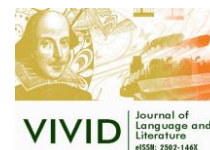




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Literature

# The Main Character's Loss, Emptiness and Object of Desire in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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### A B S T R A C T

This thesis shows the result of the analysis toward Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* by using psychological approach. The focus of this research is Liesel Meminger's personality as the main character which is assumed suffers from trauma and anxiety after losing the important people in her life. This research uses psychoanalytical theory by Lacan about human's real, symbolic and imaginary; and also theory of anxiety by Freud. This research concludes that Liesel indeed suffers from trauma and anxiety which is shown by some symptoms found in her that caused by the loss of her parents and brother at young age. This loss has created a situation as if Liesel felt empty and she unconsciously longs to fulfill that emptiness. A book she had stolen in her brother funeral gives significant contribution toward Liesel's desire in symbolic order to fulfill her lack and emptiness, but the book has also caused her to get trapped in her imaginary order until in the end, Liesel could finally find self-realization and heal from her trauma.

## INTRODUCTION

Every living creature, especially us as human beings, might have experienced such traumatic event once in our life. A traumatic event is an "incident that causes physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological harm. The person experiencing the distressing event may feel threatened, anxious, or frightened as a result [1]. Tyson explains that one might experience the trauma of sudden death, being separated from the loved ones, losing sibling or family, and later after the event occurs, the person that face the trauma will experience the trauma or crisis of being flooded by all the guilt, denial and conflict that the person has been repressed concerning with that event [2].

A traumatic event and the after effect of the experience itself are also found in *The Book Thief*, a novel written by Markus Zusak. As Burakova says that after a closer reading, this book could not only be classified as a young adult' fiction, but it is more like a textbook example of a trauma narrative [3]. This novel sets in Germany during the world war. Unlike his other novels which are inspired by his own life and experience, *The Book Thief* is drawn from the experience of Zusak's parents who are growing up in Germany and Austria during the war.

Liesel Meminger, the main character in *The Book Thief*, sees her little brother dies before her eyes on her way to meet her foster parents, Liesel is also separated from her biological mother and never meet her father since she was little and no one tells her the reason until later, she figures it out herself. Liesel always has nightmare since the very first day she lives with her foster parents, she seems to live a normal life for the girl at her age, but whenever she is upset or anxious, she always have the urge to conduct a book thievery. This strange impulse of stealing book begins in her brother's funeral after she has done it once and after that, whenever she gets caught in an unpleasant moment, she will steal the book.

The writer is interested in exploring the motives behind Liesel Meminger's action to steal multiple books. The writer assumes that it has something to do with the emptiness she feels after the loss of her beloved ones, the writer believes that the book itself is used as her object to fulfill what she might think has lost from her whether she realizes it or not. Hence, the writer will conduct a research under the title of: The Main Character's Loss, Emptiness and Object of Desire in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*.

## METHODS

In conducting this research, the writer evaluates the novel based on Abram's idea about objective criticism which says that it describes the literary product as autonomous object, or else as a world-in-itself, which is to be contemplated as its own end, and to be analyzed and judged solely by "intrinsic" criteria such as its complexity, coherence, equilibrium, integrity and the interrelation of its component elements [4]. Additionally, there are three steps that need to be followed in evaluating a literary work. The first step is collecting the data. In collecting the data, the writer uses library research, there are two kinds of data that is used; the primary data is taken from the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak [5] itself and the secondary data is taken by collecting some information from scholarly articles or essays and theory books related to the object of this research.

The second step is analyzing the data. The method of analyzing data is descriptive analysis. The writer uses psychoanalytical theory by Lacan about real, imaginary and symbolic order; and also theory of anxiety by Freud. The analysis is begun by analyzing the intrinsic element, that is the plot of the story itself and then relating the condition and situation which occur along the story plot to the main character, Liesel Meminger and then the analysis will be continued by discovering what kind of psychological problem that can be found in the character, the discovery will be led by the psychoanalytical theory itself. Then the writer will see what are the causes and symptoms of Liesel Meminger's anxiety, the role of book thievery to her emptiness and the book itself as her object of desire.

