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The Good, the Bad and the Useless: The Perception of Books in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, Markus Zusak's The Book Thief, and Gary Shteyngart's Super Sad True Love Story

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Good, the Bad and the Useless: The perception of books in Ray Bradbury's
Fahrenheit 451, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True
Love Story*

by

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Abstract

Literature acts as a thought experiment that allows authors to test out theoretical concepts. In dystopian literature, authors test their theories on what leads to a dystopian society, and therefore how to avoid it. In this thesis, I examine three dystopian novels, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* as well as the theories the authors engage with on how to avoid dystopian futures. All three of the novels suggest that wisdom is the way to avoid a dystopian future, but the ways they define wisdom are different. By examining how books are portrayed in each of these texts, I show how wisdom is being represented. I then connect the different portrayals of books in each of these three novels to three different philosophical theories. *Fahrenheit 451* is a retelling of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and books are an allegory for the guide out of the cave. Books in *The Book Thief* are pragmatic and are therefore tools. In *Super Sad True Love Story*, books are not portrayed as the key to wisdom, but, instead, Zusak uses an Aristotelian concept of wisdom. I then compare the three theories and show the strengths and weaknesses of each. Ultimately, elements of each the three philosophical theories contained within the books that I have identified are required to avoid a dystopian future.

Keywords: dystopia, *Fahrenheit 451*, Plato, *The Book Thief*, pragmatism, *Super Sad True Love Story*, Aristotle, wisdom, thought experiment

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I. Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines philosophy as “the branch of knowledge that deals with the principles of human behavior; the study of morality; ethics. Also: practical or proverbial wisdom; virtuous living”. In short, philosophy is all about trying to understand humanity. “What is the nature of being? Is change possible?” It was questions like these “and others like them that were the preoccupation of those who first introduced philosophy into the world” (Chalmers). Philosophers still grapple with questions like these about the nature of humanity, but it is not just philosophers that have pondered issues of human nature. Other fields have tried to find answers to questions like these as well, and one of those fields is literature.

Literature allows authors to create fictional worlds and “fictional worlds are a kind of thought experiment through which spectators’ theories about their own world may be tested, amended, or even invented” (Degani-Raz). In other words, writing allows authors to test out their theories on things such as philosophical concepts. Fictional worlds allow authors to put vague or broad philosophical concepts into action. Hence it is not surprising that there is a strong connection between literature and philosophy.

One of the questions that both philosophy and literature return to time and again is how to create a better future and not repeat our mistakes. History has certainly shown us that humans are capable of horrible things; genocide, slavery, war. How do we keep horrible things like this from happening again? One way that authors try to figure this out is through dystopian literature. Dystopian literature is an example of a thought experiment that allows authors to test out theories on what would make a society become

bad enough to be considered dystopian, and by showing what not to do, the author points the way to what to do.

One topic that often shows up in books of this sort is the role of literature. This is not terribly surprising since an author must feel strongly enough about literature enough value in it to justify the time and energy it takes to write a book. Literature does often show up in dystopian works, but the role it plays is not always the same. Three examples of dystopian novels where literature plays a major role are Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*.

Since most dystopian literature takes place in the future, *The Book Thief* may not typically be thought of as dystopian literature, but it most certainly is. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines dystopia as “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible”. Even though *The Book Thief* takes place in the past and deals with events that have actually happened, including World War II and the Holocaust, it is a work of fiction with fantastical elements, such as death narrating the story. All three of these works of dystopian literature give different solutions for how to prevent humanity from reaching, or returning to a dystopian level. In *Fahrenheit 451* knowledge gained from literature is the key; in *The Book Thief* good people must use books in positive ways; and in *Super Sad True Love Story* it is not intelligence, which books represent, but a more all-encompassing sort of wisdom based on ethics and empathy that has the power to save. None of the theories is entirely new. In fact, each novel has its roots in a well-known philosophy or philosopher. In the first book I look at *Fahrenheit 451* and I find a connection to Platonic theory, in the second I find a connection to pragmatism and in the third I find a connection to Aristotle.

II. *Fahrenheit 451* and Plato

Ray Bradbury's 1951 novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, is about a future where books are forbidden. In this dystopian future firemen do not put out fires, instead they are sent to burn any books that are discovered. Guy Montag is one of these firemen; as the book progresses Montag begins to question not only his job, but also the society he lives in. Montag begins secretly collecting books and by the end of the novel he runs away and joins a wandering group of book loving hobos. It is books and the people who still secretly appreciate books that lead Montag to reject his dystopian society. This entire novel can be read as a retelling of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. When read in this way, books become givers of wisdom that allow people to access a universal truth.

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, people live in a cave, chained up so that they can only see what is in front of them. They see only shadows, which a fire behind them throws on the wall in front of them. Since all they can see are these shadows, "the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images" (Plato, p. 547). Plato goes on to argue that if a prisoner were to be let out of the cave he would at first be blinded and have trouble accepting what he saw, but once he accepted it he would be able see the reality of things, as opposed to seeing merely the shadows of them. Knowing that his fellow-prisoners were still in the cave and only able to see the shadows, he would pity them. Once he had seen the light he would "endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner" (p. 549). But if he were to return to the cave the people who had never left would think him ridiculous, and if "any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death" (p. 549).

The connection between Plato's allegory of the cave and *Fahrenheit 451* has been examined before, specifically by George E. Conner in his article "Spelunking with Ray Bradbury: the Allegory of the Cave in Fahrenheit 451". Conner says that, "Bradbury borrowed the 'masterplot' of the Allegory of the Cave" (p. 415). Conner connects the different characters to different roles in the Allegory of the Cave. Though I agree with most of the roles he assigns, such as Montag as the prisoner that escapes the cave, I will argue that Conner does not accurately assign the role of the guide out of the cave

Conner himself seems to have difficulty deciding who plays the role of the guide. At first he claims that Clarisse is the guide, but then later says that, "Faber, Granger, and Montag serve as Platonic guides" (p. 415). Conner also says that these guides are only "in the text" while the real guide is the author, Bradbury, because he guides his readers to enlightenment "through the text" (p. 415). This confusion, I believe, can be cleared up by assigning the role of guide not to a specific character, but instead to books.

