

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

BACHELOR THESIS

The Analysis of the Narrator in *The Book Thief*

Author: Adam Suk

English – German

Supervisor: PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, Ph.D.

Prague 2018

Declaration

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is the result of my own work and that I have used only the cited sources.

Prague, 13th July 2018

Adam Suk

.....

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, Ph.D. for her supervision, helpful feedback, time, patience, and valuable advice, without which the completion of this thesis would not be possible.

Abstract

The objective of this bachelor thesis is to analyse the unique narrator figure of Death in Markus Zusak`s young-adult novel, *The Book Thief*. The thesis focuses on the determination of the narrator's level of omniscience and reliability. It further elaborates on the narrator's narrative strategies, the use of language and the relationship with the reader.

Keywords

Narrator, Narrative perspective, Personification of death, Omniscience, Narrator`s Reliability

Abstrakt

Hlavní úkolem této bakalářské práce je analýza postavy smrti jako vypravěče v románu pro mládež od Markuse Zusaka, *Zlodějka knih*. Tato práce se zkoumá stupeň vypravěčovy vševědounosti a spolehlivosti. Dále popisuje vyprávěcí techniky, vypravěčovu volbu jazyka a jeho vztah se čtenářem.

Klíčová slova

Vypravěč, Perspektiva vyprávění, Personifikace smrti, Vševědounost, Vypravěčova spolehlivost

Contents

Introduction	6
Theoretical part	
1. <i>The Book Thief</i> and Markus Zusak.....	8
2. The Readership.....	11
3. The narrator	12
3.1. Narrative perspective.....	14
3.2. Omniscience	16
3.3. Nelles' four attributes of omniscience	17
3.4. Limited omniscience	18
3.5. Erin M. Gipson's conception of performative omniscience in <i>The Book Thief</i>	19
3.6. Narrator's reliability	20
4. Personified Death	21
Practical part	
5. Death as a narrator.....	23
5.1. Death's gender.....	27
5.2. The connection between the narrator and the reader.....	28
6. Death's knowledge and omniscience	30
6.1. The source of Death's knowledge	31
6.2. Omnipotence	33
6.3. Omnitemporality	33
6.4. Omnipresence.....	36
6.5. Telepathy.....	37
7. Death's reliability	38
Conclusion.....	39
Works cited	41

Introduction

The objective of my bachelor thesis is to analyse the figure of the narrator as well as describe and comment on the narrative techniques and strategies used in the novel *The Book Thief* (2005) written by the Australian author Markus Zusak. After reading both Zusak's most famous novels, *The Book Thief* and *I am the Messenger* (2002), I have noticed certain unique features in his writing style, most importantly his relatively idiosyncratic conception of narrators. Therefore, I decided to examine one of his narrators in my bachelor thesis. In *I am the Messenger*, Zusak puts the protagonist, Ed Kennedy, to the position of a first-person narrator, whose narration is unusually frank and honest. In *The Book Thief*, Zusak presents a personification of death as the narrator of the story. Eventually, I have decided to focus on the unique narrator in *The Book Thief*.

Narration is one of the most prominent factors influencing the way how the content of the story is presented and described by the author as well as the way it is perceived and understood by the reader. In the case of *The Book Thief*, the narrator basically retells a story which the protagonist has written herself. The story is set in Nazi Germany before the beginning of World War II and describes the life of nine-year-old Liesel Meminger, who arrives to her new foster family on the outskirts of Munich. Zusak's Death is a particularly complex narrator, who plays a very significant role in the whole story. Therefore, the reader's proper interpretation of the narrator should lead to correct understanding of the conveyed information. It is essential for the reader to be aware of the narrator's identity, since it determines the way the story is presented. The identification is necessary for the reader to perceive the narrated events in the correct way. The narration by personified death, who is a supernatural being with partly human-like appearance and behaviour, might significantly differ from the narration by a normal human being or an unspecified omniscient narrator. The supernatural nature of Death may offer the author a way to narrate the story without the limitations, which may occur in the case of a natural human narrator.

The theoretical part presents the criteria according to which the narrator is examined and analysed later in the practical part. Both the author, Markus Zusak, and his novel, *The Book Thief*, are introduced, paying particular attention to the novel's narrator. The work further describes the narrator's function and position in a literary work, from the point of view of narratology, various types of narrative perspective, which the narrator can adopt,

are also presented, together with the level of the narrator's reliability, which defines the trustworthiness of its narration. Particular attention is paid to the definition of omniscience, since in the case of supernatural narrators, such as Death, the possession of infinite knowledge might be expected. I use William Nelles' four attributes of omniscience to determine whether Death is an omniscient narrator or not. The term, "performative omniscience", which was introduced by Erin McLeod Gipson to describe narrator of *The Book Thief* is also presented and discussed. Since Death is a personified narrator, who is actually a character in the story, the last chapter deals with the tradition of personification of Death in various human cultures, using primarily the work of Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death*.

The practical part applies the criteria presented in the theoretical part to the analysis of Death as the narrator in *The Book Thief*. Firstly, the character of Death is being discussed, determining his male gender, describing his appearance and characterizing his behaviour. Considering the fact that Death retells a book which was written by Liesel herself, the narrator's omniscience and reliability are examined, as well as his narrative strategies which he employs to communicate with the reader and to present the story. Every chapter is supplied with several examples from the novel to support my interpretation.

Theoretical Part

1. *The Book Thief* and Markus Zusak

Markus Zusak was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1975. He is the youngest of four children in a family of European immigrants. Before emigrating to Australia in the late 1950s, both his mother and father lived through the Second World War in Europe - his mother in Munich, the Bavarian capital in Germany and his father in Vienna, the capital of Austria.

Markus studied English and history at the University of New South Wales from which he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma of Education and he briefly worked as a teacher at the beginning of his writing career. He began his first writing attempts at the age of 16, but his first novel, *The Underdogs*, was published much later after several rejections from the publishers, in 1999. Two novels which followed as sequels in the next two years, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry*, received various awards and honours. His next novel, *The Messenger*, which was published in 2002 earned Zusak considerable prestige in his native Australia, as well as in the US and Europe.

According to Zusak, his parents' childhood stories had the strongest influence on his decision to create *The Book Thief*, which he began writing in the winter of 2001. He describes his first ideas as following: "I'd first thought about writing about my mother's upbringing during and after the Second World War, in Germany. It wasn't going to be fiction" (Zusak 589). After some time, he changed his mind and decided that it would be the work of fiction revolving around his three central ideas which he wanted to employ in the story: his parents' childhood stories from Nazi Germany and Austria, a girl who steals books as the protagonist, and Death as the narrator.

The Book Thief was first published in 2005. It was Zusak's fifth and undoubtedly the most successful book. It became an international bestseller translated into several languages and won several awards, including the Printz Honor Award. Additionally, it was made into a film in 2013, directed by Brian Percival.

The story is set in Nazi Germany, in a fictional town of Molching in the suburbs of Munich, Bavaria. It starts before the declaration of World War II, in January 1939 and ends in October 1943. The protagonist is a nine-year-old German girl named Liesel Meminger,

who is put into a new foster family after the loss of her mother and brother. Since death was ever-present in Nazi Germany, Zusak decided to put it in the position of the narrator of Liesel's story. It observes Liesel growing up in Molching, her relationships with her new foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, and with her best friend, Rudy Steiner. At the beginning of the story, Liesel is an illiterate child, but with the help of her foster father, she gradually becomes a passionate reader. Over time, she manages to steal several books which she reads again and again. Later on, she even receives two hand-written books as a gift from Max, who is a Jewish fugitive harboured in their basement.

It is essential to be aware of the fact that Death merely retells a story which Liesel has written herself. Death collects Liesel's autobiographical book during the tragic events during the end of the story. Small as this detail may seem, it plays a rather crucial part in identifying and analysing the role of the narrator. This particular fact also raises an important question about the novel's title. When the readers discover that Death has actually stolen Liesel's book from the garbage truck, they may raise a question of who is actually the book thief. It may be a reference to both - Liesel, who has stolen several books throughout the story, as well as to Death, who stole Liesel's book, which actually made it possible to retell Liesel's story to the reader.