The last step is presenting the result of the analysis. The result of the analysis will bear several points since the research itself is a qualitative research. According to Babbie [5], qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numeral data, this type of research refers to the meanings, concepts definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things.ssss

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Main Character's Loss, Emptiness And Object Of Desire In Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief***

#### **The Main Character's Loss and Emptiness**

Freud argues that anxiety is a reaction to a traumatic situation, an experience of helplessness in the face of an accumulation of excitation that cannot be discarded. Freud also mentions that traumatic situations are precipitated by situation of danger such as birth, lost of the mother as object, and loss of the object's love. In Liesel's case, she has lost most important people in her life; her father, mother and brother. The sudden loss of her brother because of the death and the abandonment of her mother are the kinds of loss that attack her the most.

Liesel have experienced the loss of her father long before she loses her mother and brother. It happened when she was still very young that she could not remember his look any longer. When Liesel loses her mother, she has already been warned, though she is not given the clear explanation for why she leaves. What Liesel knows about her mother's condition is just her sickness, she has been ill for a while, but as for the little girl, abandonment is still abandonment. It makes Liesel feels like she is not loved and it leaves her in pain, even when she has been saved with her new family.

Liesel losses her brother in a train on their way to meet their foster parents. Her mother is about to leave and she already knows it, but her brother, the only person she hope will stay with her, leaves without warning, without giving sign that he is going to leave. Liesel has surprised herself upon seeing his brother dies before her eyes. She cannot believe on what she sees and it has hurt her heart and caused her to be mentally damaged.

According to Smith there are some symptoms of traumatic stress in children around the age of 6 to 11 which are found by the writer similar to Liesel's condition after witnessing the death of her brother and being abandoned by her mother. The first one is having nightmare or other sleep problems. Liesel keeps on having nightmare when she falls asleep, as it is told in the novel that "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 sheet" [7]. Repeating the event when the death occurs in her dream, waking up in the middle of her dream and then crying after that, the writer assumes is the action of re-experiencing the traumatic events that has caused Liesel to feel anxious and stress.

The second symptom of traumatic stress in children that can be found in Liesel is developing unfounded fears. On the way to meet her new family after the loss, Liesel is described as being in the state of anxiousness. Liesel shows the signs of uneasiness, the feeling of not wanting to meet her new family and the fact that she is being anxious, show that Liesel is in fear because of nothing in particular, she fears the thing that is not even there, or yet to come.

Third, children with traumatic stress feel depressed, emotionally numb, or guilt over what happened. For many people, grieving after the loss manifests itself primarily as depression. Depression, which is a normal reaction to a loss, can be the most difficult and long-lasting phase of grieving. Depressed people feel tired, isolated, hopeless, helpless, lonely, and sad. The sign of depression could be seen in Liesel when she frequently remembers her dead brother. Not only in her dream, during the day, when Liesel is wide awake, she will miss her brother and mother, and she will cry.

The last sign of children with traumatic stress found in Liesel is that her state of becoming irritable, disruptive and angry. It is described in some part of the novel when Liesel's anger becomes easily triggered and after that she will recall the memory of the loss and all the bad things that happen to her over and over. Liesel shows another disruptive behavior and anger during the reading test in her classroom, Liesel reads aloud *The Grave Digger's Handbook* she has memorized in front of the class instead of reading what is written in the book she has randomly picked. Liesel gets another punishment and when the boys at her class mock her, Liesel beats them, she becomes very aggressive and almost kills one of them.

The loss because of death and abandonment in her young age, has caused Liesel to suffer from trauma and anxiety, this experience of loss has made Liesel feels like she is alone and not loved, and it creates a void inside herself. The longing has made Liesel to be in the state of emptiness that needs to be fulfilled.

When Liesel thinks of her mother and brother, she cannot help but feels alone, his state of aloneness is repeated more than once in the novel; "nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone" (32), "At those times, in the enormous mileage of sleep, she had never felt so completely alone" (39). When Liesel keeps thinking that she feels alone, she has shown that she is lonely and in the state of longing for her mother and brother, as Lamia says that "when we have a need and desire to be interpersonally connected and recognize that it is missing, we might become wrapped in emotion of loneliness, and loneliness can make you feel empty and a sense of longing for someone".