In *Fahrenheit 451* Montag is the man Plato talks about who lives his whole life in the cave, but eventually he escapes and sees the light. Montag's wife, Millie, is one of the people still stuck in the cave, and her medication and reliance on technology are her shadows. Books are the "offender" that help people escape from the cave. And because they help people out of the cave they must be "put to death" or in this instance, burned. Books give people the ability to see the world as it truly is; in other words, books give people wisdom. Since it is books that show people the light and the truth, they are the guide out of the cave.

Before talking about wisdom a definition must be decided upon. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines wisdom as the, "capacity of judging rightly in matters relating

to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, esp. in practical affairs”. So, in other words, wisdom simply means having the ability to judge well. *In Fahrenheit 451* there is a clear connection between ownership of books and the ability to judge well. The best example of this is Guy Montag, who becomes wise by owning books.

If wisdom is the ability to judge well then Montag may not start out as a wise character, but he does become one by the end of the novel. Montag learns to more accurately judge his occupation and his wife. In the beginning of the novel Montag enjoys burning books. In fact, the opening sentence of the novel is; “It was a pleasure to burn” (p. 1). This sentence is about how much Montag enjoys burning books. But his love of book burning does not last. When the firemen get a call to go burn books, Montag burns most of them, but he also begins taking some of them with him. This is absolutely forbidden, since the whole point of being a fireman is to punish people that own books. Montag hides his stolen books in the ventilator in his kitchen.

Montag has begun stealing books and they have led him out of the cave. As the allegory says, he at first has trouble accepting the real world. He is used to the shadows of the cave, and is blinded by a world of light. It takes time for him to accept what the books are allowing him to see. After he begins to read the book he begins the slow process rejecting his occupation. When a woman refuses to leave her home and is burned with her books, a typical occurrence, Montag is for once upset. That night when he goes home he tells his wife that, “there must be something in books, things we can’t imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don’t stay

for nothing,” (p. 48). While this is the first time that Montag voices his doubts about being a fireman to his wife, it is not the last.

Bradbury make the connection to Plato explicit when Montag says, “Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave. They just *might* stop us from making the same damn insane mistakes!... don’t you *see*? An hour a day, two hours, with these books, and maybe...” (p. 70). Here Montag literally says that books can lead people out of the cave. This connection to Plato’s allegory of the cave shows that Montag is a man in the cave and that his guides are not other characters but rather the books who become the “offender” that helps people escape from the cave.

While Montag’s first comment to his wife is about the possibility that books might have something to offer, the second comment is far more certain that books can have a positive impact on society. This shows that the books are having an effect on Montag, who is beginning to see things more clearly, or in other words, more accurately judge. He is beginning to accept the bright, true world outside of the cave. As the definition from the OED explains, then, Montag is becoming wise.

Another thing that Montag judges more accurately by the end of the novel is his wife, Millie. Millie is deeply unhappy; she takes large amounts of happy pills to the extent that even she seems unaware of how unhappy she really is. This is best exemplified when she almost dies from an overdose. Montag comes home and realizes that Millie has taken an entire bottle of pills. He calls the paramedics who nonchalantly pump her stomach and put new blood in her body (p. 11-14). The next morning Millie has no memory of any of it. When Montag asks if she remembers Millie replies, “What? Did we have a wild party or something? Feel like I’ve a hangover. God, I’m hungry. Who

was here?” (p. 16). Millie as this scene shows is also living in “the cave.” Either she does not remember what was, best case scenario, her near death experience, or at worst her own suicide attempt. In either case, like those in the cave, she is unaware of the real world around her as well as of her own feelings and actions.

Millie’s friends are also “in the cave” in that they seem to have unemotional, overly medicated, empty lives. At the same time that Montag begins questioning his occupation he also begins questioning his relationship with his wife. Montag becomes, “exasperated at the vacuous quality of the life that Millie and her friends live” (Smolla). From everything we see in *Fahrenheit 451* about Millie and her friends, it is quite obvious that they do indeed lead very empty lives. I believe that emptiness is due to their inability to see beyond the limits of “the cave” in which they live. Montag has so much trouble with Millie because Millie and her friends are the people still imprisoned in the cave. They are unable to see things as Montag does, and instead see only shadows.

Sunjoo Lee looks at the connection between reason and repression of the senses in her article, “To Be Shocked to Life Again: Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*”. Her article argues that “the reification of human relations and human reason itself—goes hand in hand with repression of the senses, without the recovery of which that of the reason cannot be accomplished”. This is to say that a person cannot be reasonable while also repressing their senses. This goes hand in hand with the allegory of the cave because it is the imprisoned people in the cave that cannot see well, only dark shadows, and cannot move enough to touch anything either.

The perfect example of a character repressing her senses is Millie. Her senses are physically and mentally dulled by the medication that she takes. She is clearly unhappy,

but also seems sometimes to fail to sense her own unhappiness. Millie's medication is the chain that keeps her from escaping the cave, and seeing the true world. According to Lee's connection of reason and the senses, Millie's failure to connect to her senses is part of the reason that she fails to be wise and reasonable. On the other hand, as the novel progresses, Montag has more sense and awareness and therefore wisdom.

If wisdom is the ability to judge well and soundly than Montag's wife lacks it while Montag himself certainly becomes wise. This is because Montag has a guide, his books. He begins to believe that books may be a way to save the morally bankrupt society that he lives in, and therefore he no longer believes his job of burning books is positive. My main point, then, is that without books, Montag would not find a way out of the cave through wisdom. It may appear that wise people such as Montag choose to own books, but this is not what *Fahrenheit 451* appears to be saying. Instead, it is the act of owning the books that makes people wise. In this world, most people do not own books, and also are not wise. Books force self-examination, and Montag only becomes wise once he starts to collect books. This society needs to keep people away from books so that they will stay in "the cave." As Beatty explains to Montag it is, "not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone *made* equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against" (p. 55-56). Beatty goes on to say that it is best to educate people on subjects such as taking apart a TV as opposed to more "slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology" (p. 58). Sunjoo Lee says it well in his article "To Be Shocked to Life Again: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" ;"Beatty's sly remarks, meant to vindicate the work of firemen, only add to the reader's horror of a society built on this vision". Lee seems to be

correct in using the word “horror” to describe the response to this “equal” society, which is in fact a society of the cave.