Zusak was about 26 years old when he began writing the story. Initially, he intended to write a 100 pages long novella but subsequently finished a considerably longer piece of literature - more than a 550 pages long novel. At first, he assumed that most readers would find the book altogether unattractive and therefore it would not gain vast audience, mainly because Nazi Germany is not a very usual setting for young-adult literature works. This kind of thinking helped him write exactly as he needed to. He planned the story in a certain layout, but throughout the writing process, the story developed in a natural way and not precisely how he had initially intended.

Particularly, Zusak struggled with the choice of the narrator and the narrative perspective. At first, he started to write the story from Death's perspective. After approximately 200 completed pages he decided to change the perspective, because Death was a too sinister and sadistic narrator, who enjoyed the work too much. Therefore, Zusak decided to put the protagonist herself in the position of the first-person narrator. But after another several months of writing, he encountered a new complication. Despite his German and Austrian background, Liesel resembled far more an Australian girl, than a German one. Afterwards he briefly tried a simple third person narration, but it did not correspond to his idea in any way. Eventually, Zusak returned Death to the role of the narrator, though he

made some radical changes in its perception and description. He decided not to choose the stereotypical picture of The Grim Reaper, cruel and vicious, carrying a scythe and wearing a hooded cloak. Instead, he created a completely new figure of personified Death, who is not sinister at all, but rather caring and also scared of humans. Death even comments on the way humans tend to depict him. “By the way – I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It amuses me” (Zusak 79). This Death is vulnerable and caring, closely observing all kinds of people. He is aware of what gruesome, but also beautiful deeds people are capable of. Sadly, in the Nazi Germany, the gruesome deeds strongly prevailed, which is the main reason why Death retells Liesel’s story: to remind himself and the readers that there is still good in people, even in the worst of times.

As was already mentioned, the major impulse to write this story and to choose this setting came from Zusak’s parents. His mother told him a scene from her childhood: when she was about 6 years old she witnessed a group of Jewish prisoners being marched through her village like cattle. There was an old man among them who barely stood on his feet and one of the local boys handed this man a piece of bread. Then a soldier came, took the bread away from the man and whipped him for taking it. Zusak explains how these two absolutely contrasting human actions have shown him, in one short moment, how big of a difference can arise between two human beings. The boy symbolizing pure kindness and humanity and the soldier as a symbol of pure evil and destruction. For Zusak, this particular story had an extensive emotional value and he later put a very similar scene into the book as well.

Zusak also wants to deny the general notion that all of Nazi Germany’s population supported the idea of national socialism and enthusiastically followed the image of the future designed by Hitler and the NSDAP. The story therefore follows ordinary people who did not blindly follow the contemporary rules and who were sceptical and sometimes even rebellious to the regime. This may be seen in the personalities of Liesel’s foster parents. Especially in Hans Hubermann, who kept refusing to become a member of the NSDAP party and later honoured his dead Jewish friend from World War One by harbouring his Jewish son, which put everyone in the family at risk of the death penalty. Zusak’s father did not want to attend the Hitler Youth meetings, which is reflected in the book by Rudy Steiner’s identical dislike for this institution. Zusak strives to show in his novel, the sympathetic portrait of the Germans, which is not very frequently shown in the stories from the Second World War.

2. The Readership

One of the most widely discussed facts about *The Book Thief* is considered to be its “crossover status.” In Australia, Zusak’s home country, the novel has been marketed as adult fiction, whereas in the United States, the novel has been given the category of young-adult literature. “*The Book Thief* ... was positioned by Pan Macmillan as Zusak’s adult debut. Random House here [USA] has chosen to publish it as a Young-Adult, a situation that Zusak is comfortable with” (Ridge). What Shannon Maughan describes in her article as a very unusual feature about the novel is that “its sales – to adults as well as young readers – have risen steadily since publication” (Maughan 1).

According to the American Library Association, Young-Adult books are those targeted at people between the age of twelve to eighteen. Although it is thought that a large percentage of the readers are adults. The protagonist is in an approximately the same age as the audience and the story mostly follows their psychological development, as well as the character’s coming of age. *The Book Thief* more or less complies with this definition, but the setting of the novel does not quite fit the prevailing area of interest for young-adults. Unlike the magical stories with wizards or vampires (*Twilight*, *Harry Potter* trilogies etc.) or novels set in contemporary times, dealing with contemporary problems (*The Fault in Our Stars*, *Eleanor and Park* etc.), which are according to Peterson the popular young-adult topics, Holocaust, war, and death are not typical motifs for young-adult books. Literary works dealing with Holocaust or Nazi Germany are usually targeted at adult readers.

When an author decides to write about the World War II or about Holocaust, the catastrophic nature of these events carries a greater responsibility as far the historical accuracy is concerned. In *Representing the Holocaust in Children’s Literature*, Lydia Kokkola explains:

The Holocaust has been subject to very specific attacks in the form of Holocaust denial... This means that authors writing about Holocaust have greater responsibilities concerning the representation of Holocaust as having taken place. There are greater pressures on them to be historically accurate and to avoid any form of writing which might encourage or enable young readers to deny the historical evidence. (Kokkola 17)

She also states, that there is no need to make a clear distinction which of the Holocaust literature is aimed at adults and which at children or young adults. “How do we separate texts written for children from texts written for adults? It begs further question, why would we want to create such a binarism? I see no value in creating a sharp divide since it is quite clear that many sophisticated teenagers read more challenging forms of literature than most adults would choose to read” (Kokkola 26). Zusak himself is not specific about what audience the book is aimed at, saying that he has never thought about it during the writing process and that the story is for anybody who would want to read it. The crossover status of *The Book Thief* basically confirms that the book manages to attract both younger and older audiences.

3. The narrator

Narration is a process of communicating a story of a narrative text between the author and the audience. Mieke Bal describes a narrative text as “a text in which a narrative agent tells a story” (Bal 15). This narrative agent is called the narrator and is a communicative device which the creator of the story uses to deliver it to his or her audience. In the chapter dealing with narrators in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2012), Uri Margolin uses the following explication: “A narrator is a linguistically indicated, textually projected, and readerly constructed function, slot or category whose occupant need not be thought of in any terms but those of a communicative role. Terms designating this role include discursive function or role, voice, source of narrative transmission, producer of current discourse, teller, reporter, narrating agent or instance” (Margolin). The reader’s perception, understanding and interpretation of the story is basically determined through the lens of the narrator.

In his Socratic Dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato first introduced a distinction between direct showing and narrative telling as the basic types of discourse. He presented two terms as the basic dichotomy of narration: diegesis and mimesis. Diegesis translates as “narrate” or “explain” and mimesis means “imitate” or “show.” The former indirectly reports, whereas the latter directly shows. According to Plato, the main difference lies in the absence or

presence of a mediator between the story and the audience. This mediator, who is present in a narrative text and absent in a drama is the narrator. In a dramatic work, the transmission of information is realized through the direct action, which the audience is able to directly see and hear. Drama does not employ the imagination of the audience as much as narrative texts do, since in drama, the setting, the characters and the action are already depicted in some way, whereas in the case of narrative texts, the readers have to picture the elements of the story on their own.

“The narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character” (Bal 18). The identity of the narrator can but must not be explicitly mentioned. It can be portrayed by a character who is actively taking part in the narrated story, or by another character more or less distanced, but still present in the story, or by some figure outside of the story and even by an anonymous undefined voice, without any mention or reference to its identity. In all cases, the narrator is present. The only exception is drama, in which the narrator may or may not appear. When the narrator in a dramatic work is not present completely, the story is presented solely through action and dialogue.

“Once the narrator has been identified in a discourse, all information about the narrated domain, including characters’ direct discourse, originates with the narrator” (Margolin). The amount of knowledge the narrator has about the world of the narrative, or about the characters might be based on only sensually detectable information, to an infinite amount of knowledge, which is the case of omniscient narrators. “A narrator may know more, the same as or less than one or more of his characters” (Margolin). The narrator then decides to what extent he or she wants to share the information to the narratee. He or she can convey everything it knows without any subjectivity, or it can emphasize some particular details to sway the narratee’s perception or interpretation of the story, or it can choose to withhold some information from the narratee completely, which may serve to make the narrative more suspenseful, or to simply lie or to equivocate, as it is in the case of Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*. The truthfulness of the information conveyed by the narrator distinguishes a reliable narrator from an unreliable one, whereas the amount of knowledge, and the extent of its vision and informational reach is the question of its omniscience.

