

Death, Friendship, and the Power of Words:
Reflections of the Holocaust in Liesel Meminger's Traumatic Story

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“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness” – Elie Wiesel

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INTRODUCTION

The Book Thief follows the story of a young German girl, Liesel Meminger, and her struggle to survive during World War II. Liesel faces the atrocities of war when her brother dies and her mother abandons her to the care of foster parents. These atrocities rattle the foundation of her developing identity, destroying her personal narrative. Though Liesel may not always bear direct witness to the gruesome violence of war, she nevertheless faces the violence of death. Recounted through the voice of Death, *The Book Thief* presents a story of trauma recovery as Liesel learns to cope with her loss. In this way, her story—as part of the developing canon of Holocaust Literature—exposes the destructive power of trauma and affirms the importance of community in the rehabilitation of the traumatized. This thesis will explore Liesel’s recovery process, showing how her traumatic experience grants *The Book Thief* the title of Holocaust Literature as it reflects the collective experience of Holocaust survivors.

The Underlying Fears and Critical Reception of *The Book Thief*

The fears inherent in Holocaust Literature have led critics of *The Book Thief* to question the value of Markus Zusak’s work. For some, the narration of death creates a work that Jenni Adams describes as “narrative fetishism” (226). Adams borrows this term from Eric J. Santner, who defines narrative fetishism as “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called the narrative into being in the first place” (144). In her article, Adams claims that the complexities inherent in the supernatural narrator softens the reality of death. This softening, she argues, ignores the traumatic nature of the Holocaust, which should naturally be at work within such literature. She claims that *The Book Thief* presents no traces of trauma, thereby ignoring the reality of the Holocaust and trivializing the story for the sake of entertainment. “In other words,” she writes,

“the redemptive narrative of Jewish death distorts the events in a significant way, denying both their traumatic dimension and their status as an unresolved ethical and memorial site that continues to demand a response” (Adams 226). Adams’ criticism reflects what many critics of *The Book Thief* have also feared.¹ In addition, Stuart Kelly claims that while “*The Book Thief* is not a bad book,” it still presents problems for “there is an iron-hard streak of sentimentality running through it” created by Zusak’s “trite” narrative techniques (75). While critics like Adams and Kelly claim that the *The Book Thief* “softens the blow” of the historical atrocity, Zusak’s novel nevertheless forces the reader to face trauma in Liesel’s story. His novel conveys the struggle of one traumatized German girl to effectively represent the plight of the many and the horrors of the Holocaust.

General Concerns Regarding Holocaust Literature

The concerns of Zusak’s critics are best understood in light of the more general criticisms against Holocaust Literature as a whole. As the genre has developed, critics have questioned the validity and ethics of Holocaust Literature due to its atrocious content. Even writers and survivors of the Holocaust doubt the ability of writers to fully capture and express the atrocity that occurred during World War II. Ellie Wiesel, one of the most prominent figures in the genre, admits such difficulties: “The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge” (“Art and the Holocaust”). Writers such as Wiesel have struggled to convert ethically the atrocities of the past into an understandable medium. This difficulty stems from the very nature of such trauma. As Caruth explains, trauma is “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—[it] is not . . . a simple and healable event, but rather an

¹ See also Janet Maslin’s review of *The Book Thief* in her *New York Times* review, “Stealing a Settle to Score with Life.”

event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In this way, the Holocaust fractured the cultural narrative, causing many to wonder how men could act so violently. For quite some time, the events of the Holocaust remained outside the realm of understanding. Subsequently, critics wonder how authors could write of something they could not even understand, whether they experienced the events directly or not.

This hesitation stems from the basic incapability of human memory to accurately record everything that occurs. Memory is deceptive, especially when filtered through the perspective of one individual. According to Ruth Franklin, author of *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, “The fundamental unreliability of the human mind has been established over and over again; it has become a truism that our memories are not the tape recorders they were once thought to be . . . but are rather more like mosaics: pieced together scraps of experience from various sources that generate the appearance of coherence” (11). Since, as she argues, the mind is an unreliable recorder, literature cannot fully represent the past since it is filtered through the author’s memory. Even Franklin admits that Holocaust Literature naturally involves a blending of fact and fiction (3). Coupling the inability of the mind to accurately record reality with the skewed perspective of one individual, the genre of Holocaust Literature begs the complicated questions regarding a stilted perspective.

The unknowable nature of the Holocaust combined with the unreliability of memory causes critics the question whether or not authors cross ethical boundaries by skewing historicity with imagination. First, the very nature of Holocaust Literature entails an inherent fear that authors may exploit the traumatic event, whether intentionally for personal gain or unintentionally from ignorance. Even Lawrence Langer admits that “[t]here is something

disagreeable, almost dishonorable, in the conversion of suffering of the victims into works of art, which are then, to use Adorno's pungent metaphor, thrown as fodder to the world . . . that murdered them" (1). To write of such barbarism is to exploit the past for the sake of entertainment. Perhaps that is why many critics of *The Book Thief* have shuddered in fear of sentimentality for the sake of profit. When Theodor Adorno claimed that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (qtd. in Hartman 30), perhaps he knew of the fear that would come. No honest writer wishes to exploit the pain and suffering of others, and no honest critic wishes to extol such writers.

In her study, Anne Rothe explores the rising popularity of trauma in entertainment, as more and more stories rely on trauma to engage the modern reader. One of her main arguments is that the story of a character's triumph over victimization "encodes a latently voyeuristic kitsch sentiment as the dominant mode of reception" (2). This kitschification causes many to balk at the thought of using an event of such dark magnitude—an event that highlights the most horrendous capabilities of man—to entertain the masses. According to Wiesel, this type of exploitation "insult[s] the dead" ("Art and the Holocaust"). In popular trauma culture, Rothe explains, "[w]e turn to the obscene to find our false religion—to make our mundane lives spectacular" (159). Critics and writers, such as Adorno, consequently fear that banalizing the memory of the Holocaust is an act as barbaric as the Final Solution.

In addition to exploitation, writers of Holocaust Literature may face temptations of transforming memories into nostalgic stories. Being so far removed from the events of World War II, contemporary authors already base their stories on the memories of others—memories that have been filtered through time and various perspectives. Even Zusak based his novel on the memories of his parents ("Printz Award"). Second generation survivors specifically face the

temptation of rewriting their family history through nostalgic lenses. Sara Horowitz writes, “Nostalgic memory, after all, refuses the harsh but true facts about the past, constructing instead a homey and familiar structure that supplants genuine and difficult confrontation with history and memory” (45). This refusal to face facts appears in Arlene Stein’s study of post-holocaust genealogies. She explains that after the Holocaust, generations faced a gap in their family lineage. Many holocaust survivors passed on incomplete family histories—if anything at all. As the second generation looked back in time, they found a “sense of inauthenticity, of having a ‘false’ self, and not feeling connected to anyone” (Stein 294). According to Stein, these individuals subsequently searched for new pieces of history: “By seeking, borrowing from and selectively appropriating traces of the past, descendants of survivors use those traces as raw material in the production of new stories” (308). The second and third generations of Holocaust survivors now reconstruct their family histories, and in many cases this reconstruction is a search for some semblance of connection. Oftentimes, however, this rewriting results in a nostalgic rendition of family history, wherein the next generation reconstructs a narrative that is more “homey and familiar” than accurate. This lack of accuracy—or truth—queries the legitimacy and ethical rank of these stories. In this way, critics fear that nostalgia distorts the truth and dishonors the dead.

Critical Responses to the General Concerns

These concerns are not without grounds. Writers—especially those who write of such difficult subjects—must be especially careful that they do not abuse the subjects of which they write. As Spargo admits, “Any late-twentieth-century poet, so it seemed, who wished to write circumspectly about the experience of atrocity or in praise of culture had to bear in mind Adorno’s dictum as setting a limit on the potential merits of an art of suffering” (8). Adorno’s

admonition reflects the fear that many critics have when they view Holocaust Literature. Nevertheless, Geoffrey Hartman claims that “[e]ven if art is viewed with suspicion, because, as Adorno feared, it may stylize suffering in order to serve it up for popular consumption, this simply underscores the difficulty of transmitting the Shoah’s manmade inhumanity” (30). To write of the Holocaust—or any atrocity—necessitates criticism for the novel’s ability to completely and ethically face the traumatic. However, as Hartman points out, this fear does not eliminate any possibility of an ethical rendition. As Wiesel declares, “In order not to betray the dead and humiliate the living, this particular subject demands a special sensibility, a different approach, a rigor strengthened by respect and reverence and, above all, faithfulness to memory” (“Art and the Holocaust”). These concerns merely call attention to the difficulty of transmitting such horrendous events in a form that can be accepted and understood while remaining faithful to history.

Critics such as Langer, Hartman, Horowitz, and Caruth all recognize the power of literature to translate the horrendous events of the Holocaust into this acceptable form. Langer is one of the first and most resonate voices of his time to stand in defense against the rising criticisms of Holocaust Literature. In his study, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Langer explores the tension that arises within readers of Holocaust Literature. This tension he designates to the literature of atrocity, wherein historical fact and imaginative truth combine to help the reader accept the reality of such atrocious events. Langer believes that the key to understanding these events with the whole being lies within the crossing of the imaginative truth and historical fact:

The literature of atrocity is never wholly invented; the memory of the literal Holocaust seethes endlessly in its subterranean depths. But such literature is never wholly factual

either, it perpetually designs windows . . . “that will give us back our perspective,” it is no mere docile dog on the leash of history. Without the Holocaust, such literature would not have been possible; with it, by a curious inversion, literature has taken as its task *making* such reality “possible” for the imagination. (8)

Authors such as Zusak exemplify this act of “making.” Within *The Book Thief*, Zusak borrows historical fact to invent a story that the imagination can grasp.² Other critics also notice the importance of the blending that Zusak exemplifies. In his article, “The Historian’s Anvil, the Novelist’s Crucible,” Eric J. Sandquist explains that “Holocaust fiction both depends intrinsically on factual allegiance and pushes the boundaries of fact so as to confront us with dimensions of human experience that elude documentary or analytic interpretation” (253). Had Zusak regurgitated historical facts without literary imagination, *The Book Thief* would not convey the reality of the Holocaust and its traumatic nature. Liesel’s trauma would be impersonal fact rather than imaginative truth. Instead, however, Zusak blends these two elements and confronts his reader with one of the most traumatic events in human history.

While critics such Adams and Kelly may fear the kitchification of the trauma story, Zusak exempts his work from any such risk through his exploration of trauma and recovery. Alan Stone, a critic of Zusak’s novel, makes an intriguing observation in his article as he reverses the book and scorns its movie adaptation. According to Stone, the 2013 movie adaptation of *The Book Thief* lacked one crucial element: the treatment of Liesel as a trauma victim. In the movie, Liesel is portrayed as a strong young girl with no psychological sufferings; Stone points out that

² Born to immigrant parents from Germany and Austria, Zusak comes from the family line of Nazi Germany survivors (Chicago Public Library “Markus Zusak”). Growing up in Sydney, Australia, he was privy to the stories of Nazi soldiers herding Jews to concentration camps and German boys giving bread to Jewish men (Creagh). Stories like these and more filled the narrative of his parents’ childhood and were subsequently conveyed to Zusak and his sister around the dining-room table. According to Zusak, his parents were “the beginning of *The Book Thief*” (“Printz Award”). Their perspectives of Nazi Germany and personal stories—of his father’s refusal to join Hitler Youth, of his mother’s absent father (Chicago Public Library “Interview”)—inspired his novel.

the book, however, does incorporate symptoms of Liesel's traumatic experience. The lack of these symptoms in the movie, he claims, leads critics to conclude that the movie is nothing more than a "shameless piece of Oscar-seeking Holocaust kitsch" (77). His observation provides essential insight into the value of Zusak's book. While the 2013 movie adaptation ignored the careful representation of trauma, its narrative inspirations maintain the traumatic symptoms that grant the novel so much power. Therefore, through the universality of Liesel's traumatic experience, her written story prevents any such accusations of sentimentality or kitchification.

The Collective Experience of Liesel Meminger's Trauma

Reflecting the broken historical narrative of the Holocaust, Liesel's individual story conveys the universal story of recovery. In order to best understand Liesel's story, this thesis applies Judith Herman's theory in trauma and recovery as the foundational pillar of Liesel's recovery. In her study, Herman explains that after an individual has experienced a traumatic event, recovery "unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life" (155). Each of these stages appear throughout Liesel's story as she struggles to redefine her identity as a survivor. While Herman's theory is over 20 years old, her study still stands prominently in trauma theory. As she states in the epilogue to the 2015 edition of her work, "Recovery still begins, as always, with safety. The model of recovery stages...has held up remarkably well over two decades and is now widely recognized as the foundation of trauma treatment" (266). Bearing in mind that each stage appears at varying times for each individual, her theory nevertheless provides a firm foundation for the exploration of Liesel's trauma and recovery. By viewing *The Book Thief* as a story of trauma recovery, the novel essentially imitates the collective story of Holocaust survivors.

