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A Close Encounter with Death: Narration in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH:
NARRATION IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S *THE BOOK THIEF*

by

Erin McLeod Gipson

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
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for the Degree of Master of Arts

August 2017

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ABSTRACT

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH:

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While critics have discussed Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) in terms of the Holocaust, its generic hybridity, and its crossover readership for child and adult audiences, I offer the first narratological reading of its unusual narrator: Death. This reading focuses on the rhetorical strategies underlying Death's contradictory narration, which is at once anthropomorphized and constitutively nonhuman. Scholars of *The Book Thief* often assume the narrator's omniscience, but I find that Death is crucially *not* omniscient; rather, he merely performs omniscience to mask his humanlike limitations. Since current terminology falls short of describing Zusak's narration, I propose the new classification of "performative omniscience" to describe a narrator who strategically pretends to be omniscient, though natural explanations prove he is not. In this new reading I argue that Zusak limits his unnatural narrator to performative omniscience in order to dismantle all performances of omniscience, particularly the "Hitler myth" advanced by the Nazi Party. To teach readers this lesson on the constructedness of all totalizing narratives, Death recruits the reader's trust through his humanlike engaging narration, which builds the credibility of his performance of omniscience.

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DEDICATION

I am sincerely grateful for the unwavering support of my husband and parents during the thesis writing process and my graduate studies. Thank you for encouraging me through these two years of studying, writing, and teaching and for lovingly listening to my thoughts on narration and cultural representations of death.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II – ANTHROPOMORPHIZING DEATH	4
CHAPTER III – ANTHROPOMORPHIZED NARRATION	8
CHAPTER IV – DEBUNKING DEATH’S OMNISCIENCE	16
Omniscience Tool I: Telepathy	17
Omniscience Tool II: Omnipotence	21
Omniscience Tool III: Omnitemporality	23
Omniscience Tool IV: Omnipresence	25
CHAPTER V – PROPOSING “PERFORMATIVE OMNISCIENCE”	27
CHAPTER VI – PERFORMATIVE OMNISCIENCE AND POLITICAL PROPOGANDA	30
WORKS CITED	36

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Markus Zusak's international bestseller *The Book Thief* (2005) tells the story of Liesel Meminger, the eponymous book thief, who is a young girl growing up in Nazi Germany. While critics have discussed the novel in terms of the Holocaust, its generic hybridity, and its crossover readership for child and adult audiences, I offer the first narratological reading of its unusual narrator: Death. Scholars of *The Book Thief* often assume the narrator's omniscience, but I find that Death is crucially *not* omniscient; rather, he merely performs omniscience to mask his humanlike limitations. As we read, we assume Death's omniscience because he is immortal, knows the characters' thoughts, and reveals the tragic future awaiting each character, all qualities that suggest his omniscience. But in small disclosures throughout the text, Death exposes the natural explanations behind his "omniscient" knowledge, which comes secondhand from Liesel's autobiographical book. Since current terminology falls short of describing this experimental narration, I propose the new classification of "performative omniscience" to describe a narrator who strategically pretends to be omniscient, though natural explanations prove he is not. Zusak limits his unnatural narrator to performative omniscience in order to dismantle all performances of omniscience, particularly the "Hitler myth" advanced by the Nazi Party. To teach readers this lesson on the constructedness of all totalizing narratives, Death must convince the reader to believe his omniscience in order to undermine it. Death recruits the reader's trust through his humanlike engaging narration, which builds the credibility of his performance of omniscience.

Set in World War II Germany, the novel mirrors the pervasive sense of death felt by those living under the Nazi regime by using the intrusive narration of Death himself. Grieving the death of her younger brother and separation from her mother, nine-year-old Liesel arrives at the home of her new foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Her foster parents resist the Nazis when they harbor a Jewish family friend named Max, putting the family in danger while giving Liesel a close confidant. After her foster father realizes Liesel cannot read and teaches her, Liesel recognizes the power and comfort in the written word and, in her own small act of retaliation against Hitler's book burnings, she begins to steal books and writes her own. Death finds Liesel's autobiographical book, also titled *The Book Thief*, in the rubble after an air raid on her street. Overworked and weary from witnessing human violence and tragedy, Death narrates Liesel's story in a desperate attempt to recuperate the redeeming qualities of the human race.

When writing *The Book Thief*, Zusak was preoccupied with questions of narration, particularly who—or what—should narrate the story. In his author Tumblr page Zusak explains that after realizing Death was too “macabre,” he tried first person narration by Liesel herself and then third person narration before realizing that Death worked best as the narrator: he only needed a personality change. In trying on and discarding three narrators and two narrative modes—first and third person—Zusak demonstrates the formal strategies underlying Death's narration. With the author's attention to the novel's narrative voice in mind, I focus on the unusual choice of Death as a narrator, considering the rhetorical strategies behind his contradictory narration, which is at once anthropomorphized and constitutively nonhuman.

Although it would seem that Death's narration benefits from unnatural narratology, I argue that Zusak crafts a strangely naturalized version of Death with human appearance, behaviors, and emotions and extends this humanization to Death's narrative ability. Unnatural narratology is a movement within narrative theory that challenges the assumption that all narratives strive to be "mimetic," or realistically resemble our natural world. In *Unnatural Voices*, Brian Richardson calls for a rethinking of our approach to unnatural narration as he argues that unnatural narrators, including animals, impossibly eloquent children, corpses, or machines, cannot be read under our existing standards of mimetic narration (3). As a nonhuman, supernatural entity, Death certainly fits the designation of an unnatural narrator, and in my study of Death's narration, I work within Richardson's assertion that unnatural narrators should not be measured by standards of human consciousness. Nevertheless, in the case of *The Book Thief*, Zusak limits his unnatural narrator to the narrative abilities of a natural, human narrator. Keeping with unnatural narratology's goal to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for *all* narratives and responding to Richardson's call for new approaches to unnatural narration, I contend that we need to account for unnatural narrators with strategically anthropomorphized narration.