3.1. Narrative perspective

Every possible narrator stands in a particular position to the story and holds a certain perspective. The function of a narrator can be given to a character that is actively present in the story and narrates it from his or her own point of view as a story of his or her own, using the personal pronouns “I” or “we.” In such a case we speak about a first-person narrator and it can be portrayed by the protagonist, which allows the reader to observe the story in the very centre of the narrative, but also by any character of the story, major or minor, who observes the story and the protagonist from a certain distance, as it is in the case of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. As will be later discussed, in *The Book Thief* Zusak uses a narrator which is very distant and who does not interact with any of the characters, but still remains present in the story. Still it is narrated in the first-person, the narrator observes the characters and reports their actions and behaviour, sometimes even commenting on it.

The first-person allows the reader to directly adopt the perspective through which the story is transmitted to them. The identity of the narrator is essential to this perspective, since the point of view of a child widely differs from the point of view of an adult man or woman. A fitting example is used by Burkhard Niederhoff in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2011): “My father towered above me.” If this sentence is pronounced by a child, it does not necessarily mean, that the certain father is a giant, but merely “the impression of his great height might simply result from the child’s viewpoint” (Niederhoff). This means that, in order to properly comprehend and interpret a story, we cannot analyse a child narrator in the same way as we would analyse an adult narrator. The reader should always be aware of the identity of the narrator, if it is mentioned, and attempt to adopt its perspective and at least partly identify themselves with it. In such a way, a situation may occur in which the reader is allowed to see the story through the eyes of a narrator of a different age, gender or social status, but also a different mental processes, values, opinions or beliefs. Niederhoff uses the example of the narrator from James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which is narrated by the little Stephen. “The point of view of a small child is indicated by the simple, repetitive syntax and by the periphrases like ‘glass’ for monocle and ‘hairy face’ for beard” (Niederhoff). Using the typology of Norman Friedman, Niederhoff shows two types of first-person narrators. First is the “I as a witness” type, which is used for the minor characters who are in the position of a first-person narrator. The second type is “I as a protagonist,” used when the main character adopts the position of the narrator.

When the narrator is somewhat distanced from the main action or stands outside completely and narrates the story from the perspective of another character or switches between various characters, it is defined as the third-person narrator, using the personal pronouns “he,” “she” and “it”. In the analysis of a third-person narrator it is necessary to determine the narrative voice, which describes the manner in which the story is conveyed by the narrator, taking into consideration possible narrator’s limitations and restrictions and defining the angle from which the story is viewed. The choice of the narrative voice gives the author an option to influence the extent to which the reader can be involved in the interpretation of the story.

When a third-person narrator has access to the minds of the characters, we speak about so called “subjective” third person narrator. There are also cases in which the narrator’s reach is limited solely for one single character’s inner thoughts and mental processes in which case we describe it as “third-person limited.” It is chiefly concentrated on the mind of the protagonist and therefore the reader does not get an opportunity to look into the minds of other major or minor characters. There may also appear a type of narrator, called “third-person objective,” which does not describe the inner thoughts of any character, but merely neutrally tells the story without any hint of subjectivity. Niederhoff gives four types of third-person narrators from the typology of Norman Friedman. The “editorial omniscience” type uses an intrusive narrator, telling the story from a third-person point of view. The second type is “neutral omniscience” which uses a third-person narrator which is less intrusive. The third type, “selective omniscience,” uses a third-person narrator from the point of view of only one character. And the last type is “multiple selective omniscience,” which uses the point of view of several different characters.

There is also the second-person narrative perspective in which the narrator uses the personal pronoun “you.” This type of a narrative perspective is most frequently used in popular music, especially in sentimental songs where the lyrics are dedicated to a particular person and therefore directly address this person. As far as literature is concerned, the second person narrator may be used in some poems, functioning in a similar way as in the case of popular music, or in certain passages in prose.

3.2. Omniscience

The degree of omniscience represents a crucial feature in the analysis of the narrator. The omniscient narrator has a general knowledge about the world of the story, being aware of everything which happens including the thoughts and actions of the characters. Ivdit Diasamidze offers the following description: “An all-knowing narrator who firmly imposes himself between the reader and the story and retains a full and complete control over the narrative” (Diasamidze 1). The capability to enter the minds of any character, not just the protagonist or other main characters, is what differentiates the omniscient narrator from the limited omniscient narrator. For the author, the omniscient narration represents a range of possibilities as far as the telling of the story is concerned. He or she can quite easily narrate the story without any limitation, describing the thoughts and feelings of various characters and occasionally interpreting them at the same time. Through the narrator the author can choose to withhold or reveal any information they want to, judge, speculate or contemplate about the characters’ thoughts and actions. It gives the author the ability to travel through time and space of the story, describing and observing anything he or she wants to reveal to the reader, without any limitations. This unlimited narrative ability offers a wide range of advantages. It makes the narration of the story easier in terms of the author’s option to describe anything they want, being able to see the action through the eyes of various characters, which offers a great variety of viewpoints and opinions shown to the readers, which greatly influences their perception and understanding of the story.

The unlimited narrative option creates an uncomplicated way to deliver to the reader the exact message and information intended by the author. While reading a story narrated by an omniscient narrator, the audience might feel a faint compulsion to identify the voice of the narrator with the one of the author, but “although it may seem to reflect the author’s beliefs and values, it is as much the author’s creation as any of the characters in the story” (Diasamidze 1).

At the same time the omniscient narrator creates an environment in which it may be more difficult for the reader to identify themselves with the protagonist than it is in the case of first-person, or third-person non-omniscient narrators. With the ability to perceive the action from the perspective of numerous characters might also decrease the reader’s ability to sympathize with the protagonist. Therefore, there may be seen a general tendency in modern literature to avoid the completely omniscient narrators “- in part because of an

intellectual temperament that tends to destruct, and even deny, absolute all-knowing attitudes” (Diasamidze 1). Unlike in the contemporary literature, there was an abundant use of omniscient narrators in the classical novels in the 19th and also 20th century.

3.3. Nelles’ four attributes of omniscience

In his analysis of Jane Austen’s narrators, William Nelles explains: “While omniscient narrators are reliable and do offer exposition and commentary, they share these attributes with non-omniscient narrators, including first-person narrators, with writers of nonfiction, and with tellers of natural narrative” (Nelles 120). For the following discussion he has introduced four core attributes of omniscience: omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence and telepathy. Since the quality of omniscience is traditionally ascribed to God, the narrators’ degree of omniscience is analysed by the same gauge as the divine omniscience, since all authors of fiction basically stand in a Godlike position to their stories as they function as creators of the world of the narrative.

If this role of the creator of the world of the story is imputed to the narrator it is a direct indication of the first of the attributes of omniscience, of the omnipotence. The narrator is put in the position of the maker of the world, therefore he is naturally aware of every possible thing going on in the world. Because he has invented everything in the world, he has full and complete knowledge about everything in the world, which “logically entails omniscience” (Nelles 3).

Omnitemporality is the ability of the narrator to move freely through time, narrating events from different timelines. It gives the narrator an unlimited reach through time. Nelles exemplifies this “temporal mobility” on the narrators in most of Honoré de Balzac’s works: “He pieces together events from 1799, 1797, 1792, 1804, 1806, and so on as he works his way back to 1838 to complete the analepsis” (Nelles 4). Nelles also notes, that the knowledge of the past can be rather normal for human characters, the complete knowledge of future events is reserved solely for Godlike agents and denied to humans.

Omnipresence is the narrator’s capability of boundless traveling through space or even of being present at several places simultaneously. Nelles characterizes the omnipresent narrator as being able to “report simultaneous events widely separated by space” and exemplifies it on a passage from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which the narrator in three

consecutive sentences describes the actions of three different characters, each present in a different place. (Nelles 4).

Nelles considers telepathy as the fourth attribute of omniscience. If a narrator possesses the ability to read minds of the characters, having access to their thoughts and feelings, it can be labelled telepathic. Nelles also adds: “I consider here only the reporting or summarizing of characters’ thoughts; commenting upon them once they are known requires no postulate of omniscience” (Nelles 4). Telepathy in the form about which we speak is denied to humans, even with the help of modern technologies, nobody is able to read other peoples’ minds. That is the reason why telepathy is still considered a godlike competence and therefore it is surely one of the fundamental quality of omniscience.

