

A project entitled
The Contestation of Power Relations in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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INTRODUCTION

The Book Thief is a historical novel published in 2005, written by Markus Zusak. It is the story of a young German girl named Liesel Meminger, narrated by Death. Liesel, after the death of her brother, is sent to her new home in Molching, Germany in 1939, shortly before the start of World War II. In celebration of Hitler's birthday, the Nazi party holds a book-burning event in town, which prompts Liesel to begin to secretly steal books and gradually learn to read. The situation becomes trickier when her foster parents provide refuge to Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man, in their basement. Liesel, as a source of comfort, makes a routine of reading to him at night, in a treacherous time of Nazism, that later results in a meaningful friendship. While in hiding, Liesel and Max together come to understand their similarities in their struggles and pain from the consequences of war.

Power may generally be thought of something that is held as a possession by an individual to dominate another. However, the term 'power', for French philosopher Michel Foucault, goes far beyond that. Power is defined as a function that is wholly relational, in the sense that it is shared and transferred among and across individuals (Kelly 89). An individual does not own power, nor is it hierarchical. Rather, power exists in relationships and occurs in the intervening space between individuals as an autonomous strategy (Kelly 91). In Zusak's novel, power is very much exercised almost everywhere, particularly through the individual subjugation and genocide of Jews by the Nazi regime. Despite his sovereign power, Liesel still covertly disregards Hitler's biography, and Hans and Rosa Hubermann vigilantly allow Max to hide in their basement. These actions are forbidden according to the beliefs of Nazism. It might seem that the Nazi regime is the most powerful on a hierarchical scale. However, as Kelly notes, "all kinds of people have all kinds of ways of influencing others" (87). Forces of power between characters are constantly being engaged and contested, which make the theme of power in the novel significant. With the manipulative techniques of the Nazi party being an immense part of the story, Foucault's concepts of discipline and biopower, in particular, will be used as the main framework for understanding how power is

exercised, rather than owned, by the Nazi regime against German individuals to serve the interests of the sovereign.

One remarkable feature of the novel is the unique narrative point of view in that Death, an existential figure, is the all-knowing narrator and the storyteller of Liesel's story. He is both "omnipresent and omniscient and sees both the victim's and the perpetrator's side of the story" (Buráková 43). This makes him the focalizer who, through omniscient power, is the agent that sees and perceives what the characters feel, and...determines which characters to focus on and ignore throughout (Oliveira and Maggio 135). Death travels back and forth in Nazi Germany and gathers people's souls during the war which presumably makes him powerful. Despite having omniscience, however, Death becomes vulnerably political in the story, "in all the years of Hitler's reign, no person was able to serve the Fuhrer as loyally as me" (Zusak 491). Death, himself, claims his position within Hitler's circle, which introduces an interesting conflict of narrative power in the political context, one that is between Death and Hitler. Roland Barthes posits that the author and the narrator are separate entities, and the language [becomes] performative alone (4). In order to interpret the text, the intentions of the author are excluded, and meaning is gained in the process of reading. By applying this theory to the novel, Zusak's role as an author diminishes and Death becomes the performer of the narrative. Other studies show that Death is neither fully omniscient or omnipresent, rather, he still "accesses the outer dimension as he gathers the souls of soldiers, civilians, and Jews" (Yoder 26). It turns out that Death is partly aware of his lack of narrative control. At the same time, he is also conscious of his political part in the story. Through the lens of power, his narrative can then be interpreted through the question of how much control he really has, especially on a political level.

While there have been studies on the narrative form of *The Book Thief*, such as Death's role as an omniscient figure and his complicated relationship with humanity (Nedelčevová 7), power relations have not been formally studied and analyzed on thematic or narrative levels. Different forces of power, occurring between characters, come into play throughout the novel, especially with the narrator himself, Death, on metafictional levels. The first half of this dissertation will use Foucault's theories of power, particularly in relation to discipline and biopower, to interpret the political situation that is represented in the novel. While there are subtle acts of resistance displayed

