

## Desire, Repression, and Sublimation: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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### Abstract

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* examines the profound psychological dynamics of characters during the Nazi regime, emphasizing the unconscious mind's role in shaping behavior and coping mechanisms. This study, drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, highlights how characters' inner worlds shape their actions and transformations in this historical context. The protagonist, Liesel Meminger, initially demonstrates an insatiable desire for knowledge and self-expression through book stealing. This desire undergoes 'sublimation' as she transitions from a "book thief" to a "writer," channelling her 'repressed emotions' and 'desires' into writing. The transformation not only helps Liesel cope with her traumatic past but also empowers her to confront the injustices of the Nazi Regime through words. The narrative incorporates motifs of violence, torture, and racial segregation, reflecting the collective trauma and depression of the characters. From death's perspective, the novel presents Liesel's journey of survival amid the horrors of war. This study contributes to scholarly discourse by exploring the novel's depiction of physical and mental struggles during war and by highlighting Freud's theories on the role of the unconscious mind in shaping personality and behaviour. It reveals how characters' struggles to reconcile internal desires with external demands underscore the impact of societal structures and power dynamics on individual development. The study concludes by adding that Zusak's narrative is a compelling exploration of war's horrors and its psychological effects, urging readers to critically examine cultural and political constructs that sustain oppression and restrict growth. Zusak's work emphasizes literature's role in addressing psychological issues and fostering meaningful discourse.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis; Unconscious Mind; Desire; Repression; Sublimation

### Article Details:

Received on 18 Feb, 2026

Accepted on 10 March, 2026

Published on 12 March, 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Published in 2005, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a poignant example of the transformative power of books set against the horrific backdrop of Nazi Germany. This highly expressive story, published in 2005, has received much praise for its distinct narrative voice and rich thematic complexity. *The Book Thief* tells the tale of Liesel Meminger, a 9-year-old girl living in Germany as World War II intensifies. The plot of the book develops on several levels, including Liesel's life during the war, her relationships with her foster parents, Hans and Rosa, the other neighbours, and Max, a Jewish fighter who hides in Liesel's home to avoid deportation. The book takes place in a realistically rendered German town. It might fall within the historical realism subgenre if Liesel's story were not told through the eyes of Death, the otherworldly figure. Everything is "upside down in Zusak's Nazi Germany," where "sounds are tasted, visions are heard, and Death has a heart" (Green, 2006, p. 6). In this entirely realistic tale, Death is the lone surreal character. Although he does not interact with other fundamental human characters, we see everything through his eyes.

*The Book Thief* lacks a distinct conventional genre that could guide interpretation. Its characteristics are unconventional and varied. Scot Smith refers to it as one of a new class of books he calls "genre busters", which are works that combine magic realism and historical fantasy (Buckland, 2011, p.73). The narration of Death in this book initially gives the impression that it belongs in the fantasy genre, yet every other element strongly suggests realism. Death describes human sorrow clearly and sympathetically, yet with an intensity that defies fiction (Buckland, 2011). Zusak combines an examination of the value of reading with the idea of how common people would have experienced the events in Germany during and during World War II. The recollections of his parents formed the basis of Zusak's book. After immigrating to Australia, where Zusak was born and currently resides in Sydney, they grew up in Germany during the war years. They told him stories about their wartime experiences when he was a child. Zusak consequently experienced living in Germany throughout the war, as the narrative suggests. He recalls two stories that were preserved in his memory, "the sky was on fire, and everything was red" (Zusak, 2006, p. 2). Initially, the book was supposed to be a biography, but gradually became a "personal story about a girl" and a "stealer of books," depicting the power of books and words. The writer does not endeavour to explain history but rather attempts to portray the struggle for survival through books and literature (Zusak, 2006, p. 3). The book is a powerful narrative about the power of words to do good and harm, the value of books and reading, and the connection between music and reading in the face of "the physical atrocities ensuing from political incitement and violence" (Webb, 2015, p. 2).

The depiction of 'loss' and 'trauma' through the omniscient writer's words sets the story's tone in Zusak's *The Book Thief* as a traumatic narrative rather than children's fiction (Burakova, 2012) as it is observed that in the early pages of the book, Liesel faces the death of her younger brother and is separated from her biological mother. She continuously suffers from nightmares and wakes up terrified in her foster parents' house. Such incidents trigger her to steal books to cope with the burden of reality. The first book she stole was at the graveyard where she buried her brother. Later, she stole the book from the mayor's house after they dismissed her mother from the job. Her actions "have something to do with the emptiness she feels", and she uses the book as "her object of fulfilment" (Merdifa, 2018, p. 18). The central context of the story's narrative is her relationship with a Jew, Max Vandenburg, who takes refuge in their basement. Their bond revolves around mutual respect, love, and learning amidst the chaos surrounding them. He narrates stories and dreams through illustrations on

the pages of *Mein Kampf* and, before leaving, presents Liesel with a short story of his own: “a statement of defiance and refusal to be downtrodden” (Webb, 2015, p. 15). His existence symbolizes the resistance against religious and political oppression and the elimination of his race. He “inscribes his life over that of Hitler” so that his struggles could be read and remembered as those of an undefeated Jew (Webb, 2015, p. 15).

*The Book Thief's* appeal stems from its tenderness, rooted in familial ties. Similarly, several reviews have noted that the antipodean perspective has contributed to the book's success. Zusak has emphasized the importance of “individual interpretations, rewritings and representations”, and his work highlights “that the most extraordinary stories in history are layered within the often-muted experiences of ordinary people in everyday life” (Jaquet, 2009, p. 7). In addition to the favorable reviews that highlight how the book realigns this history, its popularity is demonstrated by its sales and worldwide appeal. It has been translated into other languages, and a 2014 film adaptation helmed by Brian Percival was based on the book. The book's universal themes of love and adversity, along with the film's accessibility, have helped sales reach over two million copies in the USA alone. The book's classification as both young adult and adult fiction, while many call it adult fiction, has sparked debate among authors. This novel has been hailed as a first attempt at writing for adults or as excellent juvenile fiction (Stone, 2011, p. 10). It is one of the most compelling and unusual Australian novels, as the writer transgresses the boundaries of culture and language (Pierce, 2008, p. 5). These two focal points, which are dominant throughout the novel, are sympathetic to the standard German Volk, those who reluctantly accepted political fate and its consequences while remaining firmly rooted in the routine of every day, rather than the Nazis, whose children played on the streets and may have been living through the banalities of day-to-day events (Shields, 2016, p. 16).