3.4. Limited omniscience

A limited omniscient narrator, which can also be known by the term of third-person selective narrator, is able to enter the mind and observe the narrative from the perspective of only one selected character. This focal character provides the only position, through which the reader is allowed to see the story. “At times, the reader may be given direct access to this focal character’s own ‘voice’ and thoughts through dialogue or presented dramatically through monologue, represented speech or stream of consciousness” (Diasamidze 2). The focal character is put in the centre of the narrative and can be portrayed by the protagonist, thus being in the very centre of the plot, as well by any other major or minor character who observes the action and reports on the story from a certain distance. In every case, the narrator functions as a mediator, or a sort of device through which the reader is able to get to know the characters, therefore the connection between the reader and the characters is indirect or mediated. The narrator thus functions as a transmitter of “the action, characterization, description, analysis and other informing details upon which the reader’s understanding and interpretation depend” (Diasamidze 2). In contrast with the omniscient narrator, the limited omniscient one offers a narrower focus, allowing the reader a closer look by concentrating on a single character. In such a case, and in the case of a first-person narrator, the reader might be tempted to identify himself with the focal character easier than in the case of a fully omniscient narrator. However, the omniscience provides the author with a certain flexibility and variety of perspectives, which the limited omniscience or first-

person perspective cannot offer. Therefore, the choice of the narrator is conditioned by the author's intention of how he or she wants the reader to see, understand, and interpret the story.

3.5. Erin M. Gipson's conception of performative omniscience in *The Book Thief*

In her work dealing with the narrator of *The Book Thief*, Erin McLeod Gipson suggests a new term as far as Death's seeming omniscience is concerned. "Because Death's narrative ability is limited in all four areas of omniscience, we need a new term to describe the narration found in *The Book Thief*, and existing terms [...] fall short" (Gipson 27). Even though Death is not an omniscient narrator, he sometimes knows more about the events of the story than the characters. As he narrates the story from the future, as far the narrative time is concerned, in some situations he is aware of the upcoming events, while the other characters, including Liesel are not. The vast majority of Death's knowledge is realized through Liesel.

Gipson refuses the already existing terms of "semi-omniscience" and "illusory *paralepsis*" and presents a new term called "performative omniscience" (28/29). It describes a narrator who "intentionally pretends to possess omniscient knowledge that can be explained by natural events or causes" (Gipson 29). Zusak created the experimental narrator as a mixture of human-like appearance and behaviour and a spiritual power operating on the verge of this world and the world beyond. Death to some extent pretends omniscience and tries to hide the limitations in his narrative ability, but he does not go so far as to deceive the reader and he freely admits his uncertainty in several parts of the story. "Death wants the reader to see his performance of omniscience as just that – a performance – to call attention to the impossibility of perfect knowledge" (Gipson 29). Gipson finishes the presentation of her new term with a possible function of this kind of narrative performance. She claims it might have the effect of all omniscience and perfect knowledge on the reader's perception. "In his performance of omniscience, Death teaches readers to interpret any attempt to demonstrate authoritative knowledge as a performance, whether in the context of a novel or a political power" (Gipson 29).

3.6. Narrator's reliability

In the case of certain narratives, there may occur a situation in which the validity of the information conveyed by the narrator is low or at least doubtful. Such narratives feature an unreliable narrator which is an intentional device created by the author to achieve certain effect in the reader's perception of the story. Unreliability is almost exclusively restricted to first-person narrators which must also be personalized, since the unreliability of a non-living narrator's voice would be hardly detectable. In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Uri Margolin presents three axes of unreliability: "facts and events of the narrated domain; the interpretations of such facts (i.e. supplied inferences, explanations or motivations); moral, practical, aesthetic, etc. judgements and evaluations of these facts" (Margolin). The unreliability of facts and events is probably the most crucial of these, since it might prevent the reader from detecting the unreliability which may result in their misinterpretation of the story.

William Riggan in *Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-person Narrators* (1981) has classified several types of first-person unreliable narrators: The Pícaro, whose unreliability lies in exaggeration and boasting, as an example serving the German picaresque novel *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus*. The Madman, is a type which is unreliable from a rather obvious reason. A narrator suffering from a mental illness, paranoia or some other kind of psychological condition can hardly be fully trusted. In *Fight club*, Chuck Palahniuk employs the Madman type of narrator, which is discovered later in the story and gives the whole plot a dramatic twist. The third type is called The Clown, used for instance in *Tristram Shandy*. In such a case, the narrator deliberately plays with the traditional narrative techniques and strategies, it does not act as a serious narrator, bends the truth and does not fulfil the readers' expectations. The Naïf is a narrator whose unreliability lies in immaturity. It is mostly portrayed by children, or mentally simpler characters, or other beings, such as in the case of *Forrest Gump*, by Winston Groom. The last type is The Liar, who is mentally sound, stable and mature but intentionally lies to the reader, narrating false information.

All in all, the narrator's reliability presents an essential part of the complete analysis of the narrator, since the narrator is the main source of information about the story for the reader. Therefore, if the narrator's unreliability goes unnoticed to the reader, the correct interpretation of the narrative is hindered or completely obstructed.

4. Personified Death

Death is a natural part of life, which will inevitably, sooner or later, befall every human. However, the approach and attitude towards death, upon which also depends the depiction and interpretation of death, varies across human cultures. Throughout history, there has always been a tendency, in most of the cultures, to ascribe death a human form. Karl Guthke in *The Gender of Death* (1999) shows various depictions of death, as well as the motivation of humanity to personify it. “Image making is one of those urges that define humans” (8). Some religions have a God of death in their mythology, such as God Thanatos in ancient Greece, or Goddess Hel in the old Norse religion. Other religions have angels of death, for instance the Islamic angel of death, Azrail.

Probably the most iconic image of personified death is, according to Guthke, The Grim Reaper, depicted as a ghostly figure of a man, pale and cloaked, carrying a scythe, sometimes it is only a hooded skeleton, collecting the souls of the dead. In such a way, death appears in numerous paintings, stories, books and films. For the very first time he “makes his appearance early in the *Hebrew Bible* but again in the *Revelation of Saint John*” (Guthke 11). This appearance was often linked to The Black Death, and people have used it as a figure in folk performances which served both to entertain as well as to moderate the fear of death, by giving it a physical form. Zusak uses a similar personification of death in *The Book Thief* as well, although with a significantly modified, humanized way and not so sinister or macabre. There are also cases in which personified death is referenced to as a woman, as Karl Guthke shows in *The Gender of Death*:

In some cultures – Spanish, French, and Polish, for example – art, literature, and conventional thought almost regularly personify death as a woman: beautiful or ugly, old or young, motherly, seductive or dangerous. In other cultures – English or German for instance – death more often than not appears as a man, and again in a large number of variations: violent or friendly, inexorable or weak, horrifying or alluring. (Guthke 7)

The Death figure in *The Book Thief* reveals his gender only in three cases in which he refers to himself with male pronouns. Apart from these three situations he uses first-person pronouns, therefore it might prove difficult, for some readers, to determine his gender. Occasionally, Death makes some comments about his appearance by referring to certain human-like body parts, such as hands, fingers, heart etc.

The human tendency to visualize the unknown and unexplored is basically a technique of coping with the mysterious nature of these phenomena. "Such image-making, interpretation through personification occurs on all levels of consciousness, in all cultures, in all time, that have left records" (Guthke 10). Numerous artists have portrayed personified death in their artworks using a personified death figure as a symbol for death itself. For literary authors, personification of death provides a possibility to animate a non-living mysterious phenomenon, which is an inevitable part of everybody's life and which most people are afraid of. Giving a voice to death has been a tendency of many authors, who wanted to offer their interpretation of death's perspective. Around the year 1400, The humanist Johannes von Saaz (also known as Johannes von Tepl) created a famous personification of death in *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, which is basically a dispute between death and a man who has lost his wife, spread over 32 chapters. Each of them is offering their arguments, in which case death is more rational and the ploughman more emotional. The possible reasons why Von Saaz, Zusak and other authors choose to personify death and give it a shape and voice are to offer the reader a potential insight into death itself, thus making the content of the story more attractive and gripping. How the artists then approach this personification is purely at the mercy of their imaginations and their artistic intentions. They may personify it in a traditional way as a macabre grim reaper or turn this stereotype around and create a new conception of death, as Zusak has done it.