CHAPTER II – ANTHROPOMORPHIZING DEATH

Zusak's Death belongs to a long tradition of personifications of death dating back to the Middle Ages. Throughout history, death, unknowable and threatening, becomes concrete and domesticated through creative image making. In his compilation of the history of death images, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*, Karl S. Guthke writes that humans imagine death as "not an animal or animal-like being or a monstrous demon, but as a human figure, specifically a male figure" (13). The most recognizable caricatures of death include the Grim Reaper wielding a sickle or scythe, a skeleton holding an hourglass, a rider or huntsman with a lasso, or a seducing lover. In comparison to these traditional representations of death, Zusak's Death describes himself as decidedly more humanlike in his appearance, behaviors, and personality. Maria Kissova also points out Death's departure from traditional cultural representations of death, identifying Zusak's narrator as "a spiritual entity invisible to a man but having specific physical (a body) and psychical (thoughts, emotions) attributes of a person" (60). In addition to the humanlike physical and emotional attributes identified by Kissova, I add that Death possesses the limited narrating abilities of a person.

Signals of Death's anthropomorphization come dispersed throughout the novel, so the reader becomes gradually acclimated to a version of death as familiar to them as another human. Death makes sly comments that show his awareness of the human personification of death. After Liesel describes a particularly cruel teacher as the "grim reaper" nun, Death comments in a parenthetical aside, "By the way—I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It amuses me" (Zusak 75). Although Death enjoys the human imagining of an ominous death figure, he reveals that humans have it

all wrong. In a chapter entitled “Death’s Diary: 1942,” he asserts: “I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it’s cold out. 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” (307). Death instructs the reader to look in the mirror to understand how he looks (Does he look like us? Or is he trying to show that we are death?), but the text does reveal elements of his physicality and appearance. As we learn throughout the novel, Death cannot hold a sickle, scythe, lasso, hourglass, or torch as he is frequently depicted, because his arms carry an overload of souls. In the above passage, he mentions that he dresses for the temperature, and the text makes it clear that he feels cold as he tells us, “I shiver when I remember—as I try to de-realize it. I blow warm air into my hands, to heat them up” (350). He describes himself in terms of the human body with hands, fingers, and shoulders that ache or burn from the weight of his work, and he has a beating heart, but unlike the mortal human heart that he describes as a line, his immortal heart forms a circle (491). And with that heart, he feels emotion like stress, relaxation, and sadness, even if he cannot comprehend the intensity of human emotion. After imagining how much joy Rudy, Liesel’s best friend who is tragically killed in an air raid, would have felt in knowing that Liesel kissed his lifeless body, Death takes the opportunity to draw sympathy from the reader as he points out, “You see? Even death has a heart” (242). These anthropomorphized attributes offer an alternative to the intimidating or fearful image of death.

To further emphasize his humanization, Zusak’s Death identifies himself with male pronouns, but these brief mentions prove easy to miss, as demonstrated in critical

works on *The Book Thief* by Jenni Adams and Markus Bohlmann. In a footnote Adams explains that she will use the male pronoun to refer to Death, “although Zusak’s Death does not claim a specific gender,” while Bohlmann chooses the non-gendered pronoun “its” to reference Death (224; 265). However, the title page of the prologue chapter announces, “a mountain range of rubble, in which our narrator introduces: himself—the colors—and the book thief,” and later Death speaks of himself in third person: “And then. There is death. Making his way through all of it” (Zusak 2, 309). The text provides only these two usages of the male pronouns “himself” and “his”; in all other cases, Death narrates using the first person “I.” It seems unwarranted to identify a nonhuman with a gender, especially since the text uses the male pronouns only twice, but these seemingly minor moments offer insight into Death’s anthropomorphization.

By identifying himself with the male gender, Death makes it easier for readers to orient themselves to death as a character, since we utilize gender identity as a method for orienting ourselves to other humans. In historical personifications of death, the figure is nearly always given a gender. Guthke points out that in German representations of death, the figure appears as a male, and he cites Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth Aisenberg’s assertion that patriarchal societies, that is, warring or hunting societies, view death as “phallic-penetrating” with death resulting from physical wounds (20). Thus, Death’s male gendering reflects *The Book Thief*’s setting in war-torn Germany. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler redefined our contemporary understanding of gender as a socially constructed act that creates the gendered self. By adopting a gender, Death establishes himself as a member of society and adheres to its social norms and expectations. Butler’s theory dismantles the concept of gender as a natural construct,

which allows our unnatural, nonhuman narrator to make the same performance. Because Death mirrors the human performance of gender, readers can approach Death with the same social markers of gender used in human interaction. His use of male pronouns to describe himself, rather than an unnatural “it,” makes the idea of a personified death more persuasive.

CHAPTER III – ANTHROPOMORPHIZED NARRATION

In addition to his anthropomorphized personality and physicality, Death humanizes himself by employing the strategies of engaging narration that allow him to speak directly to the reader and develop a shared reading and narrating experience. Robyn Warhol's *Gendered Interventions* identifies a nineteenth-century technique of engaging narration, in which the narrator strives to close the gap between the "you" narratee of the text and the actual reader to move that reader to sympathize with the writer's cause.¹ The engaging narrator uses direct address to evoke recognition and identification in the person who holds the book and reads (29). Warhol sees engaging narration primarily as a feminine technique, because nineteenth-century female writers had to use their fiction as a platform for social change as they were denied a voice in the public sphere. However, since engaging narration focuses more on the author's agency to speak in the public realm than gender itself, we can extend the rhetorical techniques to include all marginalized voices, including but not limited to feminine voices. Death employs the confiding, persuasive interventions of engaging narration, because he has no means to communicate with humans outside of *The Book Thief*. Strict laws forbid Death from speaking to humans while they live, so he cannot fulfill his desire to comfort Liesel because, as he explains, "that is not allowed" (Zusak 7). In addition to humanizing Death by giving him an earnest voice that recruits the reader's sympathy, engaging narration

¹ Warhol cites Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-1852), and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) as examples of nineteenth century novels that use engaging strategies of direct address and interventions spoken in earnest to move actual readers to sympathize with the real political causes represented in the fiction.

suits the narrative voice of Death. For instance, in her reading of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, Warhol identifies a brief switch from the novel's primarily distancing narration to engaging narration only to narrate the scene of Jo's death. She cites Barbara Hardy who calls Dickens' use of engaging narration "the perfect voice for death," in which, "the individual experience is given a resonance and intensity, the reader's sympathy engaged through ritual or ritualistic appeals" (qtd. in Warhol 73). Both Hardy and Warhol note that the voice of death should be universalizing and sympathetic, which lends itself to engaging narration. Zusak gives his personified Death the same narrating voice, one that persuasively and earnestly recruits the trust of the reader.