Zusak has written six novels, and his first three books, *The Underdog* (1999), *When Dogs Cry* (2001), and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2000), were the primary cause of his popularity and worldwide audience. His writings touch on several recurring themes, such as maturation and identity exploration. While acknowledging that his works are not autobiographical, Zusak notes that his life has influenced his writing (Wyndham, 2013, p. 13). His novel offers a blend of confrontation and consolation in its representation of morality and historical horror; thus, Adams (2010) provides a “double narrative for young readers” (p.10). His work primarily focuses on the transformation of the main characters, who face various challenges and become stronger individuals. His book, *I Am the Messenger*, also features a protagonist whose life is shaped by external and internal factors, ultimately making him a kind, strong-willed person. Zusak's characters are mostly reflections of his adolescent inspiration. He can express his point of view in novels since he naturally has the authority to select what each character does in a given situation and what that character decides. Because of this, he can influence young readers' ideas in various ways, such as how to act in specific circumstances or how to illustrate the results of actions he frequently uses (Náplavová, 2022, p. 23). Coats enhances our appreciation of this author by highlighting the text's cultural significance, the depth and richness of the central characters, the author's skill with language, and the complexity of the subjects. Because of this, “the pedagogical potential of his books” is frequently acknowledged. He highlights society, history, and the value of literature in his writings. His writings present ethical and philosophical stances that provoke thought in the reader (Wolf, 2010, p. 317).

Prior studies of Zusak's *The Book Thief* lack a psychoanalytic study exploring the defense mechanisms. This study suggests that Zusak's writing focuses on the complex relationships among desire, social class, and identity, as well as on the role of the unconscious

in confronting unprecedented situations. This research seeks to offer a psychological interpretation of the book by analyzing the role of desire in instigating sublimation and repression, and by illuminating the societal and religious constraints on the lives of certain characters.

## 1.2. Scope and Significance of the Study

This study highlights the psychological factors that impact human behavior by explicitly applying Sigmund Freud's theory to Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. This study investigates the mechanisms that assist individuals in coping with anxiety, sadness, trauma, and desire, which are typically accompanied by internal conflicts. The research provides valuable perspectives on women's various roles as they face challenges as they traverse their own pathways and those of their families within society's complex structures and power dynamics. Freud's theory, which highlights the unconscious mind's role in storing memories and emotions and shaping personality, provides a crucial perspective. This study provides insights into the complexities of human behavior and the role of coping mechanisms, crucial for mental balance.

## 1.3. Statement of the Problem

Although extensive research on psychoanalysis exists, its application to various literary works still needs to be explored. This study addresses a research gap in the psychoanalytical aspects of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. The novel, narrated uniquely by Death, portrays a world devoid of hope and goodness, prompting questions about how defense mechanisms help characters cope with trauma. Previous research has explored diverse facets of the novel, yet the precise role of these mechanisms in shaping characters' social standing, desires, identities, and internal conflicts remains ambiguous. This research offers a nuanced exploration using psychoanalytic theory, contributing to a deeper understanding of human behavior.

## 1.4. Research Questions

1. How does 'desire' shape the development of Liesel and other characters in Zusak's *The Book Thief*?
2. How does 'repression' impact the psychological conflicts and actions of the characters in Zusak's narrative?
3. How does 'sublimation' redirect the characters' instincts and desires into transformative actions and behaviours?

## 1.5. Delimitation and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses solely on Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, using Freudian principles of Desire, Repression, and Sublimation to examine characters' psychological development. It restricts its focus to these specific psychoanalytic lenses, eliminating more general novel components such as linguistic interpretations or other thematic studies. By focusing solely on Zusak's narrative and Freud's theoretical framework, this study aims to offer a focused, in-depth analysis of how these psychoanalytic concepts operate within characters' experiences and interactions, thereby yielding a more nuanced understanding of their psychological complexities.

There are some limitations to this study. To begin with, it focuses on one primary text, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, which limits the generalizability of its findings to other literary works or to general Holocaust narratives. Second, the analysis is based solely on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, especially the theories of Desire, Repression, and Sublimation, thereby ruling out other theoretical approaches that could offer alternative interpretative views. Furthermore, being a qualitative and interpretative research, the analysis will be subjective and rely on the interpretation of the text rather than empirical validation.

These limitations can restrict the implications of the study in terms of scope and generalizability.

## 1.6. Purpose Statement

This paper examines how the concept of Psychoanalysis in the works of Sigmund Freud, as discussed under Desire, Repression, and Sublimation, is applied in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak to understand the psychological development of the novel's characters. Using a Freudian theoretical approach, the paper examines how unconscious motifs and internal conflict shape the characters' behaviours, relationships, and emotional reactions within the socio-historical context of Nazi Germany. In the end, the study will help elucidate the novel's psychological undertones and will also contribute to the literature on psychoanalytic studies of literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Recent Studies

*The Book Thief*, written by Markus Zusak, has been widely acclaimed and famous since its publication in 2005. The novel tells the story of a young German girl who lives in Nazi Germany during World War II. The book thief is a young girl named Liesel who travels to Molching, where she lives with her foster parents. The exciting factor that engages the audience is the narrator, who is death itself. It follows Liesel from the snowy graveyard where she buries her brother and witnesses her life in Himmel Street and the horrible implications of war. "This 'magical' narrator unveils a broader history of the war and the Holocaust by questioning: What is real? What is normal? What is humane?" (Yarova, 2016, p. 16). Although the novel portrays the life of a young girl, it cannot be classified as a children's fictional book because "Death's barbed irony and shockingly vivid descriptions suggest otherwise" (Buckland, 2011, p. 71). The experience, however, is that of a child who witnesses the most barbaric and devastating implications of the war imposed. She cannot truly comprehend the horrible reality being unfolded before her as she "perceives the Nazi world around her through childish eyes and is not capable of fully understanding its social and political mechanisms" (Oliveira & Maggio, 2017).

