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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

"My Cursed, Circular Heartbeat": A Trauma-Reading of Death's Proleptic Narration in *The Book Thief*.

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2026

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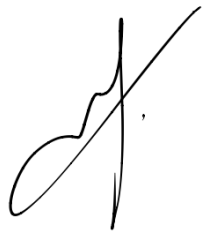

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Abstract

The present study seeks to analyse the progression across the three proleptic events in the prologue of *The Book Thief*, bridging narratology and trauma theory in a close reading of the text. Readers are accustomed to experiencing a story from beginning to end, uncovering the events chronologically as they are presented by the narrator. Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a novel narrated by Death, who plays a central role in how the story is told and understood by the readers. By means of omniscience and a first-person narration, Death tells the story of Liesel Meminger, an orphaned girl who is placed in the care of a married couple as her mother cannot look after her. The story is set in Nazi Germany, and the readers follow Liesel's story from 1939 to 1943, amid WWII, a time when death, just like our narrator, was everywhere.

From a narratological perspective, *The Book Thief* has been thoroughly studied, with a focus on Death and his role as a narrator. However, a central characteristic of Death's narration that notably structures the plot, and has been underappreciated, is his use of prolepsis. Death frequently spoils the events of the story, and while this anticipation has been widely assessed as a technique that simultaneously undermines suspense and generates tension, this dissertation contends that Death's proleptic narration can be read as a symptom of his trauma. The three events proleptically announced in the prologue are presented subsequently, and a progression of the breakdown of Death's trauma-coping mechanisms can be traced.

Keywords: *The Book Thief, Markus Zusak, Trauma Theory, prolepsis, belatedness, traumatised narrator.*

0. Introduction

"If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.
I'll show you something" (Zusak 24)

I wouldn't be writing this project had it not been for *The Book Thief*. I first read it back in 2017, as a young girl about to finish *Batxillerat* and with no idea what to pursue at university. I barely read when younger, but decided to give *The Book Thief* a try, and here I am. Finishing my degree with the book that sparked this love for literature that I have. And it was certainly Death's fault, and Markus Zusak's: how could someone think that Death would be the perfect narrator for such a story? But it is.

Published in 2005, *The Book Thief* has been a major hit in the literary industry, especially for its unique narrator. It is classified as Young Adult fiction, although many scholars reject it as such given the subject matter. It became an international bestseller and earned Zusak, among others, the National Jewish Book Award (2006) and the Michael L. Printz Honor Book (2007), together with the release of a film adaptation in 2013. Zusak sought to bring to the world the memories of his parents during WWII Germany. Having been told the story of "a burning sky" and "a boy being whipped on the street" for giving bread to a Jewish man (Zusak "Markus Zusak talks"), the author of *The Book Thief* came to find the germ of what developed into Liesel Meminger's story of survival. Talking about the book itself and its narrator, Zusak explained in an interview with Annie Coulthard that he wanted to tell a story about the other side of Germany, the one that sympathised with Jews, in an original way, and chose Death for its narrator since death and war are commonly tied together and seen as "best friends" (Zusak, "Markus Zusak talks"). Nonetheless, in Zusak's story Death does not carry the menacing role conventionally attributed to it, but rather he is "haunted by humans" (Zusak 538), and

tells Liesel's story to prove to himself that they are worth their existence, regardless of the atrocities they are able to inflict on their own kind.

As a supernatural entity with foreknowledge, Death opens with a prologue which unconventionally anticipates three events that are going to be told later in the narrative, departing from the common retrospective contextualisations attributed to these sections. This prolepsis has been examined in terms of how it affects, as a literary technique, the order in which readers come to know the events that structure Liesel's story. However, considering Death as a traumatised witness of war, and crucially his overt expression of having a circular heart (481), prolepsis can be argued to be the expression of his trauma. In view of trauma theory, trauma irrupts into the present as past, but Death's circular heart implies the unification of past, present and future. As such, Death's present becomes haunted by future events, conditioning, and appearing not as a choice but as something closer to a compulsion, the way he structures his storytelling. Furthermore, the impossibility to resolve trauma is a consequence of this condition, resulting in a progressive collapse of the trauma-coping mechanisms in Death's repertoire. This dissertation, thus, seeks to foreground prolepsis, not as a formal choice, but as a symptom of a traumatised circular heart. By way of a close reading of the text, I endeavour to trace the gradual breakdown of Death's trauma defences in the proleptic chapters and the subsequent narration of the events, attending to relevant principles in trauma theory, to show how prolepsis, in Death's case, behaves like trauma.

0.1. Trauma Theory

Trauma Theory is a field of research that has been gaining recognition in the academic sphere after PTSD ("Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder") was introduced in the manual of diagnosis of Vietnam War veterans in the 1980s. This area of research became more

relevant in the 1990s with the publication of seminal texts that linked trauma representations with Sigmund Freud's work on psychoanalysis and the unconscious, to better understand trauma and its effects on the afflicted. For several years, Trauma Theory had been understood within the scope of psychology and psychiatry, but the field has expanded to other media, especially literature and cultural studies, where it has been conceived as inseparable and inherent in writings on the Holocaust and War[1] (Pividori 99).

In considering the inexpressibility of trauma experience, Freudian psychoanalysis established the basic concepts that constitute and characterise Trauma Theory[2]. Freud introduced the idea of "traumatic neurosis" (Freud, qtd. in Caruth 2) to refer to a repeated and helpless compulsion on soldiers' part to reenact a traumatic episode they cannot leave behind (Caruth 2). Cathy Caruth further develops Freud's conceptualisation of trauma and suggests that trauma, as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Freud, qtd. in Caruth 3), is not experienced linearly and is, thus, limited in being represented in time. Caruth suggests that the wound of the mind "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth 4) and be able to reconcile with it, being only 'belatedly' when the event is acknowledged. According to Caruth, trauma does not appear in the original event itself but rather in its belated return, forcing what was "precisely *not known* in the first instance" to return to haunt the afflicted (Caruth 4). Caruth's belatedness draws from Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning 'deferred action', and suggests that trauma, considering the aforementioned compulsion to repeat and this

[1] Trauma studies have more recently brought into the picture the effects of extreme human pain caused by loss, child abuse, rape, and other harrowing circumstances that, together with the aforementioned, defy the limits of expressing the inexpressible.
[2] There are more concepts in trauma studies, but these are the ones directly related to my argument.

belated temporality, “insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact” (Caruth 7).

This belatedness and repetition from Freudian and Caruthian trauma are further developed by Dominick LaCapra, whose distinction between ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ constitutes the two possible responses to loss (LaCapra, qtd. in Whitehead 87). LaCapra presents the notion of ‘acting out’ as the inability of an individual to control the repeated replays of the past into the present, resulting in them being “haunted by revenants and reliving the past in its shattering intensity” (LaCapra 90). In opposition, ‘working through’ refers to the traumatised individual’s ability to distance themselves from the traumatic experience, making the past accessible and allowing them to begin the “arduous process of working over and through the trauma” (90). Notwithstanding, LaCapra observes that the curative process of ‘working through’ “may never bring full transcendence of acting out” (90), by which the individual will stand in ambivalence between the two possible responses.