Not only does Liesel's story reflect the traumatic experience of those who survived the Holocaust, but the studies in Holocaust Literature also testify to this experience. In the same way that trauma is etched into the identity of the individual, the Holocaust rests in history as a gaping wound that cannot be faced by the public. Paradoxically, the public fears approaching this historical moment while it simultaneously fears forgetting it. According to Franklin, the unspeakable nature of the Holocaust "fundamentally denies the possibility of creating a valid art and literature about the Holocaust . . . it smashes the novelist's crucible, emphasizing preservation rather than transformation" (5). The preservative nature of Holocaust has consequently urged critics such as Petra Schweitzer to govern their approach to Holocaust Literature "by the methodology of trauma theory, which has, at least in the field of literary studies, become central for much debate about the memory of the Holocaust" (60). As scholars study literature in this genre, they return time after time to the nature of trauma in their discussions.³

Liesel's reflection of the collective experience first derives from the traumatic nature of the Holocaust. As Diamont and Roskies explain, as the Holocaust has made its way into the public memory as a traumatic moment, it has become an archetype permanently etched into the communal memory (58). This archetype represents the violent years of World War II and the systematic death of millions. The overwhelming reality of these deaths breaks the historical narrative, much how Liesel's traumatic moment breaks her individual narrative. While most survivors of the Holocaust have found healing, many are still haunted by the past. Kenneth Kidd points out that "the Holocaust is at once history and the never ending story, the primal scene

³ See, for example, *After Representation?: The Holocaust, Literature and Culture*, edited by Robert M. Ehrenreich and R. Clifton Spargo. This collection of essays explores the ways in which authors have incorporated elements of trauma in Holocaust Literature.

forever relived and reconstructed. It is something that must be spoken about but that remains inaccessible” (122). Historians still struggle to fully uncover all that occurred during these traumatic years, for the facts repeat beyond communal understanding. In this way, society knows that the Holocaust occurred, but it does not know how to fully respond. Just as the traumatic moment is defined by its destruction of the personal narrative, so too the Holocaust destroys the historical narrative.

Due to the Holocaust’s fractured narrative, *The Book Thief*, along with other Holocaust Literature, seeks to express the traumatic experience of the Holocaust in the best way possible. However, as Wiesel claims, one has “to invent a new vocabulary...to say what no human being has ever said” (414). Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in trauma theory and literature, claims that literature is the only avenue available that provides such a vocabulary (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). While critics like Joshua Pederson would argue against her theories—claiming that individuals do not lack the capability to express their trauma, rather they lack the desire—they do not undermine the credibility of Caruth’s argument. Pederson writes, “For McNally, unlike Caruth, trauma is memorable and describable, and his book raises serious questions about the clinical foundation on which she builds her literary edifice while requiring contemporary critics to reevaluate her model” (334). Nevertheless, her model still stands. As she claims in the opening of her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, her study deals directly with the “complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it” (4). Caruth concerns herself with more than the supposed unknowable nature of trauma. She is concerned also with its knowable properties and how literature can reveal these properties. Caruth proposes that “trauma...is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not

otherwise available” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). For Caruth, it is not necessarily that the victim does not know what has happened. Rather, the victim of trauma does not know how to acclimate the traumatic event within her life narrative. The same principle applies to the Holocaust. Culture does not struggle to capture the events as they transpired. Rather, culture struggles to appropriate the Holocaust into the communal story. In the wake of the Holocaust, the world struggles to write its events into the collective narrative—it remains the unapproachable wound that cries out. However, as Caruth concludes, literature provides the answer to these questions by revealing the ways in which trauma can weave itself into personal and collective narratives once the victim heals. By recounting Liesel’s recovery process, *The Book Thief* effectively provides these same answers.

Exploring Liesel’s Recovery: Death, Friendship, and the Power of Words

Before examining Liesel’s journey towards recovery, this thesis will first seek to define Liesel as a victim of trauma. While the very act of watching her brother die and her mother leave is enough to categorize Liesel as a victim, the voice of Death steps in to speak in the deafening silence of the traumatic event. The first chapter will explore the ways that Death catalyzes her trauma and simultaneously provides a voice through which her story manifests. While Liesel displays varying levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, from hyperarousal to intruding visions, Death reaches beyond the novel’s three-dimensional plot to reveal the core of her trauma. In order to accomplish this task, Death incorporates various literary techniques that reveal his role in her story. From a fractured narrative structure to shifting focalization, Death personifies the disjointed experience of trauma.

While Death plays an important role in the causation and revelation of Liesel’s trauma, her journey toward recovery begins with her discovery of safety and empowerment through her

relationships with others. As Herman points out in her study, establishing safety and empowerment are the most important steps in the recovery process for trauma victims (133). Therefore, in order for Liesel to begin her journey, she must first rediscover her safety and empowerment. To accomplish this task, Liesel must trust those around her. In her development of safety, Liesel turns to the soothing voice of Hans Huberman to recognize that she is safe once more. Once she establishes her immediate safety, Liesel is then free to develop her sense of empowerment. While Liesel's story is affected by many relationships, the second chapter of this thesis will focus on three specific characters: Hans Huberman, Ilsa Herman, and Max Vandenburg. Hans plays two important roles: he both establishes Liesel's sense of safety and provides her with the power of words. On the other hand, Ilsa Herman provides Liesel with the defining contrast of what her life could look like if she remains trapped within her role as a victim. In this way, Ilsa's sobering presence pushes Liesel towards reconciliation and healing. Contrary to Ilsa's influence, Max Vandenburg provides Liesel with the defining reflection of a similar soul. As Liesel and Max become friends, she uncovers a variety of similarities that reveal to Liesel her identity as a victim of trauma. As Liesel interacts with each of these characters, she finds an internal source of power to claim her identity as a survivor.

While chapters one and two will focus on Liesel's interaction with other characters, the final chapter in this thesis will explore how Liesel's relationship with reading and writing enables her to reconstruct her narrative and reconnect with the world. Through her writing, Liesel abides by Herman's theory, which concludes that victims of trauma must first learn to accept the reality of trauma that before they can fully heal (192). Liesel's acceptance can only develop once she assimilates the event into her life story. In this way, she is no longer overwhelmed with the traumatic experience; instead, the traumatic past integrates into her life

story in a non-intrusive fashion. Liesel turns to her writing in order to find the distance she needs to evaluate the major events in her life. As she looks back on her years on Himmel Street through her writing, she is able to evaluate the events and her emotional responses. This evaluation enables her to fully remember and mourn all that she has lost. Once she successfully reconstructs the events into her life narrative, she is then free to reconnect with the real world. Her basement writing provides her with a holistic understanding of her status as a trauma survivor. In this way, she then develops her ethical position in the world, a position that calls her to embrace her legacy as a survivor by sharing her story.

By examining Liesel's journey in detail, I will show how *The Book Thief* reflects the experience of all those traumatized by the Holocaust. Through Death, friendship, and the power of words, Liesel's story reflects the collective story of trauma experienced during World War II and the Holocaust. Furthermore, her story reveals how these individuals face their darkest moments and still survive. Liesel's story does not trivialize their pain, nor does it sentimentalize the past. Rather, *The Book Thief* stares into the face of Death, declaring the legitimacy of suffering and carrying the next generation into an empathetic position. According to Franklin, "For literature, whatever its specific details, ultimately makes a case for universality. It makes comparisons; it encourages empathy; it awakens the imagination. In short, it emphasizes the fundamental sameness of the human condition" (242). While other critics may push against the focus of individual perspectives, Liesel's story represents the universal experience of those involved in the Holocaust, whether they be victims, observers, or oppressors. In this way, Liesel's identity as a survivor of trauma links her story to the greater narrative of the Holocaust, allowing culture to view the gap in its communal memory.

Chapter One: The Revealing Voice of Death

Liesel's Encounter with the Traumatic

The Book Thief unfurls within Death's palm—both the tragic death of Liesel's brother that instigates the novel and the cataclysmic destruction of Himmel Street that concludes it. Nestled in a war-torn Europe, the main character's childhood is filled by encounters with Death. These encounters plunge her into a journey of traumatic proportions as she searches for grounding in the constant upheaval. Every aspect of the novel speaks for the silent voice of the traumatized, from Death's narration to Liesel's story. Specifically, however, the personified Death assumes various roles throughout this novel to speak when Liesel cannot. At times, he presents himself as the savior for those suffering.⁴ At other times, he is the worker completing the tasks set out by a relentless boss.⁵ At intervals, he is the voice for the dying souls who cannot speak. Most importantly, however, Death acts first and foremost as the initiator of Liesel's trauma. While Liesel may feel at times that her war is against Hitler, the greatest battle actually rages between her self-understanding and acceptance of Death.

When Liesel's brother dies on the train, Liesel encounters Death for the first time. She stares Death in the face, shattering her personal narrative as she resists her loss. Death admits when he picks up Werner's soul in his arms that Liesel "caught [him] out" (21). In this moment, however, Liesel cannot not fully understand what she sees. She is imprisoned by the "stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts" (21). These staggered thoughts reveal her inability to recognize death as it occurs. Her physical body witnesses her brother die, but her

⁴ See, for example, pages 21, 308, 350, and 391 of *The Book Thief*. In these passages, Death presents himself as the rescuer, easing pain and healing torture.

⁵ See, for example, page 309 of *The Book Thief*. Death declares that "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.'"

mind cannot process the event fast enough. As Death so accurately writes, “With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief . . . could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead” (20). In this moment, Death indicates that as her physical body senses her environment with one eye open, her mind remains in a dream unable to witness the moment. In her study, Caruth defines this phenomenon in trauma victims as the delayed response (*Unclaimed Experience* 11). By looking at Liesel’s behavior through Caruth’s theory, it becomes clear that Liesel cannot yet respond to the event she witnesses. Even though Death does not threaten her, watching the death of her brother sufficiently sends her into traumatic shock.⁶ With one eye open and the other still dreaming, Liesel encounters death for the first time.

While her brother’s death is enough to send Liesel down a traumatic spiral, her trauma builds when her mother abandons her. While Liesel’s mother may feel that she makes the best decision for her daughter’s safety, Liesel suffers from the traumatic shock of being left in a strange land after the death of her brother. She becomes, as Death somberly points out, “an expert of being left behind” (5). In one traumatic day, Liesel loses every relationship that defines her world. This loss is heightened by the perceived betrayal of her mother. As Herman explains, “The damage to the survivor’s faith and sense of community is particularly severe when the traumatic events themselves involve the betrayal of important relationships” (55). Liesel trusts her mother to take care of her; however, her mother breaks that trust by abandoning her. Instead of having the comforting embrace of a mother in the face of overwhelming grief, Liesel must face the world alone as a stranger in a foreign land.

To make matters worse, Death isolates Liesel from her loved ones, subsequently isolating

⁶ In his study, Judith Herman explains that “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).

her from her identity. As she enters Himmel Street for the first time, she is nothing more than a “lost, skinny child, in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone” (32). Once Liesel loses her family, she loses the foundation for her identity. The correlation between lost family and lost identity is clarified in Herman’s theory of trauma recovery. She explains, “A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self” (Herman 52). If Herman’s claim is correct, then Liesel’s loss of family is indeed the cause of her loss of identity. This loss would then explain her later rage against Ludwig Schmeikl and Ilsa Herman.⁷ While Liesel is surrounded by people who love her, such as Hans, Rudy, and later Max, she struggles to connect with them for she has lost her sense of trust. Since her identity relies on her relationships with others, she inevitably shuts herself out from her own identity by severing these connections. In addition, Herman explains that the traumatic event “destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relation to others” (53). Without an understanding of self, Liesel cannot configure her moral position in the world. She becomes a girl of darkness in the shadow of death.

Haunted by Death: Liesel’s Symptomatic Behavior

Death first exemplifies Liesel’s loss of control and identity through Liesel’s first public reading. When Liesel discovers the upcoming progress tests at school, her emotions teeter as she both anticipates and fears this opportunity to read before her classmates. Death declares that these conflicting emotions derive from more than a desperate desire “to measure herself, to find out once and for all how her learning was advancing” (75). For Liesel, reading symbolizes her capability to control her world and claim her identity. Having lost her relationships, she turns to

⁷ In the chapter titled “The Heavyweight Champion of the School-yard,” Liesel fights her school-mate Ludwig Schmeikl in a moment of absolute rage. Liesel also later expresses this same rage against Ilsa Herman when she believes that the mayor’s wife has betrayed her. These moments indicate an insecurity that develops from her traumatic experience.

her books in a desperate attempt to find solace. The words in these books give Liesel some control over her life, for as Claudia Welz points out, “Severely traumatized persons are not masters or controllers of their experience, but are overwhelmed by what they cannot name. Words can, to some degree, help them to gain access to what happened” (415). Strictly speaking, Liesel claims fragments of her lost identity by learning to read. Liesel’s loss of identity culminates in the traumatic expression of fear, nightmares, and book thievery. Caruth explains that trauma is not located in the event, but rather in its “very unassimilated nature to haunt the survivor later on” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Liesel’s trauma is not isolated on that fateful train; rather, Liesel’s trauma haunts her throughout her life. In her study, Herman explains that the haunting of trauma appears through the expression of “hyperarousal,” “intrusion,” and “constriction” (35). During her time on Himmel Street, Liesel expresses variations of each symptom as she learns to overcome her fear of Death.