by characters, power is exercised throughout the social body of German citizens to meet the needs of the Nazi regime. Giorgio Agamben's ideas on biopower will then be applied in response to Foucault's theory to explore the central theme of death in the novel. The second half will slightly move away from Foucauldian forms of power and deep dive into the relationship between narrative and power in the novel on fictional and metafictional levels. By approaching Death as a narrator and a participating character in the story, on a fictional level, it will be argued that characters such as Max and Hitler threaten Death's power as an all-knowing and powerful figure. This leads to conscious knowledge, on a metafictional level, of his limitations and thereby competitively asserting his power over the reader due to his insecurity, which will be explored with references to Bal and Barthes' narratives theories. This paper will ultimately argue that *The Book Thief* reveals the contestation of power relations, where there are disputes and competitive efforts to be in control on different levels. There are strong attempts to serve one's own interests, particularly by the Nazi regime whose objective is to spread Nazism all over Germany, as well as Death's aim to convince the reader of his narrative power. Such sections will be ordered (1) Controlling German Bodies (2) Existence of Jews: Political Threat (3) Escaping and Controlling Death in War (4) Death's Insecurity in his Narrative Power

CONTROLLING GERMAN BODIES

Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is addressed to bodies and their individualization. It focuses on the training of bodies and “attempts [are] made to increase their productive force through exercise, drill, and so on” (Foucault, ‘Society Must be Defended’ 242) so as to ensure the distribution of individual bodies that become docile in the process and utilized for different purposes. It is also noted that in modern discipline, the three primary techniques of control are: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the examination (Gutting 2003). These are in accordance to the objective of “[ruling] a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can...be kept under surveillance, trained...and punished” (Foucault, Society Must be Defended 242) in order to command them to perform duties for authorities. Under this particular technique of power, bodies are subjugated and left to be under the control of others to the point where they operate in an unconscious way, as they are strictly directed to follow rules and procedures.

Throughout the novel, the Nazi party continuously exercises disciplinary power by putting German individuals through a series of trainings and instructions involving the manipulation of habits and surveillance. They are strictly given practices to follow that gradually manipulate them into believing the values of those in authority. Death narrates: “the first thing they did there was make sure your ‘*heil* Hitler’ was working properly. Then you were taught to march straight, roll bandages and sew up clothes...taken hiking...Wednesday and Saturday were the designated meeting days, from three in the afternoon until five...” (Zusak 40). The repeated routine, excluding the Hitler salute, may seem quite leisurely. However, these seemingly casual rules still serve to manipulate individuals, because they discreetly and slowly produce a group of strong-willed German subjects. To devote much of their time to their membership also means having to surround themselves with other youngsters being educated along the same lines. This actively produces a collective group of youths who believe in Nazism, which is primarily the main basis of the organization. Moreover, German soldiers are seen marching with “their uniforms walked upright, and their black boots further polluted the snow...their faces [are] fixed ahead in concentration” (Zusak 50) in Munich Street. Here, an image of intense obedience can be seen as the soldiers are embodying strict German discipline in their routine. It is very interesting to note how their garments, rather than their bodies, are shown to perform the action of marching. The words “walked upright” and

“further polluted” puts emphasis on their forceful entry into the territory of Molching. The soldiers are no longer identified by their individuality but merely by what they wear as result of disciplinary power. Their garments especially have more autonomy than the soldiers themselves do because they embody their worth and political existence as Nazis. Similar to the soldiers, the youth members are given very explicit instructions on marching straight and never to “look or wave to the crowd” as well (Zusak 108).

The contestation of power relations is seen between the Nazi party and German citizens in the novel who are condemned to exist under Nazi ideologies. While a dispute does not always directly happen between the two groups face-to-face, the power that is exercised by the Nazi party is being shared and permeates among many German subjects, which saps characters’ such as Liesel and Hans Hubermann’s attempt to resist Nazi ideologies even in secret. When Hans Junior gives a scornful look to Liesel for owning three books that are not Hitler’s works, Hans Hubermann defends her hobby by encouraging her to keep reading. For a moment here, the power that is imposed by the Nazis, is being resisted by Hans Hubermann and Liesel within their social relationship because they are disregarding not only his son’s judgmental response together, but also Nazi ideologies as his beliefs are clearly shaped by the Nazi party’s disciplinary technique of making it compulsory to read and pass *Mein Kampf* around in honor of Hitler. This technique is a way of ensuring that subjects wholly conform to Nazi ideology. Most importantly, any works that do not embody the German spirit and threaten Hitler’s rule are brought to the Nazi Party immediately (Zusak 102), so that any types of negative propaganda can be destroyed accordingly to prevent opposition. The Nazi party’s power then strongly counters Hans Hubermann and Liesel’s gesture, through the body of Hans Junior, when he accuses Liesel of being against Hitler by swearing that “[she’s] either for the *Führer* or against him” (Zusak, 105). His reaction suggests that the enforced disciplinary habit of reading *Mein Kampf* has fully subjugated him into believing that a mere book should strictly determine the position of an individual, and that it becomes a political crime if one does not obey it. Part of discipline is to “increase the forces of the body in economic terms of utility and [diminish] these same forces from the body in political terms of obedience” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138). Requiring citizens to study and promote *Mein Kampf* produces them as obedient subjects that are beneficial to the Nazi party. They become manufactured subjects who are controlled into fulfilling the economic, political and social needs