Zusak depicts the harsh reality of war and its aftermath, aiming to make a strong impression on the reader. To achieve this, he chooses Death as the narrator. People often imagine it as "the Grim Reaper wielding a sickle or scythe, a skeleton holding an hourglass," or, as Guthke notes, "a human figure, specifically a male figure" (Guthke, 1999, p. 13). However, the main reason for making death the narrator was to showcase "people doing beautiful things in hideous times" and to demonstrate that "humans can be beautiful and selfish as well" (Zusak, 2013). Ronn emphasizes the idea behind using death as a narrator. He believes the writer wants to create a sense of foreboding and comfort as the reader might feel closer to death as a character, making him appear less scary' (Ronn, 2021, p. 6). Death seems to have sympathy towards Liesel, which is mentioned several times, which induces a 'feeling of comfort', 'making him appear less scary' (p.7). The novel's narrator is non-traditional and lacks human abilities but 'reflects on characters' thoughts and uses his space to exist within them' (Ronn, 2021, p. 21).

To reveal diverse aspects of human life, the writers often use symbolism. In particular, "Zusak employs the symbol of death to explore an integral human experience of pain" (Johnson, 2014, p. 15). The narrator classifies Liesel's life into three colors: white, black, and red. The white color represents snow, a frigid day when she lost her brother; black stands for smoke, an emission from the bombs. The third colour is red, which symbolizes blood. All three colours make up the flag of the Nazi party, an indication of the Holocaust.'

Baer suggests that in fiction depicting the Holocaust, the evil must be “as something irrational, something that springs inexplicably, full-blown, unannounced, into one’s life” (Baer, 2000, p. 384). The war did not hold any specific importance for Liesel until Max arrived. He introduced her to the book *Mein Kampf*, written by Hitler himself, exposing her to the stark reality of war. As Russell comments, “knowledge of the Holocaust forces us all to confront fear, ignorance and hatred” (Russell, 2005, p. 278). The Nazis viewed literature as a threat to their authority, so they would burn every book that spoke of freedom and independence. The first book that Liesel steals is the Grave Digger’s Handbook, which she picks up from the snow after her brother’s burial. Although she initially did not know how to read, “the words themselves are what catch Liesel’s fascination, not their meaning”. As Lee remarks, “Death’s description of how the basement wall has become a page demonstrates how powerful literacy is for Liesel” (Lee, 2015, p. 11). Through stealing books, “Zusak brings together an exploration of the importance of reading”, for it is a means of accessing knowledge, ideas, and philosophy (Webb, 2015, p. 15).

The thievery plays a significant role in Liesel’s character development. It makes her brave, rational, and intense, and “she stays out of our trauma by stealing” (Maslin, 2006). To unconsciously save herself from the trauma of her brother’s death and her mother’s separation, she adopts the habit of stealing. She challenges societal norms and “proves that she is not like traditional women.” Liesel draws inspiration from those books and brings positive change to the lives of the men around her. “The stereotypical gender role is subverted in *The Book Thief* with her arrival in Himmel Street” (Bhandari, 2019, p. 19).

Rizka Merdifa, in her article “*The Main Character’s Loss, Emptiness and Object of Desire*,” describes Liesel’s psychological attachment to books. She believes that the book is the object of desire for the character because it is associated with her blood relations. “The book, as the first thing she possesses after the loss, creates such a link to them” (Merdifa, 2018, p. 18). For Liesel, learning and reading were an escape and a form of rebellion against the outside world. ‘It did not matter what that book was about. What it meant was more important (Zusak, 2006, p. 67).

The effects of war do not wear off quickly, especially for children. Although Liesel distracts herself by stealing and reading books, “the dreams of her night about losing her original family repeatedly gave her nightmares” (Zusak, 2006, p. 83). The case of Ilsa Herman, the deteriorating health of Max, and the “depiction of the walk of Jewish prisoners to the concentration camps” add to Liesel’s trauma. Despite all the suffering, she remains the sole survivor of the war and lives with the traumatic experience (Vijayalakshmi, 2018, p. 21).

Victor and Michael claim in their article that escapism provides temporary relief from the horrors of life. As books were the object of desire for Liesel, they were also a form of escape as they “wholly enticed the psyche of Liesel”. The library of Ilsa Herman provided Liesel with an alternative escape to the imaginary world of books, and her escape came through ‘the microcosmic world of books of which she was a part’ (Victor & Michael, 2017, p. 91). Max Vandenburg also copes with the trauma through escapism by illustrating in the basement. ‘The Standover Man’ and ‘The World Shaker’ represent the status of two forces in his life (Victor & Michael, 2017).

To uplift this depiction of everyday ordinariness, the novel is, as noted, set on a typical road, one without the marvels of those roads where live the town’s more elite classes, such as the Lord Mayor and his wife. Conversely, the occupants of Himmel Road live in “rundown cottages” and work as painters or launderers; therefore, merchants. In this manner, Zusak

draws a reasonable distinction between the rich and the poor. He insists upon the significance of individual representations, elucidations, and rewritings (Shields, 2016, p. 16).

