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Assis .Lect. Mohsin
Kamil Shlaka

Imam Al-Kadhum
College I.K.C

Email:

lecwasit10@iku.edu.iq

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Subculture vs. Dominant Culture in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief (2005): A Comprehensive Study

A B S T R A C T

The present study clarifies The Book Thief (2005) by Markus Zusak. It provides a detailed depiction of how people and groups deal with repressive regimes by concentrating on the conflict between subcultures and the dominant culture. Using the Sociopolitical Development Theory, the paper analyzes Markus Zusak's 2005 historical book The Book Thief by examining the characters and how their experiences influenced their fates. In addition to showing the individuals' anguish, effort, and fortitude in the face of persecution and oppression, the book illustrates the effects of political disputes and wars on societies.

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الثقافة الفرعية مقابل الثقافة المهيمنة في رواية سارق الكتاب لماركوس زوساك (٢٠٠٥): دراسة شاملة

م.م. محسن كامل شلاكة

كلية الامام الكاظم (ع) / أقسام واسط

الملخص

الحالية (2005) The Book Thief لماركوس زوساك. يقدم وصفاً تفصيلياً لكيفية تعامل تشرح الدراسة الأشخاص والمجموعات مع الأنظمة القمعية من خلال التركيز على الصراع بين الثقافات الفرعية والثقافة المهيمنة. باستخدام نظرية التنمية الاجتماعية والسياسية، تحلل الورقة الكتاب التاريخي لماركوس زوساك الصادر عام ٢٠٠٥ بعنوان "سارق الكتاب" من خلال فحص الشخصيات وكيف أثرت تجاربهم على مصائرهم. وبالإضافة إلى إظهار معاناة الأفراد وجهدهم وصمودهم في مواجهة الاضطهاد والقمع، يوضح الكتاب آثار الخلافات السياسية والحروب على المجتمعات **الكلمات المفتاحية :** الاجتماعية والسياسية ، النازية ، الثقافة المهيمنة ، الثقافات الفرعية .

1. Introduction

Zusak was born in 1975 in Sydney, Australia, He is an international author. Out of the four children—two sisters and one brother—he is the youngest sibling. He still lives in Sydney, where he was reared, along with his spouse and kids. He became a student at Engadine High School and later temporarily returned to teach English and write simultaneously. At the University of New South Wales, he studied history and English, eventually graduating with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma in Education.

Zusak credited The Old Man and the Sea and What's Eating Gilbert Grape as influences for his early writing career, which began during his childhood, specifically at 16. Before his debut novel, The Underdog, came out in 1999, he worked in a variety of jobs, such as house painting, janitorial work, and school teaching. In an interview, Zusak stated that discussing professional vocations with a variety of people, reading, and watching movies are some of his main sources of inspiration. In his remarks, he highlighted the value of books in his life and their capacity to offer solace from one's reality without permitting total detachment. "Books allow us to escape ourselves but not escape fully (Hudson, 2011).

Zusak claims that The Book Thief is a considerable change from his earlier writings and is heavily influenced by the wartime stories his parents told him as a child, including those about Munich and Vienna. In particular, Zusak has specifically named two stories his mother told him: the story of the Munich bombing and the memory of Jews being taken by force through his mother's town on their route to the Dachau concentration camp. Before they moved to Australia in the second half of the 1950s, Zusak's parents had firsthand knowledge of World War II in their home nations. "My parents didn't have a toothbrush when they arrived in Australia [from Germany]," he said. However, they had tales. Bertrin (2013) Zusak's father was Austrian and lived in Vienna throughout the war, which the Soviet Red Army besieged and took in 1945. His father, like Hans Hubermann's character in The Book Thief, worked as a

house painter (Hudson, 2010). Growing up in Munich, his mother, a German, saw firsthand the devastation of the city by Allied bombers as well as the heavy bombing of the Jews during the Holocaust. Of his mother's influence, Zusak has said that his mother told him two stories. They affected him a lot as he mentioned. The first story deals with Munich being bombed and how things became red. As for the second one, it talked about something else. That is, there was a frightened noise in the street where Jewishes were being walked to Dachau" (Berrin,2013)

In all, Markus Zusak is the renowned author of six books. *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, and *When Dogs Cry* are the first three literary works that have been published worldwide. Since its initial publication in 2005, the book *The Book Thief* has been translated into more than 40 languages. When *The Book Thief* was initially published in 2006 in Australia, the author's own country, it was regarded as his first "adult" literary effort. However, the American publisher Knopf decided to market it as young adult fiction when it was released in the US. Since its publication, *The Book Thief* has sold over a million copies worldwide, demonstrating its considerable success.

