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The Book Thief: Through the Eyes of Death

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The Book Thief: Through the Eyes of Death

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Introduction

In Brian Percival's film, *The Book Thief*, an ominous narrator pops in and out throughout the movie narrating the protagonist, Liesel's, tragic life story. It is not until the dreary end of the film that we find out the narrator's true identity, Death. It is only appropriate the film and novel would have such a narrator, as Liesel's life has been rattled by death on many circumstances. Many film reviews and essays do not believe Death to be an appropriate narrator. These reviewers feel that Death as a narrator almost pokes fun at the very serious time period the movie focuses on. I, however, do feel that Death is an appropriate narrator."

Cover Page Footnote

Selected for the Essays on Religion Prize



Alysa Mapes

***** *The Book Thief*: Through the Eyes of Death**

Introduction

In Brian Percival's film, *The Book Thief*, an ominous narrator pops in and out throughout the movie narrating the protagonist, Liesel's, tragic life story. It is not until the dreary end of the film that we find out the narrator's true identity, Death. It is only appropriate the film and novel would have such a narrator, as Liesel's life has been rattled by death on many circumstances. Many film reviews and essays do not believe Death to be an appropriate narrator. These reviewers feel that Death as a narrator almost pokes fun at the very serious time period the movie focuses on. I, however, do feel that Death is an appropriate narrator.

Narration throughout the Plot Line:

Many reviews and essays argue the fact that Death popping in and out of scenes throughout the movie creates a patchy plot that may be difficult to follow. They also feel Death as a narrator is an appalling choice seeing how the film takes place in Germany during the Holocaust and the war, and millions of people died. One critical essay states, "Death, as the narrator, often interrupts the story line to insert all-knowing asides, background information,

and witty or insightful commentary; the effect is a story that is not cohesive, but rather patchy” (eNotes 1). While parts of this statement are true, Death does interrupt the story to add his commentary, it does not necessarily make the story “patchy” or hard to follow. These film reviews may feel this way because Death does not fully state whom he is until the end of the film, leaving an ongoing string of mystery throughout the movie. André Crous wrote a film review on *The Book Thief* and his feelings about the narration were much stronger than the previous essay. As stated before, many reviewers felt the film was almost insensitive towards the tragic time period that the film is set in. Crous says, “There is something sadistic about the industry inflicting movies on us on a near-annual basis that have to do with the Jews hiding from the Nazis.” In the same paragraph he then says, “There are movie producers who are more interested in the subject as a moneymaking device than a tragic history.” Crous is clearly speaking about the film in its entirety here, but, he does go into detail about his feelings about Death as a narrator. For example, “We constantly have a narration by Death himself...the embarrassment is infuriating because of the importance of the historical context” (Crous 1). Kate Erbland agrees with Crous’s ideas about Death in her review by saying, “A film about World War II, and orphaned children, and looming death, and brutal Nazis, and the horrors of the Holocaust...Then imagine the worst possible narrator for that film -- just the most wrong-headed, bizarre and frankly offensive narrator you can possibly picture” (Erbland 1). While I must agree that I can see where these opinions are stemming from, I do not think that it ultimately makes Death a horrible, and offensive narrator. Yes, it is a very dreadful, and tragic thought to think of all the innocent death that occurred during World War II, but Death never

pokes fun at the characters in the film, and he even seems to care about the characters and their lives.

The act of dying itself is an inevitable part of life, and though many died before their time in this period, it isn't as if Death does not care, or is an evil, sadistic, character in the film. He even tells us that he *does* care about Liesel Meminger. He is aware of Max, Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and all of Rudy's brothers' personalities and lives, showing that he cares enough to be aware of what makes them unique. The night of the air raid when Death is collecting his souls, he begins in Rudy's house, speaking about his mother he says, "Then, I kissed his mother. And stole the meanness from Franz Deutscher's heart." When Rudy dies Death says, "Rudy, his soul just rolled into my arms." Holding Rudy's soul in his arms shows that Death does care. It almost resembles something a parent would do, like picking up their sleeping child and holding them in their arms. All of the things Death does that night show compassion; in no way does he enjoy taking the lives of people or make a joke out of it.

The film is centered around the events of Liesel's life, so it makes sense that Death also focuses on Liesel. Death has taken almost all of Liesel's loved ones from her, and in that time it seems that he almost develops of kind of love for her. In the beginning Death says, "I guess I should introduce myself properly, then again, you'll meet me soon enough. Not before your time of course. I make it a policy to avoid the living." This proves the point that Death is not cynical, and taking lives on purpose. He only takes the people whose time it is to die. When we first see Liesel, Death says, "I don't know exactly what it was about Liesel Meminger, but she caught me. And I cared." In the very end of the film, we get to see all of Liesel's lifetime accomplishments, her family, and viewers even hear the rest of her story from Death. This gives

viewers a sense that Death has been watching over her because he cared. He had plenty of chances to take Liesel's life, but instead he let her live a long happy life silently watching over her.