Liesel's agitational theft of books and her insubordinate dominance over words safeguard those words from annihilation, thereby transforming her memoirs into demonstrations of conflict and opposition. Her capacity to 'shake' words enables her to think through her story while, emblematically, giving voice to the hushed people, preserving their accounts, and offering a more provocative perspective on a grievous episode in German history (Domínguez-Rué, 2019, p. 18).

Lee emphasises the importance of literacy, citing examples from the novel. Its ability to empower is exemplified by how it shapes Liesel's perspective on place, her adaptation to her profound injury, and her opposition to Nazi culture during her brief years in Molching. Liesel's ability to read and write gives her a voice to speak out against Nazi Germany's culture. Hence, education "transforms Liesel to become a rhetorical Jew" by giving her a means to support herself when she is feeble and smothered, especially when her circumstances align with Max's (Lee, 2015, p. 15).

The alteration of power relations is witnessed between the Nazi Party and German citizens who are forced to live under Nazi doctrines. Even though there are situations in which the two groups do not directly clash, the power that the Nazi party wields is shared and permeates many German subjects, which undermines the efforts of characters like Hans Hubermann and Liesel to oppose Nazi ideologies even in secret. Making civilians read and advocate *Mein Kampf* turns them into compliant tools that the Nazi party may use. They become created subjects, subjugated to serving the societal, political, and financial demands of the powerful (May, 2019, p. 19).

Zusak's examination of trauma and people's coping strategies is a moving meditation on humanity's state. "Liesel's story does not trivialize the pain, nor does it sentimentalize the past". They struggle to forget the trauma that comes with pain, yet their unwavering resolve allows them to live. The novel indicates that one of the most potent ways that people interact with one another on the path to survival, recovery, and healing is through the immense value placed on words and stories (Sebastian, 2022, p. 22). The *Book Thief* consistently foreshadows events through prolepsis, setting up scenarios that let the reader at least partially guess what will happen after significant events. This story conveys a fatalistic viewpoint and builds excellent tension, focusing not on what will happen but on how it will happen.

## 2.2. Research Gaps

Whereas the topics of narration, symbolism, trauma, literacy, escapism, gender roles, power relations, and Holocaust representation in *The Book Thief* have been covered in previous studies, the particular focus on a psychoanalytic exploration of desire, repression, and sublimation as interlinked defence mechanisms has not been addressed as extensively. Followings gaps have emerged from the literature review:

### ➤ **Methodological Gaps**

They are used in most studies by employing a thematic, feminist, historical, or trauma-based approach. No adequate use of a systematic psychoanalytic model where the characters are systematically analyzed using the Freudian construct of desire, repression, and sublimation.

### ➤ **Conceptual Gaps**

As researchers speak about trauma, escapism, and symbolism, the specific psychological dynamics of the defence mechanism in the formation of the identity of Liesel and her inner struggle and behavioural change are not studied but rather under-researched. There is yet to

be a narrow conceptual connection between the unconscious desire, traumatic memory repression, and the sublime in literature and resistance.

### 2.3. Theoretical Framework

Before Wilhelm Wundt established the first laboratory for psychological research in 1879 and before the word "psychology" was created, numerous literary works had been published depicting the characters' inner struggles and the hardships of human existence. "Psychology should inevitably deal with literature since both spring from the same womb: the human psyche" (Franz, 2005, p. 119). The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, is most frequently linked to psychoanalytic critique, a term he first coined in 1896. His well-known theories, methods, and conceptions shed light on the workings of the human mind and inspired several other notable figures. In his Socratic dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato claims that "in every one of us, even those who seem most respectable, there exist desires, terrible in their untamed lawlessness, which reveal themselves in dreams" (Plato, trans. 2007).

In the 1930s, psychoanalytic criticism emerged, grounded primarily in Freud's theories. These theories included the Oedipus complex, the unconscious, and the id, ego, and superego, which form the tripartite structure of the psyche. These theories were then applied to literary works, offering intricate psychoanalytic interpretations of the authors and the protagonists. In his view, an individual is under constant pressure from decisive psychological factors that significantly shape human existence and behavior.

#### 2.3.1. The Freudian Unconscious Phenomenon

According to Freud, human actions are based on their needs and desires, which are considered a primary process in shaping the personality. Such desires are motivated by the unconscious, where the Id is found along with the aggression and sex instincts. He divides the mind into three regions: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. According to Freud, the unconscious is the source of our motivations, whether they be simple desires for food or sex, neurotic compulsions, or the motives of an artist or scientist (Freud, 1915, p. 5). The preconscious mind holds information that is not immediately accessible but can be brought into consciousness with minimal effort. "It is the unconscious that plays a major role in mental illness according to Freud's psychoanalytic theory" (George, 2010). Alternatively, Jung proposed a collective unconscious that contains archetypes or universal symbols and themes. He divided the unconscious into two layers. The first layer is the personal unconscious, similar to Freud's concept. A prominent feature of the personal unconscious is the complexes, a collection of thoughts, feelings, memories, and attitudes that focus on a single concept (McLeod, 2024, p. 24).

Id, conversely, works according to the pleasure principle, which deals with the immediate gratification of needs and does not consider moral values or norms. "The dark, inaccessible part of our personality" is how Freud defined the id. Only dream analysis and neurotic symptoms can be used to understand the id, which can only be defined by how it contrasts with the ego. It is merely interested in satisfying urges in line with the pleasure principle; it lacks organization and group will (Freud, 1923, p. 6). In the early years, before the other aspects of personality emerge, the child's Id is completely controlled. Sitting fundamental demands for comfort, food, and drink are crucial. It would be highly troublesome for people as they age to act out to satisfy their id requirements whenever they have an impulse, need, or want. All life-and-death impulses are contained in the id, which Freud thought helped dictate behavior. People's personalities do not alter in this way as they age. It remains primitive, instinctual, and inexperienced. It is disconnected from logic, reality, and societal

conventions. It aims to satisfy a person's most fundamental needs and desires (Cherry, 2020, p. 23).

