

Prompt Four-metamorphoses of a character

Upper-class, Woman, Negro, Homosexual, Jew—Society has defined groups of people throughout history, assigning them roles and regulating the way they should live. The challenge for an individual is then deciding whether they allow themselves to be smothered under the definition society traps them in, or embrace their own identity despite societal constraints.

Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*, is set in Nazi Germany, the epitome of societal attempts to control different groups of people. The character of Max Vandenburg undergoes one of the most significant metamorphoses in Zusak's novel. Zusak characterizes Max as slowly progressing towards attaining the inner strength to break free from society's judgment through the symbols of the books Max reads and writes. Ultimately, Max's success in attaining his inner strength shows that society only has as much control over a person as that person allows it to.

Zusak's inclusion of the book *Mein Kampf* symbolizes Max's passive acceptance of the fate society has decided for him. This passive acceptance characterizes Max as a man who perceives his identity as a burden. As Max reads the novel, the "only two words he ever tasted" were 'mein kampf' (160). In English, mein kampf means "my struggle". At this point in the novel, Max can only focus on the struggle of his life, and his own self-pity. Society has defined him as a Jew, and "anything was better than being a Jew" (161). Max later rereads the book multiple times, as suggested when Liesel comments that "Max was reading *Mein Kampf* again" (218). The attention Max pays to the book shows that he is trying to understand why Hitler has made Germany the way it is, and why he has persecuted Jews. However, the need to understand characterizes Max as resigned to the fact that Jews are the lowly beings that the book proclaims. Ultimately, this identity crisis is the foundation of Max's internal struggle in the opening of the novel.

As the novel progresses, Max authors two books, *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker*. These two books symbolize Max's blossoming ability to accept his own person, and blame the world, instead of himself, for how society has shunned him. In *The Standover Man*, Max illustrates himself as a bird, which symbolizes his desire to escape his reality (224-236). A bird trapped in a basement is also completely unnatural, and therefore shows the beginning of Max's realization that he should not have to endure the confinement society has forced him into. The symbol of the bird marks the shift in Max's character towards breaking free of societal opinions of him. However, *The Standover Man* also contains illustrations that deal only with occurrences from Max's past. This detail connotes an unclear future, and shows that at the point Max writes *The Standover Man*, he has no notion on how to accomplish his desire to break free from society.

Zusak's use of symbolism in *The Word Shaker* marks an even greater shift in Max's characterization to where he is finally able to envision a clear future without society's judgment. Max writes in *The Word Shaker* that Hitler put all the people in society into a machine where "words were fed into them" until "they were hypnotized" (445). This shows that Max actively accepts and wants to communicate to others that society, and not the Jewish people, is flawed by their contrived beliefs. Max eventually appears as a character in *The Word Shaker* and takes the Word Shaker character down from her tree. The tree falls and the two of them "climbed up to the horizontal trunk and began to walk" away from the crowd that had formed (450). The crowd never disappears in the scene, symbolizing the idea that society's judgment will always be a presence in an individual's life. However, this scene also proves that Max has finally discovered his ability to turn away from society's judgments, and embrace his own personal path. On a

larger scale, *The Word Shaker* symbolizes the human ability to embrace personal identity even if that identity differs from what society has deemed to be true.

Zusak's use of the books associated with Max symbolizes Max's journey towards self-empowerment. The reveal of the different books marks Max's character shifts from self-loathing to self-empowerment. Max is able to accept what society thinks, and then break free from the restraints of those opinions. Max's personal transformation in Zusak's novel ultimately reveals the human ability to persevere in the face of adversity.

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