The piece has also been honored with a Printz Honor. The book was made into a movie and a big-budget feature picture in 2013, both of which had the same title. 'The Failurist' was the title of Markus Zusak's 2014 Ted Talk, which he gave at the Sydney Opera House. The conversation mostly focused on his drafting process and his path to success as a writer of *The Book Thief*. When the author started writing his piece, his initial goal was to investigate the idea of a modern-day "book thief" in Australia. However, the author had a change of heart after this initial inclination.

2. Sociopolitical Development Theory

How "individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression" is known as sociopolitical development (Watts et al., 2003, p. 185). It is a new theory that expands on ideas related to social change and activism in community psychology, including empowerment, oppression, liberation, critical consciousness, and culture. A key component of human development is sociopolitical development (SPD), which highlights the importance of understanding the political and cultural factors that shape a person's place in society. This endeavor's reach goes beyond merely opposing oppression in the name of justice.

Instead, the capacity to envision and actively participate in the creation of a just and equitable society is a crucial element of this endeavor. Sociopolitical development theory is viewed at higher academic levels as the mechanisms that improve a person's capacity to understand and alter systems (Smith, 2008). The ways in which social power creates and maintains social inequality, as well as the material, psychological, and spiritual effects of marginalization and dehumanization, are rarely examined in these conceptualizations. These phenomena might all appear as elements of oppressive structures.

Watts et al. (1999) proposed that oppression might be defined as the systematic exercise of power by a dominant group in society over another, which perpetuates the unequal distribution of important resources. Material violence, such as physical coercion, intimidation,

denial of resources and rights, and movement restrictions, is used to maintain and spread oppression. Furthermore, other types of violence—also referred to as intellectual or subtle violence—also support repressive structures. The link between intellectual and physical violence is mutually reinforcing; whereas ideological violence serves to normalize and legitimize oppressive social dynamics and socioeconomic inequities, physical violence establishes social supremacy (Williams, 1998).

Even if the relationships involved are complicated, it is clear that ideological violence is a key component in maintaining oppressive institutions. The phenomena of "natal alienation" or cultural subordination, in which the oppressor destroys or distorts the oppressed cultural heritage, is one facet of ideological violence. Psychological empowerment and critical thinking are regarded as essential elements of sociopolitical progress. The ability to think critically enables people to recognize a variety of problems, formulate compelling arguments, and come up with original solutions for each issue. However, there is a noticeable change in behavior and cognitive processes when people reach more mature developmental stages. For example, psychological empowerment includes more than just a person's belief in their own abilities; it also includes proactive participation within one's society and an extensive knowledge of the sociopolitical context in which one exists (Zimmerman, 1995).

Therefore, critical thinking depends on emotional intelligence, which is essential for establishing connections and communicating with others as well as for a person's capacity to thrive in a social environment. Foresight is necessary to achieve liberty, which includes a change in perspective from one that is critical to one that is creative. Critique draws attention to the need for new ideas and aggressive actions, and the ability to think creatively is crucial for imagining a better moral and cultural structure. The range of objectives encompasses initiatives that seek to obtain compromises from established systems as well as those that attempt to demolish and then reconstruct these institutions (Zimmerman, 1995).

2.1 Subculture vs. Dominant Culture: An Overview

In a sociological sense, the dominant culture would be the mainstream values, norms, and behaviors of a given society, which are often set by the ruling class. The dominant culture in *The Book Thief* is represented by the Nazi regime, which imposed its authority on the people through propaganda, fear, and violence. This ideology was deeply based on racial superiority, anti-Semitism, and suppression of dissent. He has shown this through the burning of books, persecution of Jews, and indoctrination of children into the Hitler Youth. The dominant culture seeks to get rid of individuality and install a culture of conformity, as revealed through Hans Junior, who is blindly loyal to the Nazi cause. The silence and fear within the population speak of the dominant culture (McEwan, 2001).