### 2.3.2. (Re)interpreting Desire

The core of Freud's psychoanalytic beliefs on desire is the idea of libido, which he defined as the innate mental or physiological energy connected to sexual urges and, subsequently, to all positive human endeavors. According to Freud's theory, desire originates in the unconscious mind. It is intimately associated with the id, the most primal aspect of the human psyche that functions on the pleasure principle and seeks instant satisfaction for basic needs and urges without considering the repercussions (Belsey, 1993, p. 8). Additionally, Freud's theory of the id, ego, and superego—in which the id represents unbridled impulses and desires, the ego serves as a bridge between the id and reality, and the superego imposes moral and social restrictions on desires—is intertwined with his concept of desire. Freud's understanding of it highlights the fundamental significance of desire in human psychology. Desire drives people to seek satisfaction and resolve internal conflicts, eventually affecting their behaviour and mental processes.

Macqueen emphasizes that, by a law of nature, all men pursue what seems reasonable and shun the opposite. This fact explains why nature prompts men to secure whatever appears to be good. When this occurs wisely and equitably, the Stoics describe such longing by the term *bolus*, whereas we would employ the term 'wish'. The latter, they think, is found in the wise man alone, and they define it as follows: 'wish' is a rational longing for something. When, however, wish is divorced from reason and is too violently aroused, we call it 'lust' or unbridled desire, which is found in all fools (Macqueen, 2011, p. 32).

### 2.3.4. Framing Repression

According to Freud, the three components of the mind, the Id, the Ego, and the Superego, are in constant conflict. To deal with psychological collision, the ego initiates defence mechanisms. Ego-defence mechanisms are natural and normal. When they get out of proportion (i.e., used with frequency), neuroses develop, such as anxiety states, phobias, obsessions, or hysteria (McLeod, 2024, p. 24). Repression is one of the defence mechanisms that Freud introduced in his theory. It is a defensive system that keeps undesirable ideas and emotions out of the mind, preventing worry. It has an impact on the mind of the typical individual and is a significant factor in many mental diseases. Sigmund Freud developed the theory after observing how difficult it was for patients to recall the past consciously.

Vaillant states Freud's initial use of the term 'repressed' suggests a conscious process. In the Freudian approach, "it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore deliberately repressed and inhibited from his conscious thought" (Vaillant, 1992, p. 6). However, three years later, Freud argued that the physical mechanism of (unconscious) defence—that is, an attempt to repress an incompatible concept that had come into unpleasant opposition to the patient's ego—was responsible for the symptoms of a range of neuroses. As the notion of repression evolved, Freud began to examine various forms of inhibition as defence mechanisms. According to him, repression not only kept harmful information out of consciousness but also sought to prevent the dangerous impulse from being aroused by preventing it from developing as a psychic process within the individual and by preventing them from engaging in activities that would trigger it.

Though commonly associated with Freud, Johann Herbart, one of the pioneers of empirical psychology, introduced the concept and fundamental idea of repression into psychology more than 50 years before psychoanalysis. According to Herbart, repression was inevitable due to the finite capacity of consciousness. We inevitably prevent ourselves from

being aware of other ideas while we are aware of one. The suppressed concepts, in Herbart's view, do not vanish; instead, they move below the "threshold of unconsciousness" and into a "state of tendency," which was the philosophically accurate phrase for "unconscious" at the time. Repressed ideas can overturn and repress prevailing concepts currently through altered conditions or recombination (Erdelyi, 2006, p. 6).

In his book, Peter Madison remarks that as long as we interact with memories and concepts, we stay on the surface. In the mental realm, emotions are the only thing that truly matters. There are no mental powers that matter unless they can evoke emotions. Repressed ideas are only suppressed since they are linked to feelings that should not be released. It would be more accurate to state that suppression affects feelings, but that we can only recognise sensations when they are connected to concepts (Madison, 1961, p. 224). Due to the psychological entropy repression into the unconscious system, "the cognitive-affective schema in the conscious mind could stay in a state with low entropy", preventing the person from being aware of passive information (Erdelyi, 2006). A man who has lost his wife, for instance, finds it difficult to accept her passing. He may know that his wife is merely travelling and will return in a few days or weeks. By rejecting reality, the guy distances himself from the painful truth and continues his "normal" life as if nothing had occurred.

### **2.3.5. The Sublimation Discourse**

According to Freud, repressed material can come to light in various forms, including dreams, verbal blunders, or signs of neurosis, underscoring the enduring impact of repressed content on a person's psychological health. Transforming such urges into constructive endeavours—a process known as sublimation—is one approach to making them socially acceptable. It enables people to redirect their energies into productive endeavours, like science, art, or other culturally esteemed interests, turning potentially dangerous urges into acceptable behaviour. Sublimation is defined as a "displacement of libido" in which the urge to pursue a "finer and higher" joy has been subdued and "tamed"; this joy, while "much lesser intensity than the direct satisfaction of coarser drives [would bring]," does not "convulse our physical framework" (Freud, 1915, p. 58). At times, Freud seems to suggest that the libido can expeditiously sublimate in order to effectively alleviate the consequences of the conflict between mental desires and prohibition. At other times, he views "repression" as a "reaction formation" as a subspecies of sublimation. However, the potential for sublimating sexual drive has its limitations. According to Freud, sublimation is "available only to a select few people." It calls for unique abilities and gifts that are not particularly common in real life (Civitarese, 2016, p. 3).

The explanation of how this sensation arises from a depiction of the divide between the limitless realm of nature and the finite domain of humanity is at the heart of the sublime aesthetic. A deep sense of unity with the other, with all of creation, and with humanity dawns on everybody who experiences this abyss. Sublimation elevates man spiritually by guiding him towards concepts and abstract cognition. A war is required to overcome humanity's current state, which we also call subjectivation. "We lose the body" throughout this subjectification process, according to Bion (1984, p. 17). The subject can see things, himself, and the object from a different perspective, much like an aerostatic balloon from "above," but only if he gives up his proto-emotionality.

