

Stealing as an Act of Protest in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief

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Abstract

Every individual has one's own way of dealing with their grief. Coping with grief, loss of someone or something triggers many emotions in a person. Some people directly deal with their cause of grief and cope with it and many resort to defense mechanisms in order to avoid the trauma. Liesel Meminger of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* resorts to stealing books as her defense mechanism. Set in the wartime Germany, Liesel Meminger deals with her grief – her brother's death, her mother's separation, her problematic relationship with Max Vandenburg and Ilsa Hermann and finally the War and Politics – by stealing books. Stealing becomes an act of empowerment to her. The aim of this paper is to apply Freudian displacement concept to Liesel's acts of stealing.

Keywords: Liesel Meminger, Stealing, Displacement.

INTRODUCTION

Markus Zusak is an Australian writer with ethnic roots from Australia and Germany. *The Book Thief* (2005), *The Messenger* (2002) are his critically acclaimed novels. *The Messenger* bagged many prestigious awards when it was published. *The Book Thief* was translated into many languages and a movie was also made on the novel. *The Book Thief* has Death as its narrator and it tells the story of Liesel Meminger, the book thief, in wartime Germany. Liesel steals books as kind of response whenever she is upset or anxious. This can be seen as a sort of defense mechanism to prevent any serious harm. In this paper Liesel's stealing is analysed through the lens of displacement theory, a type of Freudian defense mechanism.

Defense Mechanisms were introduced by Sigmund Freud in *The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence* (1894). The tripartite structure of human kind – id, ego and superego – enables a person to function in a socially accepted way. If the id or the ego of a person is conflicted, weakened or excited, there is a sense of

abnormality in a person's actions and results in neurosis or any other psychological disorders. Freud's book *The Ego and the Id* (1923) explains the relationship between the id and the ego a human psyche. Id is based on pleasure principle and ego on reality principle. Ego manifests or suppresses the desires of id in a way that is acceptable in the society. This is the primary function of the ego component of a human psyche. When the ego is conflicted, the ego resorts to certain mechanisms, through which the conflict in a human's psyche is treated and normalised. Freud called these as "defense mechanisms" as these mechanisms defend ego from getting bruised or weakened.

Freud has listed defense mechanisms that are performed by a human's psyche in the face of a conflict. Some of the defense mechanisms are regression, repression, isolation, projection, reaction formation, undoing, introjections, reversal, sublimation, displacement. Repression is the suppression of the unacceptable desires of id. Projection is when the repressed desires are projected towards others. Emotions are transferred in displacement. Rationalization

involves justifying one's actions to the society. In reaction formation, one expresses emotions that are completely opposite to what he/she feels. Sublimation involves animalistic desires converted into acceptable social actions. Regression occurs when one goes back to their previous stage because of their inability to cope up with their ego. Many psychoanalysts like Anna Freud, George Vaillant, Roy Baumeister have emphasized the role of defense mechanisms in their works. Displacement is one of the most common defense mechanisms that are used by human in their daily lives.

The first time Liesel steals a book is when her dead brother is buried in the snow in a place enroute to Munich. The year is 1939 and Liesel is nine years old. Liesel travels in a train with her mother and brother towards Munich. Her mother has made an arrangement for them to be adopted into a foster home. Werner is the name of her younger brother and his health is poor. Her brother coughs once and dies immediately. Liesel observes the flat chest of her brother and realizes what has happened: "For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. Es stimmt nicht. This isn't happening. This isn't happening. And the shaking" (Zusak 29). Her mother is also shaken but she comes to reality. When the guards bury her brother, Liesel has still not recovered from her shock.

Liesel spots a book amidst the snow and she promptly hides it inside her jacket. She is not good in reading and thus she observes the title on the book.

By the end of the novel, Liesel has ten books with her. Six out of them were stolen. Himmel Street – Munich. Hans and Rosa Hubermann adopt Liesel. Her birthmother Paula leaves her at the station and leaves. Liesel does not see her mother again in her life. Her brother and her mother haunt her and she wets her bed every night. The Gravedigger's Handbook is the first book she steals. She becomes so attached to the book despite not knowing how to read it. She feels pulled towards the book because it connects her with her family.