Death uses engaging interventions to build a relationship with the actual reader and thereby demystify death, and he begins working towards that purpose by speaking directly to the reader. Death addresses the reader as "you" so frequently that at times the book seems to shift to second person narration. According to Warhol, an engaging narrator addresses the narratee with naming that includes all readers, most frequently "you"; in contrast, a distancing narrator speaks to the reader in more narrow ways that prevent the majority of readers from identifying with the "you" (33). On the first page of his narration, Death announces, "You are going to die" (Zusak 3). The "you" as it is used here applies to *all* readers of the novel, because mortality is universal. But who is the "you" to which Death makes his direct address? The answer lies in the novel's publication history. Zusak originally published *The Book Thief* in Australia as general fiction, but in its international marketing in the United States and United Kingdom, publishers marketed the novel as children's and/or young adult literature. The novel's crossover readership provides insight into *The Book Thief*'s audience and whether or not

those readers identify with the “you” of Death’s narration. In her analysis of the novel’s crossover readership in terms of children’s Holocaust literature, Jenni Adams answers using Marianne Hirsch’s theorization on the triangular field of looking that occurs when an adult viewer sees a child victim through the eyes of his or her own child self. Adams concludes that adult readers’ awareness that they are reading a text marketed to a child reader causes the adult reader to read the text through the imagined perspective of a co-reading child (229). When we apply Adams’ findings, then the “you” of Death’s direct address speaks to “you” the adult reader, “you” the adolescent reader, and the “you” of the co-reading child constructed by adult readers. Even though Zusak’s target audience changed due to international marketing strategies, the “you” of Death’s direct address still speaks to all reading audiences. While critics, such as Jenni Adams and Aliona Yarova, write persuasively on the novel’s effects for child readers, it is important to note that the text encourages all readers, regardless of age, to identify with the “you.” Since death remains unknowable to all humans, the universal “you” allows the demystification of death to be available to readers of all ages.

The goal of engaging narration is to get the actual reader to identify with the “you” in the narration, and Death carefully includes all reading situations: “Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and color” (Zusak 5). He anticipates his readers’ responses and addresses the issues that he feels might hinder the reader’s ability to sympathize with him, by admitting, “I am in all truthfulness trying to be cheerful about this whole thing, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me” (3). Death employs techniques of inoculation theory by presenting the reader with common

barriers to his persuasion and showing an awareness of the reader's hesitation towards him. He uses earnest language, "please," followed by a command to the reader, "trust me," as a formula for his direct addresses the reader, such as, "I urge you—don't be afraid" (3).

Warhol identifies the engaging narrator's tendency to invite the reader into the fiction through an exercise of imagination, and Death frequently uses this narrative technique to shape the reading experience in support of his purpose of gaining the reader's sympathy (36). In other words, if he can persuade the reader to interpret the narrative as he intends, he can more likely persuade the reader to adopt his perspective on humanity. He calls attention to the image-making process that occurs when reading by prompting readers to visualize the scene on the train when Liesel's younger brother died: "If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Think bits and pieces of floating despair" (Zusak 21). Death's explanation implies that he believes readers will struggle to comprehend the characters' grief, and he offers instructions to guide the reader. He continues to bring readers into the text by requiring us to use personal memories to fill in gaps of the narration, with explanations like, "I'm sure you've met people like this," standing in for character description (34). Keeping with tenets of engaging narration, Death assumes the reader remains in perfect sympathy with him, as demonstrated by statements such as, "as you might expect..." and "as I'm sure you've already noticed" (6, 39). These statements slowly condition the reader to see the events from Death's perspective, because we want to be the ideal reader who picks up on foreshadowing or accurately predicts the plot development.

Death's engaging narration encourages readers to identify with the "you" to whom he makes his direct address and conditions readers to adopt his thought process, gradually advancing from telling the reader how to interpret an event to posing "question and answer" tests that assume the reader's accuracy. Reflecting the playfulness of postmodern texts, Death interrupts his narration with bolded and centered blocks of text to offer tests to the reader. In one example, he tells of Frau Holtzapfel, one of Liesel's neighbors, whose daily ritual involved spitting on the Hubermanns' door as she walked past. Instead of narrating the full event, Death offers a direct address to the reader:

*****A SMALL QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER*****

And who do you think was made to clean the spit off the door each night?

Yes—you got it (Zusak 44).

These bolded and centered blocks of text, with separate titles marked with asterisks and all-caps, disrupt Death's narration of Liesel's story to catch the reader's attention, and therefore, alert the reader of Death's direct address. In this example, the narrator shows such confidence that his reader follows his narration and will guess correctly that, ironically, he withholds the "answer" promised in the title. He includes the reader in the narration by explicitly drawing on the actual reader's potential responses. For example, he predicts, "Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a color," and counters this assumed argument (6). He tailors his narration to the individual interests of his readers; for example, when summarizing Max's life before he became a fugitive with the Hubermann family, he adds in Max's relationship status for certain readers: "If you're the type who's interested, yes, there were a few girls in those years" (192). Death acts as the readers' guide to the narrative, acknowledging the reader's

competence and helping them understand the characters' intense emotions, visualize the setting, and apply their own experiences to the text. By using rhetorical strategies that encourage readers to adopt his perspective on the events of the novel, Death creates a partnership between reader and narrator that opens the possibility for readers to accept—rather than fear—Death.