of those in authority. One outcome is the transformation of their values and their greatest loyalty to Hitler, which makes Hans Junior an example of a successful, disciplined body.

Another example of power contestation is when Rudy Steiner exerts rebellious tendencies towards against the leader of the Hitler Youth, an organization targeted at male youths to educate them about Nazi principles and prepare them for military service. It is noted that the establishment of Hitler Youth is a technique used to extend the Nazi party's influence all over Germany, and Franz, being the head of the group, is the individualized subject that is trained to reinforce the sovereignty of Hitler as an important figure, as well as to suppress any form of deviation from the Nazi party's strict rules. When Franz notices Rudy's mischief during a military drill and asks him, "When was our *Führer*, Adolf Hitler, born?", Rudy intentionally responds with the birth of Christ and "even [throws] in Bethlehem as an added piece of information", despite knowing what the answer is (Zusak 295). Here, there is a dispute of power against the Nazi party, by Rudy who playfully shows his neglect in being a good, obedient supporter of Hitler, when individuals are supposed to show genuine compliance towards Nazism. As punishment, Rudy is ordered by Franz to do more laps while being asked the date of Hitler's birthday. It takes Rudy "seven laps before he [gets] it right" (Zusak 295) which shows how relentlessly opposed he is to Hitler as an ideal figure. Foucault argues that the function of disciplinary power exists through "practices of subjugation and coercion that manufacture individual subjects through an anatomical politics, a microphysics of power" (Schirato, Danaher & Webb 80). It can be said that this act of punishing, is a disciplinary technique used by Franz, with the influence of the Nazi party, to keep dissolving and subjugating Rudy into an individualized body that can be trained and punished in the name of Nazism. With this, through the successfully individuated body of Franz, the Nazi party's disciplinary power is also being exercised to meet its objectives of converting German citizens into being good subjects. Thus, with characters such as Liesel and Rudy who deviate from Nazi rules, the point of the Nazi party using disciplinary techniques is to rule a multiplicity of German individuals so as to subjugate their bodies into bodies that can be trained and kept under surveillance, and to create power relations that combat oppositional forces of power.

EXISTENCE OF JEWS: POLITICAL THREAT

Biopower is another form of power that functions to manage the population as a whole and is “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 140). Biopower also sees population as “a political problem...as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* 245), with an emphasis on the protection of life rather than the threat of death. It is the “inclusion of bodies into mechanisms of state power, focusing on [management] and [categorization]” (Schirato, Danaher & Webb 92) and sees men not as much for utility but merely as living beings under the power of regularization. It aims to take control of life and manage the population in terms of biological processes. Unlike discipline that focuses on enhancing the capacity of a body, biopower is literally having power over biological bodies.

The Jewish people in Germany alone is a political problem for Nazism, in a way that they perceived to be a biological threat to the population. The elimination of Jews becomes one of the main objectives of the Nazi party throughout the novel. When Max realizes Liesel’s concern over the whereabouts of his body if he dies, he tells her, “in your situation, a dead Jew is just as dangerous as a live one, if not worse” (Zusak 334). Simply, the hatred towards Jews is so extreme that even the sight of a Jewish corpse is a threat to Liesel and the Hubermann family. According to Foucault, racism is bound up with the technique of power, and is the precondition of what he calls biopower in its justification of the right to kill a certain proportion of the population (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 258). With that, biopower allows governmentality to support the inscription of racism along with its discriminatory policies (Schirato, Danaher & Webb 96). It sustains the idea of racism in the sense that it needs an imperative justification and explanation for the need to eliminate the biological threats under the biopower function. For one group to become purer and biologically stronger is to request the destruction of enemies, with racism as the basic mechanism of biopower. In the context of the story, the objective is to proliferate and improve Nazism while gradually taking the lives of the Jews. During the marching, a Nazi soldier gives a speech to the town of Molching: “We put an end to the disease that has been spread through Germany for the last twenty years, if not more!” (Zusak 110). Here, the metaphor of comparing Jews to a “disease” reinforces the notion that a group of Jews is an abnormal condition that negatively affects the Nazi population.

