

The book thief: the omnipresence of pain



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The Book Thief: The Omnipresence of Pain

The illustrious novel, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, depicts the story of Liesel Meminger, a young German girl coming of age in Nazi Germany.

Through the life of Liesel, the reader is shown several hardships humans have to endure. With the outside viewpoint of the narrator; Death, Zusak uses symbolism to depict the theme of how living comes with omnipresent pain; the belief that pain is an unavoidable part of living. Throughout this novel, symbolism is shown within the character of Ilsa Hermann, the death of Werner and the Jew parade, all demonstrating this recurring theme.

Throughout the novel, Ilsa Hermann possesses great, innate grief as a result of the death of a loved one, which ultimately demonstrates how pain is unavoidable. She is described by Liesel as “ a woman with startled eyes, hair like fluff, and the posture of defeat” (Zusak 42). Those who experience pain and lack the strength to endure it, are seen as cowardly, feeble, and broken. Her “ startled eyes” give a sense of fear caused by the pain that has affected her in the past. Her “ hair like fluff” implies that her hair was not done for the day and thus paints her as a vulnerable character. Her “ posture of defeat” indicates that she is tired of suffering and has accepted the grief. Through Liesel’s description of Ilsa, we learn that she carries this grief that weighs her down. Later on, Liesel describes Ilsa as “ transparent” (368). This symbolism creates a woman almost deathly in nature. This skeleton-like lady establishes a skewed notion of death and life. Those who resemble Ilsa, who let pain rule them, lose life’s importance and become death-like. As one can clearly see, the cadaverous nature of Ilsa Hermann demonstrates that pain is a universal and omnipresent element of living. Further on, it becomes clear that Ilsa

Hermann's son, Johann, died during World War One "parcelled up in barbed wire like a giant crown of thorns" (145). In the use of the crown of thorns, Zusak creates Johann to be a type of Christ, a martyr who eliminates pain. However, in a reversal, Johann becomes a martyr who imposes pain, especially to Ilsa, his mother. The symbolism around Johann ultimately demonstrates Death's rejection that life is innately happy. In addition, Death states, "I untangled [Johann] and carried him out" (145). Death untangles this man, Johann, from the pain of his physical condition and the pain associated with life. Ilsa Hermann however, is unable to unravel herself from the pain of life like Death did so for Johann. In fact, the death of Johann eternally haunts Ilsa. In order to compensate for the death of Johann, Ilsa Hermann deliberately leaves the window of her library open every day to the cold air to induce self-suffering. This cruel attempt to bring physical pain to veil her original suffering over the death of Johann, clearly demonstrates that the humanity must cope with pain every day. Although Ilsa Hermann does not have a great part in the development of the storyline, she and the symbolism surrounding her plays an important role in uncovering the belief that pain is an unavoidable part of living.

The theme of omnipresent pain develops in the early stages of the book. The death of Werner Meminger, Liesel's biological brother, further cements Death's belief that pain is an omnipresent element of living. To begin, Werner suddenly dies as a result of frigid temperatures on the train journey to their new foster parents' home in Molching, Germany. Zusak writes, "There was an intense spurt of coughing... And soon after—nothing." (20). The suddenness of the death of Werner Meminger, exposes the fact that pain

is inevitable. You cannot control whether something occurs or not because pain is a universal aspect of life. After the passing of Werner, every night, the anguish of her brother's death causes Liesel to "wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets" (36) for the reason of a nightmare regarding her brother's death. Drowning symbolizes life, a painful struggle that can ultimately end with death. Drowning is a common dream which usually occurs when people are under a lot of physical or emotional stress. Liesel's dream further demonstrates the inescapability of human pain because Werner's death haunts Liesel because she is alive. Werner Meminger does not share the agony because he is deceased and therefore, cannot experience the suffering. Liesel's mother also carries the pain of her son's death with her. Immediately after Werner's burial, "[Liesel's] mother carried the memory of him... She dropped him...She picked him up and continued walking" (25). Death's description of a painful memory indicates that the living carry burdens of horrible memories. Contrary to humanity's perceived loathing for pain, Liesel's mother genuinely wants to remember, despite the suffering that comes from remembrance. She immediately remembers because she deeply loved her son, Werner and feels obligated to honor him. Her continued walking demonstrates that Liesel's mother will carry the burden and suffering of Werner's death with her forever. The many acts of symbolism through the death of Werner, ultimately show the belief that pain is an unavoidable part of living.

One of the most important aspects demonstrating how living comes with omnipresent pain, occurs during a Jew parade, where Jews march through town to a concentration camp. By using symbolism, Zusak demonstrates the

great ordeal Jews have to go through. This is first shown when describing the Jews. Zusak writes “ The Jews came down like a catalogue of colours ... They would greet me like their last true friend, with bones like smoke and their souls trailing behind” (391). The symbolism of a catalogue of colours for death gives a sorrowful individuality to the Jews and presents them as if they are important to Death. To the Nazi Germans, however, these people are worthless. The “ bones of smoke” create a contrast from the catalogue of colours, giving a sense of sorrow and pain that the Jews must experience. They represent the last of the Jews’ life that death has almost extinguished. The souls trailing behind imply that the Jews have acknowledged the large possibility of death and they exist now in a state between life and death, longing to end the pain. Furthermore, Death uses symbols of life to show the Jews’ withering states. He says, “ The dirt was molded to them Stars of David were plastered to their shirts and misery was attached to them as if assigned. ‘ Don’t forget your misery...’ In some cases it grew on them like a vine” (392). The dirt and vines, both symbols of life, actually suffocate the living. This suggests that death does not destroy people; the living do. The dirt weakens the Jews representing how the pain is slowly killing them. Moreover, the Stars of David, who once symbols of pride, now represent vines that entangle, and suffocate the Jews. Throughout the book it is shown that life causes the pain and suffering, not death. Later, to further demonstrate that pain comes through life, Death describes an incident during the Jew parade. As the Jews walk, one man falls and Hans Hubermann, Liesel’s foster-father, runs to him, “[holds] his hand out and [presents] a piece of bread, like magic” (394). The contrast of a simple piece of bread to the extravagance of magic demonstrates how brutally life has

treated this man. The Jew has gone through several physical and mental hardships due to the life he was born into. The bread represents the sense of happiness that the Jew had never quite received. The Jew's gratitude, unfortunately, is ephemeral because shortly after, the Nazi soldiers proceed to whip the Jew six times and Hans, four times. One can see from an outside standpoint how cruel life can be. Through the symbols of the colours, the star of David and the vines, and the tumble of the Jew, the belief that pain is inevitable in life, shows through.

In conclusion, while examining the theme that pain is an unavoidable part of living, one can see that the narrator, Death provides a viewpoint to bring light to certain truths about human hardships. Using various symbols in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, such as the character of Ilsa Hermann, the death of Werner and the Jew parades, prove the theme of how pain is an integral and constant element in the human life. Death sums up human suffering when he says, " That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of" (25). Perhaps one will never truly comprehend the real nature and complete purpose of pain, but a foreign perception helps one uncover the truth about suffering and ultimately allows one to change pain into a crucial necessity for humanity; strength.

Works Cited

Zusak, Markus, and White, Trudy. *The Book Thief*. Pan Macmillan Australia, 2005.