

### The Transformation of the Innocent

Mark Zusak's The Book Thief, a novel about a girl named Liesel Meminger growing up in Nazi Germany, explores the varying effects of chaos on human nature. Living under threat, Liesel's best friend, Rudy Steiner, traverses a world of fear with youthful buoyancy, but grows into a young man who is frustrated by his desire to discover good in the world. Rudy's maturity and frustration display the natural aspiration to strive for order, happiness, and even retaliation when effaced with danger.

Rudy Steiner makes his first appearance in the novel as a self-confident and fearless youth with no doubts about his abilities. He is sure he cannot miss a penalty shot with Liesel as goalie, and he is unafraid to befriend her despite her supposed stupidity: "he's the type who is unafraid to make a decision" (49). As are most children, Rudy is self-centered and determined to receive short-term rewards. He looks to be awarded with a kiss in return for his friendship with Liesel, he steals food when he is hungry, and he seeks to show everyone his abilities in the Hitler Youth carnival. His rash behavior and ambitious attitude stem from the need for victory in the constantly crushing world of the Nazis.

Everyone in Germany suffered poverty as World War II dragged on. Food had to be rationed, unemployment rose, families were torn apart, and all saw awful occurrences, like stores being ransacked and burned. It is under these circumstances that Rudy is endlessly being repressed. With each ghastly event he becomes angry and loses his innocence, but he also obtains a compassion to defend what he believes is right. In his childish purity, Rudy could not understand his surroundings or why everything was happening. His "Jesse Owens Incident" shows his ignorance, as does his conversation with his father afterward. He asks, "Do you have

to pay to be Jewish?" (60); only later does he finally comprehend the mindset of Hitler's Germany toward non-Aryans. During the Hitler Youth carnival, Rudy promises to win multiple races because he wished to prove himself; but then, he purposely loses the 100 meter race "Because he isn't Jesse Owens" (364). Here, Rudy displays his maturity and understanding in quiet retaliation- to show that non-Aryans can be better than Hitler's master race.

His defiance of Franz Deutscher, his Hitler Youth division leader, also exemplifies his growing compassion and heroism for ideals. The dictatorial Deutscher loathes Rudy for always defending Tommy Müller. Rudy is frustrated by Deutscher's cruelty and intentionally prolongs punishment by refusing to answer Hitler's birthday correctly and by withstanding beatings rather than conceding to cruel conditioning much like the German citizens did under Hitler's rule. His actions are comparable to Thoreau's and Gandhi's civil disobedience, a pacifist way to defend his ideal for peace and take away the upper hand from the cruel. However, the narrator, Death, interprets his actions as a release for his frustration: "...the very sight of Franz Deutscher gave him the urge to destroy himself" (296). From this view, Rudy is searching for an outlet for the pain of being poor and losing his father; when distressed, irrational motives penetrate human actions.

Rudy also resorts to stealing, his first act that causes him to lose his innocence. Throughout the novel, Rudy uses stealing as a way to gain a victory to compensate for his losses. Sometime after his father's recruitment, Rudy determinedly sets out to rob from the wealthier home, toolbox in hand. He says to Liesel, "It feels good doesn't it? To steal something back." (483). Here, he shows his regressed state of mind, acting out rather than maturely dealing with his anger.

Rudy Steiner metamorphoses into a bitter youth who constantly seeks for something good in his world. His ideals represent what humans need in life: we search for order, despite chaos, and hope, in the face of darkness. Zusak uses Rudy as an inspirational character because few have the strength to stand up to threatening figures like Deutscher, or to act upon internal aspirations to defend just principles in the face of danger. Rudy is not only human nature's desire to act worthily, but he is the drive to achieve good. He is an important character because his frustrated attempts show how much innocence people destroy when they are threatened and how anger influences our actions over the instinct to survive, proving that we would rather have compassion and beauty in our lives than follow a miserable existence.

I confirm that this essay is my independent work and is submitted without the assistance of mentor or peer review. \_\_\_\_\_