

## THE CONVENTIONS OF HOLOCAUST LITERATURE IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S *THE BOOK THIEF*

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### Abstract

This research is aimed to find the conventions of Holocaust literature applied in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* and the disturbing elements of the convention which are less or not represented in the novel. This research is a qualitative research. The main source of the data was a novel entitled *The Book Thief* and the data was the expressions related to the conventions of Holocaust literature. The primary instrument was the researcher himself whereas the second instruments were any devices and media which were used in the data collection and data analysis process. The analysis of the data was conducted in six steps; reading and rereading, noting, identifying, categorizing, analyzing and interpreting. To ensure the data trustworthiness, the researcher used peer debriefing. The findings of this research show that the conventions of Holocaust literature are implemented in the novel. Those are depicting the Holocaust event, representing the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders, and employing disturbing elements (violence, hunger, rebellion, sense of loss and abandonment, loneliness, and loss of emotional stability). There are also the elements which are less and not represented. These are shame, hope and redemption, and spirituality. The novel depicts the struggle to live in the time when Holocaust occurred, but not in the part of seeking consolation from the higher power (god).

**Keywords:** Conventions, Holocaust Literature, Structuralism, *The Book Thief*

### INTRODUCTION

Holocaust is a word derived from ancient Greek which can lead directly to one traumatic incident in the history, the genocide of European Jews and other minorities in Nazi Germany during World War II. The word holocaust literally means a great destruction, especially by fire (Hornby, 1995:569), but the Holocaust with capital "H" is known as a systematic mass murder by German Nazi of around six million of Jewish people and millions of other people who were classified as the enemies of

German Nazi regime from 1933, chiefly 1942 to 1945. The occurrence of these laws is not far from the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler. He is an Anti-Semitic and his dictatorship leads racism becomes the central feature of the regime. Anti-Semitism is an irrational hatred for the Jews. After the defeat of Nazi Germany in the World War II, the cruelty of the Holocaust was revealed to the world and many evidence were found. From all the diaries, memoir, journals during the wartime, poems and novel whether fiction or auto-biographical which is about the tragedy

of Holocaust, the genre of Holocaust literature was invented.

Holocaust literature includes both fiction and non-fiction. Non-fiction Holocaust literature was written by perpetrator, victim and bystander, which describe the world of ghettos or concentration camps, in the form of diaries and memoirs and the fiction is novel, poetry, and any other forms of literary works. By learning genres as one of the laws in literature and how they work, literary works can be identified and understood in detail by the structure and the characteristics of the works in each genre. By using the conventional structure in the genre, Thomashevsky (in Thomson, 1984:31) states a literary work in the form of narrative, for example, can be classified into such as historical novel, psychological novel, plotless novel, or adventure novel based on what criteria the works are classified (thematic content, subject, or form, etc.). A literary work which belongs to certain genre is recognized by the conventions employed by the work and by which characteristic or element is the most dominant.

*The Book Thief* is one of popular Holocaust literature which is written in modern days by the second generation of the

survivor. It is a novel about a young German girl, a child of parents who are accused of being Communist, named Liesel. She is sent to foster parents by his own mother. Liesel and her new family struggle to live in the Third Reich era while a Jew is living in their basement. It is based on Zusak's parents who experienced the history in Austria and told Zusak the story when he was young.

*The Book Thief* must have met the requirements to be included in Holocaust literature by completing most of the conventions of Holocaust literature. This is quite interesting to study the conventions employed by the novel, because the novel is written in modern day and the author himself is the second generation of the survivor who is living in Australia who knows the event of the Holocaust only from his parents stories and the histories he has studied.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employed qualitative research design. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009:167) mentioned that the purpose of qualitative research is descriptive. The source of the data for this research is the novel entitled *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, published by Random House Children Publisher in 2012 as the UK

edition.

There were two instruments in this research. The first is the primary instrument of this research is the researcher himself and the second instruments are any devices and media used in the process of collecting and analyzing the data. The data collection in this research was processed through these four steps: reading and re-reading, note taking, interpreting and categorizing.

Creswell (2009: 185) proposed data analysis in qualitative research consists of six sequences: organizing and preparing the data, reading through all the data, coding the data, giving a description, interrelating description and interpreting the meaning of the description.

The results of qualitative studies were doubted to be too subjective, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and the research findings, a method of checking technique is used to make the data become reliable and valid. These are four criteria were checked, credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Almost all of the conventions of Holocaust literature are found in the work. Those are depicting the Holocaust event, representing the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders, and employing

disturbing elements (violence, hunger, rebellion, sense of loss and abandonment, loneliness, and loss of emotional stability).

There were many events during the Holocaust, the book burning, the first Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, and the Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. Dachau is the first place where the concentration camps was built. It was built in 1933, not long after Hitler become the Chancellor of Germany, as a preparation to become the camps for those who oppose the government of Nazi Germany. The early prisoners were the political opponent of Nazi but then followed by all Jews and Communist.