Psychodynamic "depth" theory states that thoughts and desires related to forbidden sexual or aggressive behaviours are suppressed and sent into the unconscious, where they are redirected, disguised, transformed, or otherwise channelled and expressed in more conventional and socially acceptable activities. "Primary" process thinking—impulsive, irrational, and unrestrained—operating in the unconscious and "secondary" process

thinking—realistic and logical—operating in the conscious and unconscious would combine to cause the transformation (Cohen, 2000, p. 3).

## 2.4. Conceptual Framework

This paper concerns Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of desire, repression, and sublimation. These ideas describe the influence of unconscious driving and defense mechanisms on human behavior. In *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, these Freudian concepts are applied to the characters' responses to trauma, loss, and social oppression. Desire is the expression of inner desires, the process of repression is the experience of painful events, which are suppressed, and the process of sublimation is the way to express the negative desires, which are turned into socially accepted behavior. Combined, the ideas make the theoretical basis of the research.

## 2.5. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework uses Freud's psychoanalytic concepts to analyze the chosen characters, with Liesel as the main one. Based on qualitative textual analysis, the paper has identified instances of desire, repression, and sublimation in the thoughts, actions, and dialogues of the characters. All the concepts are applied as analytical categories to explain psychological conflicts and character development. This methodological framework enables the research problem, objectives, and questions to be consistent and provides a narrowed psychological explanation of the novel.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Design

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis, this qualitative study, which offers "a deeper insight into real-world problems" (Brannan), employs textual analysis. This method involves "examination and interpretation of texts to understand their meaning and context" (Caulfield 19), to study desire, repression, and sublimation in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. The primary data source is the novel, examined for character interactions, analysis, and various incidents affecting the characters' lives. Secondary data, such as articles and related papers, have been used to support the primary text. This research provides a focused, academic analysis of the factors responsible for shaping identity, drawing on Freud's theoretical paradigms to suggest that human personality evolves through a series of stages, "each of which is centered around the satisfaction of certain physical or psychic needs" (Main 23).

### 3.2. Research Instrument

The main research tool is textual analysis, informed by Freudian psychoanalytic ideas. The novel itself is the main analytical method; the selected passages, character dialogues, narrative descriptions, and symbols are discussed through the prism of desire, repression, and sublimation. Freud's theoretical constructs are analytical categories used to explain and organise textual evidence.

### 3.2. Population and Sampling

The study population will be the entire characters and narrative events in *The Book Thief*. Nevertheless, the technique of purposive sampling is used to select key characters, especially Liesel Meminger and other main characters, whose psychological development is essential to demonstrate the functioning of the defence mechanisms. The desirable events, discussions, and scenes that directly depict desire, repression, and sublimation are carefully selected for analysis.

### 3.3. Data Collection

There are two main sources of data: primary and secondary. The main data is the full text of *The Book Thief*, which is identified and analyzed using relevant excerpts. The secondary data

entails academic articles, critical essays, and research papers that justify and situate the psychoanalytical interpretation. The data obtained is then mathematically analysed in light of Freud's theoretical paradigms to establish the role of psychological forces in shaping character and identity.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

*The Book Thief* is a harrowing narrative set in a world ravaged by war, where its inhabitants endure the anguish of trauma, loss, and grief. The story is set in the small German town of Molching. The novel's protagonist, Liesel, begins her new life after burying her younger brother, and her story is narrated by death itself. Liesel Meminger is an enthusiastic and curious girl who develops a strong relationship with books. After arriving at her foster parents' house, she struggles to fit in and has dreams about her brother's death. Her foster mother continues to criticize her since she is a quick-tempered lady, but fortunately, her father is a good man. As Liesel is illiterate, she does not know how to read or write, so her father gives her lessons and helps her to adjust. They begin with the first book she picks up from the graveyard, *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. "The book thief had struck for the first time, the beginning of an illustrious career" (Zusak, 2005, p. 30). Death is always the first observer of her actions, and it watches her pick the first book from the snowy graveyard. She tightly grasps the book in her hand while bidding farewell to her brother.

### 5.1. Demystifying the 'Desire' Hierarchy

Liesel's first act of thievery can be labelled as an involuntary act because she is grieving at that moment. As Freud observes that 'desire' sprouts from the feeling of absence, Liesel feels a sense of deprivation, which instigates the act of picking someone's book. As she is illiterate, the book is useless to her, but "it was what it meant that was more important" (Zusak, 2005, p. 39). When Hans begins reading the book to Liesel, he is somewhat unsure of the act because the title seems inappropriate for a small girl. He asks her about her intention in reading such a book, but Liesel is unsure.

"As for the girl, there was a sudden desire to read it that she did not even attempt to understand. On some level, perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right. Whatever the reason, her hunger to read that book was as intense as any ten-year-old human could experience" (Zusak, 2005, p. 44).

The book illustrates an unconscious longing for an unattainable wish that cannot be expressed. The child may fantasize about the broken bond with the mother, but the true source of desire is perfect love, fueled by the absence of any representation of this profound loss. Liesel's mother passed away, leaving her feeling abandoned. She then leaves Liesel with a new family, leaving Liesel with the impression that the person who should have loved her the most does not care about her. Things have only worsened since her brother's passing; they were supposed to start a new family together, but he did not survive. She wanted to keep her brother's memory safe, and the book was her only reminder. It was a path to connect and secure the memories of a short-lived family that was severed by the brutality of war. So, the act of thievery becomes a sense of obligation for her and a silent act of rebellion. Liesel faces the embarrassment of being unable to read correctly in front of the class. She finds several boys making fun of her, which sparks anger and resentment in her. On reaching home, she urges her father to complete the book, and they read it throughout the night. After its completion, Liesel feels a sense of fulfilment, a sense of achievement that feeds the desire growing inside her. The next book she steals is from a pile of ashes. It was *Fuhrer's* birthday, and the people had gathered at night to burn the books, which implies the hatred of Hitler towards education and knowledge. Liesel had also gone with her father to witness the 'bonfire,' and there, for the

first time, she finds the truth about the brutality imposed by Hitler. A realization dawns upon her about the truth about her father, the disappearance of her birth mother, and the death of her brother, igniting a fire in her heart. Watching the fire burn all the books to ashes, Liesel moved and quickly picked up her second book, *The Shoulder Shrug*. She hides the book beneath her shirt and walks home.