In such a society, the biggest problem, as Beatty describes it, is that everyone is taught facts and figures and things they can all understand rather than wisdom which involves being able to judge things well. Though facts and figures can be useful knowledge, they are by no means at the core of making sound judgments. In this society of the cave, books must be excluded because they contain the “slippery stuff” that is most useful when it comes to making good judgments. In a society without books the people may be well educated, but they are also not taught to be wise.

James Filler looks at *Fahrenheit 451* through a Platonic lens in his article “Ascending from the Ashes: Images of Plato in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*.” According to Filler, Plato views the connection between freedom and reason very differently than Beatty does. For Plato, “Freedom, then, is for reason to rule over the soul. But this, by itself, is insufficient. Reason can be misguided or lack knowledge. Only when reason in its wisdom rules the soul does freedom arise” (p. 6). Filler also uses Plato to examine the levels of intelligence of the characters in *Fahrenheit 451*. For instance, Plato describes levels of knowledge through the Line Analogy.

“The line is divided into four sections: two main divisions further divided into two subgroups. The lowest two levels are the level of opinion, which corresponds to the sensible world, and the highest two levels are called knowledge, which corresponds to the intelligible world.”

Miller looks at Montag's journey to knowledge throughout the novel. According to Plato's definition it is not until near the end of the novel, when Montag is running from the hound and reaches the river, that he ascends to the final level of knowledge. It is at this point that "he understands everything," achieves wisdom and so leaves the cave.

Part of the reason, according to *Fahrenheit 451*, that books bestow wisdom is that they force self-examination. Wisdom involves being able to judge things well, and that includes one's self. Rafeeq O. McGiveron's article "To Build a Mirror Factory": the mirror and self-examination in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*" examines metaphorical mirrors in *Fahrenheit 451*. Though many literal mirrors or reflections are mentioned in the novel they are also metaphors of self-reflection, a consistent theme in *Fahrenheit 451*. For example, when Faber is talking to Montag about books "although he does not speak in terms of mirrors, the idea of the reflection of truths fills his discussion" (McGiveron). This implies that books force readers to take a closer look at themselves, to be self-reflexive which leads to wisdom.

As guides that show one a world beyond the cave, books reflect society as a whole. Through books people are able to experience the world that exists beyond the cave created by the government of Bradbury's world. As Faber says to Montag, "Most of us can't rush around, talk to everyone, know all the cities of the world, we haven't time money or that many friends. The things you're looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-nine percent of them is in a book" (p. 82). The more we get to know the world, to leave the little cave in which we reside, the more we can accurately judge it, and that leads to more wisdom. So, yet again, books lead to wisdom. McGiveron sums this point up nicely when he says. "Bradbury shows that all

of us, as individuals and as a society, must struggle to take a long, hard look in the mirror. . . . We need this self-examination to help avoid self-destruction”.

Fahrenheit 451 represents books as the catalyst for wisdom and wisdom in turn is the ability to see beyond the limitations others impose, “the cave.” At the beginning of the novel Montag is not very wise, but as the novel progresses he begins collecting books and becomes wise. Montag does not become wise and decide to steal books rather he steals books without any sort of planning. In fact, the first time Montag is described as stealing a book he is given no responsibility for it and instead the blame lies on Montag’s hands; “Montag had done nothing. His hand had done it all, his hand, with a brain of its own, with a conscience and a curiosity in each trembling finger, had turned thief” (p. 35). It is only after Montag is in possession of the books that he begins to start judging the world differently and become wiser.

The implication of this reading of *Fahrenheit 451* is that books have agency, as Plato might say, they are guides, they are powerful objects that give people access to the truth. There is one, singular truth, which can be seen outside of the cave, and everything else is untrue shadows. This concept of truth can be seen throughout Plato’s work. In the Platonic sense, there is a universal truth. Some people may believe that what they see is the truth, but in reality it is just shadows of the true thing, and only through books can people be lead into the light.

III. The Book Thief and Pragmatism

Not surprisingly, books play an important role in Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*. Death narrates the story of Liesel Meminger, a young girl growing up in Nazi Germany. Though books are prevalent in the novel, their role is less cut and dry than in *Fahrenheit 451*. Unlike in *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Book Thief* does not portray books as bestowing wisdom, as guides in an allegory of Plato's cave. Instead books here have multiple uses; sometimes books can be used to gain wisdom, other times they spread ignorance, and sometimes they seem to have no effect on the person who owns them. Perhaps most interestingly, a single book can have many different uses, depending on the person who is using it. Rather than exist as guides to a single truth, as in Bradbury, in Zusak's novel the portrayal of books is pragmatic. They do not lead to a single truth rather they lead to particular actions that are dependent on particular contexts. They are, in short, pragmatic.

According to C. J. Misak's *Pragmatism*, "the central thought of pragmatism is that philosophy must be connected to practice" (p. 2). This is to say that ideas, such as truth, are not stand-alone concepts, but instead exist only when they are applied, or put to some use in a particular context that is itself always unique. When an idea, such as "truth" is applied to an object, in this case a book, pragmatism says that the meaning of the idea is based off of the practical usage of the object as it applied to that situation only. With this definition in mind, I read the books in *The Book Thief* as pragmatic. In particular, the books *Mein Kampf*, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, and *The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus* function pragmatically in *The Book Thief*. These books are each important, just as the books in Bradbury's novel are important, but they are not guides to

a single truth. Rather they are each useful in particular unique situations. They matter but not for the reasons Bradbury says books matter.