For example, Liesel's foster father, Hans Hubermann, has to conceal his anti-Nazi sentiments just for the family. The omnipresent swastika and speeches of Hitler signify the propaganda of the regime to fasten the hold of dominant culture on the society. It was the ideology of Nazism through the book of Adolf Hitler, the so-called *Mein Kampf*, built on racial superiority, antisemitism, and authoritarianism (Kershaw, 2008). The Nazi regime aspired to establish an Aryan society, homogenous and pure, by purging the threat primarily posed by

Jews but also by Romani people, the disabled, and political dissidents. Propaganda, censorship, and fear were the tools to be used in forcing the people into compliance and suppressing opposition.

In the novel *The Book Thief*, Zusak picks up the stultifying atmosphere of Nazi Germany, whose citizens were being watched upon and bullied into compliance with the regime. The setting is in the fictional town of Molching, near Munich, during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Zusak uses Liesel's experiences to express how Nazi ideology permeated every aspect of life, from education to personal relationships. While the dominant culture is one of oppression and brutality, the subcultures in *The Book Thief* represent resistance and humanity. A subculture would be a subgroup of people part of a larger society but possessing values, norms, and other cultural elements that make them different from the dominant culture.

Jenkins (1992) states that subcultures in *The Book Thief* were formed in response to the oppressive Nazi regime that tried to homogenize society through propaganda, censorship, and violence. They constitute small tributaries within which a sense of resistance is concentrated, comforts of identity reside, and purposes are engendered. Subculture, in this respect, then, designates typically a smaller group that articulates itself within but resists or deviates against the dominating culture. An example will be how the Hubermanns in the novel hide a Jewish man or how Liesel gets comfort from her books and storytelling notwithstanding censorship by the Nazi regime.

The tension of cultures is central to the novel. Subcultures often emerge, according to Hall (1990), as sites of resistance; this provides one way of resisting dominant and oppressive thinking and living. In *The Book Thief*, subcultures act almost as a counterpoint to the dehumanizing ideology of the Nazis, emphasizing empathy, creativity, and individual agency. It is in the way the Nazi ideology influenced the characters: The Hubermann family-in particular Hans Hubermann-constitutes a subculture of care and opposition. Hans takes Max into his home, disregarding the dangers, representing individual moral decisions against systemic persecution.

Liesel Meminger: The little girl at the beginning does not fully fathom the concept of the Nazi ideology. However, in growing up, she becomes aware of evil around her committed. Accruing friendship with Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man hidden in her foster family's basement, juxtaposed the Nazi tale of Jewish inferiority. The love of books and telling stories became resistance in Liesel; the power of words was to be used against oppression.

Hans Hubermann: Hans is Liesel's foster father, the epitome of the moral struggle of the ordinary German under Nazi rule. Despite the risks, Hans helps Max, showing compassion and humanity to counter an ideology that seeks to remove both from his person. This pinpoints personal ethics pitted against societal pressure to conform.

Rosa Hubermann: Rosa, the foster mother of Liesel, is seemingly harsh and unbending at the beginning. But then, the decision to hide Max proves that she is courageous and in a silent, latent way, resistant to Nazi beliefs. Her character underlines the complications of human behavior in the context of oppressive regimes.

Max Vandenburg: A Jewish man in hiding, he personifies the victims of Nazi persecution. His friendship with Liesel and the handmade book he gives her become symbols of hope and

resilience. The story of Max is one poignant reminder of the human cost of the Nazi ideology. Max himself is representative of a subculture of survival and creativity. The book he gave to Liesel, written on painted-over pages of *Mein Kampf*, symbolized the ultimate triumph of art and humanity over oppression. As Zusak says, "The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this." This outlines the power of language and storytelling in resistance.

Rudy Steiner: Rudy is Liesel's best friend and idolizes Jesse Owens, the African-American Olympic athlete, which goes diametrically against Nazi racial ideology. His defiance and eventual death epitomize the tragic outcomes of living under a regime suppressing individuality and dissent (Evans, 2005).

