

Lauren Carr

Mrs. Rutan

AP Literature and Composition

29 September 2015

### Finding True Meanings

Literature is more than just words written on a page; it is what is between the lines that reveal the more complex meaning. With every meaning incorporated in a piece of literature comes a set of interpretations from a variety of readers, and almost every reader has a different interpretation of literature. That is where Thomas C. Foster's book-- How to Read Literature Like a Professor-- will help readers improve their analytical skills and get a better understanding of the piece of literature through the theories he provides. Several of Foster's theories can be applied to Markus Zusak's bestselling book, The Book Thief, where a girl's desire for stealing books leads to troubling situations.

It was in Foster's first chapter, *Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not)*, that readers saw Liesel Meminger-- Zusak's protagonist-- come into the role of a quester. Liesel Meminger, a young, Russian girl, was sent to live with the Hubermanns in Munich, Germany during World War II where she developed a fascination for reading books. According to Foster, a "quest consists of five things: (a) a quester, (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) a real reason to go there" (Foster, 3). Liesel fits Foster's theory of a quester by being "young, inexperienced, [and] immature" (Foster, 3) since she is only "nine years old" (Zusak, 21) and she hasn't fully developed the understanding of right from

wrong as shown in her actions of stealing books. The reason to go to Himmel Street and steal books didn't become clear to readers until Liesel and her foster father--Hans Hubermann-- developed a relationship from him teaching her how to read. As Liesel became better at reading, she craved for knowledge and adventure that books brought-- that's her reason for going around Himmel Street and stealing books. With the new fascination of searching for books, Liesel was lead down a troubling road that required help from others-- such as Rudy and the mayor's wife-- and that could have lead to consequences of getting caught which were her challenges on the quest. It wasn't until Himmel Street was bombed and took the lives of Liesel's foster family and friend that she discovered the real reason she was sent to Himmel Street which is the the relationships that she developed with the people around her. Foster states that "the real reason for a quest is always self knowledge" (Foster, 3) and Liesel learned that there is no set amount of books that could compare to the relationships she had. The use of Foster's theory of quest helps readers break down and analyze The Book Thief to understand meanings behind the journey Liesel took.

In Foster's second chapter, *Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion*, he makes an argument that meals have a more complex meaning-- especially when it comes to characters and their relationships with each other. Foster states that "whenever people eat or drink together, it's a communion" (Foster 8); therefore there is a reason why those people joined together to have a meal. Readers see this theory in The Book Thief when Rosa Hubermann offers pea soup to Max Vandenburg when he first arrives at the Hubermann's door step (Zusak, 197). The meaning behind the communion was Rosa was accepting Max into her home and showed how Hans and

she were different from the followers of Hitler. The use of a communion helped show who Rosa Hubermann is beside her dirty mouth and harsh reactions towards situations.

Liesel Meminger's foster father--Hans Hubermann-- is a unique character that stands out among the residents of Himmel Street. Hans Hubermann in some ways has characteristics that suggest he is a "Christ figure". In chapter fourteen, *Yes, She's a Christ Figure, Too*, of Foster's book, he discusses how characters can have "some of the features that make Christ who he is" (Foster, 119). He further explains that a character doesn't have to have all the traits that Christ had, but if a character had similar traits then they would be a "Christ figure". Hans can be considered a "Christ figure" because he is

“3) Self-sacrificing

4) Good with children

8) Known to use humble modes of transportation, [such as] feet” (Foster, 121)

Readers can see that Hans carried the trait of self-sacrificing when he gave a Jew, who was walking to a concentration camp, a piece of bread and then got beaten by a Nazi soldier for that crime. He is also good with children--especially when it comes to Liesel Meminger. Readers can see that when Hans was the only one to persuade her to get out of the car when she first arrived on Himmel Street (Zusak, 28). The last trait that considers Hans a "Christ figure" may not cross every reader's minds, but Hans uses "humble modes of transportation" (Foster, 121) when he goes to work and travels around Himmel Street by walking. Being a "Christ figure" helps show what type of character the author created and in this case Hans is the odd one out of everyone.

In chapter eighteen, *If She Comes Up, It's Baptism*, in Foster's book, he brings up the theory of "death and rebirth through the medium of water" (Foster, 155). His theory is shown in The Book Thief when Rudy Steiner jumped in the river to save Liesel's book. Even though Rudy didn't literally die from jumping in the river, he was reborn when he came out. The act of submerging of water represented as a change in him and how he acted towards Liesel from that point on. He no longer asked for a kiss from Liesel and didn't try to be romantic towards her. The theory of death and rebirth gives a story or character more meaning; even in this case with Rudy and Liesel's relationship.

Many of Foster's theories can be found in many pieces of literature--including The Book Thief. Even though some of Foster's theories may not be obvious like death and rebirth of Rudy, others are easy to spot once a reader learns and identifies them. With the use of the theories The Book Thief and other literature are revealed to have deeper meanings behind the characters and plot.

#### Works Cited

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Print.

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading between the Lines*. New York: Quill, 2003. Print.