The philosophy of pragmatism differs from the previous chapter's more Platonic philosophy. In her essay "Diamond's are a Pragmatist's Best Friend" Rosa Mayorga makes the philosophical similarities and differences between pragmatism and Plato very clear. She even includes a chart that shows the stance of different philosophers with regard to both Platonic universals and pragmatic singulars. There she points out the differences between Plato on the one hand, and her own and C.S. Pierce's views of pragmatism on the other (Mayorga, p. 259). EXCELLENT

Influential pragmatist, William James talks about the role of objects in pragmatism in his lecture "What Pragmatism Means." There, James argues that "to attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve... our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object" (p. 46-47). When applying this description of pragmatism to *The Book Thief*, it becomes clear that the books in *The Book Thief* are pragmatic objects that are acted upon by the characters in the novel.

The first pragmatic text in *The Book Thief* is Adolf Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*. Besides telling about the life of Hitler, the book also contains large amounts of anti-Semitic material "especially to the conceptualization of the German nation as a (human) body that had to be cured from a deadly disease caused by Jewish parasites" (Musolff). So the intended purpose of *Mein Kampf* was to spread information about Hitler and his anti-Semitic views. In *The Book Thief*, *Mein Kampf* is used in a drastically

different way; instead of spreading anti-Semitic views, it literally gives one Jew, Max Vandenburg, the key to his freedom.

The reader first meets Max when he is hiding in a secret storage room, starving and afraid. He is given a book that has a key taped to the inside of the cover, which is the key to the home of the Hubermann's, the family who will hide him. *Mein Kampf* is Max's "savior" (p. 157) and even the narrator notes the irony of the situation when he says, "*Mein Kampf*. Of all the things to save him" (p. 160). This is not the end of *Mein Kampf*'s use though. Later in the novel, Max forms a relationship with the Hubermann's, foster daughter Liesel. Max wants to give Liesel some sort of present, but he has almost no belongings and cannot leave the basement, for fear of being captured and put in a concentration camp. What Max does have is *Mein Kampf*, and access to all the paint Hans Hubermann keeps in the basement.

Max uses *Mein Kampf* pragmatically by tearing out the pages, painting them white, and then writing and drawing a new story on them. The new story is a thirteen-page booklet that he gives to Liesel. Under the words and drawings of the booklet other words can still faintly be seen and these "were the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned" (p. 207). The metaphorical implications of a Jew rewriting his own story over the one written by Hitler are obviously huge. Hitler is the most notorious anti-Semite in history and his book is the epitome of his hateful ideas and practices. It is because of Hitler and people that shared the views of Hitler that Max had to go into hiding in the first place. In the story of Max's life Hitler and his Nazi regime have written a defining chapter, but on top of that chapter's words Max has written his own story and so turned the tables on Hitler.

This pragmatic use of *Mein Kampf* is as important as the literal implications. For instance, here is a book that is supposed to be spreading Nazi propaganda and is instead being used as “savior” for a Jew and also as a gift of thanks from a Jew to a young girl. The book is therefore not a singular truth as are books in Bradbury. Rather instead of being either good or bad, it instead reflects the goals of the person who uses it. In this instance a book is merely an instrument of whoever chooses to use it. It is the practice that defines the philosophy of the book, not the book that defines the philosophy.

When Hitler uses *Mein Kampf* in the way he intended it to be used, it spreads prejudice and racism because Hitler was a prejudiced and racist man. When Max uses the same book, it becomes an amazingly thoughtful, beautiful gift because Max is a kind, thoughtful young man. The importance of *Mein Kampf*, easily one of the most infamous examples of a racist text, then, has little to do with the book itself, but instead it becomes an instrument, a pragmatic tool of the person who chooses to use it. This is obviously quite different than Bradbury’s more Platonic portrayal of books in *Fahrenheit 451*, in which all books make whoever read them wise with regard to revealing the singular truth that they are living in a cave and not in reality, In Bradbury’s universe all books are good insofar as they are guides out of the cave; books make people wise, which would mean that in Bradbury’s universe the same book cannot have both positive and negative uses, as *Mein Kampf* does in *The Book Thief*.

When applied to *Mein Kampf* in *The Book Thief*, pragmatism says that it is not important what *Mein Kampf*’s intended meaning was, or even that it contains anti-Semitic material. What matters is how people use it. So even though *Mein Kampf* is a collection

of ideas, these ideas fails to have any power until they are used as tools by readers. The different ways in which people use it give it any sort of meaning, positive or negative.

One can also see a pragmatic use of books in another book mentioned in *The Book Thief: The Grave Digger's Handbook*. The intended use of *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is to teach gravediggers how to do their job well. In *The Book Thief* *The Grave Digger's Handbook* has multiple alternative functions just as did *Mein Kampf*. The first alternative use is to remind Liesel of her family. Liesel stole *The Grave Digger's Handbook* from the cemetery after burying her brother. This was shortly before Liesel's mother because she was unable to care for her gave Liesel up to a foster family. Liesel cannot read but she grows very attached to the book. When she wakes up in the middle of the night she would pull the book out from under her pillow and look at it: "She had no idea what any of it was saying. The point is, it didn't really matter what the book was about. It was what it meant that was more important. The Book's Meaning: 1. The last time she saw her brother. 2. The last time she saw her mother" (p.38).

If *The Book Thief* applied a Platonic THOUGH I LIKE PLUTO TOO!!! plutonic philosophy to books, Liesel would read *The Gravedigger's Handbook* and it would make her wiser, but that is not what is happening here. First of all, Liesel cannot read this or any other book. Secondly, Liesel uses the book not for its words but rather as a physical object that reminds her of her family. This could be perceived as a positive use, since it gives Liesel a link to her family; it could also be perceived as negative, since it reminds her of a tragic part of her life. This leads to my conclusion that *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, like *Meine Kampf* is a pragmatic text. Its meaning derives from its use,

This book is also more than just a physical object. It also a vehicle for education. Liesel and her foster father, Hans Hubermann use *The Grave Digger's Handbook* to teach Liesel how to read. The reading lessons occur in the middle of the night when Liesel wakes up from terrible nightmares. The obvious benefit of these nighttime teaching sessions is that Liesel learns to read, but they also serve as a way for Liesel and Hans to build their relationship. In this way, the book is a tool that teaches reading; it is also a tool to help build a relationship. In both cases, the meaning of the text itself is irrelevant, just as the words of Hitler's book were irrelevant to Max. Since the text is irrelevant, the book fails to fit into the Platonic perception of literature portrayed by Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*. These books are not guides to a universal truth.