Practical Part

The practical part of this thesis will attempt to analyse the narrator in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, based on the criteria which were introduced in the theoretical part. The main objective is to examine the character of Death as such, comment on its reliability and determine his gender. Further discussed is the connection between the reader and the narrator as well as the narrative strategies used to communicate with the reader. The narrator's omniscience is determined with the help of William Nelle's four attributes of omniscience and the term "performative omniscience," suggested by Erin McLeod Gipson, is presented. Every chapter is supplied with several examples from *The Book Thief*.

5. Death as a narrator

As was already briefly mentioned, when Markus Zusak decided to write *The Book Thief*, he rather struggled with the decision of who would function as the most suitable character to narrate the story. The narration by a personified death figure was one of his core ideas which he wanted to employ in the story, but when he started to write from the perspective of the stereotypical death, he encountered an unexpected distaste for this particular kind of narration. It was too sinister and vicious, enjoying its work too much as Zusak describes in the appendix of *The Book Thief* edition published in 2016: "After a page of writing, I felt like I needed to take a shower – he was too sinister and typically death-like" (Zusak 596). Still, it was quite an interesting and appropriate choice of the narrator, since life in Nazi Germany is generally and by right associated with death, which was ubiquitous at that time. Therefore, after several attempts to change the narrator, which have been already described in the theoretical part, he has returned to death, but radically changed its nature.

The new conception of death, which Zusak introduced, is basically determined by the very last sentence of the story: "I am haunted by humans" (Zusak 584). Unlike the grim reaper type of death, this one does not present a scary and sadistic supernatural power, which would strike fear into the readers, but on the contrary, it is a more or less humanized image of death, which is able to feel empathy and emotions. It enjoys watching the good in people,

especially in the time of Nazi Germany, during which the good deeds were scarce. He denies the assumption that death and war are best friends, which most of the audience would expect. “They say that war is death’s best friend, but I must offer you a different point of view on that one. To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible. He stands over your shoulder repeating one thing, incessantly. ‘Get it done, get it done.’ So, you work harder” (Zusak 331).

Death is being identified as a heterodiegetic narrator in various works which deal with this topic, including the work of Débora de Oliveira (2017). They argue that Death is not present as a character in the story and does not communicate with any of the characters, but only with the reader. However, Erin McLeod Gipson and Maria Kissova correctly assume that Death is in fact an active character in the same narrative as all the other characters and therefore should be labelled as a homodiegetic narrator.

Death’s narration resembles a typical human narrator, but at the same time emits a certain level of supernatural power, which results in a narrative style which is simultaneously natural and supernatural. Therefore, it can be assumed that Death possesses a certain physical shape, but also functions as a spiritual and supernatural being, resembling humans by certain features of his personality and by his appearance and behaviour, but also exercising a higher force. In some of the Death’s narrative comments there can sometimes be found references to certain human-like body parts. “Five hundred souls. I carried them in my fingers, like suitcases. Or I’d throw them over my shoulder. It was only the children I carried in my arms” (Zusak 359). In this particular extract Death makes a direct reference to his limbs, which further confirms his human-like appearance. As a further evidence of Death’s human-like personality features can serve his ability to feel empathy, compassion and certain emotions, which is not necessarily expected from a supernatural being. It can be seen in his sorrow when he came to collect Rudy’s soul: “I carried him softly through the broken street, with one salty eye and a heavy, deathly heart” (Zusak 565). His empathy and perceptiveness are also the reason why he sympathises with Liesel and why he decides to narrate her story. Another feature of Death’s similarity to humans can be observed in his capacity to feel change of physical and psychological conditions, such as exhaustion or coldness, as can be seen in the following extract: “As usual, I collected humans. I was tired. And the year wasn’t even halfway over yet” (Zusak 361).

To summarize, all these features mentioned above provide an opportunity for the reader to easily identify themselves with the narrator. All these similarities resembling typical human qualities and appearance encourage the reader to adopt Death’s perspective

without any particular complication, which could be felt in a case when Death was presented as a supernatural and spiritual being, high above humans, distancing himself from the readers and thus hindering the connection with them.

Since the novel is being classified as a work of young-adult literature, its open description and projection of rather problematic events such as death, war and holocaust clearly challenge the general notion of what young-adult literature may portray. The narration by death is also a rather unusual phenomenon, but it might have certain advantages as far as the perception and confrontation of difficult topics by younger readers is concerned. Zusak's humanized portrayal of Death might also help the readers, especially the younger ones, to approach death without fear or reluctance. The human-like appearance and behaviour might help the younger readers accept Death's narration more easily. In addition, Death is able to understand the sentimental and emotional intensity of certain events that he narrates, such as the murders in the gas chambers of the concentration camps, which he had witnessed.

When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. Their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, and their spirits came towards me, into my arms. We climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's certain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute. Shower after Shower. (Zusak 372)

He also describes how strong and horrible these events were even for him: "I shiver when I remember – as I try to de-realise it" (Zusak 373). Then he continued to describe his experience from the gas chambers when he collected the souls of murdered French Jews in 1942. "Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last gasping cries. Their French words. I watched their love-visions and freed them from their fear" (Zusak 373). Because he comprehends the emotional and moral value of these unprecedented crimes against humanity, he tries to moderate it through a careful choice of words, soothing

the reader and offering an explanation of what followed afterwards. This confirms that he possesses some human character traits, since he is able to feel sorrow, regret and most importantly empathy.

However, Jenni Adams considers these passages as highly problematic, which she discusses in her work *“Into Eternity’s Certain Breadth”: Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak’s The Book thief* (2010). According to her, passages such as this, are perceived differently by its adolescent and adult readers, being written in a way which serves to moderate the horrific nature of these tragic events, by offering a form of consolation for the younger readers. This moderation, she continues, might not be accepted by the novel’s adult readership. Adams describes these passages as “obscuring the event’s traumatic historical reality in their presentation of a narrative of escape which seeks to recuperate the atrocities represented” (Adams 226). The mentioned extracts from pages 372 and 373 are also being discussed in her work: “The redemptive narrative of Jewish death distorts the events in a significant way, denying both their traumatic dimension and their status as an unresolved ethical and memorial site that continues to demand a response” (Adams 226).

These passages truly deal with a very delicate issue and carry a hugely important ethical, moral, and historical legacy. However, it is a matter of interpretation of each and every reader of Zusak’s novel and to accuse the author of distorting and denying the traumatic dimension of the Holocaust events, seems as a rather harsh and precipitate assertion. Dewald Steyn, in *Looking at the Dark Sun: Aspects of Death, War and the Power of Stories in Markus Zusak and Terry Pratchett’s Novels* (2017) reacts on Adams’s opinions as well, saying “Adams’s claims rest on what is, in my opinion, a misreading of Death’s role in the narrative. The notion that Death offers a rescue for the dying Jews, and that this is evidence of ‘redemptive repositioning’ is debatable” (Steyn 33). Zusak does not mention anything about the possible afterlife, he merely tries to mildly narrate these traumatic events and offer a form of consolation, both for his adolescent and adult audience which does not necessarily mean that he denies their problematic moral value, nor does it mean that he gives preference to the young-adult part of his audience. Steyn also speculates that “the use of Death as narrator for the novel may be viewed by some readers and critics as an affront or discourtesy to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust and the second world war [...] for trivialising this period of history” (34). He believes that this perception of the novel is misplaced “as the use of anthropomorphic figures in an allegorical style forms part of a long tradition” (Steyn 34). Zusak uses Death as a literary instrument according to the setting of

the novel, in order to make the narration more attractive, not to trivialize important historic events.