As his engaging narration breaks the natural barrier of distrust between himself and his reader, Death begins to fuse himself with the reader using “we” narration. Despite his announcements to remind the reader that unlike the narrator, “you’re a human,” Death is more interested in aligning himself and the reader as joint witnesses to the tragedies of World War II presented in the text. In the first example, he writes, “Now for a change of scenery. We’ve both had it easy till now, my friend, don’t you think?” (138). After being immersed in Death’s narration for over 100 pages, the idea of Death as a friend seems natural. His leading question, “don’t you think?” conditions the reader to agree, and his claim that both he and the reader have “had it easy” fuses reading and narrating into a shared experience. In this use of the pronoun “we,” Death refers to himself and readers as separate beings joined together by a shared event. Near the novel’s end, Death offers a new fusion of himself with the reader as he instructs, “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. The first bomb hits Tommy Müller’s apartment block. His face twitches innocently in his sleep and I kneel at his bed” (529). The strategic switch from the derivatives of “you” pronouns to the first person “I” forces readers to imagine themselves *as* Death.

Death's use of "we" narration in his foreshadowing of the most devastating event of the novel, and later in its full narration, implies that we, the reader, share some responsibility for the events. Much earlier in the novel, Death foreshadows his fusion with the reader in the climactic air raid on Himmel Street, although at the time, we do not know the extent of the event's devastation. In the scene, we learn that Liesel's book stealing motivates her foster father to apply for membership with the Nazi Party to avoid suspicion that he doesn't support the Nazi regime, and more critically, to avoid suspicion that he harbors a Jewish fugitive. Death casts doubt on the effectiveness of Hans's strategy, but cedes, "For now, though, let's let him enjoy it. We'll give him seven months. Then we come for him. Oh how we come" (128). The collective pronoun "we" does not necessarily include the reader; Death could use "we" to refer to himself and some other entity that will come for Hans. But since he begins with "let's," there's no question that only the reader can be included in the contracted "us."

We move from accepting Death as the narrator to receiving Death as a friend and guide to the story, and finally, to envisioning ourselves in Death's shoes, should he wear them. These fusions of Death with the reader answer my earlier questions regarding Death's instructions for the reader to look in a mirror to understand him (Does he look like us? Or is he trying to show that death *is* us?). Through the "we" narration and the fusion of the image of Death and the reader in the mirror, Death reminds us that the image of death is nothing more than a projection of human consciousness, and in that sense, we—as humans—are death. In their scholarship on *The Book Thief*, Kissova and Yarova reach similar conclusions that Death's limitations force readers to recognize that in times of war, humans must take responsibility for the violence and death. While

persuaded by their conclusions, I argue that it is the rhetorical techniques of his anthropomorphized narration that allow Death to align readers sympathetically with his message that we shouldn't fear death—we should fear what humans are capable of doing to one another. In addition to recruiting the reader to accept his outsider perspective on the human race, Death's use of engaging narration conditions the reader to trust his performance of omniscience.

CHAPTER IV – DEBUNKING DEATH’S OMNISCIENCE

Although Death appears to be an omniscient narrator, I argue that his narrative ability is limited to the restrictions of a human homodiegetic, or first person, narrator. Scholars frequently misread Death as an omniscient narrator, including Corinne Buckland who addresses Death’s “unique...omniscient witness not only to the Holocaust but also to the procession of previous atrocities in previous generations” (77), and Kissova who claims Death possesses the abilities of “an omniscient narrator and a character” (60). While Buckland and Kissova assume Death’s omniscience, Yarova offers support for her claim of omniscience, and goes so far as to propose, “readers accept Death’s total omniscience” (62). In addition to being misread as an omniscient narrator, Death has been misread as a heterodiegetic narrator, when he is in fact a homodiegetic narrator, or character within the world he narrates. Gérard Genette uses the term homodiegetic to describe a narrator who is a character in the story world, and this certainly applies to Zusak’s narrator. Unlike Yarova who identifies Death as a heterodiegetic narrator (69), I contend, alongside Maria Kissova (60) and Steve Rasnic Tem (43), that Death is a character in Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. Even though he primarily tells Liesel’s story, Death relates her story to his own experiences of the same WWII events in sections titled “Death’s Diary.” Death plays an active role in the same world as the characters, even if he is not bound by the conventions of human existence. Death functions as a narrator and character in the novel; his narrative ability, however, proves more complicated to classify.

As a supernatural, nonhuman narrator, Death allows for the rare case where a homodiegetic narrator could demonstrate pure omniscience, but Death is, I argue, not

omniscient. Many narratologists find fault with the slipperiness of the term “omniscience” to describe a narrator because there is not a concrete definition for what we mean by the word. “Omniscience” functions as a catchall term to describe a variety of narrative techniques, and most theorists find the conflation of an author with an all-knowing God insufficient.² To rectify the imprecision of the term, William Nelles redefines omniscience as “a toolbox, with different novelists using the different tools within it in distinctive ways” and offers four tools of omniscience: omnipotence, omnipresence, omnitemporality, and telepathy (119). Using Nelles’ rubric for omniscience, we see that despite our expectation for omniscient narration, Death does not fully possess *any* of the four types.

Omniscience Tool I: Telepathy

I begin with Nelles’ last level of omniscience, telepathy, or mindreading, as it influences the absence of the other three and is the ability often thought of first when determining omniscience. Death knows Liesel’s mind and the thoughts and emotions of the other characters, but he only performs telepathy, rather than actually being capable of it. He attributes his intimate knowledge of Liesel’s experiences to her autobiographical book, also titled *The Book Thief*, which he finds in the rubble following a devastating air raid on her street. From the notebook, Death learns Liesel’s thoughts, perceptions, and emotions during important moments of her life. Like a human homodiegetic narrator, Death’s knowledge is limited to his personal experiences and the secondhand knowledge

² See Jonathan Culler’s “Omniscience,” *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2004, pp. 22-34, and Nicholas Royle’s *The Uncanny*, Routledge, 2003.

he gets from reading Liesel's book. After divulging that he has read Liesel's book several thousand times over the years, Death describes his limited narrative process: "I would watch the places where we intersect, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do—watch it fall in line with everything else I spectated during that time" (Zusak 14). When reading the novel, we assume that Death reads the minds of the characters, especially when he uses misleading phrases, such as "In Liesel's mind..." or "In her memory" (56, 57). But in these disclosures, Death only narrates Liesel's mind as she preserved her thoughts in her book. He occasionally exposes the natural explanations of his narrating knowledge in easy-to-miss and brief phrasing, where he cites her book as his source of information: "After reading *The Book Thief*, I discovered that she called everyone that" or "When she wrote about that night..." (532, 99). These phrases allow Death to discreetly attribute his knowledge to Liesel's book, before narrating an event with seemingly omniscient knowledge.