In a similar vein, Dori Laub builds on LaCapra’s ‘working through’ and suggests that bearing witness to trauma is a “ceaseless struggle” (Laub 75), given that the mechanisms that allow for the registration of the event are not sound and in place (57). This inability to register the event leads to an impossibility of telling, whereby the victim finds it necessary to tell their story, although “no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion” (78). Therefore, language is unable to convey the traumatic experience but the pressure and imperative to testify to their experience “continues unremittingly” (78).

In conceptualising trauma in literature, Anne Whitehead presents trauma fiction as a paradox: “if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativized in fiction?”

(Whitehead 3). Given this paradox, writers have had to re-evaluate trauma representation, shifting away from "*what* is remembered of the past to *how* and *why* it is remembered" (3), and to consider the symptomatology of trauma in their attempt to represent it. Thus, novelists aiming to portray traumatic experience draw on narratological devices that imitate these symptoms at a formal level (84). Considering Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma, Whitehead argues that trauma fiction implies "a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (6). Hence, repetition, fragmented narration and disrupted temporality form some of the formal traits that intend to express the inexpressible. Beyond these structural features, Whitehead notes that this inexpressibility forces trauma fiction writers to break the natural order of reality by drawing on the supernatural in an attempt to allude to the fact "that traumatic knowledge cannot be fully communicated or retrieved without distortion" (4). Completing this, Cristina Pividori posits that trauma can sometimes only be expressed obliquely in a narrative, and that it is through "personification, irony, metaphors, symbols or *double entendres*" (Pividori 101) by which traumatic experience can be traced in a text. Thus, identifying signs of trauma and dealing with them in fiction requires attending to the features of a text that indirectly "reveal signs and symptoms of traumatic experience and abuse" (101).

In light of the above, *The Book Thief* can thus be classified as trauma fiction. Death's proleptic narration, as will be further assessed in the analytical section of this project, presents at a formal level Caruth's belatedness, LaCapra's perpetual state of 'acting out', Laub's ceaseless struggle in testifying to what is impossible to tell, and Pividori's oblique approach to narrating traumatic experience. Death's circular heart can be understood as the condition that roots his narration in a compulsive repetition of events he cannot reconcile with, which seems to force the formal structure of the story to re-enact his traumatic experience as both a witness and a victim.

0.2. Prolepsis

Prolepsis is a literary technique by which events in a narrative are presented before they have happened. French literary theorist Gérard Genette, in his seminal work *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, distinguished between two types of anachronisms, that is "all forms of discordance between two temporal orders of story and narrative" (Genette 40). The first form is called analepsis, those events that are being narrated having happened at an earlier point than the temporal framing of the narrative. In other words, a flashback in time or also known as retrospection. In contrast to analepses, Genette defines prolepses as "any manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (40). In other words, a flashforward or an anticipation. These figurative devices allow for the chronological order of events in a narrative to be disrupted, and while both constitute two common tools in contemporary literary tradition, prolepsis is significantly less frequent (67)[3].

Contemporary literature is notorious for presenting fragmented narratives and non-linear chronologies, which aim to reflect societal trauma at a group or individual level, amidst times of political distress. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez opens the story with a flashforward that anticipates Colonel Buendía facing a firing squad. In a similar manner, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut makes use of fragmented narration to portray Billy Pilgrim's traumatised mind as Vonnegut's alter ego, after the bombing of Dresden. However, prolepsis is not only a contemporary narrative device as the three major classical epics, *The Iliad, The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, begin with a proleptic summary of their heroes' adventures.

[3] In defining prolepsis, Genette distinguishes two variables: reach, that is, "the temporal distance from the future to the present moment" (Genette 48); extent as "the duration of the anachrony" (48).

In *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, Mark Currie builds on Genette's framework and reformulates the concept of prolepsis with the notion of *anticipation of retrospection*. According to Currie, narratives are retrospective inasmuch as "the teller is looking back on events and relating them in the past tense" (Currie 29-30), while at the same time being anticipatory as the present "is the object of a future memory" (6). By that, Currie refers to the idea that what is being experienced in the present by the reader is a narrator's past account, by which retrospection and anticipation "cannot really be one without the other" (6). Therefore, it can be suggested that prolepsis is not merely an anticipation of future events, but rather the narration of memories. Currie's conceptualisation of *anticipation of retrospection* is particularly relevant to Death's narration in *The Book Thief*, provided that it allows for the re-evaluation of his proleptic accounts as compulsive returns to traumatic events that show how the structure of his storytelling goes beyond the undermining of suspense as a mere narratological tool aligned with his supernatural foreknowledge, to involuntary returns to past memories his circular heart cannot preclude.

0.3. Literature Review

Prior to the assessment of the text, it is worth situating *The Book Thief* within the academic sphere. The conversation centres on two main branches: on the one hand, focussed on the narratological aspects which provide an analysis of Death as a narrator and the narrative techniques he employs; on the other hand, focussed on the trauma-theoretical readings related to the novel's engagement with Holocaust memory and WWII. This review of the literature seeks, thus, to survey both branches to consider where they converge, and where the gap that this dissertation intends to fill lies.

When considering the narratological approaches to Death as a narrator, Oliveira's doctoral thesis provides the most extensive and thorough contribution as to Death's function in the narrative as narrator. Drawing from Genette's classification, she posits that "the narrator of *The Book Thief* is a peculiar one due not only to his supernatural nature, but also to the fact that he is, at one time, homodiegetic, heterodiegetic and autodiegetic" (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 108), a narrator who subverts the Grim Reaper image traditionally associated with it to portray "the positive connotation of a desirable friend who comes to set us free from extreme agony" (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 21). In the same line, Oliveira also reflects on focalization and how Death "holds most of the focalization in the narrative" (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 110). As an extension and working with Maggio, she argues that *The Book Thief* comprises what is known as embedded focalization, by which the primary narrator-focalizer allows the focalization to move to other characters to express their experiences (Oliveira and Maggio 138).

In "Temporal Dimension: Order, Duration and Frequency in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*", Oliveira applies Genette's temporal classification to the analysis of the novel, arguing that where Genette had maintained that prolepsis is less common in Western literature, Zusak's novel is precisely notorious for showing the opposite (Oliveira 317). In parallel, Oliveira builds on Mieke Bal to posit that the proleptic anachronisms expressed by Death shift suspense from "*what* is going to happen" to "*how* things are going to happen, which produces a great amount of tension" (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 44), given that "the suspense generated by the question 'How is it going to end?' disappears; [...] another kind of suspense, or rather a tension which keeps the reader engaged, may take its place, prompting questions like 'How could it have happened like this?'" (Bal, qtd. in Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 44).

In considering Death's omniscience, Gipson challenges the traditional assumption of Zusak's narrator as a real omniscient one, proposing the notion of 'performative omniscience' in opposition to Genette's focalization, which aimed at describing the limits of a narrator's knowledge (26). According to Gipson, Death emulates the foreknowledge ascribed to a supernatural entity, but his actual awareness of the character's inner world is restricted to what Liesel had written in her book (26). In considering prolepses, Gipson acknowledges their frequency and function as revelations of what will happen in the future time of the narrative, but asserts that although these anticipations are seemingly predictions, they are nonetheless recollections, and hence, retrospective in nature (23). Therefore, Death's unnatural form needs to be accounted for its "anthropomorphised narration" (3), by which his version of the events is more akin to memories rather than foreknowledge.