Hence, why it is important to prevent the spread of Jews as a means to keep Germany healthier under Nazi ideology.

An instance of racial discrimination is evident in the novel when the League of German Girls are told that “Germany is the superior race...everyone [knows] about the Jews, as they [are] the main *offender* in regard to violating the German ideal...people of such political creed [are also to be punished]” (Zusak 111). Jews are seen as inferior subjects and held as prisoners within the state purely due to their race. It is also the twisted generalization that all Jews are communists, as a result of the sovereign’s power in promoting racism, which puts the hatred towards them as an ultimatum. Shops are abandoned, labeled with yellow stars and anti-Jewish slurs (Zusak, 50). The Star of David is painted on Jews’ doors and their houses were “lepers” that had “infected sores on the German landscape” (Zusak 50). These actions are insinuated and expected in Nazi Germany, to the point where derogatory notions are inevitably applied to Jewish individuals. Regardless of whether a Jew has misbehaved or not, it does not matter because according to Nazi ideology, being Jewish means to automatically become a criminal. Discriminatory policies include the stigmatization of those who befriend and help Jews. For example, when Hans offers to paint over the words “Jewish Filth” on the door of Mr. Kleinmann’s shop, his application to the Nazi Party is rejected because he is looked upon with suspicion (Zusak 181). On a whole, Jews are viewed and ideologized as racial enemies, which is one of the Nazi party’s techniques in exercising its sovereign power under biopolitics. This gives them a rational foundation to eliminate the Jewish population that will eventually lead to a genocide later on, in relation to the approach that “racism alone can justify the murderous function of the [authorities]” (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* 256). If more Jews die, the Nazi race can become biologically stronger.

The brutal mistreatment of Jews and their impoverished condition is evident throughout the novel, ultimately leading them to their deaths. Unlike Foucault’s biopower that concerns itself with the political subject that is categorized, Agamben believes that death is central to biopower. Sovereignty’s main activity is the production of *zoe* to *bios*, which refers to people’s bare life and the political public life respectively, for the mobility of humans and order. Once the subject is deprived of their public life, they are reduced to their bare life which leaves them to only become their own biological bodies that become killable (Agamben 53). How this is reflected in the novel

is in how the Nazi regime strip Jews of their German citizenship, rendering them merely biological and subjecting them to bare life without any political existence. The marches, for instance, are one of the most common practices imposed on Jewish prisoners to be controlled and then eliminated and it is where their bare life comes into existence turning them into killable bodies. Death narrates that, “when the soldiers pulled over to share some food and cigarettes and to poke at the package of Jews, one of the prisoners collapsed from starvation and sickness” (Zusak 389). The interesting packing imagery here gives this idea of the massification of bodies that have become products of the Nazi party at a collective level. There is an achievement of regularity where their life and well-being are controlled by the biopower of the Nazi party. If they cannot keep pace or collapse, the Nazis, without hesitation, shoot them because the permit to kill without committing homicide is in the sovereign sphere (Agamben 53). Furthermore, the fact that Jews are described as “a new batch of fresh, tired Jews” (Zusak 508) truly shows the quick production of Jewish bodies due to the biopower of the Nazis. The implication of the idea of “batch” is that their bodies are going through biological processes in which they become incapacitated bodies which again, becomes a regular mechanism in controlling and eliminating the Jewish population.

It is interesting to note how body parts of Jews are specified in the novel, such as the description of “limping Jewish feet” (Zusak 509). The will to survive and extreme desperation for escape, is portrayed through the description and personification of body parts. For example, when Jews are being exterminated in gas chambers, Death says that “their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door” and “their fingernails had scratched the wood and in some cases were nailed into it...” (Zusak 349). Metaphorically, the Jews’ body parts are performing the action, which contributes to this idea of Jewish merely being seen as bodies. Their bodies no longer belong to them but have become products of political strategies and mechanisms for controlling life. The situation forced upon them is so brutal and inhumane, that even their body parts are the ones struggling to escape. This contributes to the portrayal of Jews existing not as human beings, but merely as biological bodies in bare life, and who were banned from the public life that is centered around Nazism. Hence, with the existence of the Jews being a dispute to the objectives of the Nazi party, biopower is exercised throughout.

