened? How could an apparently normal society conform to Nazi violent measures against humanity? What happened to moral choice as well as human conscience and decency when so many turned into accomplices of Nazi atrocities? Was it possible to resist when all around pushed ordinary Germans to comply with evil? *The Book Thief* satisfies an increasing need to listen to the other side of the story. Interestingly enough, Zusak decides to use the figure of Death as narrator, which also turns him into both a witness and victim of trauma since he is also haunted by the atrocities of the war. This overwhelming presence of Death and its piercing reflections lead us to raise a final question: can trauma/a traumatic past ever be overcome or can it ultimately be resolved only in death?

2. FACING THE TRAUMATIC AND ANALYZING WAYS TO COPE WITH IT

2.1. TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN LIESEL'S CHILDHOOD

The Book Thief unfurls a wide-ranging view of trauma within Death's palm. According to Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad: "The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery" (1). Considering this claim, the protagonist Liesel Meminger bears the burden of both physical and psychological suffering, imperceptible wounds that result from the imminent presence of death, destruction and the dislocations of war.

The novel's main setting is Molching, a small German town on the outskirts of Munich with no military bases, munition factories or armament plants. Liesel arrives there in January 1939, three months before the German invasion of Poland and the beginning of the Second World War. As the war progresses, so do its hardships, as the presence of the Nazis and their rules increasingly affect Molching. The villagers' lives change under

a totalitarian regime marked by violence and harsh repression, especially against Jews and Communists: destruction of Jewish shops, yellow stars painted on doors and windows, ration cards, disease, malnutrition, deportations to camps, etc. Ironically, the place where Liesel's foster family resides is Himmel Street, being "Himmel" the German word for Heaven. All through the novel, Liesel most often feel that her main enemy is Hitler while, actually, the greatest battle is the struggle involved in her understanding and acceptance of Death.

Significantly enough, the story is narrated by Death, something unusual for a Holocaust novel. This soul-ripping figure "demonstrates a degree of macabre humor and a self-conscious attention to the attempts at the conceptualization by humans" (Adams 148). In Genette's terms, Death would be a homodiegetic narrator since he also participates in the story he tells (245, qtd. in Oliveira 90). However, Death is also an omniscient character and is attributed supernatural qualities that allow him to move both temporally and spatially, witnessing the actions, feelings and thoughts of humanity. The primary story would be based on "Liesel's text, coupled with Death's own recollections and reminiscences" (Abate 64). Nonetheless, the main narrative contains several embedded stories, i.e., stories within the main story, such as those by the German Jew Max Vandenburg, which will be analyzed later in this dissertation as their role is highly symbolic.

Zusak affords the character of Liesel a greater complexity by illustrating through her a variety of trauma manifestations. The first time Liesel encounters Death is when her brother Werner dies on the train travelling towards Molching in order to be given over to their foster parents. Even though Liesel and Werner were accompanied by their mother, Liesel was the only one that noticed: "With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief—also known as Liesel Meminger—could see without question that her young

brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead. His blue eyes stared at the floor. Seeing nothing” (Zusak 28). Traumatized by the experience, Liesel subsequently finds herself unable to respond to her brother’s death. According to Judith Herman, “witnessing the death of a family member is one of the events most likely to leave the survivor with an intractable, long-lasting traumatic syndrome” (54). To Liesel, there was just “the imprisoned stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thoughts” (Zusak 29), which clearly points to her failure fully understand what is happening.

Besides, Liesel’s traumatic shock deepens when she feels compelled to follow her mother, who carries the dead body of Werner to bury him in the snow, a pitiable gravesite in a nameless place. On top of that, Liesel was not yet aware that her biological mother was soon to abandon her, which further complicates her trauma. Hitler had already gained enough power to implement a Nazi socio-political agenda in Germany. Consequently, Liesel’s father had been persecuted and imprisoned for his Communist ideology, and her mother had constantly struggled to support her children on her own. In fact, as the narrator points out, “everything about her was undernourished. Wirelike shins. Coat hanger arms. She did not produce it easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile” (Zusak 38). The description highlights the fact that the life of Liesel and her family has always been marked by poverty, material deprivation and fear. As a last resort, Mrs. Meminger decides to give both Liesel and Werner up for adoption in the hope that her children will have a more comfortable and secure life, as well as to protect them from a fate similar to that of their father at the hands of the Nazi authorities. But Werner dies and Liesel has to go on with her life having lost both him and her mother, just the first of several traumatic experiences that will drastically affect her.