Shifting the lens to the trauma-theoretical readings, Zuzana Buráková is established as the scholar who provides the soundest survey of trauma in *The Book Thief.* In her view, Zusak's novel is a "textbook example of a trauma narrative" (Buráková 62), where the core concepts of trauma theory are present in the form of postmemory, transgenerational transmission of trauma, PTSD, survivor's guilt, and the unspeakability of trauma in artistic representation (62). She contributes to the field by suggesting that the trauma portrayed in fiction must go beyond the victim and lead into perpetrator trauma, and that Death's role in the story is that of unifying victim and perpetrator trauma, becoming "the most objective witness" (69) in an attempt "to be the witness, the story-teller, and the healer of the trauma simultaneously" (69). Buráková's reading of the book is complemented by Shields, who argues that the novel, by positioning German citizens outside responsibility and the Nazi party at full blame, allows for "the possibility of a personal or cultural means of exculpation" (Shields 5). In an alternative trauma-reading,

Emma Domínguez-Rué analyses Liesel's book as "acts of confrontation against the destructive potential of the Nazi discourse" (Domínguez-Rué 514), suggesting that it is words which function as the recuperation of the voices that had been silenced during WWII. However, none of the latter identify Death as a traumatised narrator.

Considering this review of the literature, it can be concluded that both branches analyse *The Book Thief* in different ways. The narratological side focusses on what Death does as a narrator, how he manipulates time and performs in a human-like nature, whereas the trauma-theoretical side describes how trauma presents itself in the characters, positions Death as a witness, and foregrounds the consequences of witnessing from the survivor's and perpetrator's perspective. In Oliveira's thesis, Death is presented as a traumatised entity (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 29), but what this scholar and the others do not ask is whether Death's narration at a formal level is influenced by his trauma. Death's proleptic narration as belated returns to unregistered events allows for an alternative reading of the formal structure of the book. Considering the concepts described in the theoretical framework, and Death's overt expression of his circular heart, this project aims at exploring Death's proleptic narration as a formal expression of his trauma, bridging the gap between narratology and trauma theory to show that Death's fragmented narration is his almost inescapable way of bearing witness to Liesel's story and restoring his hope in humanity.

Considering the aim of this dissertation, the structure will follow a thread across three chapters, each encapsulating a different dimension of Death's trauma and his coping mechanisms. Chapter One focusses on the establishment of these mechanisms as necessary mediations. Chapter Two examines the first instance where these buffers show signs of breakdown. Chapter Three attends to the final collapse of Death's defences. Each chapter will consider the proleptic announcement and the ensuing narration of the event.

It may be noticed that the length of each chapter varies and is not consistent. However, that variation emulates the devastating effect of what Death narrates, hence the more analytical content. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made with some suggestions for further research thereafter.

Chapter One: Death's Trauma-Coping Mechanism

Chapter One of the analytical section will serve the purpose of assessing Death's establishment of his coping mechanisms. In the first and second chapters of the prologue, the narrator presents his mediating method: using colours as a "saving grace" (Zusak 14), controlling the narration and the recollection of events as brief interruptions in the form of typographical inserts, and using irony embedded within the inserts as a form of emotional detachment. The first proleptic episode with Werner's death reflects an imperative to distance himself and withhold information. While these mechanisms are presented as a necessity for him to do his job as a collector of souls, Death himself hints at their frailty from the beginning.

"Death and Chocolate"

"First the colours.
Then the humans.
That's usually how I see things.
Or at least, how I try" (13)[4].

The first chapter in the prologue serves one very crucial role for Death: that of introducing his method for coping with the traumatising nature of his job. Although it is not proleptic in essence, analysing the first encounter with Death sheds light onto his burdened

[4] Some of the quotations are included as such, mimicking their presentation in the novel. This is especially used when quoting the typographical inserts.

condition. His presentation begins with himself, before any of the other characters are mentioned, and without delay, establishes colours as his "saving grace" (14), the distraction that helps him cope. By claiming that he first looks at the colours and then at the humans, Death already signals what this close reading interprets as his traumatised state by overtly acknowledging that he cannot directly confront "the leftover humans" (15). His method, sometimes, falters. He has no control over his psychological condition and is unable to take hold of his actions, in the same way that he cannot take hold of his narration: "I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind" (15). Dori Laub's impossibility of telling (Laub 79) can be read in Death's "I try" (13), an admission of his own mechanism failing. For Death, the colours are his way of distancing himself from pain, to which Oliveira adds that the colours are "more than just a distraction", they are "a necessity" (Oliveira *Haunted by Humans* 27), a compulsion which is, from the outset, exhibiting some fissures.

"HERE IS A SMALL FACT
You are going to die" (13).

The typographical inserts constitute breaks in the narration, another instance of fragmented narration that formally reflect Death's inability to tell the story in a linear manner. These short interruptions are present throughout the novel, by which Death summarises events he deduces the readers may need to know. More frequently, though, he uses them to pre-empt the readers' possible negative thinking by directly addressing his narratees in a formal, bureaucratic tone. The direct addresses appear to reflect Death's need, as a witness, to share in the trauma with the listener, which aligns with Laub's second level of witnessing:

> I recognise three separate, distinct levels of witnessing (...): the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself. (Laub 75)

Death tends to minimise the impact of these announcements by using hedging language and irony, dressing the impact of these statements as trivial facts when these are actually major expressions of grief and mourning. It must be noted that colours are not his only coping mechanism. While constituting the primary one, these typographical inserts and sardonic irony function in a similar manner: the former as his method to control the pace of the narrated information, and the latter as a way to deflect emotional involvement.

Event 1: Prologue – "Beside the Railway Line"; Part One – "Arrival on Himmel Street"

In the second chapter of the prologue, Death is proleptically narrating the first time he and Liesel meet. Werner dies due to a cough, on his way to Himmel Street with his mother and sister Liesel, by train. However, Death's anticipation of their first encounter withholds important facts of the episode which seem to reflect his traumatised condition and his inability to process the event and move on. The readers are given an outline of the traumatic loss for Liesel: a colour, a mother and a daughter, a corpse, two guards, and a train. However, this proleptic chapter serves more as a snapshot than a full characterisation of the event. In their first encounter, Death had found the unfairness of Werner's death, of an innocent young child, unbearable. Werner's passing marks the beginning of Liesel's story, and how her story of survival and of being constantly left behind began: losing at once both her brother and mother, and later Hans, Rosa and Rudy. Death is already aware of all these losses, and his circular heart is already carrying the weight of this knowledge when he begins his storytelling.