Because Death cannot read the characters' minds, he often fills in the gaps of his narration with speculation, signified by hedging phrases such as, "*I think* her mother knew this quite well" (25, emphasis added). Death bypasses the gaps in Liesel's autobiography and embellishes with his imagined interpretation of events as needed. Death reminds the reader that he is limited to the information provided in Liesel's book, with phrases like "...which, for all we know..." and "He never did explain it to Liesel, but I think..." (29, 303). These moments position Liesel as the focalizer of the text. According to Genette, internal focalization describes a narrative restriction in which the narrator has access only to the mind of the focal character, in this case, Liesel Meminger. It is important to note that unlike true internal focalization, Death cannot actually read

Liesel's mind, but the terminology usefully describes Death's limitation to what Liesel knows and writes in her book.³ Because Liesel carefully observes and documents her family and friends' thoughts as they are told to her, Death can use this knowledge from her book to relay their thoughts, as well. In an explicit statement on his narrative restriction, Death explains, "Max, Hans, and Rosa I cannot account for, but I know that Liesel Meminger was thinking..." (384). Here we see that Death cannot read their minds, and he cannot know what Max, Hans, and Rosa think unless Liesel preserves that information in her book.

Death sometimes narrates events outside of Liesel's knowledge, like her foster parents' lives before she came to live with them, distant war events, or information shielded from Liesel. These moments seem to show Death's omniscience, but he explains that these secondary stories also come from Liesel's book where she narrates past events that have been revealed to her as she matures. Death narrates the war stories of Hans Hubermann and the events that led to his fallen friend's Jewish son hiding in their basement when they occur in the story, so it appears that he operates outside of Liesel's knowledge. However, Death's knowledge can be naturally explained because Liesel's foster father later told her the full story, which she documented in her book. Death describes the subject she learned, "He explained World War I and Erik Vandenburg, and the visit to the fallen soldier's wife," as well as Liesel's careful attention to Hans's

³ In "Death and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak," Steve Rasnic Tem supports my reading of Liesel Meminger as a focal character: "Everything we know is filtered either through his senses or through the notebook the young girl Liesel Meminger has written recording the most traumatic events in her life" (43).

stories: “The book thief sat and listened to Hans Hubermann’s story. It lasted a good hour” (202). This combination of scene and summary allows Death to narrate Hans Hubermann’s close encounters with death during World War I and II, his risky decision to evade the Nazi Party by harboring a war buddy’s Jewish son, and how he met his wife. Death chooses to narrate these subplots in scene to make his narration more dynamic and showcase his seemingly omniscient knowledge. Sometimes, when Liesel’s recollections are insufficient, the narrator steps in to supplement the text with information that only he can know: “She would never know how it occurred, but I can tell you without question that one of us here knows. I always seem to know what happened when there was snow and guns and the various confusions of human language” (458). In times of war with few survivors, Death may be the sole witness to the events, so his knowledge of war events comes from his witnessing the event rather than telepathic ability. Moreover, Death uses hedging language in stating, “I always *seem* to know what happened,” which curbs the assertion of all-knowing omniscience (458, emphasis added). Keeping with the restrictions of human homodiegetic narrators, Death’s contributions to Liesel and Hans’s stories come from what he sees and knows, and as he tells us, no one knows war better than Death.

Despite his limitations, Death possesses the supernatural ability to intuit people’s life-flashed-before-my-eyes experiences in their last living moments, which grants him partial telepathy, but because mentions of the so-called “love visions” are brief and infrequent, and in the rest of the novel he is restricted from the characters’ minds, he cannot be considered a telepathic narrator. Death describes the experience of the visions when narrating the tragic death of Rudy, Liesel’s closest friend and childhood crush, who

was killed when a bomb exploded on their street: “With him, I tried a little harder. I watched the contents of his soul for a moment and saw a black-painted boy calling the name Jesse Owens as he ran through an imaginary tape. I saw him hip-deep in some icy water, chasing a book, and I saw a boy lying in bed, imagining how a kiss would taste from his glorious next-door neighbor” (531). In Liesel’s book, Death discovers the details of the Jesse Owens incident, the icy book-chasing escapade, and Rudy’s frequent attempts to kiss Liesel, so the vision supplements what he will later learn. In the above passage, Death also reveals that he must exert effort to see these dying visions, rather than experiencing the visions naturally. Liesel stops writing her book when she is fourteen years old, after losing her family in the deadly air raid, but Death’s narration spans Liesel’s entire life. When Liesel dies of old age, having lived a long, fulfilling life, Death witnesses her “love vision” and later uses those images to fill in the most significant events that take place in the gap from the end of *The Book Thief* to her death. These flashbacks allow him to narrate Liesel’s experiences immediately after she becomes the sole survivor of the bomb strike that kills her family and friends, as well as her emotional reunions with Rudy’s father and Max after the war. The “love visions” provide the narration for only 6 out of 550 pages; moreover, no scholars mention the “love visions” as evidence for their claims of Death’s omniscience, which further demonstrates the visions’ minimal effect on Death’s narrative ability.