FICTIONAL LEVEL: ESCAPING AND CONTROLLING DEATH IN WAR

While power is contested between characters, the power that Death exercises among humans is also threatened by characters such as the survivors and Hitler, in a way that they escape and control him respectively. The main fact of death, according to Garcia, is that “[it] is the end of an individuated life’s presence [and] denotes the absence without return of what lived” (410). One of the fundamental things about death is that it is inevitable and there is “no avoiding it” (Kagan 264). The “central badness of death lies in the fact that it deprives [us] of life worth living” (Kagan 264). By placing Death as the main narrator of the story, this should make him a very powerful existential figure that has ultimate control of humans by choosing who dies and who does not. Humans cannot avoid him whenever their time comes because the function of death is inescapable, and it is a part of life. There are, however, instances where characters, particularly the Jewish victims, try their hardest to survive and actually manage to escape Death for a while, despite the appalling conditions they are stationed in. Interestingly, Death also claims that he sometimes needs a distraction “considering the length of time [he has] been performing this job” (Zusak 4-5), that job being to collect the souls of dying people. This counters the idea that Death is first on a hierarchical scale because power is also being exercised against him to force him to complete his tasks. Death is no longer the agent, but rather a passive figure under another, which is later revealed to be Hitler (Zusak 491). It should be noted that this argument will be understood with the concept of Death also functioning as a character in the novel because he still “plays an active role in the same world as the characters, even if he is not bound by the conventions of human existence” (Gipson 16). The first-person narrator also draws the story with the “I” point of view, which gives the narrator the role of a participating character (Leveen 2018). Considering all these, it can be seen that Death’s exertion of power as a narrator and a character, is being contested back and forth by different groups of characters.

War involves chaos and destruction to the point where it exposes its citizens to death. On the other hand, there are also people who fight to stay alive and surprisingly, Death who is supposed to be the powerful one, has limited control on humans and over his own actions. First, Death states his reason for needing a distraction from having to look at the Jewish victims after his inability to make them die: “it’s the leftover humans. The survivors. They’re the ones I can’t stand to look at,

although on many occasions I still fail. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs' (Zusak 5). The diction "punctured" and "beaten" emphasizes brutal abuse of the Jews, which is something Death notices. One may perceive Death as a bad figure that takes away the lives of people. Surprisingly, he turns out to have an earnest side that evokes sympathy (Gipson 8), because even he cannot stand to watch the Jewish survivors' situation. The fact that Death needs a distraction from his job is an example of his limited power to control things. He also describes the perpetual survivors as "experts at being left behind" (Zusak 5). No matter how much Death may want to take them away with him, they still manage to stay alive on their own. The word "expert" shows that the survivors have experienced this situation many times that they become even better at escaping death, hence, countering Death's function to eliminate characters.

Furthermore, there are several moments where Death's process of collecting souls is delayed, particularly because of people's desperation to live. He mentions that "some people cling longer to life than expected" (Zusak 9) which shows the victims' desperation to continue living. There is some sense of power that is being pulled back and forth, with the victims trying to restrain from being brought to Death, while Death is exercising his power to take them away. An example is Max's power to suppress Death's function. Death says "I readied myself to insert my hands through the blankets. Then there was a resurgence—an immense struggle against my weight. I withdrew..." (Zusak 318). In this, Death's power is being contested through Max's strength to revive himself and avoid him, which surprisingly makes Death give up. Also, when Death witnesses Hans Hubermann's participation in World War I, Death thinks "[Hans] was doing his best to avoid [him]...he was either too lucky, or he deserved to live, or there was a good reason for him to live" (Zusak 174). The "work" Death is referring to, is his mission of collecting dying souls during the war. It is everyone but Hans that cannot escape him. This is something that Death, even as a narrator and the collector of souls, does not have the exact answer to. Surprisingly, Hans escapes Death for the second time in World War II which leads to Death stating, "not many men are lucky enough to cheat me twice" (Zusak 178). It is interesting how the idea of luck is repetitively used as Death's reasoning for Han's survival because it shows his lack of power to dominate characters' timing of death on his own terms. With that, Death has "no power over the destiny, no possibility to choose who is going to die and who live" (Nedelčevová 28). Not only

are the characters' victorious in avoiding Death, undermining the power of his function, but it also limits the credibility of Death's omniscience and role as a powerful narrator.