Thanks in part to their late night reading lessons, Liesel grows to love her foster father. She views Hans not only as her "papa" but also as her friend and she loves him and the smell that reminds her of him. By contrast, Rosa Hubermann, Hans' wife, often tells Hans that he stinks of cigarettes and kerosene, but while Hans is getting scolded for smelling this way Liesel, "imagined the smell of it, mapped out on her papa's clothes. More than anything, it was the smell of friendship, and she could find it on herself too. Liesel loved that smell" (p. 72).

Meanwhile, Liesel herself is the book thief of the title. And *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is the first book that Liesel ever stole. In addition, Liesel also steals a few other books throughout the novel. After she steals *The Grave Digger's Handbook* from the grave of her brother; the second book she steals is *The Shoulder Shrug*, which Liesel steals from a Nazi book burning. The third and final is from the library of the mayor's wife. Even though the title of the book is *The Book Thief*, Liesel does not actually steal

very many books. Furthermore, Liesel does not steal books simply for the thrill of stealing. Instead, Liesel's thefts are pragmatic. Theft normally has a negative connotation: but in Liesel's case, each theft is yet another way for her to get a tool. In each instance, the book she steals is an instrument, a tool that she can use. For instance, the stolen books are a memento, a teaching tool, and an act of defiance. The first book Liesel steals acts as a reminder of her mother and deceased brother, the second is a means by which she can rebel against the Nazi book burning, and the final book stolen can be viewed as revenge against the mayor's wife. Each theft has a practical implications, positive and negative, either way it is not the stealing that is good or bad, but what it means to Liesel that makes the thefts good or bad. Each book's meaning comes from the use to which she puts the particular book in the particular situation, the very definition of pragmatism. For example, the *Grave Digger's Handbook* does not bestow wisdom in the way in which it was intended. It is not the book or the message of the book that makes Liesel wiser, but instead by using the book as a tool Liesel builds her relationship with her foster father and keeps the memory of her family alive.

In addition to Hitler's book, and the manual, *The Book Thief* also makes pragmatic use of a third book, *The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*. The obvious intended function of this book is a dictionary and thesaurus, but its alternate uses are particularly interesting and surprising. The first alternate use is surprising because it is not one of the characters in the novel that is using the *Duden Dictionary*, but instead the narrator who uses it as a storytelling technique. Throughout the novel the narrator stops the story in order to add commentary of one sort or another. In part seven, eight of these comments are definitions of German words from the *Duden Dictionary*. The narrator

does not use these eight definitions to define a particularly hard or challenging word that the reader might not know. Instead the words give deeper insight into the story. For instance, when the words *Verzeihung* and *Schweigen* are defined the narrator defines *verzeihung* as “Forgiveness: To stop feeling anger, animosity, or resentment. Related words: absolution, acquittal, mercy” (p. 368). The word *verzeihung* is not used in the text other than that definition, so the narrator is not defining a word from the text, instead it is the context that is important, and as a result, the narrator is putting this particular German word to a particular use.

Prior to this definition being given, for instance, Liesel had just gone by the home of Ilsa Hermann. Ilsa is the mayor’s wife and therefore a Nazi. Ilsa had to fire Liesel’s foster mother and, at the time, Liesel had been angry because Ilsa had a beautiful library that she let Liesel use when she came to pick up the dirty clothes for her mother to wash and return. Her mother being fired meant that not only were Liesel and her family in deeper financial trouble, but it also meant that Liesel could no longer visit the library. As revenge for the firing, Liesel and her friend Rudy steal a book from Ilsa Hermann’s large library. Instead, however, they find a book is waiting for them on the windowsill of the library window.

As Liesel and Rudy are running away from the mayor’s house Liesel looks back at the library window and “witnessed the mayor’s wife, standing behind the glass. She was transparent, but she was there...her wounded eyes and mouth and expression held themselves up, for viewing. Very slowly, she lifted her hand to the book thief on the street. A motionless wave” (p.368). It is after this scene that the definition for the German word for forgiveness is given. By defining the German word for forgiveness the narrator

is able to communicate to the reader how Liesel feels, without having to directly say a single thing about Liesel's feelings. The word becomes an instrument by which the narrator can convey the emotions of a character.

Another instance of making use out of the *Duden Dictionary* is the definition for the word *Schweigen*. After Hans Hubermann makes himself known as sympathetic to Jews by publicly giving a piece of bread to a Jew walking to Dachau, it is no longer safe for Max to stay with the Hubermanns. Max leaves that same night and after he departs the seventh *Duden Dictionary* definition is given: "*Schweigen*- Silence: The absence of sound or noise. Related words: *quiet, calmness, peace*". The narrator then says, "How perfect. Peace." (p.398). This time, the narrator uses the word ironically, since the Hubermanns feel anything but peace with Max gone. In fact, a few paragraphs later the narrator goes on to say, "Now more than ever, 33 Himmel Street was a place of silence, and it did not go unnoticed that the *Duden Dictionary* was completely and utterly mistaken, especially with its related words. Silence was not quiet or calm, and it was not peace" (p. 398). As with the previous word, then, so too does this word become an instrument with which the narrator can convey the feelings of his characters. In this case, it is not as simple as defining an emotion. Instead the definition is used as a jumping off point to describe how the Hubermanns do not feel, which is peaceful. By describing how they do not feel the narrator gives insight into how they do feel. Some antonyms for peaceful include agitated, conflicted, and distressed. These words seem to be much better descriptions of how the Hubermann's feel in the silence resulting from Max's departure.