Symptom One: Hyperarousal

After her brother’s death, Liesel plummets into a state of hyperarousal. She sees everything as a threat, even her mother’s touch. Herman explains that after a traumatic shock, hyperarousal “reflects the persistent expectation of danger” (35). This expectation transfers to her mother in a violent response. Having faced Death, Liesel is acutely aware of her mortality. As a result, she feels threatened by every shadow that surrounds her. As she digs relentlessly at her brother’s grave—refusing to accept his death—she is interrupted by “the boniness of a hand on her shoulder” (24). Even though Liesel knows that the hand belongs to her mother, her traumatic shock induces a violent reaction in the young girl, and her mother must drag her away as a “warm scream filled [Liesel’s] throat” (24). In this scene, even Liesel’s mother becomes a threat to the young girl.

While Liesel transfers her fear and anxiety to her mother, her entire arrival on Himmel Street also suggests her nervous vigilance. First, Liesel perceives the trip as a threat, “dreading the last, lethal turn” (27). Though she travels away from Death and toward safety, Liesel expects nothing but harm. This expectation transfers to her description of the street with houses that looked nervous (27). In this moment, she projects her nerves onto the buildings around her, seeing danger at every turn. Even her description of the man seated beside her is ominous: “He remained with the girl when Frau Heinrich disappeared inside. He never spoke. Liesel assumed he was there to make sure she wouldn’t run away or to force her inside if she gave them any trouble . . . Perhaps he was only the last resort, the final solution” (27). By comparing the man in the car to the Final Solution, Death associates this figure with Hitler’s final solution to destroy the Jews. Adams claims that “the sense of threat implicit in the speculation that the man’s role is to ‘force her inside if she gave them any trouble’ creates parallels between Liesel’s experience and the forcing of victims into the gas chambers by SS. Guards” (232). If Adams’ claims is true, then Death reveals Liesel’s perceived threat. Emphasizing her speculative doom, Adams also points out that, ironically, the name for Himmel Street was often used as “a slang term . . . to refer to the pathway to the gas chamber at Treblinka” (231). While Death speaks for Liesel in these moments, his narrative choice effectively conveys Liesel’s fear. While she may not have known about Hitler’s Final Solution or the Nazi gas chambers, her fear is nevertheless confirmed. Death notes her hyperarousal with precision, using every allusion in his historical arsenal.

Symptom Two: Intrusion

As Liesel struggles with her state of hyper-arousal, she also shows signs of intrusion. Herman explains that for traumatized individuals, the traumatic event intrudes in their daily lives, even though those individuals are no longer in danger (37). In this way, she explains that

intrusion “reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment” (Herman 35). This imprint appears in various forms, but most commonly in dreams, flashbacks, and actions. As survivors like Liesel continue their lives after their encounter with death, they are haunted by the ghost of their trauma. Caruth proposes that this haunting is “not simply an attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival*” (*Unclaimed Experience* 64). Likewise, Liesel’s conscious mind dredges up memories of her traumatic encounter in order to claim her survival. She revisits the site of her trauma in her dreams and visions to finally understand her encounter with Death.

First, Liesel suffers from the dreams and flashbacks of her traumatic encounter as if some part of her hopes that the past will change. When Liesel first moves into Himmel Street, visions of her dying brother fill her dreams. Each night she wakes with horrific screams, having faced yet again her brother’s death:

Those first few months were definitely the hardest. Every night, Liesel would nightmare. Her brother’s face. Staring at the floor. She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boatlike in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. The vision didn’t help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped. (38)

These dreams testify to the trauma that haunts her. She cannot escape her brother’s death. Even the vision of the floating bed emphasizes her loss. Furthermore, she screams in terror at the reality of her loss. In addition, she endures visions of her mother, seeing her face “a hundred times in a single afternoon” (38). Liesel cannot escape these visions, and they follow her as constant reminders of her traumatic encounter. As Herman explains, traumatic memories “break

spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). In this way, Liesel must constantly relive her traumatic encounters as Death follows her in her dreams and haunts her during the day.

Liesel’s traumatic intrusions are not limited to visions only; they also appear symbolically in her relationship to books. On first inspection, her book thievery appears to be an act of rebellion; however, through Herman’s trauma theory, Liesel’s actions resemble additional intrusions. First, one must understand that Liesel closely associates stealing books with the memory of her brother and mother. Even death recognizes that *The Gravedigger’s Handbook* has two meanings: “1. The last time she saw her brother. 2. The last time she saw her mother” (38). This association extends beyond that first book. As Adams concludes, Liesel uses all forms of thievery to mourn her losses (223). In addition, Aliona Yarova believes that “Liesel’s thievery of the books is her search (as a child of war) for imaginative space and her subconscious emotional survival strategy in extreme conditions” (76). In this way, Liesel seeks to claim her survival. With the close association to her loss, book thievery partially returns what she lost during her first encounter of Death. When faced with trauma, Liesel loses control; by stealing books, she may reclaim that control once again.

Liesel’s relationship with books goes deeper than her thievery; books connect her desire to read with yet another attempt at claiming her survival. After her bedwetting experience (yet another form of intrusion), Hans discovers the little black book that Liesel stole from her brother’s graveside. This book, as previously established, links Liesel to her brother’s death. Subsequently, when she decides to learn how to read, the desire springs from an unknown place—one she did not fully understand nor fully refute. She had “a sudden desire to read [the book] that she didn’t attempt to understand. On some level perhaps Liesel wanted to make sure

her brother was buried right. Whatever the reason, her hunger to read that book was as intense as any ten-year-old human could experience” (66). Her unrecognized motive directly reflects the uncontrollable reenactments that trauma victims experience. As Herman explains, “Most commonly, traumatized people find themselves reenacting some aspect of the trauma scene in disguised form, without realizing what they are doing” (40). Without understanding her true motive, Liesel learns to read so that she can return to her brother’s gravesite and conquer Death once and for all.

Symptom Three: Constriction

Constriction, the final symptom of trauma, reveals itself in Liesel’s life through more subtle allusions than the first two. According to Herman constriction, “reflects the numbing response of the surrender” (Herman 35). In Part II of *The Book Thief*, Liesel reaches out to her mother by writing letters; however, she soon learns that the letters will never reach her. When Liesel finally accepts that her mother will never return, she enters a stage of constriction wherein she shuts down. This constriction crystalizes when Liesel confesses to Rosa that she used Rosa’s money to mail her letters. After she receives a beating from Rosa’s wooden spoon, Liesel understands that it is all for nothing: “her mother would never write her back and she would never see her again. The reality of this gave her a second *Watschen*. It stung her, and it did not stop for many minutes” (99). This constant stinging numbs Liesel as she lays on the cold floor, “unable to move” (99). According to Schweitzer, “[T]he consciousness of a victim protects itself against painful violation by becoming absolutely numb” (62). In order to protect herself, Liesel returns to the numbing power of constriction to stifle her pain.⁸ As Liesel lies on the floor in her new realization, she slips outside her own body to observe her figure in detachment. As she lays

⁸ Herman explains that constriction enables the “helpless person escape from her situation...by altering her state of consciousness” (42).

on the kitchen floor, suffering from the pain of the new realization, she cannot see herself as a whole person. Instead, she sees her personhood in pieces, “A forearm, a knee. An elbow. A cheek. A calf muscle” (99). This constrictive perception of herself indicates yet again that young Liesel suffers as a victim of trauma. Unlike the symptom of intrusion, however, Liesel does not hope to claim her survival through constriction. Rather, she hopes to sink into the oblivion of her grief.

Narrated by Death: a Voice for the Silenced

As Death’s voice echoes from the pages of *The Book Thief*, he accomplishes more than telling a child’s story. He reaches into each layer of a three-dimensional plot of trauma. These dimensions include an outer dimension where the horrors of World War II surround the German city of Molching, a surface dimension where Liesel’s life unfolds on Himmel Street, and an inner dimension where Liesel struggles with the darkness of her traumatic encounter with Death. As a traumatized child, Liesel’s inner life is fraught with the unspeakable death and loss of her family. At times, she cannot comprehend nor face all that has happened to her.⁹ While Liesel may show signs of her suffering in the surface dimension, internally, she cannot reconcile these symptoms with her identity. Subsequently, *The Book Thief* avoids Liesel’s narration for she cannot tell her story completely. On the other hand, Death presents a holistic review of the three-dimensional plot due to his supernatural point of view. While Death is neither omniscient nor omnipresent,¹⁰ he accesses the outer dimension as he gathers the souls of soldiers, civilians, and Jews.

⁹ In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth explains that traumatic moments are often too painful for victims to process. Consequently, they forget the event completely. Her theory in literature and trauma claims that imaginative literature is useful for these victims of trauma because it provides an avenue through which the victim can speak the unspeakable.

¹⁰ While Death has access to the inner thoughts of most characters, he does not present himself as an omniscient or omnipotent entity. His perspective is limited by the journeys that take him from one countryside to the next collecting souls. The only access Death has to Liesel’s story comes to him from his direct encounters with her and her book.

Furthermore, he accesses the plot of the surface dimension when he collects Liesel's story from the ashes of Himmel Street. Then, using his gathered knowledge of the War and Himmel Street, Death reaches past the surface of Liesel's life and into the core darkness of her traumatic experience. Consequently, he appears throughout the novel to speak *of* and to speak *for* this traumatized character.

In order for Death to speak for Liesel and reveal her trauma, he incorporates techniques of focalization to shift from perspectives. In their article, Debora Almeida de Oliveira and Sandra Sirangelo Maggio argue that Death acts as the narrator-focalizer in the novel, a role that allows him "to perceive what characters feel as well as what they cannot know, such as important events to come" (136). In this sense, Death knows what Liesel cannot—that she is a victim of trauma. While Death admits from the beginning that he only met Liesel three times, he nevertheless knows her story. He has read it "several thousand times over the years," and each time he reads her story, he "watch[es] the places where [they] intersect, and marvel[s] at what the girl saw and how she survived" (14). He admits that each time he "hangs suspended" above her story, "until the septic truth bleeds toward clarity" (14). That clarity, he suggests, is Liesel's identity as "one of those perpetual survivors—an expert at being left behind" (5). After reading her story over and over, Death feels as if he knows her. This knowledge allows him to slip in and out of her perspective as the narrator-focalizer, revealing both the cause and effects of her trauma.

Whenever Death shifts from his perspective to Liesel's, he changes his tone and language. When Death speaks from his perspective, he does so from a distanced point of view that creates ambiguous characters. This distancing appears most drastically when Liesel and Death cross paths for the first time. He describes Liesel and her family in ambiguous terms, as "one mother and her daughter. One corpse" (7). He does not shift into their perspective, nor does

he provide specific names for these individuals. He does not grant any insight into the grief that engulfs them after the recent death of the brother and son. Instead, Death is the outside observer watching the characters stand beside the train. Contrasting this starchy distance, Death shifts into Liesel's perspective when Werner dies. Death reveals her shocked inner core: "Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud" (22). This shifting occurs throughout the novel, and while it is based on the observations he gleans from Liesel's writing, his distanced perspective contrasts with the highly emotional and personal suffering of the traumatized child. In these moments of supreme grief, Death peels back the surface layer of the plot to reveal the rising action of Liesel's inner turmoil.

Another example of his revealing shift in perspective occurs in the climactic scene that reveals Liesel's lost identity. After Liesel fails her reading test, her fragile identity weakens more than ever before. Due to the *Watschen* from her teacher and the teasing from her classmates, Liesel loses all control. In retaliation to Ludwig's mockery, Liesel turns to violence. In this scene, Death reveals her fragmentation by shifting perspectives once again. As she beats up her schoolmate, Liesel is ecstatic—literally beside herself—and therefore cannot recognize herself as the one acting. She acts on instinct for the protection of her already fragile and dark identity. This instinct is reflected in Death's depiction of the scene. As Liesel begins to pummel Ludwig Schmeickl, Death abandons her point of view and focuses on Ludwig's perspective: "Well, as you might imagine, Ludwig Schmeickl certainly buckled and on the way down, he was punched in the ear. When he landed he was set upon. When he was set upon, he was slapped and clawed and obliterated by a girl who was utterly consumed with rage" (78). In this passage, Death first indicates Liesel's fractured identity when he abandons her proper name. Instead of writing that Ludwig was "obliterated by [Liesel]," Death resorts to the generic reference of "a girl." In

addition, he uses passive voice to avoid Liesel's perspective. When Death writes that Ludwig "was slapped and clawed," he places him as the focus of the sentence and the receiver of the action. Through this subtle use of passive voice, Death places Liesel's perspective in the background while simultaneously revealing her fractured identity. He reveals her inner struggle for identity by precisely ignoring it. Through the absence of her thoughts, Death reveals her inner struggle.