While the power to lead humans' destiny is being contested, that being said, it seems that Death is being challenged by another figure that is Hitler, which is also a testament to his lack of narrative power. There is the constant mention of being tired and needing a vacation from collecting humans throughout the story. For example, when Death mentions about his travels around the world, he complains, "Goddamn it, I needed a broom or a map. And I needed a vacation" (Zusak 307). The desire for a vacation shows Death's need for a break from something that he was perhaps employed to do because he feels extreme tiredness. His tone here is heavy, expressing fatigue over his responsibility. Interestingly, the use of "broom" and "maps" not only suggest the sweeping of blood and disposal of human corpses, but also this idea of labor that Death is being held responsible for, as much as he dislikes the exhaustion. Moreover, Death's constant address of Hitler such as "Happy Birthday, Herr Hitler. Many happy returns." (Zusak 100) shows his inferiority and employment under him. It does not necessarily mean Death is intimidated by Hitler, rather it signifies his role as a servant to him. While Death describes his process of collecting humans, during the bombing of Munich which includes the sights of colors, he says, "just a last moment of darkness...Heil Hitler" (Zusak 491). This greeting of pledging allegiance to Hitler suggests that Death is under Hitler's authority, despite his role as a powerful entity of human life. His situation is similar to the way how Nazi soldiers are disciplined to use this phrase in order to show their obedience to Hitler. Therefore, Death's roles as a narrator and a passive character overlaps because while he does have the power to function as a collector of souls, he is being controlled by Hitler. It is clear that Death somberly glorifies Hitler, which metaphorically shows this idea of power that is being exercised on him.

Additionally, Death's role in the midst of war is, in fact, more crucial than expected. He is aware of this and even positions himself under the authority of a "boss". Evidence of his inferiority is most noticeable in the moment he expresses his view on war while hinting at Munich as the next target for bombing.

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 309)

Rather than Death being the supporter and ally of war, he is actually lower in status and is being managed by war. The third-person pronoun "he" is in reference to Hitler and its implication is that Hitler is the "boss" who is controlling and demanding Death to kill and collect humans' souls during the war, whereas Death is an overworked and passive servant. The repetition of "get it done" puts emphasis on this idea of a manager having authority over his employee and the urgency of completing the task. The Foucauldian claim that politics remains war, according to Kelly, means that "under the surface calm, society remains a churning mass of contestation, in which everyone strives for power" (95). Within the context of the story, considering the political takeover of Germany by Hitler and the Nazi Party in the existence of war, Hitler is technically using Death to exercise his power over Germany in relation to the objective of eliminating the Jewish population. Death says, "the bombs were coming—and so was I" (Zusak 335). The bombing indicates the upcoming destruction and chaos of Munich that lead to more humans being killed. It is then Death's job, under Hitler and the Nazi Party, to chase after them. The war is the foundation of death and it is ultimately Death's responsibility to finish the process. Therefore, with the escape of characters from death and Hitler's authority over the narrator, the notion that Death has the ultimate power over everything is an overstatement.

METAFICTIONAL LEVEL: DEATH'S INSECURITY IN HIS NARRATIVE POWER

According to Bal, a key difference between the narrator and the author is that the former is “the linguistic subject” and the latter is “a person” (16). He argues that the narrator is “a function...which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text” (16). Barthes posits that once the writing begins, “the author enters his own death” and the narrator becomes the agent in charge of its own self (Barthes, *The Death of the Author* 2). Since Death is the narrator of *The Book Thief*, this should make him a separate entity, a completely different figure that should not be seen as being influenced by Zusak’s role as an author. Barthes also states that the communication between a narrator and the reader is an integral part of narrative fiction, with a dismissal of the author’s existence. He says, “there is a donor of the narrative and receiver of the narrative. In linguistic communication, *I* and *you* are absolutely presupposed by one another” (Barthes, *A Barthes Reader* 281). The use of the pronouns “I” and “you” must coexist together in the sense that they affect the closeness of the reader and the narrator, enhancing the immersion of the narrative. Interestingly, while the third-person is used to describe the experiences of Liesel and other characters, there are often uses of personal pronouns in Death’s narrative to prove to the reader his omniscience. However, it turns out that Death does not truly have the answers to everything. Thus, due to the contestation of his power as a narrator, as discussed earlier, he constantly addresses the reader in a competitive effort to take over the story which in fact, shows his insecurities in his narrative power.