5.1. Death's gender

So far in this thesis Death has been referenced to with male pronouns, but it is necessary to explain why. As far as the gender of Death in *The Book Thief* is concerned, it is quite difficult to determine it from the text itself, since Death uses first-person pronouns throughout the novel almost exclusively when talking about himself. But there are three cases in which Death reveals his gender, by referring to himself with male pronouns. The first case is: “A mountain range of rubble – in which our narrator introduces: **himself** – the colours – and the book thief” (Zusak 2). The second case is: “Still, it’s possible that you might be asking. Why does **he** even need a holiday?” (Zusak 5). And lastly, the third case: “And then. There is death. Making **his** way through all of it” (Zusak 309). These three mentions are the only references in the whole book which give away the narrator’s gender, therefore they are easy to miss and, in some works dealing with the topic of *The Book Thief*, including the work of Dewald Steyn, the authors conclude that Death does not have a specific gender. Only Erin Gipson claims in her thesis that Death in the novel is male, however she also claims there are only two cases in which Death uses male pronouns and obviously fails to notice the example from page 5.

Another possible way of determining Death’s gender is the author himself, who in the appendix of the 2016 edition of the novel and some online interviews refers to Death with male pronouns as well, which only confirms the assertion that Death is in fact a male. Zusak’s decision to give Death the male gender might be connected with the novel being set in Germany, where there has always been a cultural tendency to depict death as a male, as describes Guthke. In the film adaptation of *The Book Thief* from 2013 appears Death as well, although only his voice. The voice, however, is male, which yet again confirms the assumption, that Death is male.

5.2. The connection between the narrator and the reader

As was already mentioned, a certain connection between the reader and the narrator is already established by Death's human-like appearance, attitudes and behaviour, which help the reader to accept Death's narration and adopt his perspective. Zusak also employs various narrative strategies which further develop this connection. Since the very beginning of the novel, Death orients his narration directly to the reader. He speaks to the readers addressing them directly as "you" as can be seen in the following example: "Picture yourself walking down Himmel Street in the dark. Your hair is getting wet and the air pressure is on the verge of drastic change" (Zusak 563). This technique serves to further deepen the relationship between the reader and the narrator, making it easier for the reader to accept all of the narrated information. Additionally, the directly targeted addresses help eliminate a possible barrier which might occur in a case of a distanced unspecified narrator. The relationship with the reader, which was developed through the direct contact and addressing, further supports Death's human resemblance, which then results in easier conditions for the relationship to be established.

In her thesis *A Close Encounter with Death: Narration in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief*, Erin McLeod Gipson claims that this technique which Zusak employs with his narrator is called "engaging narration." It is a kind of narrative strategy from nineteenth century, introduced by Robyn Warhol, used chiefly by female authors to gain recognition. In this strategy "the narrator strives to close the gap between 'you' the narratee of the text and the actual reader to move that reader to sympathize with the writer's cause" (Gipson 8).

Death also uses his opportunity to narrate the story as the sole manner of communication with living humans. Through the novel he is enabled to speak directly to the readers, as he is strictly forbidden to do so otherwise. In some parts of his narration, he also expects and assumes the reader's reactions or thoughts "Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a colour and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well I'm here to tell you that it is" (Zusak 7). Occasionally, he even asks question, which again functions to draw the reader closer to the story and to build up a relationship. "Does this worry you? I urge you – don't be afraid. I'm nothing if not fair" (Zusak 4). Death basically guides the readers through the story, offering them to adopt his point of view and thus see the story

through his eyes, but at the same time he encourages the reader to project their own experiences and opinions and use them in their perception and interpretation. Gradually, these strategies result in a sort of bond between the narrator and the reader which supports Death's narration and suppresses potential scepticism towards the allegorical nature of the narrator.

Aware of the bond, Death starts replacing the "I" with the collective "we" in some parts of the narration, involving the readers themselves into the narration. This may seem as a quite natural and gradual change, since it corresponds to Death's overall narrative style. In one of these cases he foreshadows the consequences of Hans Hubermann's idea to use *Mein Kampf* as a camouflage for Max's journey to Molching: "For now, the idea was enough. It was indestructible. Transforming it into reality, well, that was something else altogether. For now, though, let's let him enjoy it. We'll give him seven months. Then we come for him. Oh, how we come" (Zusak 139). Erin Gipson comments on this particular sequence of sentences, saying that "The collective pronoun 'we' does not necessarily include the reader; Death could use 'we' to refer to some other entity that will come for Hans. But since he begins with 'let's,' there is no question that only the reader can be included" (Gipson 14).

The bond between Death and the reader is further strengthened through the horrible events of war and holocaust which Death sometimes narrates. Death's likeable nature and rhetoric is put into contrast with these horrible events, caused by humans. The readers are thus encouraged not to fear death, since death is merely a consequence of evil. Instead they should be wary of humans since, at least in these events, they are the cause.

Death also inserts into the narrative numerous of isolated blocks of text, which interrupt the narration of the story, such as this one on the very first page of the novel (3):

*** HERE IS A SMALL FACT ***

You are going to die.

These isolated blocks of text serve various purposes, for instance they summarize past as well as upcoming events, state important facts, anticipate essential future events, show a short extract of a dialogue and numerous other purposes, which should always attract the reader's attention, build suspense or sum up important story elements. In one of these blocks,

Death reveals some information about his appearance, compared to the grim reaper archetype (329):

***** A SMALL PIECE OF TRUTH *****

I do not carry a sickle or scythe.

I only wear a hooded black robe when it's cold.

**And I don't have those skull-like
facial features you seem to enjoy
pinning on me from a distance. You
want to know what I truly look like?**

**I'll help you out. Find yourself
a mirror while I continue.**

In this particular block of text, Death denies his analogy between his true appearance and the imagined appearance, how people tend to depict him. He also encourages the reader to wonder about their own mortality by looking into a mirror if they desire to see how Death actually looks like. Furthermore, and this is especially true in the events that the novel depicts, Death is hinting at the chilling fact that he is not doing the killings. He only takes care of the souls of the dead, but humans are those who kill.

6. Death's knowledge and omniscience

Since Death has been characterized as a homodiegetic narrator, who is simultaneously a supernatural force as well as a personified physical being, it can be believed that such a narrator is able to perform pure omniscience. Death does resemble certain features which can possibly sway the reader to ascribe his ability of perfect knowledge, however it is vitally important to trace the source of Death's seeming omniscience. Various authors misread Death's function in the novel and analyze him as an omniscient narrator, including Maria Kissova and Débora de Oliveira. They fail to notice that the fact that Death only retells

Liesel's story and does not observe the action himself, makes impossible for him to possess omniscient knowledge. However, Erin McLeod Gipson correctly identifies Death as a narrator who does not have an omniscient point of view. She suggests a new term, "performative omniscience", to describe the narrator in *The Book Thief*. It describes a narrator who pretends to be omniscient but actually is not. However, he does not try to hide the fact that he is merely pretending omniscience. He does not lie to the reader and explains, where his knowledge of the story comes from.

6.1. The source of Death's knowledge

To be able to analyse if Death is or is not omniscient, it is essential to determine where his knowledge of the narrative comes from. Death does not narrate a story which he personally witnessed. In the prologue of the novel, he recollects three separate situations when he met Liesel during the time of the story of *The Book Thief*. Naturally, all of these meetings must occur on the occasion of somebody's death, otherwise he would not have a reason to be there. For the first time, Death meets Liesel on a train in which Liesel travels with her real mother and her brother Werner in January 1939. The little brother is the one who dies which is why Death arrives. He describes his first encounter with Liesel as following: "I wavered. I buckled – I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched. Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them. A small soul was in my arms. I stood a little to the right" (Zusak 9).

The second time was several years later, but Death still recognises Liesel. This time he had come to collect the soul of a pilot who had crashed into the field behind Molching. And for the last time in the story, Death meets Liesel during the most tragic moment of the whole novel. It is the day when the neighbourhood of Molching, including Himmel Street was accidentally bombed by the allies. The result was catastrophic as every resident of the street died, except Liesel. On the night of the air raid she was sitting in the basement and writing her story, which later saved her life. Death meets Liesel in the moment when he collects the dead, including Liesel's foster parents Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her best friend Rudy Steiner, along with his siblings and mother and all the other residents of the Himmel Street. It is an extremely moving scene, when Liesel sees the corpses of her loved

ones. “Please, again. I ask you to believe me. I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say. ‘I am sorry child.’ But that is not allowed. I did not crouch down. I did not speak. Instead, I watched her a while. When she was able to move, I followed her. She dropped the book. She kneeled. The book thief howled” (Zusak 14,15).