In addition, Death also uses the developing plot of World War II to emphasize Liesel's traumatic experience. First, Death places the horrifying violence of World War II off stage, exemplifying how traumatic violence cannot be fully faced. When *The Book Thief* was initially published in Australia, it was directed at an adult audience. Nevertheless, when the book was published in the United States and the United Kingdom, publishers readjusted its audience. In her article, Adams attributes this adjustment to two factors: the age of the main character, and the distancing of violence in the novel (226). While Adams concludes that the tempering of violence in *The Book Thief* assigns the book to a younger audience, Death's tempering rather mirrors Liesel's traumatic symptoms. In Part VI of the novel, Death finally allows three brief glimpses into the overwhelming deaths during World War II. These glimpses arrive in the form of short diary entries regarding his journey across Europe. In each entry, he reports the mass-slaughter with poetic language that further distances the events in a seemingly contradictory tone. He shifts from anger, to cynicism, to compassion. He does not describe the historical event in detail; he merely recounts the facts. In these moments, he mimics the inability of traumatized individuals to describe the event. They can only recall that something has occurred.

In addition, Death also narrates Liesel's story through a fractured narrative structure. The disfigured narration of Death is symptomatic of traumatic encounters. In her study, Jane Robinett

concludes that “[t]raumatic experience produces narrative structures that are fractured and erratic” (297). Mimicking this structure, Death retells Liesel’s story through the use of short chapters filled with clipped language. His highly poetic language stutters and flows to relate the events that transpire. When Death officially begins to tell Liesel’s story, he opens the chapter with incomplete sentences and paragraphs:

That last time.

That red sky...

How does a book thief end up kneeling and howling and flanked by a man-made heap of ridiculous, greasy, cooked-up rubble?

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one. (19)

His narrative voice echoes the fragmented voice of the traumatized, creating an atmosphere within the book that points towards Liesel’s experience. In addition, he echoes the intrusion of the traumatic event by sprinkling demanding asides throughout his chapters. The very first page of *The Book Thief* includes the interjection of his thoughts in a jarring format:

***** HERE IS A SMALL FACT *****

You are going to die. (3)

Death bombards his reader throughout the story with such “small facts,” some as jarring as the inevitability of death and others as simple as a definition or translation. These interjections, nevertheless, show the reader just how a traumatic event can interrupt the personal narrative of the traumatized individual. From Death’s perspective to his interjections, his narration in *The Book Thief* uncovers the traumatic plot of Liesel’s inner life.

Many critics have commented already on the role of Death in *The Book Thief*, from de

Oliveira and Maggio's study on his focalization, to Adam's critique of his role in ambivalent escapes. What they have yet to discuss, however, is just how Death fulfills his role as narrator in revealing Liesel's trauma. As this chapter has explored, Death not only provides the catalyst for her trauma, but he also provides the voice through which her trauma is revealed. Without his macabre presence, *The Book Thief* would lose the universality of Liesel's experience. In this way, Death provides the pedestal upon which her story can be placed. Without Death's revelation, *The Book Thief* risks kitschification. Instead, his witty asides and poetic expression grant Liesel's traumatic story the voice that it requires. Death speaks where no voice can be heard.

Chapter Two: The Empowering Safety of Friendship

The relationships that Liesel develops on Himmel Street are vital to her recovery. Having experienced a traumatic encounter with Death and the abandonment of her mother, Liesel severs herself from the people around her. Many theorists conclude that after a traumatic event, victims display this same disconnection. In order to begin the recovery process, these victims must rebuild their lost relationships.¹¹ This step grounds Liesel's recovery, for it allows her to cultivate the trust that was lost during their traumatizing event. After her brother's death, Liesel no longer trusts her environment or herself. She fears the immediate threat of death and feels inadequate in her ability to cope with her losses. This loss of trust is directly linked to her sense of safety and empowerment, two vital components in recovery.¹² In order to rediscover safety and empowerment, Liesel places her trust in the safety of her surroundings and in her strength to heal. This trust is made possible by the characters in *The Book Thief* who support Liesel's development of empowerment and safety. First, Liesel finds safety in the soothing presence of Hans Huberman. The safer Liesel feels, the freer she becomes to develop close friendships with Ilsa Herman and Max Vandenburg. Through these defining friendships, Liesel learns once more what it means to feel safe and empowered.

The Safety of Sound in the Darkness: Hans and His Accordion

Before Liesel can heal, she first recognizes that her life is no longer in danger—that her immediate surroundings are safe. Safety has long been an established foundation in theories

¹¹ The following theorists underscore the importance of relationships in trauma and recovery:

- Judith Herman - *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2015)
- Lori A. Zoellner and Norah C. Feeny – *Facilitating Resilience and Recovery Following Trauma* (2014)
- Hilary Abrahams – *Supporting Women After Domestic Violence: Loss, Trauma and Recovery* (2007)

¹² In her study, Herman concludes that before the traumatized person can begin to heal, they must first establish their safety. This safety, she reveals, develops alongside the victim's sense of empowerment. These victims must recognize that healing can only come from within. The victim must claim responsibility for their healing.

regarding trauma recovery. While different therapists refer to this step in different terms, their definitions all point back to the necessity of feeling safe. Some theories are more clearly linked, such as Hilary Abrahams's study regarding the traumatic experience in domestic violence, which establishes that "the first consideration [in recovery] must be the establishment of physical and mental safety" (24). Watson and her colleagues agree, claiming that "safety is critical and understood to incorporate psychological as well as environmental safety" (535). Furthermore, Herman refers to numerous studies in trauma theory where safety is termed as either stability or trust (156). No matter what approach these therapists may take, they all agree on the foundational importance of establishing safety for the traumatized person. As Liesel arrives on Himmel Street, she begins her journey by settling into the physical and mental safety provided by her new family.

This safety comes to Liesel in a myriad of ways. First, she enters a stable home with sufficient food, shelter, and care for her immediate physical needs. While her meals of burnt eggs and pea soup may be sparse and unappetizing at times, the steady supply of care provides Liesel with the basic means to live a healthy life, meeting her immediate physical needs. She no longer starves on a frozen train, nor wonders where she will sleep at night. The steady and rough hands of Rosa Huberman feed and bathe and care for Liesel. In addition, the normalcy of the Huberman home gives Liesel the stability to cope with her traumatic loss. She slips into a soothing routine of going to school, delivering the washing, and rolling cigarettes. This simple routine encourages Liesel to trust her surroundings once again. Slowly, she begins to unravel, connecting with characters around her—from Rosa Huberman to Rudy Steiner. In kind, the Hubermans provide Liesel with a stable environment that she can trust.

While Rosa plays her fair share in the development of Liesel's safety, Hans provides a

soothing voice, the comforting presence, and the guiding eyes that leads Liesel toward her recovery. Death even describes him as the character that “was always just *there*,” and in that *thereness*, Liesel discovers his greatest value (34). That value derives from the security he provides the young traumatized child. After the traumatic loss of her brother, Liesel shrivels inside of herself, denying both her loss and her presence in the real world. When the foster care representative speaks to Liesel on the way to her new home, Liesel refuses to listen. Instead, she “draws a clear circle on the dribbled glass and looked out” (27). While she looks out the window of the car, Liesel stares into nothing for she is too focused on her fear. She refuses to acknowledge the importance of those around her. Her mind is wrapped in thoughts of “her mother back at the Bahnhof, waiting to leave again. Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat” (27). Liesel’s fixation on her mother’s suffering blinds her to the safety surrounding her. When Liesel arrives on Himmel Street, she even refuses to exit the car. The only person who has the power to reach through her fear is Hans: “It took nearly fifteen minutes to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it. Quietly” (28). Hans’ quiet personality allows him to break through Liesel’s fear. His voice soothes instead of frustrates. After the brutal addressing of Death’s presence, Hans’ quiet nature catches Liesel’s attention, draws her in, and shelters her.

In addition, Hans guides Liesel through her worst nightmares, providing the calm presence in which Liesel finds comfort. Through the months following her arrival, the recurring nightmare of her brother’s dead face plague her nights. However, Hans combats these nightmares by remaining by Liesel’s side as the protector that she desperately needs: “Possibly the only good to come out of these nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubermann, her new papa, into the room, to soothe her, to love her. He came in every night and sat with her. The first couple of times, he simply stayed—a stranger to kill the aloneness. A few nights after that he

whispered, ‘Shhh, I’m here, it’s all right’” (36). His protective presence and affirming words give Liesel the strength to trust her environment. Abandoned by her mother, Liesel fears that everyone else will leave as well. At times she even fears Hans’ will leave her: “The only anxiety Papa brought her was the fact that he was constantly leaving (40). However, through his consistency, he earns Liesel’s trust: “Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man’s gentleness, his thereness. The girl knew from the outset that Hans Hubermann would always appear midscream, and he would not leave” (37). While Liesel may fear at times that Hans will leave, in her heart she knows he will remain. The security of this knowledge allows her to open up to Hans and the people around her. In this way, Hans breaks through Liesel’s overwhelming trauma, addresses her presence calmly, and provides a foundation of security upon which she finds her power to heal.

Because of Hans’ soothing presence, Liesel cultivates her feelings of safety. This trust is symbolized by Hans’ accordion. Death explains that in the wee hours of the night, when Liesel would startle from her dreams, Hans would be there to sooth her with his music. Consequently, Liesel associates the accordion with the light. As the sun rises in the early morning, it is accompanied by the security of Hans’ presence and the sound of his accordion. While in the early months, Liesel still battles with the fear of darkness—of the nightmares and death that it symbolizes—Hans combats her fear with his music. Despite her fear, Liesel learns to trust Hans completely. This trust appears in the passage of the book where Hans and Liesel go to the river to continue her reading lessons. Symbolizing the shadow of Liesel’s fear, the characters face the Dachau concentration camp as they sit by the river. This reference establishes the macabre atmosphere. As Hans and Liesel physically face their bodies toward the camp, they symbolically face the darkness of the Holocaust. Instead of presenting Liesel trembling in fear, however,

Death sets a scene that secures her safety. He writes that “when darkness was near, Hans pulled out the accordion” (71). In the stillness of his accordion playing, Liesel finds peace as she “settled into the long arms of grass, lying back. She closed her eyes and her ears held the notes” (71). Before this scene, Liesel deciphered the stark contrast between night and day, finding safety only in the rising sun. Now she feels secure, even as the sun sets and she faces the darkest part of the war. She finds her safety amidst the raging war within the presence of Hans and his accordion.

Empowerment through the Defining Voice of Others: Language and Identity

The second process to be analyzed in this chapter deals with Liesel’s personal empowerment. In order to claim this empowerment, Liesel must also learn to trust herself. However, this trust does not develop in isolation. She must learn to trust herself through the eyes of those around her. As a victim of trauma, Liesel has no point of reference for what has occurred to her; she has no language to define her identity as a victim. Without this defining language, Liesel has no point of reference for who her “self” is; she cannot trust what she does not know. David Berstein concludes that “only through the position of an unknowable other is the formation of a sense of self possible” (144). Therefore, in order for Liesel to first define her “self” and then understand that “self,” she must look to the people who surround her. While Liesel learns much about herself through many of the characters on Himmel Street, the most radical roles belong to Ilsa Hermann, Max Vandenburg, and Hans Huberman. These characters provide the strongest perspectives for self-empowerment, for each character carries his or her own story of trauma with which Liesel can relate. By interacting with these characters, Liesel begins to construct a basic understanding of herself as a victim.

In the recovery process, identifying the presence of trauma is the first crucial step in

developing a sense of empowerment. According to Herman, once a victim learns that there is a term for who she is, she finds comfort in the community. By learning her identity, the victim recognizes that she is not alone in her suffering. In turn, she can look to other trauma victims as examples of recovery, recognizing that if they survived, then perhaps she too can survive (158). For Liesel, this hope is essential to her recovery process. While she never has a moment wherein a character defines her as a “victim of trauma,” she nevertheless finds comfort in her similarities with Ilsa, Max, and Hans. These three characters have traumatic experiences, and each tells a story with varying glimpses into a possible future. While not all characters provide a positive picture, they nevertheless push Liesel towards empowerment. She looks to these characters, identifies traces of herself, and begins fully to understand herself. Through this holistic self-realization, she finds hope for recovery.

Ilsa Hermann: A Story of Cold Wind and Defeat

One of the most pivotal relationships in her recovery is with Ilsa Herman, who casts a dismal shadow upon Liesel’s identity. Ilsa first steps into Liesel’s story the night of the *Fuhrer*’s birthday, when Liesel steals her second book. As the mayor’s wife, Ilsa is often misunderstood as a pampered individual with access to all the finest accommodations in Nazi Germany. However, Liesel and the other citizens of Molching do not recognize the suffering that this woman endures. Having lost her son to the carnage of first Great War, she is a defeated woman. She withers inside of herself, refusing to claim her identity as a survivor. At first, Liesel is fascinated by this figure who offers her endless access to books; however, Ilsa does not face the power of these books. They stand in her bookshelves as painful memories of her lost son. The entire library bears the signature of Ilsa’s loss even though Liesel only discovers one book with the son’s name scribbled inside. Subsequently, as Liesel interacts with this woman and builds her relationship

with her, she discovers a potential future that she does not want for herself. She glimpses what her life could look like if she fails to claim her empowerment.