The lack of love or the feeling that she is not love, as what the writer believes as another causes of Liesel's emptiness, is also agreed by Paul as she says that "there is only one cause of inner emptiness: a lack of love, but it is not the lack of someone else's love that cause you emptiness, inner emptiness is caused by self abandonment, by not loving yourself". Losing her closest persons in her early life has made Liesel feels like she is not worth loving, Liesel might have gained a new family after losing her mother and brother, the feeling of being saved after she meets her foster parents is the sign for her that she will also be loved, but since she is still nine years old, it takes time for Liesel to realize that what she really need to fulfill her emptiness and get rid of her anxiety is accepting what has happened to her and starting to find her true self instead.

### **Book as the Object of Desire**

Liesel's state after the loss, as what the writer believes to be the state of her emptiness, is the gateway of her symbolic order. Lacan defines the symbolic order as the collection of codes and

distinctions embodied in language and culture, and he insists that human subjectivity can be sustained only within the limits of this framework [8]. Liesel, within her symbolic realm, has formed her ego into a German girl who lives in Germany during Hitler's reign, because that is what she is taught to be in order to be part of her society.

The society she lives in, is a society where the book, perhaps some books in particular, is considered forbidden. Although Liesel is a German too, her behavior and passion is quite different from the regular Germans, she likes the book and the torrent of words contained in it, and of course, she likes reading.

Liesel does not deliberately differ herself with the other Germans, her unconsciousness demands her to do so, just as what Lacan has explained that the unconscious is not a biologically determined realm of libidinal drives; rather, it is formed in tandem with the formation of the ego. It is the remainder of the ego's subjection to the Symbolic. Thus the unconscious reveals the presence of the subject within the construct of the self and reveals the fact that we as subjects are always more than our social selves allow [9].

Liesel has made the book and the words as something precious to her which then leads her to like reading as well, as it is stated in one part of the novel that says "when she came to write the story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything" (30). Based on Lacan theory, the book could be positioned as her object *petit a*, it refers to anything that put us in touch with our repressed desire to the loss object. It is clear that what has been lost from Liesel is her mother and brother, and the book as the first thing she possess after the loss, creates such link to them, as it is told in the novel that says "The point is, it didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important. 1. The last time she saw her brother. 2. The last time she saw her mother" (38).

The object *petit a* represents an unconscious clinging to an impossible desire that cannot be shared or satisfied, although the child can elaborate a fantasy of its lost link to the mother. More accurately, the lack of any representation for this primal loss stimulates a fantasy of absolute love that is the true cause of desire [8]. In Liesel's case, she has lost her mother because of abandonment. She leaves Liesel to a new family which created the feeling that she is not loved by the one who should have loved her the most. Her brother's death has made everything worst, they should have been together to come to a new family, but he does not make it.

### **Drifting Back to Imaginary Order by Stealing**

Liesel might have thrown herself into reading and live her life as a German in her symbolic order, however, just as Lacan points out, the mirror stage is not limited to early childhood, but the permanent representative of the main structural contradictions of the subject who is always captured by her own image [10]. So that, we can still figure out Liesel's psychological state of "mirror stage", or of the imaginary, in which Liesel is drifting toward love and reunion with the lost object through fantasy.

At the beginning of the story, Liesel has already on the way to meet her new family and being left by her biological mother and brother. Liesel's father is long gone and she could not remember anything about him except the words "communist" he had been labeled with. When

she comes to live with the new family and face the new life, Liesel could manage it pretty well, she gets the love from her new parents, and the people around her. Liesel has lived in her symbolic world, a realm which is thought “to subordinate and repress the pre-symbolic imaginary” [10]. Liesel could manage to calm her trauma for the loss by replacing it with the love of the people around her.