2.2. TRAUMA-RELATED SYMPTOMS IN LIESEL'S BEHAVIOUR

Once Liesel arrives at Himmel Street and is taken in by Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her foster parents, she starts a process of settlement into the physical and emotional safety provided by them. In the course of one traumatic day, when her younger brother dies and her mother “abandons” her, Liesel loses the main relationships that sustained her inner world and, all of a sudden, she finds herself alone, stranded in an unknown place full of unknown people, far away from the comforting embrace of her mother: “When Liesel arrived in Molching, she had at least some inkling that she was being saved, but that was no comfort. If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else’s doorstep? Why? Why? Why?” (Zusak 38). As a result, this inevitably leads to Liesel’s loss of identity. As Herman suggests, personality development is possible thanks to the foundation of safe and stable connections with caring people (52). However, if those connections are threatened, or even torn apart, then the basic sense of the self of the traumatized person is completely lost. In a way, this is what Liesel experiences because she perceives that her mother has betrayed her. Consequently, she creates a kind of shield to protect herself from the external world. As pointed out in the Introduction, this could be linked to Freud’s notion of “stimulus barrier” (29), but these protective shields are different in important respects, among other things because Freud’s stimulus barrier is positive in that it protects the individual mind from external aggression, it protects from possible traumatic disorders. By contrast, the shield that Liesel creates is a consequence of the traumas she has experienced, but it actually makes it more difficult to heal from them as her self-imposed isolation prevents her from forging new relationships with people and opening herself to the world, which is, after all, a step towards working through, as her evolution shows later on.

Experiencing what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Liesel clearly shows traumatic symptoms, such as recurrent nightmares and bed-wetting. Undoubtedly, the loss of her brother is one of the most shocking events affecting Liesel: his death and quick burial in the middle of the snow will haunt her, especially at nights, when “she would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets” (Zusak 43). The nightmare that recurs is always the same: “As usual, her nightly nightmare interrupted her sleep and she was woken by Hans Hubermann. His hand held the sweaty fabric of her pyjama top. ‘The train?’ he whispered. Liesel confirmed. ‘The train’” (Zusak 89, 90). In fact, when she remembers the death of her brother in this way, Liesel visualizes herself digging Werner out of the snow until her fingers bleed, which clearly conveys her resistance to accept his death and is in tune with her behaviour after his burial, since she refused to leave the gravesite.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that what will later contribute to making her feel better and stronger, is initially a source of distress that complicates her traumatic symptoms. While books eventually save her, illiteracy haunts Liesel during her childhood. At one point in the novel, Liesel has to pass reading tests at school in order to make progress. However, in spite of the fact that she is moved up to her rightful year level, “she still read with great difficulty. Sentences were strewn everywhere. Words fooled her” (Zusak 78). For Liesel, the act of reading in front of her classmates brings about a state of anxiety: “a string of nerves tightened in Liesel’s ribs. It started in her stomach but had worked its way up. Soon it would be around her neck, thick as a rope” (Zusak 79). This anxiety will be later transformed into absolute rage, which she unleashes against Ludwig Schmeikl when he insults and ridicules her in front of her classmates during a break. Liesel gives Ludwig Schmeikl “the hiding of a lifetime” (Zusak 82) as a mechanism to reassert herself and prove that her inability to read properly does not mean

that she is completely weak and “stupid” (Zusak 83). Consequently, Liesel will have to gather some weapons and healing aids in order to clear a path towards trauma recovery.

2.3. SAFETY AND EMPOWERMENT: TWO VITAL ELEMENTS IN TRAUMA RECOVERY

American psychiatrist Judith Herman points out that the traumatized person can begin to heal just if s/he first establishes a sense of safety, which will be developed alongside a sense of empowerment (156). One of the key elements in Liesel’s recovery is the defining relationships she establishes on Himmel Street. As has been previously stated, Liesel’s identity becomes completely fragmented as a consequence of the loss of her brother and the abandonment of her mother. Thus, the first step in trauma recovery is the reconstruction of those lost relationships. As Herman concludes, in “renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience” (156). The way in which Liesel comes to terms with trauma becomes progressively evident in the strong bonds she creates with different characters in the novel, especially with her father Hans Hubermann and the German Jew Max Vandenburg.