As Liesel observes the woman in the library, she begins to note the woman's self-inflicted punishment, and subsequently realizes that she does not want this future. Liesel notices that "[s]he usually paid more attention to what was next to her, to something missing" (144). The cold, empty atmosphere of the library emphasizes this illusive absence. The whole room is tainted with that missing *something*, and while Ilsa allows Liesel to enter the room and peruse the books, Liesel cannot shake the feeling that *something* else is present—something familiar in the way of grief. When Ilsa reveals that she lost her son in the frozen winter of war, Liesel notes that the woman has yet to come to terms with this loss: "Ilsa Hermann had decided to make suffering her triumph. When it refused to let go of her, she succumbed to it. She embraced it. She could have shot herself, scratched herself, or indulged in other forms of self-mutilation, but she chose what she probably felt was the weakest option—to at least endure the discomfort of the weather" (146). As Liesel looks at the woman, she sees her potential suffering—what could happen if she does not accept the loss of her family. She can suffer like the woman before her, or she can find reconciliation in her loss. By interacting and observing this woman's cold story, Liesel learns what her future could hold.

While Ilsa gives Liesel a glimpse into a dark future, she also unconsciously teaches Liesel how to take responsibility for her actions to avoid that future. When Liesel visits the mayor's library, Ilsa's constant gaze forces Liesel to recognize her individuality. As Liesel peruses the endless supply of books, she acts under the steady "eyes of the woman [Ilsa] traveling her body, and when she looked at her, they had rested on her face" (134). This blatant

stare confronts Liesel like the Lacanian gaze of the other.¹³ As Liesel acts beneath this gaze, she becomes acutely aware of herself and then separates from herself to observe her actions. This separation from self is exemplified in the scene where Ilsa gives Liesel a book for the first time. In this moment, Liesel does not respond with gratitude. However, as she is walking home from her visit with Ilsa, she slowly becomes aware of her oversight by reviewing her actions as an outside observer: “She saw the open window, the chandelier of lovely light, and she saw herself leaving, without so much as a word of thanks” (136). This awareness of self leads to a guilt wherein “her sedated condition transformed to harassment and self-loathing. She began to rebuke herself” (136). This guilt derives from the awareness of her actions—an awareness that was made possible by Ilsa’s endless gaze. As a result, Liesel returns to 88 Grande Strass to thank the mayor’s wife. In effect, Ilsa’s cold stare forces Liesel to recognize herself as an individual responsible for her own actions. This ability is vital to Liesel’s recovery. By taking responsibility for her actions, Liesel empowers herself to act differently and avoid the cold future that Ilsa represents.

Max Vandenburg: A Story of Nightmares and Resistance

While Ilsa provides a glimpse into the negative possibility of what may be, Max Vandenburg shows Liesel the reality of what is. When Max arrives on Himmel Street for the first time, he carries the fear of a German Jew and the guilt of a survivor upon his shoulders. At his mother’s insistence and with the help of his childhood friend, Max abandons his family during *Kristallnacht*. After months of hiding underground, Max makes his way across Germany, seeking shelter from the man whom his father once saved—Hans Huberman. Hunted and

¹³ According to Lacan, individuals become aware of themselves during the mirror stage of development. Oftentimes, this mirror stage can take place in the reflection of the mother’s eyes, since “the gaze of the mother is the first mirror available to the child” (509). For Liesel, Ilsa’s gaze replicates the mother’s gaze, forcing Liesel to recognize her otherness.

persecuted, Max arrives on the Huberman doorstep with the scars of trauma etched on his face. In these scars, Liesel finds a soul with which she can identify.

When Max first arrives, Liesel fears his mysterious presence. While Max sleeps in the extra bed in her room, Liesel watches him in trepidation: “Often, when she stood over him, there was the mortifying thought that he had just woken up, his eyes splitting open to view her—to watch her watching. The idea of being caught out plagued and enthused her at the same time. She dreaded it. She invited it” (205). This dread and fear stems from the fact that Max is a stranger; however, she is thrilled by the pieces of herself that she sees in him. As the narrator notes, “Liesel, in the act of watching, was already noticing the similarities between this stranger and herself. They both arrived in a state of agitation on Himmel Street. They both nightmared” (205). These nightmares are only the first of several shared qualities, yet they are perhaps the most important for Liesel’s development. As Max wrestles in his sleep, Liesel sees herself in him for the first time. Since the nightmares take on a prominent role in the young girl’s life, she feels peace in the knowledge that she is not alone.

As her fear of Max melts into familiarity, Liesel baffles at his presence. She does not know how to respond. Her Papa has made the danger of Max’s presence quite clear, but while she has the behavioral guidelines from her Papa, she has yet to appropriate them for herself. Her apprehension echoes in her thoughts. While she tells Papa that “[e]verything was good,” she simultaneously recognizes that “it was awful too” (204). Liesel recognizes the foreboding presence of Max. She recognizes and understands the danger of the Jew hiding in her basement, yet she also knows that it would be wrong to send him out onto the street to fight for his life. After hearing her father’s story, she knows that hiding Max is the right thing to do. Yet she cannot reconcile this morality with the societal laws that condemn their actions. The result:

discordance. She sees the good but also the bad. This dialectic moment leaves her confused. In order to quiet the discordance, Liesel has to determine for herself what is right and what is wrong. She must take responsibility for her identity and subsequent actions, for only then can she give an account of herself with confidence. By giving an account of herself, she demonstrates the most powerful form of self-empowerment, wherein she trusts herself to make a moral judgement.

As Liesel and Max grow closer, Liesel learns to make moral judgements through her empathy for the German Jew. On her thirteenth birthday, Liesel initiates the first step towards friendship with a hesitant hug. This small act of acceptance pushes Max to capitalize on their commonalities. With the desire to return the gesture, Max gives Liesel the gift of words. Since he recognizes Liesel's dichotomous love for books, he knows how to tap into the core of her identity through his short story, "The Standover Man." By connecting with Liesel in this way, Max inadvertently encourages Liesel's empathetic response. After she reads the story, Liesel returns to the dark, cold basement to thank him. As she stands at the foot of the stairs, she carefully looks over the hidden Jew: "The first part of him she saw was his shoulder, and through the slender gap, she slowly, painfully inched her hand in until rested there...For a while she watched him. Then she sat and leaned back" (238). Her touch in this moment indicates the kinship she feels with this man. His gift has touched her heart in ways that only a like-minded person could. As she lays on the basement floor, she feels comfortable enough in his presence to fall asleep as "[t]he scrawled out words of practice stood magnificently on the wall by the stairs, jagged and childlike and sweet. They looked on as both the hidden Jew and the girl slept, hand to shoulder. They breathed. German and Jewish lungs" (238). Liesel no longer sees the distinction between herself and Jew. She sees only a friend in whom she finds a small piece of herself. In that cold basement, Liesel sees her humanity reflected in Max.

By developing a sense of empathy, Liesel can understand the suffering of other individuals around her. She sees the value in all human life and learns to suspend her judgement of others as she evaluates her own actions. When Liesel recognizes the similarities that she shares with Max, she develops a sense of empathy that applies not only to Max, but by extension, to the Jewish people as well. Liesel's ability to recognize her position and then look beyond it to the position of others shows her personal development and empowerment. Judith Butler explains that this ability can "constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves" (28). By looking into Max's eyes, Liesel compares her actions and self to others, providing a basis from which she can think and respond—but most importantly, act. She is no longer the victim who must cower in the corner. She can take control of her actions once more, reclaiming her lost sense of power.

Hans Huberman: A Story of Words and Survival

Liesel's relationship with Hans Huberman offers more than the safety of his presence; Hans also plays a critical role in Liesel's empowerment. While Liesel shares a special relationship with many characters on Himmel Street, she grows closest to Hans. As Liesel's foster parent, he provides Liesel with more than the safety that she needs; he also provides her with the words that she will later use to recover. While Hans also carries the weight of his own trauma, he does not allow his losses to take control of his life. Liesel sees this strength in his survival and eventually learns the source. After Hans provides the language that Liesel needs to recover, he provides her with an example of how those words saved his life. This in turn reveals to Liesel the power of her words and the possibility of her survival. While Liesel will later turn

to these words to reconstruct her narrative, this would be an impossible task had Hans not taught her how to read.

First, Hans confirms Liesel's identity as a victim. After the momentous book burning event in the town square, Liesel seeks confirmation for her victimhood. While Death takes her brother, the blame—as Death declares in the novel—lies with Hitler. Death is merely the servant of man collecting what he destroys. Liesel's struggle to blame her perpetrator symbolically coincides with her second robbery and first spoken word against the *Fuhrer*. As she stands before her father, she asks in a moment of raw honesty, “Did the *Fuhrer* take her [mother] away?” (115). Hans' cool presence allows Liesel to voice this fear, and while the question first surprises Hans, he does not deny her accusation. Instead, he tells the truth the best way that he can: “I think he might have, yes” (115). In this moment, he demonstrates the “moral commitment to truth-telling without evasion or disguise” that Herman calls for from those who surround the traumatized (135). Hans takes a moral stance, fighting against “another lie [that] was growing in his mouth” (115). According to Herman, this stance is essential in healing relationships, for the individual can then “bear witness to a crime” (135). Liesel needs the confirmation of her father—for Hans to bear witness to the crime against her—so that she can learn to accept it. He provides this confirmation, essentially enabling Liesel's empowerment.

Having received recognition for the crime that has been committed against her, Liesel then empowers herself through a declaration against Hitler. As she stands on the steps of the church, “Liesel could feel the slush of anger, stirring hotly in her stomach. ‘I hate the *Furher*,’ she said. ‘I *hate* him’” (115). In this emotionally charged scene, her declaration shows her recognition of the evil acts against her. As Hans names her suffering, he allows her to claim her role as an unwilling participant in the brutal acts against her. Once Liesel recognizes herself as

the victim of something horrid, she seeks to redefine herself and subsequently turns to the burning books. In this way, her books take the place of her shattered identity—an identity lost when her brother died and mother left—an identity stolen by Hitler. These books take on the role of what Paccaud-Huguet defines as the "substitutory object" (286). In addition, book thievery provides Liesel with yet another way for her to retaliate against her perceived perpetrator. Liesel desires reconciliation and justification for that which she has lost, and since she cannot quite yet obtain those items, she steals books.

While Hans provides Liesel with the confirmation she needs, he also provides her with the ability to use her books. While Liesel may turn to book thievery to find solace for her loss, they would do her no good without the midnight lessons provided by Hans. When Liesel and Hans enter into the mid-night agreement of reading, Hans inadvertently gives Liesel the power to abandon victimhood and claim her identity as a survivor. He accomplishes this task by providing her with access to the words and their meaning. Following Liesel's first night of bedwetting, Hans finds her first stolen book beneath the bed. Instead of admonishing her for her thievery, though, he offers to teach her how to read. This moment is vital to Liesel's developing identity, and she recognizes this magnitude when she later becomes the writer:

Four years later, when she came to write in the basement, two thoughts struck Liesel about the trauma of wetting the bed. First, she felt extremely lucky that it was Papa who discovered the book...Second, she was clearly proud of Hans Hubermann's part in her education. *You wouldn't think it, she wrote, but it was not so much the school who helped me to read. It was Papa. People think he's not so smart, and it's true that he doesn't read too fast, but I would soon learn that words and writing actually saved his life once. Or at least, words and a man who taught him the accordion.* (64)

This passage reveals the dualistic effect of Hans's relationship with Liesel. Not only does he teach her to read—granting access to language—but he also reveals how those words saved his life. This lesson becomes vital to Liesel's recovery, as she uses the power of words to reconstruct her narrative.¹⁴

Before Liesel can reconstruct her narrative, however, Hans reveals the capability of words to bring consolation and reconciliation. It is no random accident that Liesel learns to read from her first stolen book, *The Grave Digger's Handbook: A Twelve-Step Guide to Grave Digging Success*. As Liesel reads about the twelve steps to digging a grave, she faces her greatest fear—death—in tangible, acceptable terms. The narrator notes, "As for the girl, there was a sudden desire to read it that she didn't even attempt to understand. On some level, perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right. Whatever the reason, her hunger to read that book was as intense as any ten-year-old human could experience" (66). Her reasoning reaches beyond confirmation of a proper burial. It allows her to confront her brother's death at a distance through the symbolism of words. As Liesel begins this confrontation, Hans' initial response to the book lightens the seriousness of its content. As always, "he knew what to say... 'Well, promise me one thing, Liesel. If I die anytime soon, you make sure they bury me right... no skipping chapter six or step four in chapter nine'" (66). His serious yet comical request confronts the reality of death, making it an acceptable topic. As a result, he and Liesel find themselves laughing at the idea of death. While Liesel may still deny the pain of her brother's death, Hans helps her confront his burial, and slowly, she understands not only the abstract concept of death, but also the abstract concept of her own identity. Without Hans' guiding presence in the middle

¹⁴ The third chapter of this thesis explores in depth Liesel's use of literature to reconstruct her narrative. This reconstruction allows her to first remember and mourn those whom she lost, and then reconnect with the world around her.

of the night teaching her how to read, Liesel may never find access to her identity.

