

Anthropomorphizing Death: A Magic Realist Reading of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the anthropomorphization of Death in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, focusing on how the author transforms the conventional image of Death into a compassionate, reflective, and emotionally complex narrator. Traditionally represented as the Grim Reaper, Death is reimagined with distinctly human physical, emotional, and psychological attributes, allowing readers to engage with mortality from a unique perspective. Drawing on theories of anthropomorphism, gender performativity, and magic realism, the study explores how Death's narration challenges conventional perceptions of life, death, and humanity. The paper particularly analyses the magic realist strategy of inversion, in which the supernatural narrator appears more humane and trustworthy than the human world devastated by the Holocaust and the Second World War. By reversing traditional binaries of life and death, humanity and inhumanity, Zusak foregrounds the moral contradictions of war and exposes the brutality of human actions.*

The study argues that Death's compassionate voice not only humanizes an abstract concept but also intensifies the emotional impact of historical trauma, encouraging readers to reflect on compassion, loss, and the resilience of the human spirit. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that

The Book Thief employs the personification of Death as a powerful narrative strategy to redefine mortality and deepen readers' understanding of the human condition.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Death, *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak, Magic Realism, Inversion, Holocaust, Narratology, Humanity.

Introduction

Markus Zusak's *Death* belongs to a long tradition of personifications of death dating back to the Middle Ages. Throughout the history, death, unknowable and threatening, becomes concrete and domesticated through creative image making. In his compilation of the history of death images, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*, Karl S. Guthke writes that humans imagine death as "not an animal or animal-like being or a monstrous demon, but as a human figure, specifically a male figure" (Guthke, 13). The most recognizable caricatures of death include the Grim Reaper wielding a sickle or scythe, a skeleton holding an hourglass, a rider or huntsman with a lasso, or a seducing lover.

In comparison to these traditional representations of death, Markus Zusak's *Death* describes himself as decidedly more humanlike in his appearance, behaviors and personality. Maria Kissova also points out *Death*'s departure from traditional cultural representations of death, identifying Markus Zusak's narrator as "a spiritual entity invisible to a man but having specific physical and psychical attributes of a person" (Kissova, 60). In addition to the human like physical and emotional attributes identified by Kissova, *Death* possesses the limited narrating abilities of a person.

Signals of *Death*'s anthropomorphization come dispersed throughout the novel, so the reader becomes gradually acclimated to a version of death as familiar to them as another human. *Death* shows the comments like awareness of the human personification of death. After Liesel describes a particularly cruel teacher as the "grim reaper" nun, *Death* comments in a parenthetical

aside, "By the way I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It muses me" (TBT, 75). Although *Death* 22 enjoys the human imagining of an ominous death figure, he reveals that humans have it all wrong. In *Death's Diary: 1942*, he asserts:

I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it's cold out. And I don't have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly like? I'll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue (TBT, 307).

Death instructs the reader to look in the mirror to understand how he looks but the text reveals elements of his physicality and appearance. In the novel *The Book Thief* *Death* cannot hold a sickle, scythe, lasso, hourglass, or torch as he is frequently depicted, because his arms carry an overload of souls. In the above passage, he mentions that he dresses for the temperature, and the text makes it clear that he feels cold as he tells us, "I shiver when I remember as I try to de-realize it. I blow warm air into my hands, to heat them up" (TBT, 350).

He describes himself in terms of the human body with hands, fingers, and shoulders that ache or burn from the weight of his work, and he has a beating heart, but unlike the mortal human heart that he describes as a line, his immortal heart forms a circle (TBT 491). And with that heart, he feels emotion like stress, relaxation, and sadness, even if he cannot comprehend the

intensity of human emotions. After imagining how much joy Rudy, Liesel's best friend who is tragically killed in an air raid, would have felt in knowing that Liesel kissed his lifeless body, Death takes the opportunity to draw the sympathy. These anthropomorphized attributes offer an alternative to the intimidating or fearful image of death.