The Hubermanns are the first to provide Liesel with a comfortable and reliable environment. The description of Liesel’s arrival at Himmel Street already suggests that she will immediately connect with Hans as “fifteen minutes passed till they were able to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it” (Zusak 35). Hans’ smooth personality becomes a shelter for Liesel. In fact, it is Hans who actually calms Liesel down whenever she has her nightmares, thus providing the safety and relief she desperately needs: “he came in every night and sat with her (...). Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man’s gentleness, his *thereness*” (Zusak 43). Moreover, Hans also plays a crucial role in Liesel’s empowerment as he is the one

that helps her with words, which will help her in her recovery process. All the hardships Liesel had to face earlier in life had taken their toll on her educational progress, which explains why she is illiterate. Every night, after the bed-wetting occurrences, “the midnight class began (...). Hans Hubermann merely repeated his previous clean-up heroics and got down to the task of reading, sketching and reciting” (Zusak 73). These reading classes become vital for Liesel since Hans teaches her how to read and write properly: first, she learns the letters in the alphabet, and then, the words in a book. To Liesel, reading becomes a symbol of her ability to control her inner world and a way of claiming her identity. This is inextricably connected with her compulsive need to steal books, which comes as a result of her inability to come to terms with the death of her brother. The first book Liesel steals, just after Werner’s burial, is *The Gravedigger’s Handbook*, “a twelve-step guide to gravedigging success” (Zusak 36), which will be not only the first of several book thefts but also the first book she reads, the one Hans uses to teach her.

In order to better understand Liesel’s recovery process, it is essential to consider two key phases in the experience of trauma: “acting out” and “working through”. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Dominick LaCapra explains that “acting out” is connected with repetition, compulsion; it describes the stage in which the traumatized individual compulsively relives the traumatic events and remains stuck in the traumatic past. In turn, the term “working through” refers to both the assimilation and integration of traumatic memories, thus allowing the subject to establish a distinction between the traumatic past and the present. So, recovering from trauma requires an evolution from the “acting out” phase to the “working through” one. Bearing all this in consideration, the aforementioned guide initially relates to the “acting out” of Liesel’s trauma. In her case, the process of “acting out” is characterized by nightmares among other symptoms that amount to the

compulsive repetition of, mainly, her brother's death, a traumatic phase during which, in LaCapra's words, "tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (21). This clearly points to the dual function of *The Gravedigger's Handbook*: on the one hand, this morbid book is connected with Werner's death and burial, and therefore evokes the original trauma scene; on the other hand, Liesel improves her ability with words by reading the book (she becomes more literate) and this helps her to overcome her trauma. In a metaphorical sense, through the book she moves back to the site of her trauma, i.e., her brother's grave, but also acquires the tools to overcome it as she will eventually be capable of digging her trauma up. In her dream, she tried to dig her dead brother out of the snow, but what she unburies is the silences and suffering of trauma as she transforms them into narrative memories.

Like Liesel, the German Jew Max Vandenburg is introduced in the narrative as going through an experience of great loss: Max feels compelled to leave behind his family in order to survive by finding refuge against the growing anti-Semitism of his country. In Moses' words, "German Jews were a highly integrated minority before National Socialism, with a hybridized subculture, retaining elements of both Jewishness and Germanness, that was very much their own" (104). Nevertheless, it is after the emergence of National Socialism that the position of German Jews became notoriously threatened to the point that hiding a Jew was punishable with death. During the First World War, Max's father saved the life of Hans Hubermann, so, in a sense, he feels morally obliged to offer shelter to Max as a way to pay his father back. The similarities between Liesel and Max are clear from the moment Max gets to Himmel Street 33: "they both arrived in a state of agitation on Himmel Street. They both nightmared" (Zusak 209). Most importantly, they are both haunted by the loss of their families and, on top of that, Max feels guilty all the time not only because he has left his mother behind, but also because he is putting the