Liesel calculated that there were four more reading sessions like that with Frau Holtzapfel before the Jews were marched through Molching. **They were going to Dachau, to concentrate.** (Zusak, 2012:415)

Molching is a fictional area outskirts of Munich. It is a depiction of the real parade which move through cities in Germany and aim to Dachau where the first concentration camps built by Nazi. There were many marching which directed toward Dachau.

When the soldiers pulled over to share some food and cigarettes and to poke at the package of Jews, one of the prisoners collapsed from starvation and sickness. **I have no**

**idea where the convoy had traveled from, but it was perhaps four miles from Molching, and many steps more to the concentration camp at Dachau.** (2012:416)

This quotation shows the parades were from any direction, with the Jews from many places, marching toward Dachau. They were suffering and some of them collapsed because they could not hold it anymore.

The second convention is representing the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders. Lipstadt in Bloom (2004:110) said “The Holocaust is not one but a series of stories, each focusing on a different set of characters who can be broadly subsumed under the headings: perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.” The perpetrators are them who have done the crime, Nazis and them who support Nazi in exterminating the Jews and Communist are the obvious perpetrator. The victims of the Holocaust are mostly Jewish people. The bystanders are them who are there in the locations of the tragedy but did nothing, neither helping the perpetrators nor the victims.

**The brown-shirted extremist members of the NSDAP (otherwise known as the Nazi Party) had marched down Munich Street, their banners worn proudly, their**

faces held high, as if on sticks. Their voices were full of song, culminating in a roaring rendition of “Deutschland über Alles.” “Germany over Everything.”. (Zusak, 2012:64)

Nazi in brown-shirted uniform are the soldiers of Nazi military detachment, *Sturmabteilung*, or more known as Storm Troopers. The brown-shirt also become the symbol of the perpetrators, and it can be found in the book often.

Between the perpetrator and the victim, there were Germans people who did not take part in helping the Nazis to find Jews. In the same time, they also were not taken to concentration camps which means they were not included in the enemies of Nazi Germany because they were not Jews or Communist, but it was still unknown whether they support Hitler or not.

In 1933, 90 percent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler. **That leaves 10 percent who didn't. Hans Hubermann belonged to the 10 percent. There was a reason for that.** (Zusak, 2012:65)

Hans Hubermanns was one of the good Germans who actually did not support Hitler and his laws. The reason for not supporting Hitler was because a Jew saved his life. When he served as a soldier in the army for First World War, his friend who was a Jew saved him.

Jews and Communist are obviously the victims of the Holocaust. All the events of the Holocaust were targeting both of them since the beginning. Nazi Party used both to be the scapegoats. Both were blamed for most of every failure faced by Germans since their defeat in the First World War. The sentences below depicts the victim of the Holocaust.

There were boarding houses crammed with people, rooms filled with questions. And that word. That strange word was always there somewhere, standing in the corner, watching from the dark. It wore suits, uniforms. **No matter where they went, there it was, each time her father was mentioned. She could smell it and taste it. She just couldn't spell or understand it. When she asked her mother what it meant, she was told that it wasn't important, that she shouldn't worry about such things.** At one boardinghouse, there was a healthier woman who tried to teach the children to write, using charcoal on the wall. Liesel was tempted to ask her the meaning, but it never eventuated. **One day, that woman was taken away for questioning. She didn't come back.** (Zusak, 2012:31)

Liesel as the child of Communist parents had to live with questions about their parents. His father was missing long before she could remember, but there was one word that she always knew about her father.

*Kommunisten* (Communist). It was a strange word for Liesel because she did not know the meaning, she was still a child and no one wanted to explain it to her, even her mother always answered that it was not important.

The third convention is employing disturbing elements. Disturbing elements are those elements of stories which some writers think are too frightening or shocking to read about and be portrayed in literary work, because it can give bad impacts to the readers (Roseman, 2004:27). Disturbing elements can be found in horror novel, crime fiction, mystery novel such as detective story, and hardboiled fiction.

The violence covers physical and psychological violence. A physical attack like kicking or punching, and a psychological violence such as causing a frightened feeling of being beaten or killed. There are many data found in the book, from the violence found from a single fighting until a mass violence in a riot.

**Many Jewish establishments were being surgically smashed and looted when there was a clatter of knuckles on the apartment door.** With his aunt, his mother, his cousins, and their children, Max was crammed into the living room. "Aufmachen!" **The family watched each other. There was a great temptation to scatter into the other rooms, but**

**apprehension is the strangest thing. They couldn't move.**

Again. "Open up!" (Zusak, 2012:208)

In the event of Kristallnacht, all Jewish shops were destroyed. As the name said, the Night of the Broken Glass is the night when the shard of glasses from the shops were spreading on the street. All Jews shops which most of the building have glass on its front were smashed, and the things inside were looted.