What is particularly interesting about the function of the *Duden Dictionary* definitions is that a dictionary is generally regarded as one of the least emotional texts. In

the context of *The Book Thief*, however, it is used to give insight into the emotions of the characters. In fact, most of the words that *The Duden Dictionary* defines are related to emotion. The English equivalent of these words, given in the order they are given in the text, is as follows: happiness, forgiveness, fear, misery, regret, and silence/peace.

This insight into the feelings of the characters in *The Book Thief* is unexpected because a dictionary is typically thought of as one of the least emotional texts, but in *The Book Thief* it is actually helping to supply the emotion. So in this instance it is not just the book that fails to have one, true function, but the words that make up the book as well.

This pragmatic portrayal of books is completely different from the portrayal of books in *Fahrenheit 451*. In *Fahrenheit 451* books have one meaning and it does not matter who reads them and the meaning certainly does not change. Also, the books themselves are the ones with agency, as opposed to in *The Book Thief*, where the people who own and read the books are the ones that give them meaning. There is no one, true meaning of the books and they do not necessarily make a person wiser. Instead it is because people are different that the books mean different things, and even as one person becomes different at different points in their life, a book can take on a new and different meaning for him or her, such as the changing meaning of the *Grave Digger's Handbook* for Liesel.

This varying, pragmatic function of books in *The Book Thief* can be seen as a response to the concept of the function of books as seen in *Fahrenheit 451*. While *Fahrenheit 451* follows the Platonic theory that there is one truth, and things have only one meaning, in this case it is books that have one meaning, *The Book Thief* by contrast shows that books can have multiple meanings and be proof of the theory of pragmatism.

In both novels books are important. Whether books are important because they have the ability to make people wiser, or because people can use them as tools and bestow their own meaning upon them, it is clear that they do have some function. Sometimes their effect is positive and sometimes it is negative, but they always seem to have some sort of effect on the characters or even the reader. This is not the case in the next book we will look at, *Super Sad True Love Story*, which portrays books in a different manner than either of the previous two books.

IV. *Super Sad True Love Story* and Aristotle

Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super Sad True Love Story* takes place in the near future and is about Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park. Lenny, the thirty-nine year-old son of Russian immigrants, falls in love with Eunice, a twenty-four year-old Korean American. The novel traces the relationship of Lenny and Eunice as they try to survive the credit crisis in America, enduring riots, tanks on every corner and technological communication failing. In *Super Sad True Love Story*, much like in *Fahrenheit 451*, people no longer read books and the society as a whole seems to care more about frivolous things, like owning the newest technology. Both novels show that society must become wiser in order to avoid this dystopian future, but the two novels diverge in their definitions of wisdom. *Fahrenheit 451* portrays book knowledge as wisdom, while *Super Sad True Love Story* portrays wisdom in the Aristotelian sense, which is to say wisdom is not so much about truth as it is about action and empathy.

The focus on action and empathy rather than truth can be traced back to Aristotle who was born in 384 B.C. and was taught by Plato. In philosophy Plato influenced Aristotle, but "grave differences on important points became gradually more apparent to Aristotle." After Plato's death Aristotle went on to found a school of his own (Ross). One of the ways in which Aristotle and Plato differed was in how they defined knowledge. Plato argued that knowledge made men good, while Aristotle argued that knowledge mattered only insofar as people do something with that knowledge. According to T. H. Irwin in his essay "Conception of Happiness in the Nicomachean Ethics", "Aristotle affirms that we realize the human function in prudence and moral virtue, not only in theoretical wisdom" (p. 519). This means that to Aristotle, theoretical wisdom was not

the end all be all because what matters is how people applied such knowledge. Such application Aristotle referred to as ethics.

Richard Kraut explains Aristotle's thoughts on the connection between knowledge and ethics in more specific terms in his essay "Aristotle on Becoming Good: Habituation, Reflection, and Perception". Kraut says that, "Aristotle holds that the mere acquisition of craft knowledge or any other knowledge that is not at the same time a training of our affective and conative side does not by itself lead to action" (p. 533). He then explains an example Aristotle gave in his book *De Anima*, which talks about medical knowledge. A doctor can have medical knowledge, but that does not cause action. The doctor must have a desire to act in order for that knowledge to have any sort of effect, either positive or negative. And the action that doctor takes, meanwhile, should be designed to benefit the patient one of the keystones of Aristotle's concept of ethics. Against helping others, for instance, one might merely wish to satisfy oneself. As a result, Aristotle differentiates types of knowledge by referring to the knowledge that is the "ability to work out the best instrumental means for the accomplishment of one's goals" as cleverness. For Aristotle cleverness was "a skill of the thinking part of the soul that can be possessed by those who have bad ends, no less than by those whose ends are good" (Kraut, p. 535). Against such cleverness, Aristotle depicted an ethical knowledge dedicated to doing good. By connecting knowledge to ethics, then, Aristotle meant to solve a problem Plato's transcendent universal truth had created.

As discussed in chapter one, *Fahrenheit 451* portrays books as bestowing wisdom on people. In *Fahrenheit 451* books function as truth in the Platonic sense, which is to say that they function outside of human thought or opinion. A book will always make a

person wiser, no matter what book it is or what person is reading it. Again, the definition used for wisdom in chapter one is from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and it is the “capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, esp. in practical affairs”. The problem with this definition arises when one begins to consider ethics, as does Aristotle. For instance, what exactly does judging “rightly” mean and what qualifies as “soundness of judgment”? According to Aristotle it is putting knowledge into practical use with positive motivations. For Aristotle ethics and actions are interrelated, “in fact he treats moral conduct largely as the final stage of practical activity” (Mure, p. 136).

When looking at the characters in *Super Sad True Love Story* it becomes clear that the Platonic wisdom when understood without a connection to ethics becomes what Aristotle would call cleverness. Detached from ethics truth, wisdom, knowledge do not create moral characters. This becomes clear when examining Lenny, Eunice, and Joshie’s relation to books. Lenny is the best example in *Super Sad True Love Story* of the absence of a correlation between wise moral conduct and reading. Even though Lenny owns many books and often talks about how much he enjoys reading, he fails to be wise because he fails to derive any ethical action from what he reads. Reading does not make him good as if to say that no matter how accessible Platonic truth may be it does not necessarily create an ethical person.