Hubermanns in danger as they hide him in the basement. Yet, in important respects, Max's guilt derives from his wanting to live and each character finds in the other the strength to go ahead despite all difficulties. All the pain and suffering he and Liesel have gone through powerfully binds them together. In fact, it could be said that Max becomes a soulmate, someone with whom Liesel feels identified. As their relationship grows stronger, Liesel acquires the ability to make moral judgments by developing a sense of empathy for Max, which allows her to understand the suffering of the individuals that surround her. Not only that, Max also provides Liesel with the gift of words: for her twelfth birthday, he gives the girl a book written by himself, *The Standover Man*, and, for Christmas 1942, Max leaves a sketchbook entitled *The Word Shaker* as a gift for Liesel¹. The latter book deals with the story of Nazism, narrated from a ludic perspective, and includes "many thoughts, sketches and dreams relating to Stuttgart and Germany and the Führer. Recollections of Max's family were also there" (Zusak 437). *The Word Shaker* illustrates both the friendship between Liesel and Max as well as the story of how Hitler came to rule the world with the aid of words. Thus, this fabula serves as a wonderful representation of the dual function of language: words can be powerful for good and for evil. On the one hand, Hitler used hateful words to manipulate people's minds and create "a nation of farmed thoughts" (Zusak 438), a forest full of propaganda, and, on the other hand, a girl, the best word shaker, cried a tear of friendship for his persecuted friend, a tear which dried, became a seed, and later an impenetrable tree. This tree comes to represent a new hope for Germany and the way in which words, if used in an effective way, can be extremely powerful against evil.

¹ Both *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker* function as embedded stories, written by Max and therefore placed on a secondary narrative level. They play a crucial role in Liesel's understanding about the implications and power that words have, especially in a country dominated by Nazism.

In order to write those embedded stories, Max uses some pages from Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as canvas. Ironically, that book is Max's safe-conduct since it allowed him to hide a piece of paper containing "one name, one address: Hans Hubermann, Himmel Strasse 33, Molching" (Zusak 197). Hitler's book was his only possession, but Max could not think of giving such propaganda to Liesel as her birthday gift since "that would be like the lamb handing a knife to the butcher" (Zusak 224). Hence, he decides to cut out several pages from *Mein Kampf*, paint over them in white and use them as blank pages for his stories and drawings. It could be concluded then that the book written by the Führer himself—propagandist writing which seeks to justify the manipulation of democracy in order to achieve his goals—is also, in this narrative, a book that saves the life of the German Jew Max Vandenburg. Nazi ideology can thus be said to be subverted through the book as object, not only because it helps Max to escape but also because another story is written over Hitler's words whose contents and effects radically oppose Nazi thought.

3. BOOKS AND WRITING: TWO POWERFUL CATALYSTS FOR LIESEL'S RECOVERY PROCESS

3.1. FINDING ESCAPE AND SOLACE IN BOOKS

In the narrative, words, stories and language are metaphorically transformed into a kind of shelter to which many characters go, especially Liesel, since they find comfort, meaning and escape in them. In fact, Liesel is presented to the readers as increasingly eager for books, to the point that she is so fascinated about texts that she even commits larceny. As could be expected in the light of the book's title, the narrator refers to Liesel as "the book thief" (Zusak 28).

Individuals who have gone through traumatic experiences (e.g., those associated with war) can benefit from medical practices that provide them with the basic tools to redirect their lives. If approached from a psychological point of view, professor Abate has documented that “during the 1920s, clinical psychologists experimented with a new method: bibliotherapy” (57). This new therapy uses literature for the purpose of healing and is based on the idea “that reading could affect an individual’s attitude and behavior and is thus an important influence in shaping, moulding, and altering values” (Lenkowsky 123, qtd. in Abate 57). In tune with this, the narrator reveals that books acquire emotional meaning for Liesel but also have a healing effect. Thus, she associates her first book, *The Gravedigger’s Handbook*, to “1. The last time she saw her brother [and] 2. The last time she saw her mother” (Zusak 45). But, as a matter of fact, the aforementioned nightly sessions with Hans provide her with the moral strength to “confront the loss of her parents, combat memories about the horrible hardships she has suffered since the Nazis took power, and process the trauma of her brother’s death” (Abate 58). The narrative repeatedly brings to the fore the therapeutic role of the books Liesel steals, which also have a symbolic meaning: it is during the Führer’s birthday that Liesel takes *The Shoulder Shrug*, a book sent to a bonfire because it was considered intellectually corrupting as its protagonist was a Jew presented in favourable terms. The burning of books at the hands of the Nazis was a common practice aimed at “cleansing” what Goebbels called “Jewish rubbish and filth” from German culture (Johannsen 12). Thus, by stealing that book Liesel can be seen as directly challenging Hitler’s ideology, which sought to limit people’s access to what they considered “un-German” books, as if the ideas in them were infectious.