“The book felt cool enough now to slip inside her uniform. At first, it was nice and warm against her chest. As she began walking, though, it began to heat up again. Smoke was rising out of Liesel's collar. The book started to burn her. It seemed to be igniting. Beneath her shirt, a book was eating her up” (Zusak, 2005, p. 82). As the book was burning in the fire before she grabbed it and hid it beneath her shirt, its cover was scorching and painful on her skin, but the desire and hatred bulging inside her was more unbearable. After hearing the word “*Kommunisten*” attributed to her father, the curses directed at him, and the suffering of her mother, Liesel could not care less anymore. She wanted everyone to suffer, especially Hitler; she had come to despise him. This is a pivotal stage in Liesel's life since it shows how much her quest for justice and knowledge of the outside world has grown.

As Freud claims that 'desire' pushes people to seek satisfaction and resolve internal conflicts, eventually affecting their behaviour and mental processes, Liesel finds solace in her books amid the destruction of war. To fill the void in her heart, she steals food from the farm with the help of Rudy Steiner, steals a book from the mayor's library, and continues desperately to read. This desire also dictates the life of Max Vandenburg, a Jewish fist-fighter who takes refuge in Hubermann's basement. Hans's life was saved by Max's father, with whom he had developed a strong bond. Max knew that his life was nonetheless short, but he wanted to survive. He had a desire to live. “When death captures me, he will feel my fist on his face” (Zusak, 2005, p. 127). Max dreams about several fistfights with the Führer in his basement. He dreams of defeating him and proving his strength before the crowd. Every time he is beaten and punched to the ground, he stands up with unwavering determination and defeats the oppressor. The Nazis were hunting down every last Jew, torturing them, murdering them, and Max knew that he was not an exception. Despite all this, he wanted to live and to see the world outside the basement.

## 5.2. The Mind, Cognition, and the Unconscious

According to Freud, to deal with unhealthy desires, the ego initiates defence mechanisms that control and divert the course of action. The unwanted and painful memories are forced into the unconscious through 'repression.' This also leads to nightmares and different health conditions. When Liesel buries her brother and moves to the house of the Hubermanns, she continuously suffers from nightmares and hallucinations.

“She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for brother floated boat-like in the darkness. Slowly with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor.” (Zusak, 2005, p. 27).

She was just nine years old when she suffered from the trauma of her brother's death. Her small mind could not comprehend the severity of loss. The sinking bed image symbolizes Liesel's hidden burden of loss and pain, illustrating how these repressed memories resurface when her guard is down. The dreams or visions of her brother, however, did not stop coming. They seemed to appear whenever her mind was in a state of delirium. Her visions began when she first arrived in Molching, a completely different life marked by turmoil and distress. Later that day, she goes to the mayor's house to pick up the laundry, but unfortunately, they fired her mama from the job due to worsening conditions in Germany. This news was infuriating for

Liesel because she thought that the rich were always cruel and trampled on the poor. She rang the bell of the mayor's house, and his wife emerged from the front door. Liesel bursts with anger and lashes out at her. "Immediately. Her brother was next to her. He whispered to her to stop, but he, too, was dead, and not worth listening to" (Zusak, 2005, p. 180). Her mental state had shaken, and her unconsciousness created an image before her. Something she had repressed for a long time. Liesel believes that these visions are a way for her unconscious mind to process the trauma she experienced as a young child. They demonstrate how challenging it was for her to psychologically comprehend and acknowledge the extent of her losses, even with her limited perspective as a nine-year-old.

Before Max arrives in Himmel Street, he is hiding in a storeroom because the government has started the elimination of Jews. He had to spend months hiding in a dark room to save himself from being killed. The mental torture of being alone and completely deprived of human company, the light of day, and good food depressed him to the point of no return. He began to see things that were not there, and to create images with his mind, imagining a world of victory. He had 'repressed' his emotions into something imaginative and superficial. Faced with the constant threat of discovery and the ever-present fear of death, Max represses his emotions, leading to vivid and imaginative scenarios. In these scenarios, he envisions himself fighting Hitler in a crowded arena, emerging as the strong, unbeatable victor.

Freud's insight into the unconscious mind's impact on mental state is crucial to understanding Max's transformation. He observed that the "unconscious mind has a strong impact on a person's mind, and it could lead to mental distress" (Freud, 1915, p. 29). Max's mental stability had completely changed. He imagines himself fighting Hitler in a ring. The place is crowded, and everybody is cheering for the *Führer*, but Max is strong and unbeatable.

"Sometimes, though, when his heartbeat neutralized and his body became functional again, he would turn off the lamp and stand in the darkness of the basement. Around him, it all materialized. White light lowered itself into a boxing ring and crowd stood and murmured – that magical sound of many people talking at once" (Zusak, 2005, p. 242).

The images that he created in his mind would become real before him, and everything felt alive. When there are no outside stimuli, Max's mind fabricates a parallel reality in which he may face his oppressors, assert his agency, and feel in charge and empowered. Max's ability to create imagined worlds and find solace and strength in the face of overwhelming adversity speaks to the resilience of the human spirit. Despite the physical and emotional toll of his isolation, Max's desire for survival and a sense of purpose and agency drives him to transcend the limitations of his circumstances through the power of his mind.