Omniscience Tool II: Omnipotence

Even though he is a nonhuman, supernatural being, Death cannot be omnipotent because he is a character within the world of Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, not a metafictional creator standing outside the realm of the story. Nelles describes omnipotence as the most

godlike of the omniscient tools, as it applies to a narrator who doubles as the creator of his story world. An omnipotent narrator controls the actions and fates of the characters because he created them as fiction.⁴ Death bemoans his limited power in the world and often takes the attitude of an overworked employee trying to keep up with his demanding boss—war. Death reminds the reader, “I am a result,” and he insists he has no influence over who lives and who dies (6). In addition to his narrative restrictions, Death is limited in agency. He wants to tell Liesel that he’s sorry for the suffering she experienced, but cannot because “that is not allowed” and can only stay to watch Liesel “as long as [his] schedule allowed” (13, 7). The emphasis on “allowed” implies a set of rules or laws dictate Death’s schedule and his interactions with humans, but it is unclear who or what governs the world of *The Book Thief*. Death turns to an authoritative God when he is troubled by the horrific violence of humanity, but because of Death’s skepticism towards God, the governing force of the world remains unknown: “God. Twice I speak it. I say His name in a futile attempt to understand. ‘But it’s not your job to understand.’ That’s me who answers. God never says anything. You think you’re the only one he never answers?” (350). The capitalized “His” demonstrates a degree of reverence typically shown by the Judeo-Christian church, and by turning to God for answers, he imbues God with authoritative knowledge. But the silence from God either implies that, in the world

⁴ In an example of omnipotent narration, William Thackeray’s narrator in *Vanity Fair* (1848) refers to the characters as his puppets, in the sense that the narrator decides their actions, and concludes the novel with “Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (657). Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* (1857) offers an example of omnipotent narration in Chapter 15 when the narrator interjects as the novelist to explain that he would never allow “[his] Eleanor” to marry Mr. Slope, implying that the narrator determines the fates of the characters (132).

of *The Book Thief*, God does not exist or that Death cannot directly communicate with God. His unanswered prayer aligns him with human religious beliefs and doubts, as well as human restrictions from the spiritual realm. In either reading, Death's knowledge of God or the meaning of life proves as limited as humans', which further demystifies Death himself by aligning him more closely with the human reader than a supernatural God.⁵

Omniscience Tool III: Omnitemporality

Death is not omnitemporal, although it *appears* that he moves freely through the past and future. According to Nelles, narrators are omnitemporal when their narration is free from time restrictions, which allows them to narrate from the far past and future of the narrating position. Death's immortality allows him to have knowledge of the indefinite past—he alludes to the busy years of 79 and 1346—so we can say he is partially omnitemporal, but the information relevant to his narration in *The Book Thief* is recent and covers a realistic human life span. Nelles points out that even though extensive knowledge of the past can be explained in human terms, full knowledge of the future is exclusively granted to godlike agents (121). Death's narrative frequently uses prolepses, or flash-forwards, to reveal how and when a character will die; however, he narrates the story from decades in the future, so his prolepses do not indicate supernatural knowledge of the future. Death only narrates what has already happened from his narrating position. Tem claims that because the narrator is Death, "we can assume he is timeless and reliable in his predictions of what is to come," and, while Tem is correct that we can trust Death's foreshadowing, he misses that Death is not making predictions at all (44). Death's

⁵ Buckland also reads this scene as evidence of Zusak "keeping Death human" (79).

reliability comes from his narrating position in the future where the foreshadowed events have already occurred, not from a supernatural ability to predict the future.

Because he narrates from a position decades after the story's events, Death's narration creates an illusion of omnitemporality, with statements such as, "We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it" or "The Steiners have 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 19, 47). Death tells the story in the order he sees fit, which significantly rearranges the order from Liesel's book. He recognizes that his narration breaks from traditional plot conventions as he explains, "Of course, I'm being rude. I'm spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chokes me. I know what happens and so do you" (243). He includes his self-conscious ordering decisions in the narrative: "Then came an incident I'll fully present to you soon enough"; "Before I show you, I think we should first take a look at what he was seeing prior to his decision" (104, 127). The order of the narration allows for dramatic irony even though the information comes from Liesel herself, because in Death's narration, events can occur before Liesel becomes aware of them. In an example of the dramatic irony, he reveals, "So there you have it. You're well aware of exactly what was coming to Himmel Street by the end of 1940. I know. You know. Liesel Meminger, however, cannot be put in that category" (142). The anachronies, or nonlinear narrative, create an illusion of omnitemporality, but because Death narrates from a position decades in the future from the story time, he does not demonstrate omniscient knowledge of the future.

Omniscience Tool IV: Omnipresence

Death is not bound to the same spatial restrictions as humans, but he cannot be called omnipresent because he can only be in one place in the world at once and cannot report events firsthand unless he is present. He delivers souls to a vaguely and briefly described afterlife, so he demonstrates an ability to move beyond the earthly realm, but Death does not narrate from an all-seeing position above the Earth. Just like human character narrators, Death only knows what he sees based on his location in the world; it just so happens, as he puts it, “I’m in most places at least once, and in 1943, I was just about everywhere” (Zusak 539). In her examination of inverted magic realism in the novel, Aliona Yarova identifies Death as an omniscient narrator because “he knows what is happening in many places at the same time, and can also be physically present as a spirit” (61). She supports her observation by close reading the following passage from the novel: “Now for a change of scenery [...] How about we forget Molching for a minute or two? [...] We will travel a little, to a secret storage room, and we will see what we see. A GUIDED TOUR OF SUFFERING To your left, perhaps your right, perhaps even straight ahead, you find a small black room. In it sits a Jew” (Zusak 138). Death offers a “change of scenery” as he transitions from narrating Liesel’s discovery of the mayor’s wife’s library to the storage room where Max, the at this point unidentified Jew, sits in hiding. Yarova reads this scene as evidence that Death can narrate events happening in different locations simultaneously, and thereby identifies death as a more reliable omniscient narrator (61). While it certainly seems that Death’s move between the two scenes signifies omnipresence, we must remember that he narrates decades in the future from the events in his story. His proposals for a “change of scenery” and “to travel” signify only a

shift in the setting of his story—not an actual location change. But the question of Death’s knowledge of an event happening “a few hundred miles northwest [...] far from book thieves, mayors’ wives, and Himmel Street” remains (Zusak 139). In this scene Death introduces us to Max Vanderburg, the hidden Jew, and discloses Max’s thoughts and emotions as he suffers in isolation. It seems that Death must be physically present in the room at the same time he narrates Liesel’s encounter in the library, as Yarova claims; however, Death’s narration of these scenes has the same natural explanation as his knowledge of Hans Hubermann’s war stories. Later in the novel, after Max arrives at the Hubermanns’ home, Hans decides Max must keep up morale by telling his story to the family and “so began a kind of storytelling phase in the living room each night [...] The pieces of a Jewish fist-fighting puzzle were assembled before them all” (217). Death includes a list of the types of questions that Hans, Rosa, and Liesel asked Max, and these questions correspond to the information included in Death’s earlier narration of the isolated room. Here too Death narrates 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. Death must defer to Liesel’s narration of events in her book because he was not present for those moments and does not have the ability of an omnipresent, all-seeing narrator.