Hans's impact in Liesel's life does not end with the late night reading lessons. As their friendship grows, Hans reveals his greatest story to Liesel, which provides her with the morality to empower her life. When Liesel learns of this story, she recognizes that the words saved her father. During World War I, Hans' life was saved by a German Jew and a few words. These words appeared in the form of letters that Hans had to dictate due to the German Jew's intervention. As a result, he was spared from going to the battle field where everyone lost their lives. In some ways, Hans suffers from the same scars of trauma. He has been to the battle front, seen his close friends die, and walked away as the only survivor. According to Caruth, the concept of survival—of life witnessing death—is the hardest part to reconcile in trauma (“After the End” 124). Hans epitomizes the reconciliation of this witnessing. He walked away from the war alone. As Liesel looks upon her Papa, she recognizes the elements of trauma within him, and simultaneously sees his survival. In her mind, she translates the cause of his survival into the words he had to write. As she looks at her Papa, she sees the hope for recovery.

As Liesel begins her journey towards recovery, she depends on the relationships that surround her. When she first arrives on Himmel Street, she is nothing more than a scared child, scarred by the reality of war. However, Hans' soothing presence provides her with the security and continuity that she needs to trust her environment. Slowly, she begins to see that in the shadow of Himmel Street, she is safe. Once she recognizes this safety, she then empowers herself through the reflections of others. She learns from Ilsa Herman the importance of reconciliation and acceptance. From Max, she learns to empathize with those who suffer. And with Hans, she discovers the power of her words and the hope for healing. She knows that she can turn to these words and actively use them in her recovery. In this way, she becomes

empowered to survive. Without the influence of these characters, her recovery would be impossible.

Chapter Three: The Restoring Power of the Written Word

Remembrance, Mourning, and Reconnection in Liesel's Basement Writing

Literature also plays a vital role in Liesel's journey to recovery. When she first encounters the power of words in the small black binding of *The Grave Diggers Handbook*, Liesel uses this book and the others that she steals in order to regain some semblance of control over death. Having faced a traumatic event, she feels especially powerless. By learning to read, however, she reclaims an aspect of control in her life. As a victim, Liesel turns to book thievery and reading in order to conquer Death. However, as she begins to recover from her trauma, she becomes the active author of her trauma story. No longer does she seek to erase her trauma from her life, but rather, through the reconstruction of her personal narrative, she assimilates the reality of her loss into her life. In essence, as she writes about her encounter with Death, she learns to accept his inevitability. This acceptance signals the culmination of her recovery. Instead of trying to erase the past, she learns to assimilate it into her future.

The books that Liesel steals, receives, and even writes provide her with the tools she needs to recover from her trauma. After establishing her sense of safety through her friendships with the other characters, she utilizes these tools to reconstruct her narrative, incorporating the traumatic event within the fabric of her life narrative. In this way, she aligns with Herman's theory of recovery, which concludes that reconstruction is a necessary component for healing (175). After the devastation of the Holocaust, many survivors have turned to the healing power of literature in order to achieve this reconstruction.¹⁵ Mary T. Shannon explains that the "process of writing, of ordering memory and image into a coherent narrative, provides us with a

¹⁵ See, for example, *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust: Trauma, Psychoanalysis, and the Living Mind*, edited by Marilyn B. Meyers and Nancy R. Goodman. In this collection, noted artists, scholars, and authors explore the power of reconstructing narratives after the Holocaust.

semblance of control over that which we cannot control—the past” (“Reconstructing”). In order to achieve this control through reconstruction, Liesel turns to the power of literature, which enables her to face her experience and mourn the loss of her family. After this mourning process, Liesel is then free to reconnect with the world through her writing, signaling her full recovery.

Remembrance and Mourning: The Second Process of Trauma Recovery

After a survivor of trauma has claimed empowerment through safety and identification, she is then able to enter into the second process of recovery: remembrance and mourning. Judith Herman explains that in this process, the survivor learns to balance her newfound safety with the need to face the past (176). This individual must bravely reflect on the events of the trauma, recognizing both the factual events and her emotional response. For Liesel, literature provides her with the safe distance from the events to recall bravely both the factual and emotional details of her experience. Various Holocaust writers have testified to the safe distancing in writing. For instance, in her article “Too Young to Remember’: Recovering and Integrating the Unacknowledged Known,” Sophia Richman explains that writing enabled her “to face what had been outside my control, in an active way but from a safe distance,” fostering “a feeling of mastery” (114). In this way, as Liesel remembers her traumatic event, she puts the events back together. This recall then enables her to recognize holistically all that she has lost and then mourn those losses to the fullest extent.

Knowing the Un-knowable

As Liesel begins the second process of recovery, she reconstructs the unknowable event of her brother’s death and mother’s abandonment into a knowable part of her past. In this reconstruction, Liesel demonstrates the power of language of which Caruth writes. According to Caruth, trauma victims access the unknowable aspects of trauma through the power of language:

“And it is indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). As previously explored,¹⁶ the nature of Liesel’s traumatic event shatters her personal narrative, leaving her unable to fully understand what has happened. In order to heal, then, she must find a way to face that unknowable event—death—and reconstruct it in such a way that she can understand it. In order to accomplish this task, she uses the evaluative power of writing. As Liesel writes in the cold basement, she slowly begins to understand her loss and subsequently incorporate it into her life story. As Herman explains, this process is about “integration, not exorcism” (181). Liesel can never erase her traumatic event, but she can rewrite it into her narrative in such a way that she becomes the survivor, not the victim.

As Liesel writes from the basement, she first begins to understand her trauma by facing the facts and evaluating her emotional response. This combination is a necessary component in Herman’s theory, wherein the trauma victim must reconstruct the traumatic event as a recitation of facts, while including both the event itself and her response (177). In essence, then, this reconstruction reflects the process of Holocaust Literature, wherein authors reevaluate the brutal, yet historical, facts and incorporate them with literary imagination to reveal the true emotional experience. As Langer explains, “Literature seeks ways of exploring the implications and making them imaginatively available” (9). In the same way, Liesel uses her writing to understand the implications of her traumatic event and to evaluate her emotional response.

In some ways, the complex structure of *The Book Thief* complicates the narrator’s access to Liesel’s emotional responses. Death does not always provide direct glimpses into Liesel’s

¹⁶ See “Chapter One—The Revealing Voice of Death: Liesel’s Encounter with the Traumatic.”

original writing. In this way, filtering her narrative through his own words creates ambiguity at times. Due to his second hand telling of Liesel's writing, Death appears in some scenes to only provide his interpretation of Liesel's thoughts and emotions, making it difficult to decipher when Liesel first faces her emotions. According to de Oliveira and Maggio, this interpretation derives from death's use of focalization. They explain that Liesel's "impressions are perceived, felt, and evaluated by him, who adds his own impressions to what she experiences" (de Oliveira and Maggio 136). Even though Death moderates Liesel's writing through his own impressions and language, the feelings of which he speaks still derive from the perspective that Liesel presents in her writings. Death is not the omniscient narrator that these critics would have him to be. His perspective is limited by his immediate experience and the stories he carries in his coat pockets.¹⁷ Therefore, when Death reveals Liesel's emotional response to certain situations, these emotional responses he gleans from her book. Death even admits to his audience, "That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of" (25). In this way, then, whenever Death explains Liesel's response to situations, he relies on the emotions she originally conveys in her writing.

Considering Death's limited access to Liesel's emotional response, whenever he describes the emotions that Liesel feels, he reveals Liesel's reconstructed narrative. This reconstruction is first seen when Liesel arrives on Himmel Street. He writes, "When Liesel first arrived on Molching, she had at least some inkling that she was being saved, but that was not a comfort. If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else's doorstep? Why? Why? Why?" (32). When Liesel reflects upon her arrival, she imposes these questions onto the scene in

¹⁷ In the opening chapters of *The Book Thief*, Death tells his audience that he carries Liesel's story in one of his many coat pockets. As previously explained in "Chapter 1: The Revealing Voice of Death" (see page 27), Death is neither omniscient nor omnipresent, complicating his supernatural point of view.

an attempt to understand the nature of her loss. These questions align with Herman's theory of trauma recovery. Herman explains that through the process of reconstructing the narrative, the survivor will reach a point wherein she seeks to find a reason for her trauma: "Survivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding" (178). While Liesel knows the answer at the most basic level, she cannot reconcile the answer with reality. As Death writes, "No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment. Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone" (32). As Liesel looks back at this defining moment, she recognizes the fact—that she was abandoned—and combines that fact with her emotional response. As she writes from the basement, she recognizes her feelings of isolation when she arrived on Himmel Street.

Contrasting this recognition, when Liesel first realizes her mother's complete abandonment after the composition of her letters, she does not recognize her pain right away. Rather, in the very moment she realizes her loss, she shuts down her emotions and steps outside of herself through constriction.¹⁸ In the moment of her pain, she reflects the symptoms of a trauma victim. However, once she rewrites the story from the safety of her basement, she faces the full weight of her emotional response through the power of her literary imagination. She filters the experience through symbolic language: "When she wrote about that night . . . [t]he only thought that continually recurred was the yellow tear. Had it been dark, she realized, that tear would have been black" (99-100). She later recognizes that it was dark after-all, and this darkness symbolizes the pain of her loss. As she writes from her basement, she describes this

¹⁸ See "Chapter One: The Revealing Voice of Death," which explores the ways in which this constriction affects Liesel's life.

scene in full awareness of her emotional response: “She was beaten in the dark, and she had remained there, on a cold, dark kitchen floor. Even Papa’s music was the color of darkness” (100). This comparison of her Papa’s music to darkness is especially powerful, as his music had once brought her comfort. Now, however, lying in her pain, she feels nothing but the dark weight of her loss, and even Papa’s music fails to soothe her. However, as she writes about that night, she does not allow the darkness to overwhelm her. Instead, she understands “how things were and how they would always be” (100). Without reconstructing that night and facing her emotional response, Liesel would not be able to attain this understanding.

Contrarily, Liesel’s first attempt to use literature to reconstruct her narrative fails because she does not include her true emotional response. This first attempt appears in the form of letters to her mother. While she easily recounts all that has happened on Himmel Street, “telling her mother all about Molching, her papa and his accordion, the strange but true ways of Rudy Steiner, and the exploits of Rosa Hubermann,” she refuses to address the “sense of foreboding that was quick to accumulate inside her” (95). She focuses all of her attention on the people that surround her, indicating her hesitance to explore her emotional responses. While she is proud of her progress thus far in reading and writing, she lacks the courage to face her mother’s abandonment. Even the act of sending letters to her mother indicates a level of denial. As she lays in bed at night, she asks herself questions to which she cannot find the answer: “Where was she [her mother]? What had they done to her [mother]? And once and for all, who, in the actual fact, were *they*?” (96). These questions, while important to her holistic understanding of her loss, reveal her refusal to face her emotional response. She would rather focus on the facts—the “where,” the “what,” and the “who.” Furthermore, these questions are not her own. She gathered these questions from Rosa Huberman. Instead of facing her emotional response and asking her

own questions, she relies on facts and the questions of others.

Emphasizing her developing understanding, the next chapter of the novel opens with a “[f]lash forward to the basement, September 1943” (97). By ending the previous chapter with Liesel’s questions regarding the facts, Death juxtaposes Liesel’s underdeveloped awareness with her aware older-self. The younger Liesel of the previous chapter is clearly frightened. Death explains, “In bed, Liesel hugged herself tight. She balled herself up” (96). This description reflects a frightened and emotionally distraught child. In contrast, Death describes the older Liesel as “bony but strong,” having “seen many things” (97). This description, though lacking in emotional detail, shows a stronger, braver character. Death specifically notes that she “is writing in a small dark-covered book” (97). This detail couples with the description of Liesel to imply that Liesel’s strength generates from her writing. Compared to the little girl “balled” up tight in bed, the fourteen year old Liesel has the strength and wherewithal to face reality: that her mother will never write back. Even as Hans admits that he almost wrote her “a reply and signed [her] mother’s name” (97), Liesel keeps writing, having learned that through that “dark-covered book,” she can finally understand the questions that plague her as a child.