2.1.1 Subcultural Practices

Eaglestone (2013) claims that different activities can be understood through the struggle among people who portray different cultures. These can be elaborated as follows:

1.The Role of Books and Storytelling

One of the most evident subcultural practices in *The Book Thief* is reading and storytelling. Books, which are forbidden and burned by the Nazis, become symbols of resistance and freedom. In the story, it is highly symbolic that Liesel steals books; thus, it was quite subversive against the regime's control over knowledge and thoughts. In this novel, readers and tellers-Liesel, Max Vandenburg, the Jewish man hidden in the basement of the Hubermanns-even Death, the narrator-demonstrate the way in which literature may guard human relationships through telling us events around the world adopting them via his/her literary works. Max's gift to Liesel is another example of how subcultures use creativity in resistance and identification.

Liesel therefore attached a great deal of sentimental importance to *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. The book is even more significant because she was reading it on those special evenings with Hans Hubermann when she first started learning the letters. She uses the book as a coping strategy for her extreme loneliness, and her foster father Hans gives her the confidence to overcome it. She moves from thinking of her mother and brother to Hans and all those treasured midnight reading sessions, which is a wonderful example of symbolism. Liesel was surrounded by people who loved her, but she still had to face the brutal reality of her situation (Gilbert & Susan, 1979).

She would miss him and frequently cry in the tiny washroom as quietly as possible, but she was still glad to be awake." She spent most of her time crying quietly since she missed her mother and brother so much. She would occasionally whisper the word "Mama" and see her mother's face a hundred times in one day (p. 43). However, their hardships paled in comparison to the fear she experienced in her dreams. Because of this, she feels more secure and at ease in the presence of daylight and the sound of the accordion.

During her years in Nazi Germany, Liesel had experienced unimaginable atrocities that a child should never have seen. She observed her neighbor, a young soldier on the war, hang himself to end his life, and she also witnessed the death and burial of her younger brother. "She had seen a Jewish man march into a death camp after he had twice handed her the most beautiful pages of her life. Near her home, she had witnessed the death of an enemy bomber pilot in an aviation accident. Liesel experienced multiple traumatic events that caused psychological suffering. Despite this, she was one of the most sympathetic characters in the book. Liesel offered to help people unwind by sharing stories at the bomb shelter.

2. The Subculture of Concealed Jews and Their Helpers

Another important subculture in the novel is the network of people who hide and save Jews during the Holocaust. This subculture works underground because members of this subculture risk their lives in order to go against the Nazi regime. The Hubermanns' decision to shelter Max Vandenburg is a prime example of the values of this subculture, which puts compassion and justice above conformity and fear. In this subculture, Zusak explores moral courage and the human capacity for empathy. The relationships between Max, Liesel, and the Hubermanns show how subcultures can create bonds of solidarity that transcend societal divisions (Hall, 1999).

3. The Subculture of Childhood and Innocence

Evans (2005) maintains that Liesel and her friend Rudy Steiner are part of a subculture of childhood innocence in jarring contrast to the brutal world of adults. Their games, pranks, and shared experiences provide a glimpse of normalcy and hope amidst the chaos of war. This subculture serves as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of preserving innocence in the face of adversity. Rudy's admiration for Jesse Owens, an African-American athlete, further underscores the subculture's rejection of Nazi racial ideology. His defiance in painting himself black to emulate Owens is a poignant act of resistance against the regime's propaganda.

4. The Subculture of Death as Narrator

Death, the novel's narrator, can be seen as part of a subculture that exists outside the boundaries of human society. A unique perspective of the events in the novel unravels through Death's view and brings insights into the fragility and beauty of human life. This subculture of the afterlife, personified by Death, is a counterpoint to the forces of war and oppression. Death's interest in Liesel and her story highly gastronomized the much-enduring power of human connection and the subcultures that breached even the life-death boundary (Eaglestone, 2013).