CHAPTER V – PROPOSING “PERFORMATIVE OMNISCIENCE”

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, including Genette’s focalization, fall short. As an alternative to omniscience, Genette offers focalization to describe the types of restrictions placed on the narrator’s knowledge and abilities. But even these categories of focalization seem insufficient to describe Death’s narration. Zero focalization describes a narrator who knows more than the characters and is traditionally aligned with an omniscient narrator, but we have already seen that Zusak restricts Death’s narrating knowledge to Liesel’s book (Genette 189). Even so, Death does at times know more than his characters in the order of his narration, especially in moments of dramatic irony, and he knows at least some thoughts of all the major characters. His narration is focalized through Liesel’s knowledge and emotions as he reads it in her book, so we see an impure version of internal focalization, meaning the narrator can access the mind of one character (193). But Death cannot actually read Liesel’s mind, and he supplements her perceptions with his own or with information that she does not know yet. External focalization describes a narrator who knows less than the characters and only reports his observations, which accurately describes Death’s natural ability, but Liesel’s book grants him a sort of access to the characters’ minds (190). The mixing of nonfocalization, internal focalization, and external focalization demonstrates a humanlike narrative privilege—Death knows the thoughts of many characters (nonfocalization) as they have been relayed to him by one central character (internal focalization), but he cannot enter the minds of any characters (external focalization).

Audrey Jaffe's "semi-omniscience" and Ruediger Heinze's "illusory paralepsis" get closer to naming the experimental narration in *The Book Thief*, but I find these terms insufficient for describing Death's narration because they fail to account for an unnatural homodiegetic narrator. Jaffe takes her position on homodiegetic narrators who know too much with the term "semi-omniscience," which points to the tensions between the supposed limitations of first-person narration and the limitlessness of third-person narration.⁶ Semi-omniscience implies that the narrator demonstrates partial omniscience, which seems too generous for Death's limitations. Heinze uses the term "paralepsis," Genette's term for the inclusion of information outside of the perceiver's viewpoint, in place of "omniscience" to describe "the phenomenon of a first-person narrator knowing and/or sensing something to which he/she should not have access by all that we as readers know about human cognition and perception" (282). Heinze explains that illusory paralepsis describes when delayed disclosure reveals there are natural, realistic sources of the narrator's unusual knowledge (282).⁷ It is important to note that paralepsis signifies a *problem* of the narrator knowing too much information by human standards for knowledge; but in this case, the seemingly omniscient narration fits most readers' imaginations of Death's supernatural abilities. We *expect* Death to know more than humans and find it jarring that his narrative privilege comes from a banal, natural explanation.

⁶ Jaffe offers case studies of "semi-omniscient" figures in Dickens' novels, such as Boz, Master Humphrey, Florence Dombey, Mr. Carker, David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and John Harmon, all of whom act as "surrogates" for an omniscient narrator.

⁷ Ruediger Heinze cites Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight* or Iris Murdoch's *The Philosopher's Pupil* as examples of illusory paralepsis.

I offer the new term “performative omniscience” to characterize the narration of a narrator who intentionally pretends to possess omniscient knowledge that can be explained by natural events or causes. Zusak’s Death is a nonhuman, homodiegetic narrator who performs omniscience to mask his humanlike narrative limitations. Because Death exposes the natural explanations behind his omniscience, we can see that he is not attempting to trick the reader. Here we must ask why Death bothers to make the performance at all rather than admitting his narrative limitations outright. Death wants the reader to see his performance of omniscience as just that—a performance—to call attention to the impossibility of perfect knowledge. 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; and in exposing the performance, he calls attention to the constructedness of perfect knowledge.

CHAPTER VI – PERFORMATIVE OMNISCIENCE AND POLITICAL PROPOGANDA

In dominant readings of *The Book Thief*, scholars consider how the novel confronts child audiences with their own mortality and the traumatic history of the Holocaust;⁸ while this may be the case for its youngest readers, reading *The Book Thief* as young adult or adult fiction supports a more sophisticated takeaway for readers. Although scholars debate the novel's audience, I find the case for a mature audience of young adults and adults most persuasive. I agree with Buckland's assessment of the novel's audience, which emphasizes the impact of Death's narration: "Despite the protagonist being a child, and the frequent market of the book as children's fiction, Death's barbed irony and shockingly vivid description suggest otherwise" (72). Karen Coats, in "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory," weighs in on the ongoing debate on how to demarcate children's literature from young adult literature. Coats offers a distinction "more ideological in nature," as she argues, "a book with a closed moral universe, that is, a plot line that features punishment for the wicked and reward for the good, is more likely to be preadolescent, whereas a book that calls that moral universe into question [...] is clearly YA" (322). Zusak certainly calls the moral universe into question, as readers must grapple with the death of innocent children, as well as Liesel's grief over the devastating loss of her family and friends. No character in the novel, no matter their morality, escapes the tragedy, which aligns *The Book Thief* with a more mature reading audience. As he

⁸ Examples include Adams' "Into Eternities Certain Breadth," Kissova's "The Concept of Death in Children's and Juvenile Literature: Reading and Interpreting Death in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak," and Yarova's "Haunted by Humans: Inverting the Reality of the Holocaust in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*."

struggles to understand the human race, Death admits, “I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race—that rarely do I ever *estimate* it” (550). Coats applies Death’s message to literary criticism, as she charges readers, educators, and critics to *estimate* young adult readers instead of over or underestimating their abilities and responses to literature. In this same vein, I find Zusak indeed estimates his readers as capable of a more critical lesson from the novel than critics previously note.