In historical personifications of death, the figure is nearly always given a gender. Guthke points out that in German representations of death, the figure appears as a male, and he cites

Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth Aisenberg's assertion that patriarchal societies, that is, warring or hunting societies, view death as "phallicpenetrating" with death resulting from physical wounds

(20). Thus, Death's male gendering reflects *The Book Thief's* setting in war-torn Germany. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* Judith Butler redefined our contemporary understanding of gender as a socially constructed act that creates the gendered self.

Death establishes himself as a member of society and adheres to its social norms and expectations. Butler's theory dismantles the concept of gender as a natural construct, which allows our unnatural, nonhuman narrator to make the same performance. Because Death mirrors the human performance of gender, readers can approach Death with the same social markers of gender used in human interaction. His use of male pronouns to describe himself, rather than an unnatural 'it', makes the idea of a personified death more persuasive.

The narrator Death is the only magic realist feature in *The Book Thief* and this device works as a tool to foreground the strategy of inversion. To explain the concept of inversion in magic realism we need two other common magic realist strategies, namely "naturalization" and "super naturalization". According to Hegerfeldt, naturalization is an magical feature in a matter-of-fact manner, making the magical feature seem ordinary or normal. Super naturalization on the other hand portrayed as a fantastic or unreal. Inversion as a magic realist strategy is achieved when the magical feature is naturalized. Hence, the magical features and the realistic features are overturned or reversed.

Death works as a tool for the magic realist strategy of inversion like Death as narrator is surreal, yet the picture of reality during the Second World War is even more surreal. Death as a character is more trustworthy than the story he tells. Death, traditionally portrayed as grim, becomes humanized and kind hearted in the realm of the Holocaust. Death also personally touches

every character in the story. Liesel's brother dies in her arms, and her parents are most likely killed in concentrations camps. Max's entire family is probably killed in those same camps, and he spends a desperate struggle fighting against potential death the entire novel. Neighbors to the Hubermann's have sons, brothers, fathers, and uncles who die in the war, just as the Hubermann's son is also out fighting for the Nazi cause. Hans has friends in the army who die while fighting with him, and he himself narrowly avoids dying while out on patrols.

Death can come at any time, in any number of ways, and is a ruthless and inevitable part of war, and of life when his brother did not. In the end the many deaths of the novel become overwhelming and the reader is given a glimpse into the mind of Death, who is weary of working, horrified by war, and “haunted by humans”. Death is not only the personified narrator of the story; it is also a prevalent theme. Set during World War II, death continuously intersects with many of those that lived in Germany. Millions of Jews died in the concentration camps, German soldiers died fighting for their country, and many innocent German civilians died as a result of the Allied bombings on their cities. Markus Zusak’s Death possesses humanlike physical features: And I don’t have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look 25 like? I’ll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue (TBT,380).

Death is not only humanized in his physicality, he is also portrayed as humoristic and possesses features such as sympathy and sentimentality mentions that the story became more interesting when Death acts as a character in Markus Zusak’s novel. According to Arva magic realist texts rely on characters and events that Surprise the readers. Thus, He argues that “‘magic realist texts seem to appeal to us because it is important to us”(TBT,381)and Kreitman points out

that if the constructed elements are connected then they are emotionally charged. The character Death is unquestionably connected to our wellbeing, to explain the character Death.

Death as a ghost is reasonable since, the students in the English group acknowledge that, Death is not a human despite his humanlike features. Additionally, Death belongs to the spiritual world since the only interaction between Death and the human characters in Markus Zusak’s novel occur when he collects their souls. By possessing humanlike features Markus Zusak’s Death becomes less distant and the matters of the fact presentation of the character Death engenders a considerable amount of reader hesitation, which means that the readers become uncertain where the magic ends and reality begins. Hegerfeldt defines this effect of magic realism as defamiliarization. “The character of Death seems more trustworthy than the story he tells”(TBT,503). The statement also points to the strategy of inversion since it indicates that the surreal narrator Death, the supernatural character, is more trustworthy than the represented reality.