THE BOOK'S MEANING

1. The last time she saw her brother.
2. The last time she saw her mother. (Zusak 45)

Whenever she is disturbed by her dreams, she resorts to read the book she has stolen. "On some level, perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right" (Zusak 77). A clear example of Freudian displacement is seen here. Liesel is anxious when she thinks of her brother. Her brother's death has left an emptiness that needs Liesel's participation to be filled. Hence she displaces this anxiousness to the book which she attempts to read. Liesel cannot explain her dire need to read the book. All she believes is that her nightmares would be less threatening if she reads the book. When Hans Hubermann comes to know of this, he helps her in reading it. Though he clearly knows that Liesel has stolen the book, he gives no indication of his disapproval towards her stealing. Hans finishes reading the book through a night and it was the only time Liesel talks about her brother to him. She tells him that his name was Werner. This becomes the starting point of her stealing career and continues till the very end of the novel.

The next book is *The Shoulder Shrug*. Just before this act, Liesel has come to know more about her birth parents. Her father was a "Kommunisten" (119), a Communist and she has no remembrance of seeing him. Her mother decided to leave Liesel and her brother because of this as she was also considered a Communist. She also learns about the German's hatred for the Jews. The German soldiers decided to celebrate Hitler's birthday by burning everything that is written against him. They also extended the rules to Jewish shops and synagogues. Liesel is already agitated by the details of her birth parents and accompanies Hans to watch the burning. She gets anxious and loses her control. At that instant she sees a book burning in the nearby fire. It is a blue book and has a picture of cuckoo under its title. Ilsa Hermann, the wife of the Mayor, has seen Liesel during the act but she tells nothing. Though Liesel is certain that

Ilsa Hermann would confront her about the stealing, Ilsa does not show any sign of it. Ilsa always had a cold reserve look when Liesel comes to collect and deliver the washing. Thus Liesel continues reading her second treasure. She reads this book after her nightmare. The basement became her reading room and the preserver of her nightmares.

When Ilsa Hermann terminates the service of Rosa Hubermann, Liesel loses her patience. She wound Ilsa by talking about her dead son and promises herself that she would never see Ilsa again. She bursts out at her: ““You think you’re the only one?”” (Zusak 272) - again a reference to Werner, as she also lost a person in her life. In this instance, Liesel anger is displaced towards Ilsa unknowingly. She feels that Ilsa’s suffering is not greater than her own suffering. But when Rudy with his idea of stealing approaches Liesel, she cannot control herself. Previously, Ilsa Hermann has allowed Liesel to read in her home library. But after Liesel’s burst out, Ilsa does not make an attempt to reconnect with Liesel. Liesel deprived of new books and her haunting nightmares, decides to steal one from Ilsa’s library. The Whistler is the book Liesel steals next. Liesel does not accept the book when Ilsa gives her. “Stealing it, on the other hand, seemed a little more acceptable.” (Zusak 297).

The Hubermanns offer sanctuary to a Jew named Max Vandenburg. Liesel grows close with him and reads with him. Max tells his story and his struggles – he has left his family to die and has come to the Hubermanns alone. The guilt suffocates him and he shares this with Liesel. Liesel, already tormented by her dreams, now dreams of Max’s dreams. This makes her to strike again at Ilsa’s library. This time it is a red book with the title *The Dream Carrier*. The title brings all those she has lost in front of her.

Liesel steals her next book soon after *The Dream Carrier*. She is triggered when she watches the parade of Jews who are treated like animals. So as a response, she steals *A Song in the Dark* (Zusak 374) from Ilsa’s library.

The last book Liesel steals is *The Last Human Stranger*. This is soon after Max’s departure from the Hubermann household. As a result of helping a Jew during a parade, Liesel’s father is sent to army to fight in the war. Liesel is disheartened. Her nightmares increase and she soon finds herself in a compulsion to steal a book. She creeps up to Ilsa’s library. *The Last Human Stranger* is the final book she steals. It beckons to her in the dark and with a heavy finality she steals it.

Finally, Himmel Street is bombed and all the residents die except Liesel as she has been reading in the basement. The novel is set in the wartime Germany and several horrendous deaths occur in war. Added to this is the most atrocious crime in the world history – the genocide of the Jews. Liesel has seen the Jews being marched to the concentration camps, the ill treatment of the Jews. All these affect her personally. To top it all, her dead brother and lost mother haunt her daily. She is in a constant state of fear and anxiety which she finds difficult to explain. She displaces this fear and anxiety by stealing books to read though she is a poor reader. As books are the only connection between herself and her dead brother, she feels it is her duty to steal books and read them. Markus Zusak has portrayed the story of Liesel Meminger in a most beautiful and moving manner. For, she is the girl who is admired by Death and she is happy only when she steals. Death has observed this about Liesel and Liesel stays true to his saying without a doubt.

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