As is his mode of approaching his job, the first thing Death foregrounds is the colour of the sky: "First up is something white. Of the blinding kind" (16), a colour usually

associated with purity, innocence, and ironically, new beginnings. At this stage, Death finds it necessary to clarify that for him "white is without a question a colour" (16), referring to the fact of it not being widely conceived as such. While this may seem irrelevant, Death is anticipating the importance of this colour in the anti-Nazi story he is telling, but disclosing what it means, "the weight of all that snow" (17), at this stage, would imply a confrontation with what it reminds him of, the Nazi flag. The colour white and its meaning frames the whole episode within innocence and unfairness, before any of the details are fully explained. The "small male corpse" (17) is that of a child, who has passed away at the beginning of his life, thus constituting the first traumatic event that haunts Death, the passing of an innocent child as a casualty of war. Who the child is, is not yet disclosed, though Death does group the mother and the daughter with the dead child together, who remained "stubborn and silent" (17) outside the train, from which the narratee can deduce that the child is closely related to Liesel. But this information is withheld as if naming Werner and what his relationship is with Liesel would imply confronting the weight and importance of his death, and the subsequent effects on the young girl.

It is thus understandable that Death's description of Liesel is distant, only depicting her reaction from the outside, "tears were frozen to the book thief's face" (18), which appears to reflect Death's inability to fully come to terms with Liesel's suffering and to go more in depth into her inner feelings. Death's "REASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT" (16) is also relevant. In the form of a typographical insert, Death positions himself as a witness who cannot take action in the story. He describes himself as "a result" (16), expressing obliquely his inability to have agency not only in the story, but in the way he narrates his story. As a result, he can only come back to certain events after they have happened, in line with Caruth's belatedness (Caruth 4), which may account for his use of

prolepsis in the prologue: he will go back to those events when the time comes, but for now, and provided that these proleptic advance notices constitute for him the past, he is providing an outline which indirectly reflects the wounded mind of a witness who cannot fully come to terms with certain events: Werner's death at a young age at the hands of war and Liesel's loss of her brother and beginning of a life of survival.

In Part One, Death provides a complete view of the episode. Whereas the proleptic second chapter in the prologue was terse, the first chapter in Part One is significantly more detailed. Nonetheless, Death remains a detached traumatised entity that appears to be inept at directly confronting Liesel's pain. Death unveils the dead child's name and his relationship with Liesel, where the train is heading and why Liesel and Werner are on that train. Werner is six years old, confirming the innocence and the apparent purity of the death that haunts the traumatised narrator. The colour white circles back to him. What was supposed to be the coping mechanism that should serve as distraction, repeats itself in Death's unconscious compulsively, reminding him again of the weight of this death both on him as an exhausted witness and Liesel as the leftover survivor.

When describing Liesel, Death depicts a frantic girl trying to shake her brother awake, although to no avail, struggling later to dig him out from his burial site, a girl who experiences a "staggered onslaught of thoughts" (29). Death's descriptions of Liesel detail her confusion "He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't–" (31), and provide more introspective portrayals of Liesel's suffering: "her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud" (29), dwelling on her suffering but not accomplishing a full entrance into her grief because for him, as a witness who is ceaselessly struggling to resolve his trauma, it is too much to bear, and resorts to only observing "Stupidly, I stayed. I watched" (29). Death's apparent omniscience, to which Gipson refers as a performance "to mask his humanlike limitations" (Gipson ii) would

allow for a deeper account of Liesel's pain and inner thoughts, but this clear oscillation between inhabiting her and retreating right after, points towards a narrator whose telling of the events is deeply influenced by a traumatised mind, a circular heart that first approaches the event sideways, initially providing a very cut outline of the event, and which returns to the episode belatedly, but still unable to resolve the experience. Hence, prolepsis functions both as a narratological technique which anticipates events, and as a protective shield. It reflects Death's traumatised condition of a circular heart that belatedly for him, but newly for the readers, comes back to an event that remains a deep wound no matter the amount of telling and reliving. It is also the first wound in Liesel, but this wound will repeat itself in the subsequent losses in her life.

Colours and typographical inserts constitute the defences he employs primarily, but beneath them, storytelling functions as the all-encompassing mechanism for Death, the compulsive return to Liesel's story as his means of bearing witness which will be further analysed in the following chapters. For now, the trauma-coping mechanisms Death has established show signs of fragility. Nonetheless, the first signals of failure are more evident in the following episode, which confronts Death with a coexistence that will haunt him for the rest of the story.

Chapter Two: Death's Coping Mechanism Starts to Break Down

Chapter Two examines how the coping mechanisms Death had established in Chapter One begin to fissure, showing the first signs of breakdown. The pilot's death episode constitutes the contradiction of witnessing human kindness and destruction at the same time, a paradox that appears to overwhelm Death's mediation with trauma and results in an inability to resolve the contradiction between Rudy's sympathy and war's cruelty.

Event 2: Prologue – "The Eclipse"; Part Nine – "One Toolkit, One Bleeder, One Bear"

In chapter three of the prologue, Death is advancing the second instance in which he and Liesel meet. After a bomb-raid in Himmel Street, Rudy and Liesel following behind, arrive at a scene where an enemy pilot's plane had tried to land, but lethally failed. In the same way as the second chapter, Death is announcing an event already from its aftermath, which repeats itself in his consciousness in glimpses of what happened that again reflect his inability to fully reconcile with what he witnessed at the time it occurred. Rudy, a young boy, shows kindness to a dead soldier, who happens to be an enemy. Rudy's action of kindness amidst destruction seems to overwhelm Death's ability to understand human beings, reflecting on how the good and bad of humanity can be witnessed at the same time. Death had made, once again, the mistake of staying, not only because of what this simple act of kindness with enormous significance means, but also because Rudy's fatal end, and his lack of comfort when his time comes, haunt Death, who will carry the weight of the unanswerable question of "where was Rudy's comfort?" (520) as an involuntary thought later in Part Ten. Rudy places a teddy bear unwarrantedly, going beyond what war would have taught him about the Allies. He provides comfort to a dying enemy pilot, driven by an instinct which embodies the good nature of children but Rudy more specifically. Death, thus, is not only haunted by the leftover survivors like Liesel, but also by humans who show him that there can be goodness in the middle of war, especially from children who are innocent. The unbearableness of this scene resides in Death's wish to find faith in humanity, to find human existence worthwhile when war has proven and exhibited the worst in them. But his quest ends up colliding with the fact that war, after all, will result in the destruction of generosity, showing how the worst of humanity will end up taking over.

In the pilot scene, Death again withholds information which would allow the reader to locate the focalised character's importance in the story. Rudy's name is unknown, as well as the reasons he should be carrying a teddy bear in his toolbox. As is his modus operandi, Death begins by highlighting the colour of the sky, a "signature black" (19) that is later acknowledged as "an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature" (20). Death does not fully disclose where the familiarity resides or what the relationship between the signature and the pilot's death is yet. Nonetheless, the fact that he repeats the word signature hints that in some way, the authorship of this death haunts him and he cannot fully reconcile with it.