This is the scene where Death gets acquainted with Liesel’s story. He climbs aboard the garbage truck where the book has been thrown and takes it. He claims that he has read the book several hundred times since that time “I would watch the places where we intersected, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do – watch it fall into the line with everything else I spectated during that time” (Zusak 15). Evidently, the book presents a form of reminder of the good in people, even from the time of war. He reads the story over and over again, since he has witnessed incredible events during the time of the Second World War, including the deaths of more than 60 million people. Liesel’s simple story full of love, friendship and kindness hugely contrasts with the atrocities, which happened during the same time span.

Death decides to retell Liesel’s autobiographical book and thus the novel is created. “Yes, often I am reminded of her, and in my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell” (Zusak 15). Occasionally, he makes remarks on Liesel’s authorship of the book, throughout the story. Some of them are easy to miss while some of them are stretching over several sentences. “Flash forward, to the basement, September 1943. A fourteen-year-old girl is writing into a small dark-covered book. She is bony but strong and has seen many things. Papa sits with the accordion at his feet” (Zusak 105). These remarks remind the reader of who the author of the story actually is. It reminds the reader that Death is basically a mediator between Liesel and them, retelling her story to them with some commentary of his own. If Death decided to assign himself a role of the omniscient narrator in the story, he would very well be able to do so. But he is unable to do that if he wants to remain a reliable narrator. He could take Liesel’s book and retell her story in a way he wishes, but instead he decides not to enjoy the power of omniscience and remains authentic to the original.

During the analysis of Death as a narrator, especially as far as omniscience is concerned, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that Death retells the story and that he was not present in its events, apart from the three situations mentioned above and therefore the only source of his knowledge comes from Liesel’s handwritten book. Basically, Death narrates a story, which has been experienced by somebody else, which would render a living human narrator incapable of adopting the omniscient point of view. Death, however, is not a typical mortal nor human being, it is a supernatural spiritual force and as such it might sway the

reader to believe that Death is an all-knowing narrator with complete control over the narrative. To determine whether Death is truly an omniscient narrator, it should be examined according to the four attributes of omniscience by William Nelles, which were introduced in the theoretical part.

6.2. Omnipotence

First of the four attributes is omnipotence, which is characterized by Nelles as the most Godlike of the four. It is the unlimited power and ability to do anything. Although Death is a supernatural being it is still one of the characters of Zusak's *The Book Thief*. He does not function simultaneously as a creator of the world of the narrative and the narrator, which is a feature that an omnipotent narrator should possess. If Death was omnipotent, it would have a complete control over the characters, it would therefore be able to know everything about them, as well as everything about the story, including every possible future plot development. Death in no way possesses such a power, his task consists of collecting the souls of the dead, but he does not decide who dies.

Death is also submitted to various limitation in the world of the narrative, which obviously denies a possible omnipotent stance, since a creator of the world would not be limited in any way. For instance, he is not allowed to communicate with humans, as was demonstrated in the extract from the scene of the air raid, when Death really desires to console and comfort Liesel, but "that is not allowed" (Zusak 14). The limitations in Death's actions imply the existence of some kind of higher power, which could theoretically be the omnipotent entity in the world of the story. However, none such entity appears in the story and Death remains the only element with a sign of supernatural powers.

6.3. Omnitemporality

For Death to be an omnitemporal narrator would mean to be able to report, without any limitations, events from the past, but most importantly from the future. To have knowledge about the past is, to some extent, granted to humans as well. Almost everybody is able to recollect certain events from the past, and thanks to human communication, it is

also possible to have knowledge about certain past events, without necessarily being present. Knowledge of the future is, according to Nelles, a true sign of an omnitemporal narrator.

The character of Death might again imply his complete knowledge of both past and future. Occasionally he foreshadows certain scenes which are in some way important for the story. However, this foreshadowing does in no way imply the narrator's omnitemporality. As was already mentioned, Death is narrating the story several years after it actually happened therefore his task of retelling Liesel's book contradicts the possibility of having a full knowledge of the future. The foreshadowed events are actually not predictions, but merely events which are narrated or indicated in advance. The narrator is able to move freely through the time of the story, but not because he is omnitemporal, but because he has thorough knowledge from the multiple readings of Liesel's book.

Death uses the strategy of foreshadowing for various reasons. They can serve to build suspense and expectations in the reader. A lot of these apparent predictions appear in the beginning of the story, when Death wants the reader to become interested in the story, so he offers a small insight into the upcoming events, which is supposed to attract the reader's attention and appetite for what is to come.

When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started not just to mean something, but everything. Was it when she first set eyes on the room with shelves and shelves of them? Or when Max Vandenburg arrived on Himmel Street carrying handful of suffering and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? Was it reading in the shelters? The last parade to Dachau? Was it *The Word Shaker*? Perhaps there would never be as precise answer as to when and where it occurred. In any case, that's getting ahead of myself. Before we make it to any of that, we first need to tour Liesel Meminger's beginnings on Himmel Street, and the art of saumensching. (Zusak 39,40)

In this extract, Death lists numerous scenes which will all happen in some time throughout the story. All of these scenes refer to Liesel's relationship to books, which in fact determines her development as a character as she evolves from an illiterate nine-year-old girl to an adolescent with several books in her possession, each symbolizing a chapter of her life in Molching. The reason why Death predicts this list of scenes is to offer the readers a

glimpse into the upcoming events in the narrative and thus, lure them to continue further into the story.

Some of the predictions seem to have a specific function to create some expectations: “As mentioned already, the house next door to the Hubermanns was rented by a family called Steiner. The Steiners had six children. One of them, the infamous Rudy, would soon become Liesel’s best friend, and later, her partner and sometime catalyst in crime” (Zusak 48). In the last sentence Death briefly mentions Liesel’s criminal behaviour, which might elicit a certain reaction in the reader, possibly suspense or anticipations. Since the reader knows the novel’s title, in which the word “thief” carries a criminally tainted meaning, they might expect this particular prediction as important and thus become more immersed into the story.

When death foreshadows the death of Rudy Steiner, it is a prediction with probably the strongest emotional load. The very first mention is realized through one of the blocks of text (261):

*** A SMALL ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT RUDY STEINER ***

He didn’t deserve to die the way he did.

This announcement might shock the reader but at the same time create an unusual curiosity towards the upcoming events. At the time the reader cannot be sure whether the death of Rudy Steiner occurs in the novel, but it encourages them to read further, paying full attention. The narrator then continues to reveal information about Rudy’s death, but he withholds any mention about the manner, place or time of the event. “On many counts, taking a boy like Rudy was a robbery – so much life, so much to live for – yet somehow, I’m certain he would have loved to see the frightening rubble and the swelling of the sky on the night he passed away” (Zusak 262).

Later he reveals a small hint that Rudy’s death might be connected with the end of the book: “Of course, I’m being rude. I’m spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it” (Zusak 263). These predictions might decrease and possibly “spoil” the ending of the book, but at the same time they increase the shock and the overall emotional value of the current scene at that particular part of the book. They make the reader wonder about the ending, about what is going to happen and raise numerous questions.

Simultaneously, when the reader has a notion about Rudy's fate, they have a possibility to pay more attention to every part of the narrative where Rudy appears, expecting the tragic event which has been revealed to them, but also enjoying his presence in it.

To summarize, it can be concluded that Death is not omnitemporal, although he makes apparent predictions and foreshadows certain events, which may create an illusion of omnitemporality. All this apparent movement in time does not come from Death's ability to travel through past and future, but from the fact, that Death tells Liesel's story, which had already taken place.

6.4. Omnipresence

Death reports events from his current location in the world of the narrative, similarly as a conventional human narrator would. Although he is able to travel to beyond the world of the living to a world of afterlife which was not further specified, he is not omnipresent as far as the narration is concerned. As a supernatural force he must be able to travel fast or even teleport from one place to another, since death occurs all the time, at various places and sometimes even simultaneously. This may obviously imply Death's ability to be omnipresent, but as far as his narrative competence is concerned, he in fact narrates in the majority of cases only events from the area of Molching, where Liesel's story is taking place, however, he might occasionally jump to Stalingrad or Auschwitz to offer a picture of the atrocities which are going on simultaneously with the story of *The Book Thief*.