A characteristic about Lenny that is stressed throughout the novel both by Lenny himself, as well as other characters around him, is that Lenny loves books and reading. Lenny talks about reading works by famous authors such as Chekhov and Milan

Kundera. Even though Lenny talks positively of books, it is clear that many other people do not like them at all. When Lenny is on a plane he pulls out a book and notices that the people around him look at him strangely. The young jock sitting next to him says, “Duder, that thing (the book) smells like wet socks” (p. 37). Eunice Park also unceasingly teases Lenny about his love of books, such as when she tells Lenny that her friend from college used to call books “doorstops”(p. 25). For all the failure of the characters to appreciate books, Lenny who does read, and so who does have access to wisdom as contained in books certainly would not be described as a wise character. He does not become a good ethical man.

To show that Lenny is naïve, obsessive, not terribly bright, and in Aristotelian sense lacks the moral motivations to be wise, I turn to his own journal. There, he writes, “Today, I’ve made a major decision: *I am never going to die*” (p.3). Immediately this makes it clear that Lenny might not be terribly bright if he truly believes that he has a chance at immortality. Lenny’s fear of death is present from the first sentence of the writing. His naïvely trying to deny his inevitable death is a theme that manifests itself throughout the novel. One way that Lenny’s attempts to deny his death is by dating a considerably younger woman; Eunice. Eunice is twenty-two to Lenny’s thirty-nine, and the two have pretty much nothing in common. Eunice is obsessed with her *apparat*, clothes, and does not get along well with Lenny’s friends. The only thing that Lenny seems to like about Eunice is that she is young, beautiful, and makes Lenny feel young and cool.

Another example of how Lenny tries to cling to his youth and ignore the fact that he will one day die can be seen when he pretends to understand modern technology. At

the start of the novel Lenny is in Italy. When he returns to the U.S. after a year abroad he has no idea about the Äppäräts people are using or the things they do, such as allowing you to rate the attractiveness of the people around you. Lenny pretends to understand this technology but eventually has to have all of it explained to him by either his coworkers or his friends.

Lenny's cliché attempts to cling to his youth are not the only way in which he fails to be wise. Lenny is also incapable of recognizing the meanness and unethical behavior of those he most respects. For instance, he is clueless about Eunice, who is cheating on him with his boss and friend, Joshie. Lenny loves Eunice and worships Joshie yet they are both betraying him. Joshie owns the incredibly successful company that Lenny works for and all the other employees try desperately to get Joshie's approval, including Lenny. Lenny believes that he and Joshie are good friends and that Eunice is completely in love with him. The fact that Lenny fails to judge the situation, Eunice, or Joshie accurately shows that Lenny, in Bradbury's sense, has not been able to use books as a guide to the truth. He remains in his cave and is certainly not wise. He is in fact quite naïve and oblivious as are the people in Bradbury's world.

Not only are Eunice and Joshie unethical but the company Lenny works for is working with the American military in deeply immoral projects. Even though there are many obvious clues that point to this, such as the messages that Lenny receives after the credit crisis come from the "Wapachung Contingency emergency scroll" (p 251), Lenny fails to question any negative moral implications. Lenny, however, is not just naïve. He is also unethical himself because not only does he live in complete denial of what his

company and best friend do, he also takes advantage of the power the company he works for has, without ever considering what the cost may be.

Lenny is not necessarily a bad person, but his self-perception and his perception of the world are more childlike than wise. No matter how many books reads, then, Lenny remains completely unaware. For instance, he is unaware of people's perception of him. For example, when Lenny meets Eunice's parents he thinks it went well, but it actually went horribly. Lenny thinks that he and Joshie are good friends when in fact Joshie is sleeping with his girlfriend. Lenny thinks he is able to fool people by acting younger and cooler than he is, but his coworkers make it clear that he is not fooling anyone. The list goes on and on. Like a small child, Lenny is fairly selfish and therefore lacks the positive moral motivation that would make him wise by Aristotelian terms.

So far, then, each of the major characters, including Lenny who has access to books, prove themselves to be unethical, merely clever to use Aristotle's term. Of them, however, only Eunice will learn to be an ethical person. Even though she does not like books, Eunice becomes both wiser and more ethical than Lenny. Eunice is far from a pillar of moral integrity and wisdom, but by the definition of wisdom that I am using, it does appear that Eunice has some amount of wisdom. Though Eunice does not always make the best decisions when it comes to men, she does seem to be able to judge wisely when pointed in the right direction. She also shows a self-awareness that the much older Lenny certainly does not have. Throughout the novel Eunice looks at her values and priorities and begins to reevaluate them, therefore becoming a more morally motivated person, and therefore a wiser person.

At first Eunice is technology obsessed and appears only to care about clothes and meeting men. As the novel progresses Eunice begins to become more empathetic. The best example of Eunice's growing empathy is when she takes care of the elderly in Lenny's building. Eunice lives with Lenny and in their building there are a large number of elderly people. During the credit crisis there is no power or water and Eunice, unlike Lenny, tries to help the elderly get the AC, water, and supplies that they need (p. 267).

Eunice also meets a man named David, who is part of a group of protesting veterans camping out in Tompkins Park. Eunice becomes friends with David and eventually begins bringing supplies to the needy people in Tompkins Park. Conversations that Eunice has with David make Eunice begin to question things about her society and government. Though Eunice does not make any huge stand or dramatically retaliate against the government in the way that Montag does in *Fahrenheit 451*, Eunice does question the negative parts of her society and she does attempt to make her small contribution by bringing the protestors things that they need. This is especially notable because the people in the park are protesting the government at a time when that is no longer a terribly safe thing to do. So Eunice is willing to risk her safety in order to make a contribution to a cause that she believes in.

Eunice's story shows that a person like Lenny can read books and not be wise while someone like Eunice who reads nothing can be both wise and good. She not only learns to judge her actions but she also has the ability to judge well and so act in a moral way.