Not only does Liesel recognize her emotional response to her abandonment, she also recognizes her emotional response to the books. As she evaluates her life through her writing, she sees for the first time why her books mean so much to her. In the heat of the moment when Liesel steals her books, she did not always understand her motive—that the action was often involuntary.¹⁹ However, as she reconstructs her narrative, she recognizes the emotional significance of these books, specifically in Ilsa Herman’s library. Looking back on the numerous books in the library, Liesel cannot recall the exact content of those books; however, she does

¹⁹ See “Chapter One: The Revealing Voice of Death.” In this chapter, I explore in detail the nature of Liesel’s involuntary actions.

remember the emotionally charged details: “Later on, as an adolescent, when Liesel wrote about those books, she no longer remembered the titles. Not one. Perhaps she had stolen them, she would have been better equipped. What she did remember was that one of the picture books had a name written clumsily on the inside cover” (145). This clumsily written name symbolizes Liesel’s emotional connection with Ilsa Herman.

Liesel’s response to Ilsa’s loss indicates her capability to face her own pain through a writing that combines fact with an emotional response, for it shows her empathetic stance. As previously explored, Liesel’s connection with Ilsa Herman derives from their shared experience of traumatic loss.²⁰ Due to this connection, when Liesel looks back on the facts—the name scribbled inside the book—she also recognizes an emotional response that derives through empathy. While this scene in the library does not specifically reflect Liesel’s personal emotional response to her loss, she nevertheless experiences this pain through her empathetic position. While she is sorry for Ilsa’s loss, she is also sorry for her own loss. As she watches the pain flit across Ilsa’s face, she feels the echoes of a similar loss inch across her chest. Consequently, Liesel is acutely aware of Ilsa’s suffering. This awareness, however, does not appear until Liesel later writes about the day she discovered the scribbled name. Looking back on that day, however, Liesel expresses an urge to say “I’m sorry” (146). This desire to express sorrow reveals her ability to face the pain of trauma. As she declares her sympathy, she combines the facts of the event (the name of Ilsa’s dead son) with emotion (her empathetic response).

As Liesel develops a fuller understanding of her life by evaluating both the facts and her emotions, she begins to understand her role: her guilt and responsibility in regards to the events around her. This process is essential to Liesel’s reconstruction, reflecting Herman’s conclusion

²⁰ See “Chapter Two: The Empowering Safety of Friendship.”

that “in order to develop a full understanding of the trauma story, the survivor must examine the moral questions of guilt and responsibility and reconstruct a system of belief that makes sense of her undeserved suffering” (178). Liesel’s development in this process is most evident when Ilsa Herman releases Rosa Huberman from her service. When this occurs, Liesel feels betrayed by this woman with whom she shared so much. Due to the developing relationship between the woman and young girl, the rejection pierces Liesel more painfully than the other patrons who had already released Rosa from their services: “When the others had canceled, it hadn’t hurt so much. There was always the mayor, his library, and her connection with wife. Also, this was the last one, the last hope, gone. This time, it felt like the greatest betrayal” (260). Liesel misconstrues Ilsa’s intentions, lashing out in anger, convinced that Ilsa means to hurt the Huberman family. Liesel chooses to ignore the actual situation, to ignore “[t]he clumsiness of sorrow [that] still kept her at close proximity” (260). Liesel refuses to acknowledge Ilsa’s remorse for firing Rosa Huberman and threatening Liesel’s safety. Instead, Liesel only sees that Ilsa was dying to get rid of her. At first, Liesel walks home with no intention of lashing out, but as she walks, the anger builds and she soon finds herself standing on the doorstep of the mayor’s home. In this moment, Liesel ignores any trace of empathy.

Due to her lack of empathy in the moment, Liesel justifies her anger by seeking penance through violence. Liesel first seeks to destroy her most treasured possession—words. As she walks home, “she imagined the fate of that paper the next time it rained, when the mended glass of Molching was turned upside down. She could already see the words dissolving letter by letter, till there was nothing left. Just paper. Just earth” (265). When this act fails to expunge her anger, she desperately seeks some form of physical punishment—some outlet for her pain. When Rosa Huberman refuses to beat Liesel for losing their customer, “[Liesel] was torn between distress

and total mystification. The one time she desperately wanted a *Watschen* and she couldn't get one!" (264). Subsequently, she turns to her final resolutions—self-flagellation—to complete the task that no one else will. In the basement with Max, she fights against herself by pushing her body “to complete enough pushups to make her hurt for several days. Even when Max advised her that she'd already done too many, she continued” (265). She pushes herself to find solace for her anger, pain, and grief—a way to stifle the guilt.

As Liesel later writes about the event, however, she examines the personal injustice and begins to understand her personal responsibility and guilt. She finally recognizes the reality of the situation and admits that it was not what she initially assumed:

In hindsight, Liesel told herself that it was not such a big deal. Perhaps it was because so much more had happened by the time she wrote her story in the basement. In the great scheme of things, she reasoned that Rosa being fired by the mayor and his wife was not bad luck at all. It had nothing whatsoever to do with hiding Jews. It had everything to do with the greater context of the war. At the time, though, there was most definitely a feeling of punishment. (258)

From the basement writing, Liesel evaluates the injustice and punishment that she received and recognizes that Ilsa did not mean to harm her—that the punishment was not intentional act against her. When Liesel first feels the pain of rejection and abandonment, cannot understand why Ilsa would seek to harm her. In this way, she reverts to victimhood. However, by later writing about the event, she accepts the inevitability of the situation and adjusts her reaction. From the distance that her writing provides, she does not seek retribution—rather she accepts her sorrow.

This encounter with Ilsa is not the only place in which Liesel recognizes moral

responsibility. When Hans risks his family's safety by publically giving bread to a passing Jew, Liesel recognizes that her Papa is not to blame for the following consequences. When Hans offers bread to one of the Jews in the group being herded through town, he risks the safety of his family by showing his sympathy. As a result, Max is forced to flee in the middle of the night. Liesel understands why her Papa gave the bread to the suffering man, but it takes her basement writing for her to find the words: they finally "came to her more than year later, when she wrote in the basement. She wished she'd have thought of them at the time" (402). In reflecting on Papa's action, which risked the family and exiled Max, Liesel recognizes that her Papa was not an fool; he was "just a man" (402). This ability to analyze painful events and recognize true responsibility and guilt comes only through her reconstructed narrative. While these scenes do not always deal directly with Liesel's traumatic event, they nevertheless reveal the power of her writing to bring about healing. In this way, she demonstrates the ability of the survivor as she "reclaims her own history and feels renewed hope and energy for engagement with life" (Herman 195). As she forgives Ilsa and her Papa, she learns to accept the events in her life for what they are.

As Liesel reconstructs her narrative, she reaches a point of true mourning. While she exhibits signs of resistance by looking for revenge and compensation, she finally finds a way to mourn the loss of her brother and mother. Death points out that her "book was divided into ten parts, all of which were given the title of books or stories and described how each affected her life" (528). This intentional structure reveals Liesel's recognition of each event's importance in her life—from "the train and the snow and [her] coughing brother" (526) to the nights "Papa...brought the accordion down [to the basement] and sat close to where Max used to sit" (527). This recognition of these important moments allows Liesel to memorialize her losses and

mourn their passing, to realize “with great sadness...that her brother would be six forever” (473). As she writes from the basement, she accepts the past and finds hope for the future—a hope that enables her to smile even though her brother and mother are dead.

Reconnection: The Final Process of Trauma Recovery

While Liesel uses her basement writing to reconstruct her narrative in order to remember and mourn her losses, her writing also enables her to reach beyond the basement to reconnect with people. Having established a hope for the future, she is free to pursue that hope. When Liesel encounters Death for the first time, the resulting trauma isolates her from the world. While she may find safety in Hans’ embrace and mourn the memory of her loved ones in her writing, Liesel cannot accept her identity as a survivor until she rebuilds her lost relationships and reconnects with the world. In order to return to the land of the living, however, Liesel must first ground her identity in her survival.

By writing her story, Liesel connects once again with her internal self. She recognizes her status as a victim and fully incorporates the effects of victimization into her life narrative, thereby aligning with Harvey’s fifth criteria for resolution: “the person’s damaged self-esteem has been restored” (Herman 213). This restoration develops as she redefines her identity as the survivor, shedding her victimhood. As a result, Liesel develops a new sustaining belief, or moral purpose through which she connects with the world. This belief offers her the last criteria for full resolution, as defined by Herman: “the person has reconstructed a coherent system of meaning and belief that encompasses the story of the trauma” (213). Liesel looks inward through her writing, examining the behavior that rendered her helpless, essentially giving a full account of her actions. As Butler explains, however, this only comes once again through the suspension of

self and the understanding of another.²¹

While Liesel identifies herself through her relationships with Hans, Max, and Ilsa, she uses her writing to explore these relationships. In this way, her writings provide her with what Butler calls “the horizon within which the Other sees and listens and knows and recognizes” (22). In Trauma theory, this principle lives in the very act of writing, wherein the victim stands outside to observe the events that occur and the subsequent relationships that develop. Instead of focusing on identifying the self, the subject turns its attention to the Other, asking “who are you?” (Butler 24). By turning away from the self and focusing on the external other, the subject “exists in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you” (Butler 24). In this address, the subject finds a relationship that makes her story possible. In Liesel’s recovery from her traumatic event, she depends on her relationship with others to redefine herself as a survivor—a term that implies an Other that does not survive—yet she does not step outside of these relationships until she writes her story.

First, Liesel suspends her judgement and gains the capacity to sympathize with the suffering Jews as they march through town. At this point, Max has fled the safety of the Huberman home and Hans has been shipped off to war. Every time the Nazi’s parade a group of Jews through town, headed to the Dachau concentration camp, Liesel searches for Max’s face among the emaciated faces of the Jews. She admits to herself, “If nothing else, it alleviated the pain of simply watching” (502). The pain of which she speaks refers to the pain of witnessing

²¹ In response to the poststructuralism critiques of the subject—that an individual cannot claim responsibility for his actions without first fully understanding itself—, Butler claims in her article, “Giving an Account of Oneself” that “a theory of subject-formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a conception of ethics and, indeed, of responsibility” (22). If, as Caruth would propose, a traumatic event destroys self-knowledge in its very nature of the not-knowing, then Liesel as a victim of trauma has the foundation she needs to develop her ethics through the recognition of her limitations. While some critics may argue that one must know oneself completely in order to define these ethics, Butler directly refutes this stance, arguing that the subject’s “opacity” or limitation of self-knowledge does not allow the subject to “do what it wants or to ignore its relation to others” (22). Rather, the subject’s very limitations actually deepens the ethical sense.

others suffer. In order to ignore the waning bodies of the suffering Jews, Liesel searches for a distraction. She does not want to look at the traces of death in each face that passes her.

However, when Liesel later writes about the day in her book, she recognizes the selfishness behind her thought: “That’s a horrible thought, she would write in her Himmel Street basement, but she knew it to be true. The pain of watching them. What about their pain? The pain of stumbling shoes and torment and the closing gates of the camp?” (502). By asking herself to consider their pain, she recognizes her inner struggle of morality. Instead of addressing herself, she turns to the other, essentially asking “who are you?” This process reflects Butler’s argument that in order to hold one’s self accountable for his actions, he must turn to others (24). Liesel essentially calls into question her responsibility in this moment. As Hartman explains, “Out of an inner discord, a struggle with the selves in our self, flows some sympathy for others” (34). Out of the “inner discord” expressed in her book, Liesel develops her awareness of the suffering of others. This awareness, in turn, leads to her recognition of selfish motives. She is aware of her position as the survivor in this moment. The Jews suffers, yet she stands pain free.

Not only does Liesel show signs of sympathy for the suffering Jews, she also develops a deeper understanding of humanity after Michael Holzapel’s suicide. Having returned home after fighting in Stalingrad with news of his brother’s death, Holzapel suffers from the common guilt of survival.²² Unfortunately, Holzapel cannot handle this guilt and eventually commits suicide. Liesel later claims in her book that “[h]e killed himself for wanting to live” (503). This simple statement indicates a deep and sympathetic understanding of the human condition. This understanding comes through her empathetic relation to the Holzapel’s position. He too is a

²² Herman explains that “[i]n the aftermath of traumatic events, as survivors review and judge their own conduct, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal. Robert Jay Lifton found ‘survivor’s guilt’ to be a common experience in people who had lived through war” (53).

victim of trauma. He too is a survivor. Liesel meets a man who suffers from the same encounter with and escape from death. Liesel looks to this suffering man and connects with him, another soul tormented by those he has survived. Through this encounter, Liesel expresses a desire to act differently—to enact change. She feels the ethical urge to help this man. While she voices this desire too late, she nevertheless expresses her regret: “Liesel wrote that sometimes she almost told him about her brother, like she did with Max, but there seemed a big difference between a long-distance cough and two obliterated legs” (504). While Liesel identifies with his suffering, she also recognizes the degree of his suffering. Unlike Liesel, Holzapel refuses to reconnect with the living world. Instead, he embraces death in order to escape his guilt. Her ability to empathize with his pain and her desire to enact change indicate her developing ethic, an ethic that will connect her to the world.