Again, the source of knowledge is essential in the question of omnipresence. Death narrates the story several decades after the story actually took place, which allows him to skip between places. Therefore, he is able to insert into the sequence of Liesel's story, which is taking place in Molching, his own strong memories of the events which were taking place at the same time, but in a different place. However, Death did not personally witness the absolute majority of Liesel's story, apart from the three times they met. This means that he is not present in the events at the time they happen. Erin McLeod Gipson concludes: "Death narrates the story in advance what will later be told to and documented by Liesel and revealed to him in her book, which answers for his seeming omnipresent knowledge" (Gipson 26).

6.5. Telepathy

Whether Death is capable of telepathy actually means whether or not he has access to the minds of the characters. It is an ability which naturally comes along with omnipotence, but it is possible for the author to use it separately as well. In the novel, Death is able to read Liesel's mind, see her thoughts and transmit them to the reader. However, this ability is limited only to Liesel and he is not able to enter the minds of other characters. As described in the theoretical part, this situation would correspond to the limited omniscient narrator, were it not for Liesel's authorship of her story. The reason why Death is able to read Liesel's mind can, yet again, be found in the origin of the story. He knows Liesel's thought, as she preserved it in the book, which he had taken from the garbage truck. This simple fact renders the narrator unable of possessing the talent of telepathy.

There are also some passages in the novel, which do not trace Liesel as the protagonist, but put another character in the centre for a while. For instance, the story of Max Vandenburg, which on several pages describes his life, from his childhood days, to the contemporary time and his role of a Jewish fugitive. Or Hans Hubermann's story from World War One also stretching over several pages, telling the story of how Max's father unknowingly saved Hans' life. These little stories might suggest Death's access to the minds of both Hans and Max, but it is not where Death has found them. Only because Liesel recorded these stories in her book is Death able to retell them.

Even the choice of language suggests that Death is not capable of telepathy. He explicitly expresses uncertainty about some facts as he is clearly unable to extract them from the mind of other characters. "I think her mother knew this quite well" (Zusak 25). In this case, Death is not able to certainly say whether her mother knew that at the end of their journey a problem awaits, therefore he chooses to admit his uncertainty. These passages prove that Death's knowledge is widely limited and based solely on Liesel's handwritten autobiography.

Taking all these factors into consideration, it can be said that Death is not a narrator with the ability to read minds of the characters without any limitation. Neither the amount of Death's knowledge, nor the choice of language suggest in any way that Death possesses the gift of telepathy.

7. Death`s reliability

Whether the reader can rely on the truthfulness of Death`s narration can be examined in the fact of what the book represents for him. Death decides to narrate Liesel`s story as it contrasts with the horrors he had personally witnessed at the very same time. He keeps the story as a reminder of the good in people, since he is due to his profession forced to see more of the bad. He keeps the book and as he describes “I can watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time” (Zusak 15). It may seem that the story epitomized a high moral value and therefore it might sway the reader to ask whether Death does or does not embellish some of the narrated events.

As it was already briefly mentioned, Death could possibly take a role of an omniscient narrator of the story, if he wanted. However, such a decision would discredit the story`s reliability, since he would be forced to think certain facts up and adjust and thus change the story according to his will. This would come at the cost of the authenticity of the original story, taking it from Liesel and giving it to Death and as he would be forced to lie and deceive the reader, pretending an all-knowing status, he would thus become an unreliable narrator.

This is not the case, since Death values the authenticity of the story, he reports it in a way which is true to the original. Although he occasionally adds some ideas and beliefs of his own, he always marks the facts he is uncertain about by constructions such as “I think” and “It seems,” etc. Thus, it can be concluded that Death is a reliable narrator.

Conclusion

The theoretical part of this thesis presented several criteria, according to which the analysis of Death as the narrator in *The Book Thief* was performed. Both the author and the novel were introduced, along with several essential terms from narratology, which were necessary for the analysis of the narrator. The thesis aim was to provide the analysis of Death's narrative abilities and to determine whether he is omniscient and whether his narration is reliable. Therefore, the theoretical part presented a general characterization of an omniscient narrator, together with four core attributes of omniscience, according to which the determination of Death's omniscience could be performed.

A suitable term to describe Death's narration is "performative omniscience", which was suggested by Erin McLeod Gipson. It characterizes Death as a narrator who intentionally pretends to be omniscient, but in fact is not. He tries to hide his narrative limitations but does not deceive the reader and occasionally even admits his uncertainty, which makes it possible for the reader to discover that the narrator is not actually omniscient. The theoretical part further includes the definition of narrator's reliability, for the correct examination of the trustworthiness of Death's narration. Lastly, it was necessary to describe the human tendency to personify death in order to be able to characterize Zusak's depiction of Death, which is in many ways different from the typical representations.

The practical part applied the criteria from the theoretical part to the narrator in *The Book Thief*. Even though Death is a supernatural being possessing some sort of higher power, it also resembles a human, as far as the appearance and character is concerned. There are several references in the novel regarding Death's human-like body parts or indicating his human-like way of thinking. The narrator's gender was determined, using the only three situations in the book when Death refers to himself with male pronouns.

Death was described as a homodiegetic narrator. Although he does not interact with any of the other characters, he is still actively present in the story. However, Death directly communicates with the reader, using direct addresses, expecting the readers reactions or thoughts and even asking questions. Through this communication and his partial resemblance to humans, he establishes a closer relationship with the reader. This relationship encourages the reader to sympathize with the narrator, making it easier for them to adopt their perspective and accept Death's narration.

In chapter 6, in the practical part, it was determined that Death is not an omniscient narrator. Death might seem to possess an infinite knowledge and power. He uses techniques which might sway the reader to think that he can see into the future, as he frequently foreshadows important events of the story. This foreshadowing, however, does not actually predict the events. They build expectation and encourage the reader to continue further into the story. It is crucial to be aware of the fact that Death merely retells Liesel's book and meets her personally only three times throughout the story. Most of his knowledge about the narrative comes from the autobiographical book, which Liesel has written herself. This basically denies all four attributes of omniscience and for this reason, Death cannot be described as an omniscient narrator. The last chapter, examined Death's reliability. Death could choose to adopt the omniscient point of view and have a complete control over the narrative, which would, however, force him to reduce the authenticity and trustworthiness of his narration. Since Death does not deceive the narrator and strives to keep the narration as authentic to Liesel's story as possible, it can be concluded that Death is a reliable narrator who values the authenticity of the story.

Works cited

Primary source

- Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Definitions, 2016.

Secondary sources

- Adams, Jenni. „Into Eternity’s Certain Breadth”: Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. *Children's Literature in Education* [online]. 2010, 222-233.
- Diasamdze, Ivdit. Point of View in Narrative Discourse. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* [online]. 2014, 160-165.
- Gipson, Erin M., "A Close Encounter with Death: Narration in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*" 2017. University of Southern Mississippi: Master's Theses, 2018.
- Guthke, Karl S. *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Kissova, Maria. “The Concept of Death in Children’s and Juvenile Literature: Reading and Interpreting Death in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.” *Reimagining Death and Dying: Global Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009, pp. 57-67.
- Kokkola, Lydia. *Representing the Holocaust in children's literature*. Routledge, 2003.
- Margolin, Uri. “Narrator”. *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, <http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narrator>. Accessed 8 March 2013.
- Maughan, Shannon. “It's a Wonderful (Sales) Life: The Staying Power of 'The Book Thief'”. *Publishers Weekly*[online]. 2010.

- Niederhoff, Burkhardt. "Perspective – Point of View". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Perspective_-_Point_of_View. Accessed 11 June 2011.

- Nelles, William. Omniscience for atheists: or, Jane Austen's infallible narrator. *Narrative* [online]. 2006, 118-131.

- Oliveira, Débora Almeida de. "*Haunted by Humans*": *The Uncanny Narrator in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief*. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2017.

- Peterson, Valerie. "Young Adult and New Adult Book Markets: Facts and Figures to Know.". *thebalancecareers*, 8 January 2018, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/the-young-adult-book-market-2799954>

- Riggan, William. *Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs and Clowns: The Unreliable First-person Narrator*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1981.

- Steyn, Dewald M. Looking at the Dark Sun: Aspects of Death, War and the Power of Stories in Markus Zusak and Terry Pratchett's Novels. *Mousaion* [online]. 2017, 28-40