Death begins by saying that the pilot was "perhaps twenty-four years of age" (19), which contrasts with his refraining from disclosing Werner's age in the prologue. Given that the age of the pilot is disclosed and Werner's wasn't, the source of Death's inability to cope with this episode appears not to be the death of a soldier. He refers to the crash as "beautiful in some ways" (19), with the "some ways" foreshadowing the significance of what is to come. It is beautiful because a young child, Rudy, places a teddy bear as an emotional support for the dying pilot, but at the same time seems to reflect Death's fluctuation between finding the scene harrowing and finding it beautiful for Rudy's act of kindness. It is at the same time worth noting how Death's first illustration of the scene is a description of the plane, which was "still coughing" with smoke "leaking from both its lungs" (19), that serves as a parallelism for the pilot's slow death.

When describing the scene, Rudy's name remains unknown, as in the previous chapter, where Werner's was not mentioned either. Naming him, acknowledging who he is and what his relationship is with Liesel, would again imply accepting who they are, recognising the person, and that is something Death is not able to do in his recollection of the event. It is Death distancing himself from the trauma, allowing himself to detach

from Rudy and his character, and his act of kindness, all the while being cognizant of his later fate. Rudy places a teddy bear on the dead pilot's chest, and Death provides first the gesture rather than the name of the boy, foregrounding the teddy bear, a symbol of innocence and childhood, that is supposed to comfort the enemy soldier.

It is worth noting how this scene is focalised through Rudy. Liesel's presence here is peripheral. Death explains that the book thief, who he does not yet name either, arrives thirty seconds after Rudy, and is panting (19). Her presence and role in the scene are secondary, which serves as justification for Death's loitering in the scene. Evidently, this scene is important for Death because it is one of the three instances in which he sees Liesel. However, it is what it shows about Rudy's character, in comparison to his later death, that will haunt Death throughout his telling of the story. In multiple instances, the image of Rudy as "a giver of bread and teddy bears" (507) and of his death compulsively returns to Death. For instance, it is in Part Five of the story that Rudy's death surfaces for the first time in the main narrative, and notably in the form of another typographical insert. This short break hints at Death, again from his foreknowledge of what will happen, being confronted by the repetition of an image that haunts him:

"A SMALL ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT RUDY STEINER
He didn't deserve to die the way he did" (245).

In Part Nine, the pilot scene is fully explained. Where in the prologue Death provided, as expected, an outline of the traumatic event, in "One Toolkit, One Bleeder, One Bear" Death reveals what he had withheld in the prologue: why Rudy would be carrying a teddy bear inside his toolbox and how he and Liesel came to find the dying pilot in the forest. The narratee learns that the plane crash happens after a bombing in Molching, and that this toolbox was supposed to contain the essentials during bomb-raids. Initially, though, the toolkit comprised instruments that Rudy would use to go stealing, and among those

objects, the teddy bear was already considered a fundamental tool "to calm [children] down" (473) when going into someone's house to steal. Rudy's character is again highlighted, for intending to undertake a malevolent deed but considering someone else's wellbeing, especially, and particularly, that of a child. It ironically eventuates in the teddy bear being the emotional support for an adult man, which once again stirs Death from within as he circles back to Rudy's lack of comfort when he dies in the bombing in Part Ten.

Death's arrival at the scene coincides precisely with the moment in which Rudy is placing the teddy bear on the dead pilot's chest, which further testifies to the inseparable link that haunts Death between kindness and destruction. The familiar black is here directly referred to as the eclipse, and Death now makes the direct connection with the blockage of light and its significance: "Above me, the sky eclipsed – just a last moment of darkness – and I swear I could see a black signature in the shape of a swastika" (480). In the prologue, where the event is repeated in Death's unconscious belatedly, the significance of the colour black and of the eclipse was expressed obliquely. Death referred to a "scrawl" that was "familiar" (20), but the withholding of the parallelism Death drew between the Nazi flag and the colour suggests again his inability to give name to what is haunting him.

Notwithstanding, the importance of this chapter resides not only in what it shows about Rudy's character, but also in Death's overt articulation of his burden of having a circular heart:

> It's probably fair to say that in all the years of Hitler's reign, no person was able to serve the Führer as loyally as me. A human doesn't have a heart like mine. The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time. The consequence of this is that I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugliness and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both. Still, they have one thing I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die. (480-81)

In his own words, Death is acknowledging this burden, his inability to 'work through' the repeated compulsions (LaCapra 90), which lead him to re-experience and relive the events, proleptically for the readers, and retrospectively for him. This may be Death's justification for the way he narrates the story: the circular nature of his heartbeat prevents him from succeeding in resolution and keeps him constantly reliving the experiences given that this circularity implies the overlapping of past, present, and future. It could be argued, of course, that Death's proleptic narration is exclusively a narratological technique that aims at undermining suspense. Nonetheless, given that the traumatic experience of an individual exhibits itself belatedly, in retrospection and unconsciously, Death's proleptic narration seems to depict LaCapra's 'acting out' (LaCapra 90), the compulsive return to events that prevent resolution. In addition, the passage highlighted also encapsulates the reason Death is "haunted by humans" (538), and why this scene is painful for him. As an overwhelmed witness of war atrocity, who is ceaselessly struggling to testify to events he cannot attest to without deviation provided that his heart is circular, he is constantly faced with instances of humans where their goodness and meanness coexist in a paradox. Death is unable to understand how humans would take part in inhumane actions, when there are people, like Rudy, who do the complete opposite, showing compassion for another person regardless of who they are. This paradox appears to take Death's trauma-coping mechanisms to a breaking point, whereby these will dissolve in the next chapter, and show Death's most intimate and sympathetic countenance as an elegiac witness and a mourning participant.

Chapter Three: Death's Coping Mechanism Has Completely Broken Down

This third chapter considers the complete and final collapse of Death's coping mechanisms. Where in Chapter One they were established and in Chapter Two they were under strain, the Himmel Street bombing culminates in the collapse of his mediating methods. This is the most traumatic episode Death witnesses, and consequently, the boundary between observation and participation seems to disappear. Most importantly, Death himself acknowledges the function of prolepsis as preparation for the retelling of what he cannot face at once.

Event 3: Prologue – "The Flag"; Part Ten – "The End of the World (Part I and II)"

In the third chapter of the prologue, Death is proleptically outlining the most devastating event for Liesel, where the home and haven she had found in Himmel Street is bombed and completely destroyed. The traumatising effect this has on Death seems to be reflected in the formal structure of his narration. As in the prior two events, the prologue serves as an outline, but whereas the former had the event happen in one single episode in the main narrative, Death's inability to face the event directly in one single sitting is suggested by the fact that he needs two different chapters, under the same title, to fully explain the end of Liesel's world. The inability to tell and confront the event directly is expressed explicitly by Death himself, acknowledging that prolepsis is the inevitable result of his trauma: "Again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps it's to soften the blow for later, or to better prepare *myself* for the telling" (487). Until now, I have speculated why Death narrates the events proleptically and intended to find textual evidence in which his trauma is expressed obliquely. However, Death, given the weight of this traumatic occurrence, acknowledges himself that on the one hand, he may have used prolepsis pre-emptively to subdue the reader's grief as a sort of anticipatory mourning mechanism, and also that it

might as well be his inability to encounter the event in a direct manner what had driven him, as a burdened witness and narrator, to present the events in a proleptic manner.