Because Liesel has learned to understand the position of others through the position of her own pain, she secures the strength to face the death of Holzapel. Her strength is first indicated by the switch in narrative form. When Death presents Liesel as a victim of trauma, he must step in to speak for her. His intervention appears throughout the early development of the novel whenever Death and Liesel cross paths. In these moments, Death always speaks from his perspective. However, when Death comes to collect Holzapel, it is Liesel who speaks. Death confesses, “I did not see Liesel Meminger at all that day . . . I did not hear the detonation of an old man’s voice when he found the hanging body . . . I did not see Frau Holtzapfel laid out flat on Himmel Street . . . No, I didn’t discover any of that until I came back a few months later and read something called *The Book Thief*” (503). His confession reveals Liesel’s bravery. She no longer shrinks away from death. Instead, she finds the strength in her writing to face death and feel remorse. When Liesel faces the death of Holtzapfel, she faces trauma head-on through her

empathetic understanding of human nature.

Not only does Liesel have the strength to face Holzapel's suicide, she also finds the strength to face the complete destruction of her life. Near the end of the novel, Liesel returns to Ilsa's library once more in her climactic encounter with the power of words. While she sits upon the cold, hard floor, she willingly faces her traumatic encounters. She does not hide from the death she has seen:

For a long time, she sat and saw.

She had seen her brother die with one eye open, one still in a dream. She had said goodbye to her mother and imagined her lonely wait for a train back home to oblivion. A woman of wire had laid herself down, her scream traveling the street, till it fell sideways like a rolling coin starved of momentum. A young man was hung by a rope made of Stalingrad snow. She had watched a bomber pilot die in a metal case. She had seen a Jewish man who had twice given her the most beautiful pages of her life marched to a concentration camp. (520-21)

Individuals still suffering from their traumatic experience run from such confrontations. However, through Liesel's journey of recovery, she finds a center from which she can face her pain, reliving her brother's death and her mother's abandonment. She considers the other losses accumulated over the years. In this moment, she awakens to her past. Her awakening reflects one of Caruth's theories regarding literature and trauma, which states that "[i]t is the dream itself, that is, that wakes the sleeper, and it is in this paradoxical awakening—an awakening not to, but against, the very wishes of consciousness—that the dreamer confronts the reality of a death from which he cannot turn away" (*Unclaimed Experience* 99). In this way, Liesel does not want to wake from her dream. She would rather sit in isolation. However, she knows that remaining in

isolation will destroy all hopes of recovery. Instead, she wakes with a passionate resistance to death through the destruction of a nearby book. She does not want to face the words (her dream), but she has no choice, for the words call to her—they name her as the survivor.

By developing her ethical stance, Liesel connects to the world. Caruth explains that “the psyche’s relation to the real not as a simple matter of seeing or of knowing the nature of empirical events, not as what can be known or what cannot be known about reality, but as the story of an urgent responsibility, or what Lacan defines, in this conjunction, as an *ethical* relation to the real” (102). By defining her ethical stance, Liesel determines how she will act within the world. Without this ethical stance, she cannot connect to others. Through her writing, she is able to step outside of herself, evaluate her relationships with others, and build a strong foundation upon which she can determine her ethical stance. In this way, she fulfills Herman’s last vital step to recovery, wherein the victim must connect to the world (213).

Having awakened to her position in the world, Liesel then listens to the call of the survivor’s legacy. She hears the voice of the dead calling her to bear witness to their story. As the survivor, she must speak for the dead—to tell their story and fully connect with the next generation. This connection with the next generation is the greatest form of connection that Liesel can experience. By connecting to the next generation, she joins her narrative with the historical and societal narrative that surrounds her. Furthermore, by bearing witness to her traumatic encounter, she immortalizes herself as the survivor through acceptance. She knows who she is—the survivor—and she knows what she must do. During her first night writing in the basement, Liesel forces herself to recall every event in her story: “She made herself remember, and as was her habit, she did not look away” (525). Now, having accepted her role as the survivor, she recognizes that she has an ethical obligation to tell the truth. She reflects Dori

Laub's claims that "in each survivor, [there is] an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (qtd. in Welz 420). This imperative, however, reaches beyond the need to tell one's story. This imperative also calls the survivor to speak for those who cannot speak. Caruth explains: "It is precisely the dead child, the child in its irreducible inaccessibility and otherness, who says to the father: *wake up, leave me, survive; survive to tell the story of my burning*" (*Unclaimed Experience* 105). By awakening to her ethical stance, Liesel realizes that she has no choice but to tell the story and to tell it right. Her last words in *The Book Thief* ring true of her desire: "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right" (528).

The power of words plays a prominent role throughout *The Book Thief*. As Liesel develops into a young woman and survivor of trauma, she learns more than how to read; she learns how to utilize the power of language in her life. She uses books to soothe children in the bomb shelter as the sirens resound through the night. She uses her poetic language to bring Max mental pictures of the sky. In essence, she explores every aspect of language, even "the injury of words. Yes, the brutality of words" (262) to hurt Ilsa Herman. All of these uses, however, pale in comparison to Liesel's use of words in her recovery. As she writes from the basement, she faces her trauma, remembering her losses in painful and emotional detail. She gathers the soul of each loved one into her words to remember them always. Through the power of words, Liesel then reconnects with the world as a survivor with a story to tell.

CONCLUSION

Just as Liesel's basement writing reconstructs the unknowable events of her trauma, *The Book Thief* reconstructs the communal memory of the Holocaust into a knowable and imaginable truth. While this reconstruction necessitates questions regarding the possibility and subsequent ethicality of using the Holocaust to create such stories, understanding the nature and purpose of literature can help navigate these difficult questions. Critics rightfully fear the distortion and exploitation of this historical moment, for as Langer asserts, "no one will ever clarify satisfactorily or portray completely the 'quivering flesh of the reality' of the Holocaust; it remains the unconquered Everest of our time, its dark mysteries summoning the intrepid literary spirit to mount its unassailable mount" (7). However, Langer can apply this same principle to every attempt to recreate the past through literature, for in the heart of this mimetic act lies an element of impossibility. As authors seek to capture the real world through language, the symbolic nature of language requires a separation between the two. Subsequently, Zusak and other authors can never fully recreate the experiences of the past, nor should this be their goal. The purpose of literature lies beyond recreation, in the realm of reconstruction and connection.

Literature seeks first to tell a story that brings about a redemptive moment. This moment occurs when the audience's world-view is called into question, forcing that audience to re-evaluate their position in the world. James K. A. Smith explains this process when he declares that "at the end of the story that has 'worked,' we find the world and its characters continuing to reverberate with(in) us, and we come back to our own worlds with a different angle, a different horizon, a transformed 'background' that now changes our perception of the world in ways we can't quite name" (135). For Holocaust Literature, this reverberation takes on a different role, as it demands that society re-evaluate its stance in regards to those who died. Much like Liesel

accepts the loss of her family through the reconstruction of her life story, so too society must learn to accept the traumatic gap in its communal memory by remembering and mourning the dead. In this way, Holocaust Literature provides the medium through which the dead are remembered and honored.

As Liesel's story reveals, the reconstruction that occurs in Holocaust Literature does not recreate the traumatic experience, nor does it ignore it; rather, Holocaust Literature reconstructs the past into a knowable story that reverberates into the present. As it brings the abstract past into the concrete present, it weaves the memory of the traumatic deaths into the fabric of communal memory. Without such literature, the Holocaust's systemization of death obstructs the acceptance of this inhumane reality. As Hartman explains, "memory [is] so integral a part of our humanity that it is offended by what the Holocaust obliges us to remember. This leads to various forms of denial, even among victims . . . Call it a species-shame that afflicts those who learn of inhuman, dehumanizing acts. An inner turning away, a necessary forgetting, is, then a negative though understandable reflex" (33). In an attempt to fight against this reflex, Holocaust Literature combines the atrocity of history with the literary imagination to provide, what Langer earlier defines, as an approachable truth.

Liesel's story provides this truth through the integration of historical fact with literary imagination, facing what humanity urges memory to forget. By exploring how Liesel overcomes her traumatic experience to emerge as a survivor, the novel translates the full effects of the atrocious event into a conceivable story. *The Book Thief* achieves this goal by, first of all, making the traumatic experience personal. As Hartman explains, "While a ritualized collective memory can foster sharing and healing, fiction is often more effective in finding ways for the outsider to identify with what happened in a deeply personal if precarious way" (33). His

observation is echoed in the works of Kidd and Spargo, who agree that literature has the power to bring the distant past into the present—to make it personal in a life changing way. Franklin echoes this sentiment by declaring that “[w]e need literature about the Holocaust . . . because of what literature uniquely offers: an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing” (13). *The Book Thief* offers this form of access through the human capacity for imagination. Liesel’s story of trauma and recovery recognizes the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, transposes it into a comprehensible story, and assimilates it into the communal memory.

In addition, *The Book Thief* successfully integrates Death’s abstraction into a tangible, comprehensible medium. By showing Death as the cause of Liesel’s trauma, *The Book Thief* represents the real, yet abstract, experience of Holocaust survivors. Whether they experienced the violence of war or the brutality of concentration camps, these survivors all encountered death. As this thesis explores, this encounter is the root of all trauma. For the Holocaust, this encounter is heightened by humanity’s brutal role. While in some ways Zusak’s personification of Death is a mere shadow of the real horrors, this shadow sufficiently reveals the heart of trauma—an already intangible subject. Furthermore, Death’s narration further exemplifies this traumatic encounter. His techniques, such as the shifting focalization and fractured narrative structure, mimic the symptoms of a traumatized individual. By representing trauma’s effect on the human psyche, Death reflects the experience of the traumatized through his personalized narration.

In addition, *The Book Thief* embodies the importance of community in the wake of a traumatic event. Considering the Holocaust’s atrocity, survivors may struggle to trust humanity, breaking from the community and refusing to reconnect. However, when Liesel loses

everything—family, trust, safety, and identity—she still rebuilds her trust in herself and those around her. While Liesel struggles with this cultivation of trust, she overcomes these struggles to build relationships with the characters around her. Subsequently, she finds safety in their presence and empowerment in their stories. For this reason, her story personalizes the meaning of community in the rehabilitation process. Even though Liesel mourns the death of her brother and the loss of her mother, she finds life in her community.

Furthermore, Liesel's basement writing exemplifies the need to face the past and understand its emotional implications even though memory may cloud historical facts. This process of reconstruction does not destroy literary truth; rather, reconstruction enhances this truth by integrating the past events into an understandable narrative. As Herman's theory has shown, the effects of trauma cannot be erased from memory. For Liesel, her trauma haunts her until she incorporates her past into her life narrative. While the unknowable nature of trauma presents certain difficulties, Liesel uses the symbolic power of language to rewrite her experiences in a way that she can understand. As she combines the events with her emotional response, she embraces her trauma as an integral part of her identity.

The assimilative power of language represented in Liesel's story derives from imagination, not only for Liesel's story, but also for Holocaust literature as a whole. Reconstruction requires the assimilation of both fact and emotion into the narrative. While authors may have ready access to historical fact, in order to access the emotions of the past, they must incorporate literary imagination. Liesel's reconstructed narrative shows how imagination does not always exploit the past; rather, it enables survivors to understand and accept their trauma. While Death speaks for Liesel at the beginning of the novel, she finally faces her trauma when she rewrites her story. In this way, her recovery testifies to the power of the written word

to confront the gaping wound of the Holocaust and provide a language for its unknowable nature.

Through the lens of trauma theory, *The Book Thief* clearly illustrates the survivor's legacy and the memorialization of the dead through life. This legacy requires the courage to look death square in the face and accept the loss that this encounter entails. The survivor recognizes the inevitability of death, yet does not fear that death. Accordingly, through her encounter with death and her recovery process, Liesel can accept the death of others. This acceptance does not come easily for everyone. For instance, Ilsa Herman struggles to accept the death of her son, preferring to remain in her living death. Michael Holzapel also struggles to accept his brother's death, but instead of surrendering to a life of guilt, he chooses his own death. Contrary to their struggles, Liesel chooses to live her life, accepting her role as a survivor. This acceptance comes only after she reconstructs her personal narrative to include her traumatic experience. Even after she moves from Molching, she keeps the memory of her loved ones close in her heart. She no longer needs her book, for these memories have become a part of her identity. She bears witness to their lives through the legacy of her own. In much the same way, literature enables culture to encode the stories of Holocaust victims into its communal memory.

Liesel's traumatic experience and recovery process testifies to the depth in which *The Book Thief* honors and remembers the dead. When Death finally gathers Liesel's soul, she greets him just like her Papa before her, sitting up (543). For this reason, she reflects the survivor's life of her Papa. She accepts her losses and recognizes that by living her life to the fullest, she can best honor the death of her loved ones. Liesel carries their memory for the rest of her life. Even as she dies, Death carefully notes, "In her final visions, she saw her three children, her grandchildren, her husband, and the long list of lives that merged with hers. Among them, lit like lanterns, were Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her brother, and the boy whose hair remained the

color of lemons forever” (544). While these final visions testify to the importance of these relationships in her life, Liesel’s story speaks for more than the lives lost on Himmel Street. Her story reaches beyond the novel, speaking for those who lost their voice in the trauma of the Holocaust. For this reason, *The Book Thief* honors both the living and the dead through the witness of literary imagination.

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