The narrative style of inversion should reverse the magical feature and reality making Death seem trustworthy, since the representation of reality is seen as absurd. Throughout the groups discussions it became observable that *The Book Thief*’s character Death intrigued the students, which suggests that the magic realist narrative effects their engagement with the text. The students observed Death’s humanlike features and the personification of Death, but also the supernatural nature of Zusak’s Death. That the responses regarding the portrayal of humans will be more closely examined.

The Book Thief receive the portrayal of humans through the supernatural narrator Death. Death has a viewpoint on humanity. It is noble and dishonourable. The facts of human are more cruel and loving. Death finds humans fascinating, he perceives humans as odd and mysterious creatures, and traditionally it should be the other way around. Death is the one being haunted

by humans, not the other way around. The portrayal of humans in this case as realistic. That traumatic events such as war narrated in magic or unreal terms paradoxically seems more real. As been mentioned, the reader perceive the portrayal of humans through the eyes of the only magic realist feature, Death, which paradoxically makes the portrayal of humans seem more real to the students. The responses indicate an affective understanding of how the war affected real people. The students in their responses also acknowledge that humans during the war are portrayed as something else than humans. According to Bennett and Royle ghosts are “paradoxical since they are both fundamental to the human, fundamentally human, and a denial or disturbance of the human, the very being of the inhuman (TBT,218)

In their responses the students acknowledge that the picture during the war has stripped humans of their humanity, which turns humans into ghostlike shadows. The strategy of inversion becomes visible since the unrealistic narrator Death who belongs to the spiritual world is described with humanlike features and simultaneously the realistic humans are stripped of their humanity. Throughout the discussion the students acknowledged both the naturalization of Death as well as the strange and uncanny portrayal of humans, which indicates that they recognize the strategy of inversion. Paradoxically they perceive the reality represented in *The Book Thief* as realistic even though the portrayed reality is presented to them from the point of view the surreal narrator Death. Thus, to narrate a horrific reality in an unreal or magical way paradoxically makes the represented reality seem more real.

The magic realism narrative offers a reality that is unexplained but simulated and felt according to Arva. In the same manner, Langdon argue that magic realistic narrative makes traumatic and violent events seem more real. The magic realism is a way to grasp reality through a different perspective, that “magic realist universe as a flight simulator, an artificial world within the real world, meant to prepare us for better grasp of it” (TBT,446). In the same manner Coppola defines magic realism as a style of writing where the author tries to combine unusual elements with ordinary, realistic elements in order to try to present a more complete representation of reality. The tricky material and the ideas of the surreal and real being overturned and inverted and acknowledged that the narrator Death is no more surreal than the portrayed reality during the Holocaust. Death portrayed as grim humanized and kindhearted in the realm of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

As been mentioned, Death has often in history been personalized as macabre or grim but Markus Zusak’s Death resists the conventional image of the personified Death. Death’s untraditional portrayal depends upon the magical realist strategy of inversion. Both groups suggested that Death might be portrayed as kindhearted because the realm of the Holocaust is more horrific than death itself. Thus, the students have acknowledged that the concept of life and death is overturned and reversed. Throughout the discussions the students showed the ability to recognize the strategy of inversion as well as the capability to express the ideas, although they lacked the terminology. The student’s factual and social knowledge will be more closely examined as well as their emotional engagement with the historical representation of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

In conclusion, Markus Zusak uses Death as his narrator to prove that Death is similar and almost completely identical to humans. He uses the narration to establish the spectrum as a key description of *The Book Thief*. He uses his job as “soul gatherer” in the war to describe himself and explain how the events affected him as a “person”. Death uses human emotions to convey that he is just like regular, normal humans. Death is known to be cruel, disturbing and all things horrific. However, in accordance to new evidence, his personal begs to differ. Death is inevitable but he is human too.

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