The fictitious town of Molching is bombed, and when the sirens informing of an air-raid had always come in time, it is on October 7th when these come too late, resulting in the sudden and unexpected fatal bombing of Himmel Street. Hans, Rosa, Rudy, together with the rest of the characters who had come to form Liesel's new-found family, pass away and close the circular structure of Liesel's story of perpetual survival and abandonment. Death's confrontation with the continuous evidence of war inflicting pain on innocent civilians, jointly with the destruction that it brings about with no clear means to an end, reaches its most unbearable point for Death in this episode. As a consequence, Death's narration progressively becomes more intimate, showing how his detachment comes closer to breaking and the barriers he had built to not feel grief collapse.

In the prologue, Death's narration of the bombing remains once again distant. He provides the colour, the event, how it happened, and a brief image of Liesel kneeling and howling. However, his retelling of the episode focusses on the surface, rather than inhabiting the episode and narrating at length the whole of the situation. The identities of the dead are not acknowledged as he is not able to confront the full weight of the losses, and the three images he provides are of "a mountain range of rubble" (23), which will serve as the signpost for the event in Part Ten, Liesel "kneeling" and "howling" (23), and her book.

The colour that permeates the scene in the prologue is red, and while Death's narration is still superficial, it is the most visceral of the recalling of the colours which had supposedly served as distractions. In this proleptic chapter, his coping mechanism fails him completely, reminding him of a sky that "was like soup, boiling and stirring" (22),

an event that would take a long time to dissipate and come to an end. Death does not miss the opportunity to aim a barb to Nazi Germany, referring to the red of the sky as a "home-cooked red" (23). This is the other side of Death, a traumatised narrator who uses jabs that reflect his use of irony as another coping mechanism in order to reconcile with what seems to be unworkable. In this very short and seemingly inoffensive remark, Death is commenting on the contradictory nature of war. By using images reminiscent of warmth and comfort which contrast with the violence and destruction that the bombings bring, Death is appointing the Nazis as those responsible for a Germany that is being destroyed by the decisions made by its own regime. It is through this indirect but pointed argument that Death's traumatic experience appears to be only possible to confront obliquely, through irony and disrupted temporality. The raw intensity of the colour red evokes emotions of passion, be it love, hatred, anger, but most significantly for Death, it carries connotations of blood. Death cannot escape the red of the sky reminding him of a soup, but also of "ruptured veins" (22). The red of the sky has seeped down to the streets, where the red of blood "streamed till it was dried on the road" (22). Death's coping mechanism is now a constant reminder of the bloodstained war and seems to directly link to Death's inability to forget and distance himself from this event.

Retrospectively, Death himself overtly admits that he is unable to unsee what happened in Himmel Street: "Clearly, I see it" (23) and "in hindsight" (23), Death is aware of everything that happened which had led to Liesel's "kneeling" and "howling" (23), but he does not locate Liesel's pain because for him, in the same way, it is too much to bear and to testify to directly. The image the readers get is that of a young girl who is kneeling and howling out of pain for having lost everything she had come to endear, but the readers are still unaware of where this pain is located because Death is not yet able to disclose that Hans, Rosa and Rudy have perished unexpectedly, whilst asleep, because his

traumatised condition does not allow him to fully explain the details at once, rather circling around them to make sense of them, belatedly.

In addition, Death finds it necessary to position himself on the good side of the story. In the same way that he uses typographical inserts to address his readers in an attempt to pre-empt their possible negative thinking, he now addresses his readers trying to get them to understand that he, regardless of being an entity that is usually seen as a menace and a threat, had wanted to intervene and bring comfort to Liesel. “Please, again, I ask you to believe me” (23) is Death’s plea for gaining the reader’s trust. Death is aware of his position being tightly linked with war and destruction, which contradicts his truly traumatised consciousness of being another victim of war for having to collect the souls of the dead and most importantly having to witness instances of human suffering that are unbearable for him. The adverb “again” refers to Death’s persistent need to position himself as a witness who feels for Liesel and humans in general perishing at the hands of war. In the first chapter of the prologue, Death had found it necessary to point out how he was “nothing if not fair” (13), and later in the second chapter he positioned himself as “a result” (16). In this third chapter of the prologue, Death, as a burdened witness whose position in the world is seen to be menacing, once again asks the readers directly to believe his real and human-like emotional response to the events happening, showing how he wanted to say “I’m sorry, child” (23) but how his nature of being a supernatural entity does not allow him to partake in the story: “But that is not allowed” (23).

Death is a burdened witness who wants to intervene, but is unable to, which adds to his burden as a perpetual witness whose testimony remains at the observing stage. Nonetheless, he takes action in the only way he can. He finds Liesel’s book in the middle of all the rubble and is “compelled” (23) to grab it and keep it for the future with the goal of seeing his recollection of the events that happened in Molching from 1939 to 1943 in

line with the experiences Liesel had written in her book. This is, in Death's own words, "the best [he] can do" (24), his only way of taking action and doing justice to all the suffering brought about by war and the Nazis during WWII: collecting and remembering the stories of the leftover humans, "each one an attempt–an immense leap of an attempt–to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it" (24). Death is a narrator who is aware of his own limitations as a witness. He cannot fix Liesel's pain nor bring comfort to her. The only thing he is able to do is watch, which causes him to feel guilt as a witness who he himself can survive. In addition, Death is showing how his faith in humanity is not certain, and needs to go beyond his capabilities, "an immense leap of an attempt" (24), to restore his faith in humanity which has been repeatedly shattered, having witnessed first the death of an innocent young child, secondly an act of kindness amidst the destruction of war by another young boy, thirdly the collapse of a young girl's world that perpetuates her condition as an everlasting leftover survivor.

By the end of the prologue, Death reflects on the three colours that remind him of his encounters with Liesel and, once again, his coping mechanism appears to completely fail him:

> When I recollect her, I see a long list of colours, but it's the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes, I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds towards clarity. (24)

The colours collapse on top of each other, forming in Death's mind the swastika, and Death finally acknowledges that the Nazi regime is to blame for his trauma: "the scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red" (24). Death changes the order of the colours but uses the same motif for each of the colours, which may signal that his recollection of the events and the significance of the colours are deeply ingrained in his traumatised mind. Furthermore, it is notably relevant how the colours are inverted in this final recollection, which hints towards the fragmentation and non-linearity

of a traumatised mind. The same coping mechanism he had established as his “holiday” (15), is now acting as the tool that reminds him of destruction and suffering, a ”septic truth” (24) that describes the impossibility of healing his wound, forcing him to face the events belatedly and compulsively in his conscience, thus subverting the initial purpose of the colours as shields into what now reminds him of the traumatic events.

In Part Ten, as was mentioned before, instead of directly narrating the scene in a single chapter, Death’s inability to approach the bombing directly is reflected in his need to provide another introductory chapter, “a glimpse of the end” (487) he overtly acknowledges to be his way of preparing himself for the telling (487). In this first part of “The End of the World”, Death’s distancing in the prologue is starting to collapse. Most importantly, the colour of the sky is not mentioned; instead, Death informs the readers that “it was raining on Himmel Street when the world ended for Liesel Meminger” (487). In this case, Death does not access his main coping mechanism, which implicitly suggests that his trust in it has been compromised. The colours have reminded him of a “septic truth” (24) he cannot reconcile with, and the distraction they were supposed to provide is no longer reliable for him. Instead, there is a lack of colour, a colourless grey scene that reminds him of “a tap that a child has tried its hardest to turn off but hasn’t quite managed” (487). It could be argued that Death sees himself, and perhaps humanity, in this child. He is powerless as a witness and cannot intervene to stop the bombs from falling or war and destruction as a whole.

