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English Per.4

11/21/12

Kindness Amidst Suffering

In *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak, writes a story about a young girl's experiences and struggles during her life in Nazi Germany. Because it is told from the perspective of a young German girl, the reader is able to better understand how everyone, not just the Jews, suffered during World War II. Her life demonstrates how human goodness can triumph in spite of a terrible situation. Zusak uses books, reading, and words as the vehicle to show how his characters choose to demonstrate kindness even in the worst circumstances.

The character of Hans Hubermann provides an example of someone who acts with great kindness in the midst of great suffering. Zusak uses books as a tool to allow Hans to show his kindness. For example, Hans' willingness to teach Liesel to read "The Grave Digger's Handbook," a book that she found at her brother's grave, shows that he understands that the book means a lot to her. The fact that he teaches Liesel to read shows that he desires to be her father not just act like a foster father. A true display of goodness is illustrated:

A 2 am conversation

'Is this yours?'

'Yes, Papa.'

‘Do you want to read it?’

Again, ‘Yes, Papa.’

A tired smile.

Metallic eyes, melting.

‘Well, we’d better read it then. (64)

Hans also trades his beloved cigarettes for books to give to Liesel, showing his love and goodness by the sacrifice. Hans Hubermann loved to smoke and, “It appeared that there was great joy in cigarettes and it was a happy time in the Hubermann household” (90). Hans’ ultimate act of goodness is shown when he allows Max to hide in his basement. Zusak uses the book “Mein Kampf” as the vehicle to bring Max into his home. Zusak writes, “It was November the third and the floor of the train held onto his feet. In front of him, he read from the copy of Mein Kampf. His savior”(157). Max refers to “Mein Kampf” as “his savior” because it was the link to Hans Hubermann.

Another important character that Zusak uses to show acts of kindness during times of personal suffering is Ilsa Hermann. Zusak uses books to create an opportunity for Ilsa to show goodness to Liesel. When Ilsa Hermann sees Liesel steal the book from the ashes of the book burning, she does not tell. This saves Liesel from punishment by the Nazi’s, as shown when Liesel discovers, “The mayor’s wife had seen her all right. She was just waiting for the right moment” (132). Then, rather than punish Liesel, Ilsa Hermann invites her into her library to show her all of her books by saying: “Come and see, it said” (133). Ilsa knew that if Liesel was desperate enough to stick her hand into fire to get a book, seeing all the books in the library would make her very happy. Zusak describes this when he writes, “She walked over and did it again, this time much slower, with her

hand facing forward, allowing the dough of her palm to feel the small hurdle of each book. It felt like magic, like beauty, as bright lines of light shone down from a chandelier” (135). Zusak continues to use books to show Ilse’s acts of kindness when Ilse leaves the window open for Liesel to steal books from Ilse’s library. Ilse Hermann also adopts Liesel after all of Liesel’s family is killed in the bombing of Molching. Zusak describes, “It took three hours in the police station for the mayor and a fluffy haired woman to show their faces. ‘Everyone says there’s a girl,’ the lady said, ‘who survived on Himmel Street’”(545). Ilse’s final act of kindness to Liesel is an example of how even in terrible circumstances, instances of human kindness can literally arise from the ashes.

Liesel Meminger, the main character of the book, demonstrates how reading books is used by Zusak to show kindness. Liesel reads to Max while he is lying sick and unconscious in the basement. Zusak describes that, “She gave *The Dream Carrier* to Max as if the words alone could nourish him” (328). Max writes a book, “The Standover Man,” using the story to express his feelings of gratitude to Liesel. Zusak also uses the reading of a book as an act of kindness in frightening circumstances when he describes Liesel as she reads to others in the bomb shelter. To illustrate this he writes, “She didn’t dare to look up, but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out”(381). Finally, Liesel writes a book that helps her to understand, that in spite of hardship, many did act with kindness. For example, she describes writing *The Book Thief*: “I try to ignore it, but I know this all started with the train and the snow and my coughing brother. I stole my first book that day. It was a manual for digging graves” (576). Zusak uses this last book as a summary of how the story of her life shows acts of kindness in spite of suffering.

Zusak effectively shows his character choosing to demonstrate kindness even in the worst circumstances through their experiences with reading and writing books. He uses the characters of Hans Hubermann, Ilsa Hubermann, and Liesel Meminger to convey the overall message by showing how each of them chooses to be kind. Just as Victor Frankl described in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (86)

Zusak's characters demonstrate that human goodness can exist amidst suffering.

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