As I viewed the film the first time I was thinking of many possibilities as to who the narrator could be. Taking into consideration how the narrator talked about people's souls, visiting natural disasters, people's dreams, interests, and passions; I assumed the narrator to be God. Although God was not the narrator and the narrator was in fact Death, Death still possessed qualities some may think God to have. Death tells us that humans make him wonder what it is like to live. "The only truth I truly know is that I am haunted by humans." The only possible way Death could be haunted by the lives he must take, is if he cares.

Music with Narration

The idea that Death cares about the souls he takes, and that his presence does provide a good narration is also backed up through the use of music throughout the film and while he is speaking. Every time Death is narrating the same music plays in the background. It isn't a sad, or dark tune, but rather a pleasant one strung together with the sounds of the piano and violin. Another time we hear this type of music is when Liesel is in the library of the Burgomaster's wife. Liesel runs her fingers across the books while the piano plays. Percival may have used the music as a tool to set the mood for the scenes, and for Death. Perhaps he did not want Death to seem like a dark, ominous character, so he used the pleasant music to lighten the tone. It is also quite obvious that this music plays when something important is happening in the film. Everything Death says gives a small piece of insight into the overall outcome and message of

the film, therefore it is essential viewers are listening to what he is saying. Percival's use of the music with the narrator alerts viewers that something worth paying attention to is occurring.

Lighting associated with Death the Narrator

If one pays close attention to every time Death speaks in Percival's film, it is clear to see he strategically used lighting to assist with the tone and use of narration. As the movie begins, Death is introducing Liesel and the film. The scene begins panning through bright white clouds, he shows us the inside of the train where there is also light. The lightness in these parts of the film can be associated with the fact that all of the horrors that happen to Liesel are yet to occur. At this point, she still has her mother and brother, and Death has not been in her life. The middle parts of the film are filled with bleak colors; greys, greens, browns, and black. Throughout the middle, every time Death speaks it is dark. This can be associated with the fact that this was a dark and difficult time in Liesel's life. She has been thrown into a new life with a new family, new classmates, and a new village. Her brother had died, and her mother had left her. She is confused and upset with where she is at and the darkness in these scenes resembles that. There is also darkness surrounding Max when he leaves his mother. Death describes how detrimental it was for Max to leave his mother behind, and it only makes sense that this scene is filled with darkness as well. However, as Liesel begins to grow into her life, the scenes begin to become lighter. The ending of the film is filled with lightness. Although Rudy, her mother, and her father have just passed away, when Death speaks the scene is filled with light. This may be due to the fact that Death was collecting their souls and holding them in his arms. The way he speaks and shows compassion for Liesel's lost loved ones almost gives viewers a sense that Death has brought them peace. In the very last scene where Death is showing viewers Liesel's

house, the entire room is filled with light and bright colors. This clearly resembles Liesel's great life she went on to lead, and the peaceful death she died. The use of dark and light not only generates a message throughout the film, it assists Death in his narrating.

My Reflection on "The Book Thief"

After watching the film and figuring out who the narrator was, I have to admit I was confused at first. I wondered why the author of this novel, and director of the film chose of all things, and all people, *Death*, to narrate their story. I watched the film a few more times, paid closer attention to the storyline, and came to the realization that Death, although ironic, and slightly insensitive in some views, was the most appropriate narrator for the story. Like I have stated before, death is an inevitable part of life; one way, or another, we will all die and we will all experience what it is like for someone we care about to die. Death is a dreadful, depressing thought and we usually would not wish it upon our worst enemy, but this film, and novel, brings readers and viewers a sense of peace when it comes to dying. Depending on your beliefs, you have an idea of what is going to happen to you when you die. Whatever those beliefs may be, it is always unsettling to think about leaving behind your loved ones, or someone you love leaving you. *The Book Thief* does not go into detail on what happens to us after we die, but upon your final moments, and the moment you leave the world behind, it gives viewers a sense of peace. It brings the idea that perhaps we do not need to be scared of dying, because Death is not as evil as we all have thought him to be. The film leaves viewers with the idea that Death does care, and he will try and make your journey after leaving the world, as pleasant as possible. Overall, I felt that watching *The Book Thief* was worthwhile, and I would recommend watching the film, or reading the book to anyone who asks.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that some people may see Death as an insensitive, tasteless narrator for a film based on such horrid events. Though there is an irony in the fact that Death is the narrator in a film about the Holocaust, it also provides a different perspective on death. Death, in *The Book Thief*, shows us how dying doesn't always have to be the scary, dark thing, we as humans are always dreading. Though death is the inevitable part of life that no one can escape, ultimately, we get to live. "I wanted to tell the book thief that she was one of the few souls that made me wonder what it was to live...in the end there were no words, only peace." According to Death himself, having lived a life is what we should be focusing on. Not the fact that we will die.

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