“A SMALL, SAD HOPE
No-one wanted to bomb Himmel Street.
No-one would bomb a place named after heaven, would they?
Would they?” (487).

Death’s traumatised condition is further exemplified by a typographical insert titled “A SMALL, SAD HOPE” (487), where again Death uses diminishing adjectives that

contradict the weight of the announcement. He wonders whether someone would actually want to bomb any place, more specifically "a place named after heaven" (487), but it is the repetition of "Would they?" (487) at the end of his initially ironic commentary that shows his troubled mind. He cannot believe humans would inflict this sort of pain and fatal fate on one another, but he knows they would as he already lives in the aftermath and has witnessed many instances in which humans have played against one another. Thus, his reflection is deeply ironic, functioning as a coping mechanism that allows him to distance himself from trauma, but collapsing when he asks himself, introspectively and for a second time, if they actually would.

In this first part, Death reveals the identities of the dead and how they died: "Rudy Steiner slept. Mama and Papa slept. Frau Holtzapfel, Frau Diller. Tommy Muller. All sleeping. All dying" (488). The suddenness and unexpectedness of the bombs had caught them sleeping, unable to react and hide from the bombs. Death reports the deaths in a curt manner and finishes with four words divided in two sentences that mirror each other in rhythm. Sleeping and dying are juxtaposed, a moment of peace whose inevitable fate is death, and the two states are not further elaborated on as Death is only capable of confronting this traumatic scene in this compressed way. His traumatised mind leads him to linger on supposedly irrelevant images such as Hans's silver eyes and Rosa's cardboard lips (489), but these images seem to have stuck to Death and reflect how it is too soon for him to narrate how he found them when he was meant to collect their souls. Interestingly, Death also shows signs of intimacy that link to his crumbling detachment, acknowledging that "each soul was so soft" (489), which further supports the idea that Death, by the end of the story, and knowing how the story ends, has progressively become more incapable of sustaining the distance and detachment which had once helped him cope.

The second part of “The End of The World” constitutes the complete collapse of Death’s attempt at distancing. His position as a burdened witness is no longer at the stage of simply observing, but rather he participates in Liesel’s grief, becoming himself an emotional victim of the atrocities of war. In Part I of “The End of The World”, Death’s objectivity was beginning to crumble but retained some of its force which allowed him to narrate the scene in a more clinical manner. However, in Part II of the chapter, Death’s shift to becoming a participant is visible in the physical proximity he adopts towards the deceased. Thus, the line between being an observing witness and becoming a mourning victim dissolves and his trauma-coping mechanisms collapse.

Where in their first encounter Death was positioned “a little to the right” (17), establishing a distance that allowed him to observe and not become emotionally involved, in Part II of his recounting of their final meeting he is unable to maintain that distance. He goes inside the dead people’s homes and narrates the scene in close proximity to their bedsides. He notices that Tommy Muller’s “face twitches innocently in his sleep” (518), Kristina’s feet “sticking out from under the blanket” (518), which show how Death dwells on small details that reflect the unbearableness of the end of these children. He circles around what he cannot say directly, that these people are about to die, and physically intervenes by running his fingers “through Barbara’s lovely combed hair” (519) and kissing the little ones “goodnight” (519). Death is no longer a narrator keeping a distance and describing the scene as it is. He becomes a witness who can no longer refrain himself from mourning these deaths.

His journey through each of the houses resembles a mind that is dissociating and fragmented. Structurally, his narration in Part II is a fragmented journey from house to house, from the Mullers’ to Frau Holtzapel’s, to Frau Diller’s, to the Steiners’ and finally to the Hubermanns’, with little use of connectors that transition Death’s narration from

one house to the other. What he does is state the name of the family before providing a description of how he found each soul. Additionally, this narration is hierarchical, where Death provides a brief description for the first families, but is more emotionally invested in Rudy, Hans and Rosa, provided that they are the people Liesel loved the most. Along these lines, Death affords each of them an elegiac farewell and mourns their deaths as Liesel would have mourned them.

Death finds Rudy lying in bed with one of his sisters, and before he narrates how he found him dead, Death's emotional state is revealed through the impulsive and involuntary exclamation of "Oh, crucified Christ, Rudy..." (519), as a sign of a crumbling composure that cannot uphold the emotional detachment he had sought to retain in the prologue. Death picks up his soul, and the image of Rudy and his act of kindness circles back in his memory, involuntarily: "The boy from the plane, I thought" (520). Death reflects on his inability to provide comfort to him, "I'm not too great at that sort of comforting thing" (520), in the same way that he could not provide comfort to Liesel when he sees her kneeling and howling. There appears to be a realisation in Death's consciousness, that he is not fit as a supernatural entity that is witnessing the destruction of a world to act in any way that is going to comfort the dead and the leftover survivors, stop the bombs that are being hurled "by humans hiding in the clouds" (22), and save anyone from the massacre brought about by war. His position as a permanent spectator is what now constitutes his burdened condition and perpetuates his sense of powerlessness in the face of inhumane acts, which suggests that a fragmented and proleptic narration may be some of the few available means to do justice to the pain and suffering of people at the hands of the Nazi regime. It is for this reason that Death strives to try "a little harder" (520) in his final meeting with Rudy; he dwells on the scene and remembers Rudy, watching "the contents of his soul" (520). In the previous chapters and episodes,

Death had constantly referred to his lingering on a scene as a mistake, but he now reappoints the lingering to being one of the few ways he can do justice to the dead and to making his presence meaningful beyond his job of collecting souls. He admits that Rudy's death, after Death has witnessed an act of kindness he cannot surpass, particularly challenges him emotionally: "He does something to me, that boy. Every time. It's his only detriment. He steps on my heart. He makes me cry" (520). Death is no longer detached but overtly admits to being vulnerable and becoming a witness who can no longer hide behind the statement of being "a result" (16) and is now a traumatised witness who needs to come to terms with these deaths "with one salty eye and a heavy, deathly heart" (520).