It must be added that Liesel’s passion for books progressively turns her from a powerless, innocent girl into an empowered and mature adolescent. At the beginning of

the novel, readers are presented with a child unable to read in front of other people, this being one of the sources of her uncontrollable anxiety. But her evolution becomes apparent the night Molching becomes a target of air raids, which forces some of its inhabitants, including Liesel and her family, to take refuge in the basement of the Fiedler family. As claimed by Erikson, this could be referred to as “the gathering of the wounded” (187, qtd. in Buráková 9), i.e., the communalization of trauma: new bonds are created within the community during those air raids since each one is committed with the losses and lives of the other. Naturally, everybody in the basement is subject to a state of fear and nervousness that immediately created an atmosphere brimmed with terror: people were afraid of death. Aware of people’s fear, Liesel decides to open *The Whistler* and start to read it aloud in order to “shut out the din of the basement” (Zusak 377). Her reading and its effects agree with Malchiodi and Ginns-Gruenberg’s remark, which highlights the fact that “reading can also involve calming rituals and self-soothing experiences” (169, qtd. in Abate 59). In line with this, Liesel comes to soothe not only herself but also the frightened children and adults surrounding her in a moment when “everybody waited for the ground to shake” (Zusak 378). Such claim comes to reinforce the idea of the therapeutic potential of books as well as the fact that, words, in the right hands, can be both extremely powerful and life-enhancing, whereas in the hands of a tyrant, they can even destroy humanity.

3.2. THE HEALING POWER OF WRITING

The life-saving power of words can be connected with the idea that narrating trauma is a crucial step in the direction of healing. Actually, towards the end of the novel, the reader is invited to consider the idea that all the great hardship experienced by Germany, together with an intense desire for healing, have triggered creative methods to work through these war-related experiences. As claimed by Abate, “the creation of original works of printed,

visual, and material art can be a powerful means of processing, enduring, and even transcending trauma” (60). Traumatic memories are uncontrollable, intrusive, and recurrent, and they are experienced by the traumatized person as flashbacks to the events themselves, the individual being unable to incorporate them into his/her psyche rationally. In Malchiodi’s words, “being able to communicate what has happened (...) allows for emotions, events, and memories to be witnessed by others and is the powerful step in addressing the needs of any trauma survivor” (xvi). This is the case of Liesel Meminger and the special bond she develops with literature.

It is true that Liesel’s bibliophilia is present from the very beginning of the narrative; her hunger for books and reading even leads her to steal them. Still, it is her pivotal relationship with Ilsa Hermann, the mayor’s wife, that will feed Liesel’s interest in literature and facilitate access to books. Rosa Hubermann gets some money for doing the mayor’s washing and ironing, so Liesel is the one that delivers the laundry. One day, Frau Hermann invites Liesel into her library, a place which immediately becomes “one of the most beautiful things Liesel Meminger had ever seen” (Zusak 139). Liesel’s fascination leads her to adopt a habit into her daily routine: she goes to Frau Hermann’s house to spend some time at the library, enjoying the nature of words. Actually, this practice is not abandoned in spite of the fact that Frau Hermann has to stop hiring Rosa’s services due to the precarious situation the country is going through. All the words Liesel reads in that library allow her to realize that those are also the words that fuel the Nazi rhetoric in a different way; she realizes that all the pain, grief and hardships she has faced are the result of an evil and manipulative use of words at the hands of the Nazis, as suggested by a sort of epiphanic moment when “at the centre of all of it, she saw the Führer, shouting his words and passing them around” (Zusak 509). This realization is accompanied by her tearing some pages out of a volume, as if she could kill the words, at

the same time that she asks herself about the reason why words have to exist because “without them, there wouldn’t be any of this. Without words, the Führer was nothing” (Zusak 510). In fact, Liesel decides to punish herself with the promise to never return to the library, a place she loves and hates “because it is full of words” (Zusak 511). It is three days later when Frau Hermann knocks at Liesel’s house and gives her the most precious gift she could ever receive: a small black book containing just lined paper so that Liesel can write her own story, which will be entitled “The Book Thief, a small story by Liesel Meminger” (Zusak 514). This project marks the culmination of Liesel’s recovery process.

