

# Symbolism in the book thief by markus zusak

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“ I’ve seen so many young men over the years who think they’re running at other young men. They are not. They are running at me” (Zusak 174).

Narrated by Death himself, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak presents many unique and compelling questions with answers that can be very confusing.

He presents these questions in many ways, sometimes, like in the quote above, using Death’s narration as a tool to express the questions, and other times using different strategies. One of the more distinguished ways he asks these questions is by using symbolism. Symbolism is a unique literary device that can be found in most literature, defined as “ the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities”, symbols being defined as “ things that represent or stand for something else”. Throughout *The Book Thief*, Zusak uses countless different symbols to present his unique and complex questions and ideas. “ EVEN DEATH HAS A HEART” (Zusak 242).

“ MAKE NO MISTAKE, THE WOMAN HAD A HEART” (Zusak 532). There are many common symbols in literature, such as the color black representing death or flowers representing life and prosperity, and they tend to crop up everywhere, including inside *The Book Thief*. One of the most common symbols in recent writing is a heart. As a symbol, a heart typically represents love or, in the case of the two sentences above, the capacity to express love. Zusak uses having a heart throughout his whole novel to describe significantly different characters, Death himself, the narrator, in the first example, and Rosa, Liesel’s irritable foster mother, in the second example, and both uses of symbolism present different questions and ideas.

The first example, describing Death, brings us down a path of question after question, all of which are similarly difficult to answer. The first, most obvious question, is this. Disregarding how real or unreal Death is, does Death have a heart? Outside of this novel, in various beliefs, does Death care? Is Death an impartial judge of whether a person is good or bad... or does Death "have a heart" as Markus Zusak writes? The next use of the heart as a symbol describes Rosa, Liesel's foster mother. Rosa is, in summation, an irritable person. She swears constantly, insults everyone, is always yelling, and yet Zusak tells us in with this symbol that it is all a front.

He tells us that even if someone seems completely crazy on the outside, like Rosa, they still can care for someone or something. They still might have the capacity to love. THE ACCORDION Hans's accordion symbolizes countless different things to a number of different characters throughout The Book Thief. At the start, it's a fairly simple symbol. Hans plays it to comfort Liesel and it works. He plays it constantly and it begins to symbolize comfort and hope, even love, but when we begin to progress through the story, we see that it represents much more, to Hans himself and those around him.

To Hans, it stands as a reminder of the man who saved him in the first World War. It stands for survival. Then Max shows up and the first words out of his mouth are "Do you still play the accordion" (Zusak 185). To Max, the accordion is hope as well, but a more specific hope: hope that he will survive, a way to survive. Whether or not Hans plays the accordion is whether or not he has hope to survive. To Rosa, for much of the book the only thing it might represent are her husband's antics, but when Hans leaves to fight in another World War, it takes on another symbolization, Hans and Rosa's love for him.

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Rosa holds the accordion often at night remembering Hans, the accordion being the only thing she has left of him. Finally, when 33 Himmel Street has been leveled to the ground, it takes on one final representation: Liesel's story. It's been with her through almost the entire novel and has represented countless things throughout. In the end, it represents all that Liesel has been through, but still, also, hope. The accordion symbolizes many things in *The Book Thief*, and each idea it symbolizes could have an entire essay written about it and the questions it presents, but one question seems to sum up the symbolizing of the accordion. How can one object symbolize so much? How can an object be so important to a story? How can it be so important to so many people... for the accordion is important to most of the major protagonists in the story as well as the story itself.

And what about reality? Could an accordion do so much in real life? In summation, how is one object such a crucial part of a story and, in reality, can one thing really be so important? *MEIN KAMPF* *Mein Kampf* is perhaps the symbol most connected to its meaning in actuality. *Mein Kampf* is a book written by Adolf Hitler several years after the end of World War I. Translated into English, the title can be understood as 'My Struggle' or 'My Fight'. It contained a plan for Germany after World War I and many of Hitler's ideas. In *The Book Thief*, it represents two main ideas: Liesel's world and freedom.

The first idea is fairly easy to explain and understand. At first, *Mein Kampf* was just an idea of Hitler's or a compilation of ideas at least, but in the 1940's it was close to reality. Hitler's dreams were coming true. Then Max begins to paint the pages of *Mein Kampf*, erasing the evil contained in those

pages and making good out of it. These changes symbolize changes in reality, when Nazi Germany was falling.

The second idea is slightly more complicated and much more specific. Max, on the train to find Hans, reads Mein Kampf... Why? The answer is to blend in. Max reads Mein Kampf to appear like the model German man, to avoid suspicion, so when Max is reading Mein Kampf on the train, not only does it represent the evils of Naziism, but also freedom for Max and safety. This brings up one essential question about Mein Kampf as well as many other things: can something that is without question unethical somehow be good?

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak is full of symbols that have deeper meanings than what is just on the surface and these three are just a few. There are many more symbols unmentioned here, such as Liesel's books, Max's newspapers and weather reports, and all the colorful descriptions Zusak uses, but these three are certainly among the most meaningful. Love and caring, as well as the accordion and Mein Kampf, are crucial parts of The Book Thief and the story wouldn't be the same without them.

Throughout The Book Thief, Markus Zusak skillfully uses symbols to ask questions and present ideas not many people think about from day to day.