Next is hunger. For the Jews, in the period of time, whether as prisoners in the concentration camps or in hideout where they were not taken but they also could do nothing more, hunger was always felt. **"There was sleep, starving sleep, and the irritation of half awakesness, and the punishment of the floor,** ignore the itchy feet" (Zusak, 2012:151). Max, as a Jew who managed to escape from the searching were not as lucky as it could be imagined. **"For the next two years, he remained in hiding, in an empty storeroom"** (2012:209). It was in a building where Walter had worked in previous years. There was very little food. There was plenty of suspicion.

Rebellion is showed o the data below,

"Is my mother a communist?" Staring. Straight ahead. "They were always asking her things, before I came here."

Hans edged forward a little, forming the beginnings of a lie. "I have no idea—I never met her."

"Did the Führer take her away?"

The question surprised them both, and it forced Papa to stand up. He looked at the brown-shirted men taking to the pile of ash with shovels. He could hear them hacking into it. Another lie was growing in his mouth, but he found it impossible to let it out. He said, "I think he might have, yes."

**"I knew it." The words were thrown at the steps and Liesel could feel the slush of anger, stirring hotly in her stomach. "I hate the Führer," she said. "I hate him."** (Zusak, 2012:124)

Nazi leader is a dictator. Because of it, most of the citizen only knew that it was the Fuhrer behind all the decision of the government. When Liesel acknowledged that people were missing, she thought that it was the Fuhrer who did all of that, because everything they do are always for the Fuhrer as they heil Hitlering every time. When her mother might be taken away, it was the Fuhrer who was to be blame and Liesel choose to hate him, but it was breaking the law.

People were missing here and there, the Jews and the Communist, and even them who were not one of them. For them who had left, there was a feeling of being left and abandoned. This data below depicts the sense of loss and abandonment.

Her mother was constantly sick and there was never any money to fix her. Liesel knew that. But that didn't mean she had to accept it. No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment. **Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone.** (Zusak, 2012:32)

Liesel mother took Liesel to a foster parents. She did it for the sake of Liesel only. Liesel mother was perhaps also a Communist. Liesel father was a Communist, since Liesel could not remember anything about her missing father. All she knew and always remembered was only a word *Kommunisten*,

The war and the Holocaust had taken away more and more people. Missing friend and family members and even the circumstances they ever had before caused them to feeling lonely.

Door open, door shut.  
Alone again.  
What came to him immediately then was the sound.  
**Everything was so desperately noisy in the dark when he was alone. Each time he moved, there was the sound of a crease. He felt like a man in a paper suit.** (Zusak, 2012:152)

In his hideout, Max heard the sound of the door opened and closed, but he was

waiting for a friend who had promise to visit Max, but he was not coming yet and while he was waiting the loneliness had made him feeling desperate.

As prisoners or wanted people, living as Jews was the most hopeless life they could have. Nazi troops patrolled periodically. When the Nazi troops were searching the areas, there was no place to go except hiding as silent as they could and going as far as they could reach, although the chance of succeed is very little. The only hope is only if miracle happens, the war suddenly ended and the Nazi Germany loss and they were freed.

“From a drawer, she took an old piece of paper and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. “If ever . . .” She held him one last time, by the elbows. **“This could be your last hope”** (Zusak, 2012:209).

When Max about to leave the apartment, his mother gave him a piece of paper. It was an address of Hans Hubermanns house.

In the condition of suffering, a stabil emotion is surely hard to get. Even in the end of the tragedy, it can leave a series of trauma in the future. The death of someone close, a friend, a neighbor, or a family member are never an easy matter.

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

**Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't— Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.**

**Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.** (Zusak, 2012:24)

The death of her little brother was one thing Liesel never accept. Liesel as a child, who had seen her only brother died in front of her eyes, had felt a great loss which affecting the stability of her emotion.

The data sheet shows that almost conventions of Holocaust literature are found in the work. The data of most of the elements are found, but there are also elements of the conventions which are less and also not represented in the novel. There are only two data which show the disturbing elements of Hope and Redemption in the work. There are two elements of the conventions of Holocaust literature which are not represented in the novel. These are the element of shame and spirituality. Shame deals with the humiliation caused by consciousness of other guilt. This kind of humiliation is not found in the work. Roseman (2004:30) gives an example like the feeling of being shame for being stripped of clothes and having to parade naked in

front of the Nazi, and there is no such thing in the work.

## CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* with the theory of structuralism, which focusing on the conventions of Holocaust literature, the researcher conclude that the work is having almost all the requirements to be regarded as a Holocaust literature novel. Almost all the conventions are presented on the work. The work does not only focus on the presence of the conventions but also the detail presentation which make the work more complete as a story and also as a work included in the genre of Holocaust literature.

There are three general conventions of Holocaust literature, those are depicting the events of Holocaust, representing the perpetrator, the bystander, and the victim of the holocaust, and employing disturbing elements. The disturbing element consists of violence, hunger, rebellion, sense of loss and abandonment, loneliness, hope and redemption, and loss of emotional stability, shame and spirituality. The work depict the event of the war time, while the events of Holocaust also happened in the same time.



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