Liesel starts a nightly ritual consisting of going down to the basement and writing down her words on the unspoilt paper, which is somehow revealing since Ilse gave her a reason “to remind her that words had also brought her to life” (Zusak 513). Actually, this nightly habit will eventually turn Liesel into the only survivor when Molching is bombed some days later, leaving her alone in a devastated village full of dead bodies and destruction. As Death narrates, when the rescuers pulled Liesel out of the rubble, “she was still clutching the book. She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life” (Zusak 489). As analyst Dori Laub puts it about Holocaust survivors, victims of trauma “did not only need to survive in order to tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (78). The scope of this assertion can be broadened to include all trauma victims: telling one’s story and narrating one’s experience of traumatic events play a crucial role in the process of recovery since they allow the traumatized person to gain control over the effects of trauma. It could be concluded, then, that the “working through” phase begins when the traumatized person has the ability to transform his/her traumatic memories into a narrative. In the case of Liesel, she assimilates the loss of her most dearly beloved, thus accepting the inevitability of death, and she somehow learns to incorporate her traumatic past into her new life instead of trying to erase it. This

is something that is possible, to an important extent, thanks to the evaluative power of writing, as Liesel is able to rewrite the traumatic events into her narrative in a way that presents her as a survivor rather than a victim. Her debt to words is somehow anticipated by Death, who claims that “when she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started not just to mean something, but everything” (Zusak 37), thus pointing to the centrality that literature would acquire in Liesel’s life.

Interestingly enough, many years later, when Death travels to Sydney to take Liesel’s soul, he reunites her with her black book, which had been thrown aboard a garbage truck the day Molching was bombed. In spite of the fact that the text had slightly faded, “she was able to read her words. The fingers of her soul touched the story that was written so long ago in her Himmel Street basement” (Zusak 537). This moving scene comes from the very end of the novel and is accompanied by a note made by the narrator: “I am haunted by humans” (Zusak 538). Death openly declares his bafflement in this way: though he may even appear as traumatized by the cruelty of human beings, which makes his job hard and ultimately affects him, this job allows him to see human grandeur too. Aware of their splendour and their decline, their ugliness and their beauty, Death cannot but feel wonder at whatever makes humans admirable and appalling at the same time.

4. CONCLUSION

As explained in this dissertation, in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* Death narrates the life of Liesel Meminger, a German girl whose life is constantly haunted by trauma and the presence of death resulting from Hitler’s rise to power and the horrors of the Second World War and. By focusing on the lives of ordinary Germans in a fictional town near Munich, Zusak’s novel vindicates the need to listen to the other side of the story, that of

the perpetrators, in order to come to terms with the atrocities of the Second World War and assimilate them into our culture.

In the novel, Liesel's experiences and memories blend with Death's reflections on his job as collector of souls, which makes it impossible for him not to be affected by the traumas he witnesses and into which he participates too. His sometimes ironical remarks cast a critical eye on human cruelty and the recurrence of traumatic episodes caused by it, thus leading the reader to consider whether it is possible to recover from trauma and if so, how.

Throughout the narrative, we see that Liesel must overcome numerous obstacles on her journey towards recovery: the loss of her family, her recurrent encounters with death, the devastation caused by war, Hitler's ideology and Nazi repression, etc. Nonetheless, she progressively acquires the necessary tools, which she gets from the people and things that surround her, in order to assert her identity and gradually gain control of her life. While Freud's notion of stimulus barrier is a positive mechanism of our mind that protects us, to the point that trauma occurs when this shield is broken, Liesel's traumas initially lead her to build another "shield" that is not positive at all, since it isolates her and prevents her from healing. Book thieving plays a key role to break that shield and work through trauma, since books and reading become her major supports: written texts bring solace, escape and meaning to her chaotic life.

It could be said that the protagonist is not the only character who sees literature as a therapeutic remedy. Her soulmate, the German Jew Max Vandenburg, transforms his only possession, a book so full of hate as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, into something that helps him to escape and, later on, into tales that are a gift to Liesel and that, embedded in the main narrative, show them to be powerful weapons against Nazism: the painted-over pages of Hitler's work become filled up with stories for Liesel to read, about the basically

human connection between people and the bonds that Nazism tried to destroy. Moreover, it presents words as a double-edged sword: they can destroy if they are used for manipulative purposes and they can save if they are correctly used; they can empower and imperil.

Liesel's journey towards recovery culminates with the process of writing. In the end, she is able to reassert her identity in the world and regain control over her life by transforming his traumatic experiences into narrative memory. As has been previously explained, narrative memory, in contrast with traumatic memory, is not passively endured, it is rather an act on the part of the narrator that defuses traumatic memory and so contributes to the remaking of the self of the traumatized individual. Words save and words connect, and so, an individual who has undergone a traumatic experience must tell his/her story in order to survive and reconnect with the rest of the world. Liesel's narrative, and, eventually, Zusak's work, illustrate this while they also remind us that stories are testimonies that feed the memory of those that came later and have the duty to remember what happened.

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