5. Subcultures of Resistance

The dominant culture in Nazi Germany was conformity, fear, and oppression. The Nazi regime tried to annihilate individualism and impose a monolithic ideology. Subcultures, however, came to be those pockets of resistance whereby individuals could exercise their free will and resister to the status quo. In *The Book Thief*, the subculture of book lovers/readers

serves as a form of quiet rebellion. Liesel's theft of books, encouraged by her foster father Hans Hubermann, is symbolic of defiance against the regime's censorship and control over knowledge. Reading and sharing books becomes a subversive act, as in the secret gatherings in the basement of the Hubermanns, where Liesel reads to Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man in hiding from the Nazis. These moments of shared storytelling create a microcosm of resistance, where the characters reclaim their humanity and resist the dehumanizing forces of the Nazi regime. As Zusak writes, "The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this." (Zusak, 2005, p. 528). This quote really underlines the role of language and telling within subcultures as forms of resistance.

6. Subcultures and the Preservation of Humanity

In this novel, *The Book Thief*, subcultures are representatives of sanctuaries where a portion of humanity can still be preserved amidst the great wave of dehumanization. In such a light, the subculture would indeed foster such important values as compassion and empathy in relationships such as the bond between Liesel, Hans, and Max. Despite the dangers, Hans and Liesel protect Max; in that sense, one subculture of care and solidarity is established firmly against Nazi brutality. The most significant of all is the relationship that exists between Liesel and Max. While he is a Jew, an explicit outsider in the state of Nazi Germany, he finds refuge and comradeship in the house of the Hubermanns. The subculture based on their mutual affection for stories and words forms one cultural expression even the dominant culture can't smash. Max gives Liesel a book entitled *The Word Shaker*, representing the ability of the subculture to retain hope and humanity.

As Max writes, "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. 446). This is metaphor indicates the life-giving power of subcultures and their transformational potential.

7. Subcultures and Belonging Subcultures

The Book Thief points to the sense of belonging and identity within a world filled with displacement and loss. Orphaned, uprooted, Liesel creates a new home within the subculture of the Hubermann household and her friendship with Rudy Steiner. It is through these relationships that she finds some stability and a sense of self amidst chaos. Rudy, also, is a part of some sort of subculture that was at odds with Nazi Germany. His refusal to comply with the Hitler Youth and further his rebellious acts, such as coloring his body black to look like Jesse Owens, showed a disavowal with the dominant culture's values. His friendship with Liesel is almost a self-sustaining subculture of sorts as each finds room to be themselves and go against the pressure of sameness (Arendt, 2006).

3. Literary Techniques and Narrative Style

The use of Death as a narrator by Zusak gives the story an added dimension. The observations made by Death extend into a wider context of events, emphasizing the universality of suffering and the fragility of life. The fragmented narrative style, with its frequent foreshadowing and digressions, parallels the chaotic, unpredictable nature of life during wartime. The symbolism of books and words is taken as the center of this novel. Liesel's journey from illiteracy to a storyteller itself shows the power of language to inspire, heal, and resist oppression. This writing and sharing of stories can be done as a way of rebelling against these dehumanizing effects brought about by Nazi ideology. To drive the point home, let us list a few (Adorno, et al , 2002):

1. The Unconventional Narrator

Death as a Storyteller: One of the most striking features of *The Book Thief* is its narrator: Death. By using Death as the narrator, Zusak cuts across convention with regard to narration and thus carves out an inimitable perspective upon the events within the novel. He portrays Death as no evil entity but rather as a tired, compassionate observer of life who happens to be amazingly curious about the species called man. This choice of narrator allows Zusak to develop such themes as mortality, suffering, and the fragility of life in a poignant yet engagingly thought-provoking way. In Death's narration, the tone is detached yet packed with empathy. For example, Death often interrupts the narrative to provide commentary or foreshadow events, creating a sense of inevitability and tension. This technique not only engages the reader but also underscores the novel's central themes of loss and survival. As Death states, "I am haunted by humans," highlighting the complexity of human emotions and actions (Zusak, 2005).

2. Symbolism and Imagery

Zusak employs rich symbolism and vivid imagery throughout *The Book Thief* to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters and themes. One of the most obvious symbols in the book is the book itself. Books are a means of knowledge, power, and resistance in a world dominated by censorship and oppression. Liesel's journey as the "book thief" symbolizes her journey for autonomy and her rebellion against the Nazi regime. The imagery of colors is another important literary device in the novel. Death also talks much about the color of the sky, frequently using such terms as "white", "black," and "red," in the development of the mood of the story. Red is usually used to indicate violence and death, just like in the bombing of Himmel Street. The color imagery does not only give vividness to the narration but also supplements the theme of life and death in the novel (Adorno, et al , 2002).