"Finally, the Hubermanns" (520). After having observed where his story and Liesel's intersect, Death has come to know Hans and Rosa from the inside. In the same way he does with Rudy, he mourns and honours them given it is the only possible action he can take. When collecting Hans, Death explains how "His soul sat up. (...) Those kinds of souls always do – the best ones" (520). In contrast to the other souls Death had collected, Hans willingly meets him, and this exchange of soul becomes warranted rather than forced. Death is not collecting his soul any more than he is being given it by Hans himself, who accepts his fate. This farewell is emotionally charged as Death recognises in Hans a value he had been seeking in humans from the beginning: someone who would make their existence worthwhile. He represents someone on whom Liesel could rely, and amidst war, destruction, abandonment and unexpected deaths, the burdened narrator comes to find in Hans some of the faith in humanity he had been seeking all along. Along the same lines, Death finds it imperative to testify to Rosa's death in light of her true character. On the surface, Rosa had been portrayed as a harsh woman who called everyone a *Saukerl* or *Saumensch*. However, Death advocates for her and renders her as who she really was:

> Make no mistake, the woman had a heart. She had a bigger one than people would think. (...) She was a Jew-feeder without a question in the world on a man's first night in Molching. And she was an arm-reacher, deep into a mattress to deliver a sketch book to a teenage girl. (521)

Once again, Death is doing the only possible act of kindness he can do as a witness: changing the surface impression the readers might have retained from her actions. He is compelled to provide a true testimony of her character so that she is remembered in a good light. She is caught "mid-snore" (521) and thinks that she would have called him a *Saukerl* (521) for having woken her up, and this recollection of her character, of her habitual actions, exemplifies a narrator who has become intimately involved with the characters who had taken care of Liesel.

By the end of the chapter, Death narrates Liesel's encounter with the bodies of Hans, Rosa and Rudy, and where in Part I of the chapter he had still maintained some emotional distance from her suffering, the affectionate boundary collapses and Death's narration becomes more introspective as he witnesses the most devastating episode in the novel. After having collected the souls of her most beloved, Death has to witness Liesel's reaction to finding them dead. This is a grief he cannot reconcile with nor alleviate. He watches as she kisses Rudy goodbye, the longed-for kiss that is foreshadowed in Part One: "'One day, Liesel' he said, 'you'll be dying to kiss me" (60). He observes how "the words were stapled to her" (525) when she finds Hans and Rosa, how she "rocks back and forth" (526) when she realises she is left behind, once again. Death indirectly expresses his inability to cope with the traumatic scene saying that what caught his attention was the fact that Liesel was not wearing her shoes and acknowledges that "Perhaps I was trying to avoid her face, for the book thief was truly an irretrievable mess" (525), showing how he cannot face and enter Liesel's grief without grieving himself, being self-aware of dissociating in order to detach himself from her pain. Thus, this moment constitutes the end of Death's attempt at putting a barrier between himself and

Liesel's suffering throughout the story and drives him to enact the only possible action he can take to bear witness to her pain: telling her story. Conditioned by the circularity of his heart, past, present and future appear to have become one and the same, forcing the burdened narrator to return to the traumatising episodes while not making space for resolution. Death's compulsive retrieval of Liesel's book seems to enact Laub's imperative to tell (Laub 79) and testimony to human suffering and kindness, her book becoming Death's only means of preserving the stories of the leftover survivors.

Having followed this thread across the three chapters, an arc has been identified in Death's attempt at making sense of human nature. First, the mediation. Then, the collapse. But he tried. Death's proleptic narration has suggested a gradual deterioration of his trauma-coping mechanisms, thus emerging as a symptom of a traumatised consciousness whose experiencer remains, after all, "haunted by humans" (538).

4. Conclusions

"Again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps it's to soften the blow for later, or to better prepare *myself* for the telling" (487). Death's own reflection suggests a narrator who appears to be cognizant of the condition this dissertation has attempted to bring forth. In this dissertation it was contended that Death's proleptic narration, beyond being a tool which simultaneously undermines suspense and generates tension, could be likewise read as the involuntary expression of a circular heart's trauma. The analytical section focussed on the proleptic announcements in the prologue and compared them with the later narration of the events. In the three different chapters, a progressive collapse of Death's trauma-coping mechanisms was traced to challenge the assumption that prolepsis served

as a mere formal device and to posit that it was possibly one of the few ways Death could confront those events and be able to tell them in light of his traumatised consciousness.

Chapter One concerned itself with the establishment of those mechanisms and how they were showing initial signs of malfunction, evaluating Death's use of colours and distancing methods, and provided instances of prolepsis being used as a defence for what he could not confront directly. Chapter Two provided evidence of those mechanisms being under strain, where the pilot's death and Rudy's compassion formed the paradox Death could not reconcile. Chapter Three foregrounded their collapse, where the bombing of Himmel Street and the end of Liesel's world resulted in the failure of the colours and in the transformation of Death from a detached observer to a mourning participant. Thus, this gradual collapse suggests that prolepsis may not only be a formal device but also a formal expression of Death's trauma, as the narration of the three events parallels the deterioration of his coping mechanisms. What has come up as an important finding is that the three-part progression echoes Caruth's belatedness. Each event is outlined first and is later developed in full, from Death's past but from the reader's future. Therefore, it can be argued that the book's structure appears to behave in the same way as trauma.

By bridging the gap between narratology and trauma theory, this project has several consequences for the reading of the text. Death, as a witness who cannot intervene, resorts to storytelling as the only available action he can take to do justice to the victims of war and to restore his faith in humanity. Inasmuch as *The Book Thief* is widely considered an anti-war, anti-Nazi story, Zusak's choice of narrator provides, as he desired, an original contribution to Holocaust literature. As conventionally war's best friend, Death seemingly betrays his role as the Führer's most "loyal" (480) servant and aligns with the victims and pointedly the most vulnerable among them: children. Death's contribution to the preservation of these stories of survival is in itself a political statement on the author's

part. The collective memory of all those who suffered is remembered by its most omnipresent witness. This is why I believe Death is the perfect narrator for such a story: in spite of his cursed and haunted circular heart, he will not give up on humanity.

"Come with me and I'll tell you a story.
I'll show you something" (532).

5. Further Research

The following are suggested lines of research that I find compelling and which link in some way or another with my project, but which I was not able to pursue for constraints of length and divergence from my central argument.

Prolepsis beyond the prologue. This dissertation analysed the events outlined in the prologue and the subsequent narration of them in the main narrative. Nonetheless, the proleptic announcements are scattered throughout, and it would be interesting to survey those to see if they enact the same traumatic response.

Narrative and storytelling as a coping mechanism. In a blog post, Dr Susan Karpasitis analyses how narratives function as the trauma-coping mechanisms for Liesel Meminger, Max Vanderburg, and the inhabitants of Himmel Street. This assessment could be further developed positioning Death's storytelling as another strategy of survival amidst traumatic experiences.

Personification. Another compelling line of research is Death's personification of inanimate objects. He gives life to trees and sirens and observes the death of a plane. A close assessment of those personification instances would provide a new lens to Death's trauma. As a perpetual survivor and witness, Death may envy not only a human's linear heart but might also extend this envy to inanimate objects that also have "the good sense to die" (481).

Reader-response analysis of prolepsis. Initially, the idea of analysing prolepsis in *The Book Thief* had to do with the relationship between these advanced announcements and how they influenced the reader's attachment to the characters. A future possible line of investigation would focus on the function of prolepsis as advancing the death of certain characters to generate both tension and a bond that would intensify the grief after their passing.

Challenging Metanarratives. Provided that Whitehead suggests that trauma fiction draws from postmodernism (Whitehead 82), it would be interesting to regard Zusak's work as a counter WWII narrative and assess at length whether Death's trauma-driven proleptic narration challenges the official accounts of the Holocaust.

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