### 5.3. The Sublimation Journey Within

The occurrence of dreams and hallucinations, by repressing the desires, can cause mental instability, and to avoid negative behavior, the mind activates 'sublimation'. As Freud states, sublimation is a "displacement of libido" in which the urge to pursue a "finer and higher" joy has been subdued and "tamed" and transformed into socially acceptable behaviors (Freud, 1915, p. 58). Liesel's act of book theft cannot be considered socially acceptable, as it is forbidden by law. Still, her whole journey of picking up books and reading them with passion leads her to put them to good use. She eventually becomes a writer. Liesel's yearning for knowledge and self-expression, initially expressed through her compulsive book stealing, goes through a transformative process of sublimation throughout the novel. As the narrator states:

"The best world shakers were the ones who understood the true power of words. They were the ones who could climb the highest. One such word shaker was a small, skinny girl. She was renowned as the best word shaker in her region because she knew how powerless a person

could be without words. That is why she could climb higher than anyone else. She had desire. She was hungry for them” (Zusak, 2005, p. 302).

Liesel's "desire" and "hunger" for words, stemming from her traumatic past and the void left by the loss of her family, are initially channeled through the act of stealing books. However, as the novel progresses, Liesel's yearning for knowledge and self-expression undergoes sublimation as she transforms from a book thief into a writer. "Schreibe, she instructed herself. Write. After more than two hours, Liesel Meminger started writing, not knowing how she was ever going to get this right” (Zusak, 2005, p. 352). Liesel transforms from a passive consumer of words to an active creator as she channels her desire for self-expression through the act of writing. The narrator's description of Liesel's determination to "write" and her willingness to confront her painful memories reflects the process of sublimation, in which her unacceptable impulses, such as book stealing, are transformed into a more socially acceptable and constructive outlet for writing.

Max Vandenburg's repressed emotions, which had transformed into dreams and hallucinations, gradually began to transfigure into words on paper. The defense mechanism of 'sublimation' had allowed him to put his thoughts to effective use.

“Only then, on the paper that bubbled and humped under the stress of drying paint, did he begin to write the story... there were practice versions on the pages, improving his basic, clumsy artwork to a level he could accept” (Zusak, 2005, p. 150).

Max discovered that Liesel's birthday was approaching, and unfortunately, he had nothing to give her. His presence itself was a nuisance to people around him. They had risked everything to shelter him. After contemplation, he decides to write something for her, a story of his own, disguised behind images. The booklet was named 'The Standover Man,' which portrayed his fear of men standing over him while he sat or lay defeated. The booklet concludes with a realization that he does not mind Liesel standing over him, greeting him with her whole heart. The possibilities that he imagines in the basement, building the scenario of defeating Hitler, visualizing himself as a victor, gradually mold into words, providing him an escape and haven from his depression. Max uses the power of words to defy the repressive ideology and channel his yearning for justice by turning the pages of Hitler's manifesto into a canvas for his own story. Amid his solitude, he finds comfort and meaning in stories and books that he shares with Liesel.

The novel depicts the unconscious enigma of the human mind and its capabilities to enact during the horrors of life. Through the characters of Liesel and others, the narrator portrays their desires, their will to survive, and the traumas they endure. The defence mechanisms of 'repression' and 'sublimation' help the characters cope with the darkness engulfing their consciousness. It helps them repress the traumatic experiences and transform their desires into socially acceptable behaviors. Liesel is torn apart by grief and fear, but she turns her pain into a relationship with words. As the narrator states, “The words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like the rain.” (Zusak, 2005, p. 54). This photo demonstrates that she tries to transform her inner conflict into narratives, applying words as an outlet and a way of relief. Similarly, Max manages to transform fear and alienation through writing and drawing The Standover Man, not by despair, but by art. These instances collectively introduce the concept of sublimation in the novel as the ability of the characters to transform trauma into creativity and, in the face of war, remain human.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay between unconscious desires and the coping mechanisms that sustain the characters' survival. By applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this study has illuminated the profound ways in which the characters' inner worlds shape their actions and transformations within the broader societal context of Nazi Germany. The protagonist's insatiable desire for knowledge and self-expression, initially expressed through her compulsive book-stealing, undergoes a transformative process of sublimation. As she transitions from a "book thief" to a writer, Liesel channels her repressed emotions and desires into the act of writing. This not only helps her cope with her traumatic past but also empowers her to confront the injustices of the Nazi regime through the power of words. The narrative exhibits a complex interweaving of violent acts, instances of torture, and racial segregation, which reflects the collective trauma and depression pervading among the characters. Through the eyes of death, the writer presents Liesel's life and her journey of survival amid the horrors of war. The study makes a noteworthy contribution to the ongoing scholarly discourse by exploring a different facet of the novel, highlighting the physical and mental struggles of human beings amid the chaos of war and their efforts to survive. Its exploration of Freud's theories, particularly the significance of the unconscious mind in shaping personality and behavior, provides valuable insights into the complexities of human nature. The characters' struggles to reconcile their internal desires with the demands of their external environment underscore the profound impact of societal structures and power dynamics on individual development.

In conclusion, *The Book Thief* is a captivating novel that portrays the horrors of war endured by the people under the Nazi regime. It prompts readers to critically examine the cultural and political constructs that sustain oppression and restrict individual growth. Zusak emphasizes the role of literature in tackling pertinent psychological issues, underscoring the power of discourse.

## Recommendations

Given the current psychoanalytic examination, the recommendation is to conduct further research through a detailed stylistic interpretation of *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Although the work has already covered the psychological aspects of the characters using Freudian ideas, a stylistic approach would offer more insight into the novel's linguistic patterns, the use of writing voice, figurative language, symbolism, and structural means. Specific focus can be placed on how Zusak uses personification, unusual narration (Death as narrator), imagery, and diction, which greatly influence readers' emotional and thematic responses to the text. Such analysis would complement the current study by considering the role and importance of language and style in meaning construction, thereby providing a more comprehensive interpretation of the novel.

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