3. Power of Language and Words

Concerning the language and words, *The Book Thief* is all about the power of language and words. On that note, Zusak wonderfully encapsulates that words can sometimes act as oppression elements and become liberating tools, too. Conversely, while the Nazi regime would hijack language to put into motion this crusade of an ideology against him, Liesel used words to communicate with the outside world around her and desperately held onto parts of her

humanity. The novel also displays the transformative powers of storytelling: it shows how Liesel loves reading books, sharing them with others such as Max and neighbors on Himmel Street, as ways of comfort during hopeless times. Max's gift of *The Word Shaker* to Liesel is another strong metaphor that displays what words can inflict on people and society.

4. Narrative Structure and Pacing

Zusak's narrative structure in *The Book Thief* is unconventional and fragmented to reflect the chaotic and unpredictable nature of war. The novel is divided into ten parts, comprising short chapters with poetic titles. Such a structure allows Zusak to change perspective and timeline, creating a mosaic-like narrative that reflects the fragmented lives the characters lead. The novel is paced to be deliberate and reflective, with moments of tension interspersed with quieter, introspective passages. This balance between action and reflection enables Zusak to explore the emotional depth of the characters while maintaining the reader's engagement (Adorno, et al, 2002).

5. Irony

Irony is a tool of rhetoric that happens along the way in the novel *The Book Thief*. For example, the character of Death, portrayed as compassionate and wearied-an observer-is ironic to the character it usually creates in the mind. Similarly, the irony of Liesel stealing books in a society that burns them serves to underscore the subversive power of knowledge and storytelling (Adorno, et al, 2002).

4. Themes and Their Representation through Literary Devices

The literary devices used by Zusak help to enhance the main themes of the novel, which include the strength of the human spirit, the effects of war, and the dual nature of humankind. With Death as the narrator, Abrams (1999) illustrates that Zusak uses symbolism and the play of language to make the reader contemplate the nuances of morality and the power of hope that endures.

1. **The Power of Words:** Probably the most significant theme in the novel *The Book Thief* is about the transformation in the power of words. In this novel, words are identified as both destructive and redemptive. The propaganda by Hitler shows how the manipulative use of words can bring widespread persecution, as for the Jews and the indoctrination of Germans. On the other hand, the relationship between Liesel Meminger and books or storytelling reveals how words can heal, empower, and bond people together. For instance, reading by Liesel to others during air raids comforts and consoles, showing the life-giving power of language.

2. **Humanity and Inhumanity:** The novel balances off instances of goodwill and brutality, treading on the dichotomous nature of humanity. Characters like Hans Hubermann, who put his life at risk to protect a Jewish man, show human compassion and moral courage. Contrastingly, the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime expose humankind to their darkest degree. Zusak

does not flinch in portraying war's horrors; at the same time, he does emphasize the ability to love and be selfless even during those dark times.

3. Mortality and Death: The narrator in the novel is death. This gives a very different perspective on mortality. The observations by Death show the fragility of life and the certainty of death. However, they also show the beauty and importance of human existence. The recurring motif of colors in Death's descriptions acts to remind one of the transient nature of life and to make full use of every moment.

4. Love and Family: It is a book of love, mainly in the form of family. It is through the love of her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, and her friend Max Vandenburg-a Jewish refugee-that Liesel finds the strength of love and loyalty. These relationships provide Liesel with a sense of belonging and resilience, enabling her to endure the hardships of war (Abrams, 1999).

Conclusion

It is in this way that Markus Zusak finally gives way to how humanity will always outshine dehumanizing ideologies in *The Book Thief*. While the dominant culture seeks to erase individuality and enforce conformity, the subcultures of resistance, embodied in characters like Hans, Max, and Liesel themselves, assert the value of compassion, creativity, and solidarity. Their acts of defiance carve out spaces where other values and identities are possible, even at the darkest moments. In itself, the novel serves as a reminder of the intrinsic value that subcultures have in opposition to oppressive forces and the preserving of quintessential elements from which humanness proceeds.

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