However, all this abruptly change when Liesel attends the book burning to celebrate Hitler’s birthday. She figures out that the cause of all the loss and misery she has experienced at her young age is Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany. Liesel learns that Nazi is against the communist and that is why her father is taken away, her family is left in poverty which cause her brother’s death and her mother’s abandonment. At this moment, Liesel is covered up in rage and being reminded again to the loss she has experienced. This sudden realization triggers Liesel to steal the book from the book burning. Liesel’s action of stealing book, the writer believes, serves a mirror that drifts her back into the imaginary world as she is being reminded again about the loss, Liesel could feel that the lack and the void in her still exist. By stealing the book which the writer has explained before positioned as Liesel’s object *petit a* or the object as the replacement for what has been lost, Liesel perceives herself reunite with her loss object and feeling as a whole, just as the baby tend to imagine herself as a whole in the mirror.

According to Lacan’s concept of mirror stage, Liesel’s demand for the completeness of self can never be satisfied, because that lack, or absence, the sense of “otherness”, is the condition for the baby becoming a self/subject, a functioning cultural being [10]. In other words, Liesel’s concept of complete self in the mirror, known in psychoanalytic terminology as an “ideal ego” just relies on her misidentification with this image of the other, and in Liesel’s case, she misidentify the action of stealing the book as the action for taking back her “other” object that can fulfill her demand for what has been lost. Her demand for the love of her loss object and the satisfaction she feels when she steals the book is just an illusion or fantasy.

### **Realization as Self-Acceptance**

It is told at the end of the story that Liesel could finally deal with her anxiety and emptiness, she also gives up on stealing after she finds realization and return to the symbolic world. But before it happens, she kept on stealing book as her way to escape from the feeling of lack and loss. Liesel experienced more and more loss in her life, she loses Max, a Jew who takes shelter in her basement, her foster father, is sent away for war and many more.

A realization comes to Liesel when one day, she visits Ilsa Herman’s library. She simply just sits and sees the book she has taken from the book shelf, until she decides to tear the pages from that book. Liesel done this thing after recalling the loss and the death she has witnessed all her life. Liesel examination about the world, has made her realize that all the losses are the part of her reality and such loss will keep happening until the rest of her life. Through this realization, Liesel unconsciously heals herself and her emptiness. Liesel’s action of tearing the pages from the book, and giving up on stealing, the writer believes, is the symbol of acceptance for her to come back to her symbolic world, because by stop stealing, Liesel has stopped drifting herself back to her imaginary and stop fantasizing herself reunite with her lost object, that is her family. Self-acceptance can be a great aid to self-improvement as it allows us to take a compassionate attitude toward ourselves when we face inevitable set-backs on our journey of personal

development. Liesel has gained her self-acceptance through accepting all the loss that has happened and start to move on with her life.

## CONCLUSION

After reading and analyzing *The Book Thief*, the writer concludes that this novel is not merely a story about a young girl who likes to read and steal book during the era of Nazi Germany, but this novel is also a story about a young girl who tries to deal with her life after the loss she has experienced at her young age. The analysis brings two major conclusions.

The first conclusion is that Liesel Meminger suffers from traumatic stress and anxiety after witnessing her own brother's death and being abandoned by her own mother. It is depicted through the symptoms of children with traumatic stress that fit to explain Liesel's condition. Children with traumatic stress will show these particular signs: they will be having nightmare or other sleep problems; they will be developing unfounded fears; they will feel depressed, emotionally numb, or guilt over what happened; and the last sign of children with traumatic stress is that they will be in a state of becoming irritable, disruptive and angry.

The second conclusion, the writer finds out that the loss which is experienced by Liesel, has also caused her to feel empty, for the loss includes the most important people in her life, which is her family. This loss and emptiness then become the gateway for Liesel to enter her symbolic order, an order where she forms her ego and where she finds a book as her object petit *a*, a replacement for her loss object. This book then leads Liesel to be able to read and write and makes the book as her passion for the fulfillment in her symbolic. This book is also a tool for Liesel to drift back to her imaginary order whenever the reality struck her and reminds her to the loss. By stealing the book, Liesel fantasies herself reunite with the loss object and feels like she is being a complete self again. Liesel keeps on stealing until one day, realization comes to her that the loss is a part of her reality and it will keep happening for the rest of her life.

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