Death immediately addresses the reader in the beginning of the story by saying, “you are going to die” (Zusak 3). Although this is true for every reader as death is an inevitable part of life, it is his way of asserting his omniscient power in an exaggerated way, especially over the reader who is actively reading the story. Because he lacks knowledge of things such as humans’ ability to stay mentally strong in the midst of dying loved ones (Zusak 25), he determines the readers’ future in an attempt to intimidate the reader with his omniscient role. He then further elaborates, “I will be standing over you, as genially as possible...I will carry you gently away...at that moment, you will be lying there...you will be caked in your own body...a scream will dribble down the air...” (Zusak 4). Here, Death creates a vivid image of the reader’s future death and his process of collecting their souls, such as the tactile imagery in “caked in your own body” which gives this

image of a person becoming encrusted on their own corpse, bringing this idea of no escape. The constant use of “I” and “you” not only represents reader-narrator confidentiality, but it also emphasizes this intimate energy and space that, in the process of dying, only occurs between them. It forces the reader to become the object who is being controlled under Death’s narrative. Most importantly, it signals Death’s assertion of power, with Death being the collector of souls and the reader being merely a passive figure under death. The reader may also wonder why Death even addresses them in the beginning of the story when the story should be about the characters. This is because Death knows he is not very powerful as his power is contested in different aspects, hence, his instant assertion of power towards the reader.

Additionally, Death’s insecurity about his narrative control can be felt in his sneering attitude and efforts to convince the reader to trust his narrative. He is fully aware of his role as a narrator in a fictional work. Landa makes a note on the features of metafiction, “[it is] a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction” (2). It will “often be outspoken...about its aim and techniques” (Landa 4). Throughout the narrative, Death often alludes to the linear plot structure in a way that he somewhat makes a mockery out of it. For instance, in the first chapter, he suddenly interrupts his own narrative to say, “—Of course, an introduction. A beginning. Where are my manners? I could introduce myself properly, but it’s not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough...” (4). While the tone here is sarcastic, there is some irony in how he points out the importance of an introduction but at the same time, he purposefully limits information about himself. At that moment, Death is restricting the reader’s knowledge about himself to reassure the reader that they will find out the answer soon because he wants to convince them that his narrative is trustworthy. Spacey argues that “[*The Book Thief*] readers are entrusted to the authority of the narrator” (74), meaning that readers are, by default, assigned the responsibility of trusting Death in his story. Hence, Death tries to assure the reader of his narrative power as much as possible by constantly alluding to features of fiction such as when Max is heading to Himmel Street: “Soon, I will clap [Liesel and Max] together. Just give me a few pages” (Zusak 158). He also intentionally spoils Rudy’s death and says, “of course, I’m being rude. I’m spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it” (Zusak 243). Death knows that a fictional structure has an ending but quickly chooses to reveal the death of a character that happens later on. The metafictional format also “creates tension

between metafictional authority and the reader” (Spacey 79). In this case, Death is disrupting the reader’s experience of reading by spoiling the ending and challenging their power to create meaning within the text. The reader may then contemplate his rationality for spoiling the ending, which allocates the power towards Death because he is able to direct the reader’s attention to specific details and situations. With that, his insecurity can not only be seen in his teasing attitude, but also in his language to try to prove to the reader of his omniscient power and control of the entire story. Therefore, Death’s flaw in his narrative control is masked by his forceful personality towards the reader.

CONCLUSION

All in all, this study reveals that *The Book Thief* is a complicated, yet compelling depiction of the contestation of power relations where there are driven motives and efforts to be in control. Using Foucault's discipline and biopower theories to foreground the analysis of the Nazi Party's assertion of power towards the German citizens and the Jewish population, they bring out the kinds of techniques used to dominate bodies and to weaken the power of those who oppose the Nazi ideologies, as well as to increase the production of Nazi bodies in the state of Jewish genocide. Meanwhile, digging deeper into the metafictional aspect of the novel using narrative theories such as Barthes', the contestation of power is visibly seen and felt between the characters and Death, who is supposed to be an all-knowing powerful figure, bringing in the fact that he is an existential figure who is an inevitable part of human life.

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