By contrast, Joshie is the perfect example of what Aristotle is referring to when he talks about cleverness. Joshie may be intelligent, but he is not wise. Joshie owns a

company that is in league with the military. The military has a lot of power and does not use it in good ways. For example, the military attacks the protesters in Tomkins Park and eventually seizes control of the entire country. The military also seems to be behind the Rupture, which leads to many people dying. Since the military has a lot of power and Joshie works with the military this means that Joshie has a lot of power, and it does not appear that he has any problem with the fact that his power comes at the cost of innocent people's lives.

Closer to home Joshie proves to be a less than stellar man. Joshie starts a relationship with Eunice, and he seems to have no problem stealing Eunice away from Lenny, his long-time friend and employee. So even though Joshie is very smart, successful, and adored by his employees, he is morally bankrupt and does not care about how his actions affect innocent people. Joshie fails to judge his actions well and lacks empathy. Since, according to Aristotle, wisdom should be linked to actions and empathy, Joshie fails to be a wise character because he is not at all ethical.

The relation between people and books is not just examined on the individual level though, but the societal level as well. The complete societal rejection of books in the America of *Super Sad True Love Story* can be seen when Eunice tells Lenny that she “never really learned how to read texts...just to scan them for info” (p. 277), Lenny responds by saying that “reading is difficult. People just aren't meant to read anymore. We're in a post-literate age” (p. 227). Lenny, who actually likes to read, says this because even though he enjoys reading he realizes that it is no longer something people do. This “post-literate age” is easy to read as depressing. If the reader is abiding by a Platonic definition of wisdom, then it appears that in this novel though reading may lead to

cleverness, it does not lead to wisdom. In this novel, books are no longer the guide for humanity that they were able to be in the previous texts. They still might teach people things, but according to *Super Sad True Love Story* it is not the right things. Intelligent, clever people will be like Joshie and those who read books will be like Lenny. In such a world, humanity will become dystopian.

Fahrenheit 451 portrays a very bleak future, but the novel is a warning against this future. It also shows exactly how to save current society from becoming the one portrayed in the novel, and that is thorough wide acceptance and use of books. Books are society's saviors. Since *Fahrenheit 451* is a book and the reader is reading the story about the bleak future, even as the reader reads they are helping to prevent this bleak future. This infuses a hopeful element into the process of reading the book. This also occurs with *The Book Thief*.

In *The Book Thief*, books can also be saviors, but they can also spread ignorance and hate. Like *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Book Thief* can be viewed as a warning, but one about not repeating the past. Even though *The Book Thief* is fiction, it is about a very real event, the Holocaust. So it also portrays an awful society, but one that has already existed, as opposed to one that might one day exist. Again though, there is hope. If good people use books in good ways, there is hope of preventing something like the Holocaust from ever happening again.

Super Sad True Love Story is different from *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Book Thief* because it detaches goodness and ethics from books and from wisdom. If books point to a truth they do not necessarily matter if the people who read them are naïve and foolish like

Lenny, or unethical like Eunice and Joshie. Like the other two books, *Super Sad True Love Story* acts as a warning for the future and a guide for how to avoid it.

V. Conclusion

I have now discussed three different books with three different theories concerning what is required to avoid an evil, broken society in the future. There is *Fahrenheit 451*, rooted in Plato, which argues that books guide people to seeing the truth, and that if people are intelligent and can see the truth, they will not become like the society in *Fahrenheit 451*. There is *The Book Thief* based in pragmatism, which claims that good people can cause positive change by using the tools they have access to, such as books. Finally, there is *Super Sad True Love Story* which says that intelligence, like the kind we gain from books, is not what matters, but instead it is acting with virtuous moral motivations that counts, a view found Aristotelian ethical theory,

The obvious question is which one is right? It is unlikely that after thousands of years of some of the greatest minds in history pondering this question, that one thesis will prove correct. What this thesis can do is propose yet another theory based on an analysis of these three texts. With that in mind, I believe that all of the theories are both right and wrong. They all have parts of the answer, but no one theory proposed by any of the three books is sufficient. They all narrow in on one piece of the answer and make it appear as if it was the complete solution.

Fahrenheit 451 is correct because society needs intelligent people, people that read and do not drown their emotions in medication. Society needs people willing to leave the cave and try to see the world as it is, not just shadows of it. Where *Fahrenheit 451* is wrong, however, is in its implication that there is only one kind of knowledge. A society made up only of people that have knowledge gained from books is not enough to stop a dystopian future such as that portrayed in *Fahrenheit 451*.

On the other hand, in the *Book Thief* not all people that read are necessarily good. *The Book Thief* is correct because good people must use the tools at their disposal to have a positive impact on the world. The problem with this theory is that there is no way to make bad people good. So if there happens to be more bad people than good, or if a bad person gains power, there is no way to stop something awful, such as the Holocaust, from happening. So this theory gives good people a way to confront the already existing evil in the world, but it does nothing to stop the evil from existing in the first place.

Finally, *Super Sad True Love Story* is correct because a society must have empathetic people in order to avoid unnecessary cruelty and evil. Without empathy people become like Joshie, who is obviously intelligent, but is certainly not a good person. Where *Super Sad Love Story* is wrong is in its portrayal of books and the knowledge gained from books as useless. Empathy is important, but it needs intelligence to guide it.

After studying these three books, I believe that society needs three things: books, the actions of good people, and empathy. People must be intelligent in order to make the right decisions, and books can help them attain this intelligence. Books may guide a person out of the allegorical cave, but being outside of the cave does not do the rest of the people in the cave any good. People must then put their intelligence into action through the tools they have at their disposal. Finally, their actions must also be motivated by virtuous morals.

Avoiding a dystopian future requires appreciating and balancing multiple values. Being intelligent is not enough, action is not enough, empathy is not enough. Only through teaching people to be intelligent and act on their intelligence and be empathetic

does humanity have any hope of avoiding the dystopian future that authors have long been warning us might one day arrive.

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