Because Death encourages readers to see through his performative omniscience, Zusak’s novel provides readers with tools for evaluating and dismantling other performances of perfect knowledge. Similar to young adult dystopian literature, *The Book Thief* allows readers to critically examine social and political issues within the context of a fictional, distant setting; but instead of looking to an imagined, futuristic society, Zusak embeds the social and political critique in historical fiction. Death’s performative omniscience mirrors the rhetoric of Nazi propaganda, and his performative omniscience encourages readers to question how other political leaders build their authority through the dissemination of propaganda.

Like “Hitler myth” propaganda, Death manufactures an image of himself as an omniscient narrator to persuade his audience; but unlike Nazi propagandists, Death wants us to see through the illusion. The novel inadvertently addresses what scholars refer to as the “Hitler myth” when Max explains, “Yes, the Führer decided that he would rule the world with words,” and by sharing this message with Liesel, Max helps her see how Hitler manipulates her fellow citizens into following his leadership (Zusak 445). Ian Kershaw theorizes the “Hitler myth” to describe the “heroic” and popular image of Hitler

put forth by Nazi propagandists to form a rallying point for the regime (2). Kershaw's study focuses on the *image* of Hitler and argues, "the 'Hitler myth' was consciously devised as an integrating force by a regime acutely aware of the need to manufacture consensus. Hitler himself, as is well known, paid the greatest attention to the building of his public image" (3). Kershaw's use of invention language to describe the propaganda, like "manufacture" and "building," emphasizes that the "Hitler myth" did not naturally or inexplicably develop as an effect of Hitler's rise to power; instead, party propagandists developed the image in an intentional, strategic, and constructed manner. Similarly, Death uses performative omniscience to create an image of narrative authority, and he underscores the constructedness of his narrative by showing readers *how* he constructs his narrative.

By mimicking the rhetorical strategies of the "Hitler myth" through his engaging narration and performative omniscience, Death shows contemporary readers how the Nazi Party carefully manipulated German citizens into supporting the regime and elevated Hitler to a superhuman leader above dissension. Max recreates Hitler's persuasive rhetoric when he tells Liesel a fictional story of a boxing match between himself and Hitler that serves as an allegory for the persecution of the Jews. When it appears that Hitler might lose the match, he addresses the arena: "'My fellow Germans,' he called, 'you can see something here tonight, can't you? [...] You can see that what we face is something far more sinister and powerful than we ever imagined. Can you see that?'" (Zusak 254). This passage demonstrates the similarities between Hitler's political rhetoric to German citizens and Death's mimicking engaging narration: both speakers use direct address and "we" narration to manufacture a fused relationship with the audience

and leading questions (“can’t you?”) to encourage the audience to agree. Here we see how Death and Hitler use similar strategies of engaging rhetoric to earn their audience’s trust to support their end goal of projecting omniscient authority.

The similarities between the strategic construction of narratives by Zusak’s Death and Nazi propagandists extend to the *type* of image both attempt to create—omnipotent, authoritative, and charismatic. Kershaw notes that in their portrayals of Hitler, Nazi propagandists were “keen to avoid any hint of human failings”; moreover, Hitler himself was aware of the importance of his “omnipotent image” to his leadership and the strength of the Nazi regime (3). Citing Max Weber’s identification of Hitler as the prime example of charismatic leadership in *Economy and Society*, Kershaw explains, “Charismatic authority rests on the ‘heroism or exemplary character’ of the leader, on the qualities by which ‘he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers’” (4). The language describing the image of Hitler as omnipotent, devoid of human failing, and possessing superhuman abilities speaks to characteristics of omniscience. Kershaw uses the language of performance as he asserts that Hitler “well understood his own function, *the role which he had to act out* as ‘Leader of the Third Reich’” (3, emphasis added). In the same way that I describe Death’s omniscience as a performance, as opposed to the narrator actually possessing all-knowing knowledge, Kershaw emphasizes the performative aspects of Hitler’s political image.

The Book Thief’s protagonists represent the minority of Germans who saw through the “Hitler myth” and resisted the persuasive tactics of Nazi propaganda, which conditions the reader to see through the performance, as well. Death informs the reader,

“In 1933, 90 percent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler. That leaves 10 percent who didn’t. Hans Hubermann belonged to the 10 percent” (Zusak 63). Liesel joins her foster father in the 10 percent when she realizes Hitler’s responsibility for the separation of her family, after associating the attacks on “*Kommunisten*” at a Nazi Party rally with accusations against her birth parents (115). As a result of seeing through the “Hitler myth,” Hans and Liesel strategically craft their own performances of allegiance to the *Führer* to protect themselves. In their efforts to avoid suspicion that they do not sympathize with the Nazi cause, Hans has Liesel rehearse her “*Heil Hitler*” until he is confident that the neighbors will believe her performance, and the two strategically read *Mein Kampf* in public (116).

The Book Thief is a novel of performances, whether for protection, in the case of Liesel and Hans, or for power, as shown by Hitler and Death’s illusions of authority. As he encourages readers to see how he constructs his omniscience in the novel—and calls our attention to how Hitler similarly gained power through performance—Death gives readers a valuable toolkit for evaluating political messages of the past and in readers’ current political climates. Death’s performative omniscience functions in the same way as his instructions for the reader to consult a mirror to understand what he looks like: his anthropomorphization confronts readers with a reflected image of themselves as death, and his narration reflects the constructedness of authoritative messages in our own political climates. By holding up a mirror to the human race, the nonhuman narrator Death shows readers what we cannot see for ourselves—our own complicity in the most devastating acts against humanity. He leaves the reader with the last line, “I am haunted

by humans,” and after our shared reading and narrating experience, he hopes we realize that we should be, too (550).

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