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Teaching Unit

The Book Thief

by Markus Zusak

Written by Douglas Grudzina

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain how the omniscient narrator affects readers' understanding of characters and events.
2. trace the development and analyze the contribution of the following symbols and motifs to the novel's overall impact:
 - accordion
 - books and words
 - colors
 - fire
 - stealing
 - weather
3. analyze Zusak's use of figurative language.
4. analyze the significance of the novel within the context of German history and politics.
5. trace the maturation of the novel's protagonist.
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. offer a close reading of *The Book Thief* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Book Thief is set in Nazi Germany. It opens in 1939, before the start of World War II, and follows the characters' lives during the first few years of the war. While the Holocaust and particular significant battles of World War II remain an underlying presence, the novel primarily focuses on how residents of a small German town were affected by Hitler's rule.

Communists and the Reichstag Fire

Liesel Meminger's biological mother and father have ties to Communism. After World War I, the German Communist Party (KPD) was one of the major threats to the Nazi Party, in terms of which group would gain national power. The KPD appealed to the working class and hoped that the unemployed would blame business leaders and supporters of capitalism for the depressed German economy and the stock market crash of 1929. Between 1928 and 1932, membership in the KPD more than doubled to a quarter million, the KPD received an increasing number of votes in Parliamentary elections, and Communists became a visible political presence. However, the Nazi Party made even greater political gains during these years by giving jobless Germans a sense of national pride and a feeling of superiority over other groups, especially Jews.

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler was elected to the office of Chancellor. At this time, the Chancellor had limited power and served a function similar to the chairperson of a federal committee. Within weeks of his election, however, Hitler began the steps that would result in his holding nearly absolute power in the German Republic. On February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building—the German Parliament building—was set on fire. The arson was attributed to Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch Communist.

This apparent Communist attack on the lawfully elected German government provided Hitler with an opportunity. Preying on the fears of the German people, Hitler urged the immediate imposition of the *Reichstag Fire Decree* (officially called the *Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State*). This decree suspended many of the German citizens' liberties, including

- protection against unlawful imprisonment (habeas corpus);
- freedom of expression, including the freedom of the press;
- freedom of association and the right to peaceably assemble and organize;
- protection against violation of privacy (especially of postal, telegraph and telephone communications.);
- protection against unwarranted and unreasonable searches and seizures.

Within days of the decree's issue, thousands of KPD leaders were imprisoned—a reported 10,000 in all.

MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND METAFICTION

Those who had witnessed World War I, which had been the world's bloodiest conflict, accepted as obvious that previous modes of thought and expression had failed. Humanity was clearly not making the steady moral progress celebrated in the poetry and fiction of the nineteenth century. Industrialization was supposed to improve human life, but many more suffered in factories and lived in poverty than benefited from the material goods produced in the factories. The manufacturing machines of the nineteenth century had become the war machines of the twentieth. Previously unheard of numbers of men were conscripted to fight in their nations' militaries, and, consequently, many more died.

The extreme disillusionment that followed the First World War forced thinkers and artists to reevaluate their most basic assumptions about life, humanity, society, and culture. Surrealism began to replace Realism in art and literature. The actions and conflicts of individuals suddenly appeared trivial in the face of trench warfare and the suffering caused by mustard gas.

To explore their new perception, modernists sought no longer to merely *present* reality as the writer perceived it, but to find ways to *represent* a deeper, truer reality. Modernist writers experimented with conventional forms, toying with traditional narrative points of view, linear and chronological plotlines, etc., in order to encourage readers to work to make meaning out of what they read and to question their own perspectives.

Common modernist techniques included

- stream-of-consciousness;
- multiple and shifting narrative points of view,
- unreliable narrators and the possibility that the story as told may not be factually accurate,
- introspection and self-reflection,
- a focus on internal experience and conflict,
- explorations of dreams and delusions,
- nonlinear plotlines,
- experimenting with language: word choice, sentence structure, conventions of grammar and mechanics.

Postmodernism emerged after World War II and grew especially popular during the social and political unrest of the 1960s. While modernism can be credited with setting the stage for postmodern thought, the postmodern esthetic either directly refutes modernist views or advances the view to new extremes.

- In the aftermath of World War II, movements around the world—wars and skirmishes to liberate colonized third-world nations, women's liberation and minority rights movements—exposed myriad voices and perspectives previously unrecognized by the West.
- The resulting social and cultural pluralism shattered traditional notions of social, national, and ethnic unity.

Practice Free-Response Items

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 1

Read the passage from “Arrival on Himmel Street” in Part One of Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* beginning, “One eye open” and ending, “the girl clinging now to her side.” Write an essay in which you analyze how the author’s syntax and figurative language indicate the characters’ emotions.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 2

Read the chapter “Dominoes and Darkness” in Part Eight in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. Then, in a well-organized essay, explain how the details of Rudy’s playing with dominoes parallel the conversation in the kitchen and foreshadow Rudy’s ultimate fate.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 3

Read the chapter “The Bread Eaters” from Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* and the passage from the chapter “The Hidden Sketchbook” that begins, “She made her way through” and ends, “She dreamed of the tree.” Then, explain how the events in the two passages parallel one another. Consider how Liesel’s and Rudy’s actions exemplify Max’s story, *The Word Shaker*.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 4

Authors make careful, conscious choices when deciding the point of view from which to tell a story because those choices directly affect how the reader perceives the characters, the plot, the setting, and other aspects of the novel.

In a well-organized essay, evaluate Markus Zusak’s choice of Death as a narrator in *The Book Thief* and explain the effects on the novel as a whole.

The Book Thief

PROLOGUE

a mountain range of rubble

DEATH AND CHOCOLATE
BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE
THE ECLIPSE
THE FLAG

1. What does a reader normally expect to find in the prologue of a novel? To what extent does this prologue meet or challenge those expectations?

2. What effect does Zusak achieve by having the narrator insist, “I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable”?

3. What distinction does the narrator suggest by claiming, “Nice has nothing to do with me”? What might be the significance of such a distinction?

4. How does Zusak create the impression of Death being amiable, agreeable, and affable as he claims to be?

THE ARYAN SHOPKEEPER
THE STRUGGLER, CONTINUED
TRICKSTERS
THE STRUGGLER, CONCLUDED

1. How does Zusak make it clear, without explicitly revealing, what is going on in the highlighted “Conversation Between Rudy and Liesel”?

2. Explain the irony in the narrator’s assertion: “The day had been a great one, and Nazi Germany was a wondrous place.”

3. What is the intended tone of the narrator’s reflection at the end of “The Struggler, Continued,” “Of all the things to save him”? Why?

4. Explain how Arthur Berg’s statement “We might be criminals, but we’re not totally immoral” is actually *not* ironic.

PART SEVEN

the complete dudon dictionary and thesaurus

CHAMPAGNE AND ACCORDIONS

THE TRILOGY

THE SOUND OF SIRENS

THE SKY STEALER

FRAU HOLTZAPFEL'S OFFER

1. What is the Duden? What is the significance of this gift?

2. What role do painting and color play in “Champagne and Accordions”? And how do these motifs serve to characterize Hans Hubermann?

3. What earlier image does the blinding sun echo? What is its significance in this scene?
