

THE DEADLY PERCEPTION OF THE WITNESS:
FOCALIZATION IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S *THE BOOK THIEF*

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Abstract

For a better understanding of a given narrative it is essential to be aware of the one who perceives (the focalizer). The focalizer's beliefs and comprehension determine which characters and circumstances are to be ignored or closely examined through the use of sight, hearing, feeling, taste or smell. Therefore, the issue concerning focalization is relevant to be taken into consideration when a literary work is analyzed. In the present article the work by the Australian author Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*, is discussed under the assumptions from the narratological field, especially guided by Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Rimmon-Kenan. It is argued that focalization in *The Book Thief* is one of the main literary techniques which help creating the atmosphere and meaning of the text.

Keywords: Narratology; Focalization; Embedded Focalization; Perceptual Focalization; *The Book Thief*

1. Focalization

The filter that determines the presentation of the elements that compose the narrative (such as its quantity of information and the time and order they are presented) has received the name of focalization, a concept that has been used by Genette when he asked his seminal questions: "Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? ... Who sees? ... Who speaks?" (183). Mieke Bal, refining the concept, says: "Focalization is the relationship between the 'vision,' the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing" (146). That said, a narrative

presupposes, at least, the existence of a focalizer and its focalized objects.

This concept has aroused a substantial amount of controversy, especially about the possibility of considering the narrator as a focalizer. Mieke Bal is radically opposed to this idea, saying that "narrator and focalizer are not to be conflated" (147). Although holding similar opinion, Genette (73-74), not without reluctance, is open to concede the narrator as focalizer. Other narratologists like Rimmon-Kenan (74), Herman & Vervaeck (73) and Jong (48) argue that narrators can focalize as well as characters. According to Jahn (245), "Typically, these theorists advocate a 'narrator-focalizer' position that invests narrators with the power of seeing; as a consequence, speaker and seer may even, in certain

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cases, coincide". Jahn justifies this tendency to believe that narrators can focalize by adding: "Even though the narrator is obviously the insubstantial invention of the author, pragmatic meaning construction remains very firmly predicated on the assumption of an addresser observing the maxims of cooperation in human communication" (260).

In *The Book Thief*, the primary narrator-focalizer (the one who tells the main story) normally shifts from character-bound or internal focalization to an external one (Bal, 1997, p. 146). Therefore, the limitation of perception is not bound only to internal characters that would have a restricted impression of the events. The effect of the frequent shift between internal and external focalization present in *The Book Thief* produces an impression of reliability, since Death would possess an omniscient power that would allow him to perceive what characters feel as well as what they cannot know, such as important events to come. This technique is mentioned by Jong:

Focalization also has a cognitive aspect: the less restricted the focalization of the narrator, the more the narratees are allowed to know. As of old, Narratology knows the concept of "omniscience", which means that an undramatized and hence bodiless external primary narrator-focalizer (not impaired by any anthropomorphically restrictions) has access to his characters' inner thoughts, is present at all settings and knows the future. (56)

Death describes his roundabouts during the II World War in Germany, having Liesel Meminger as his main focalized object. Her impressions are perceived, felt and evaluated by him, who adds his own impressions to what she experiences. As she is the main character who guides the story, the closest characters to her (like family and friends) are also focalized, although to a lesser extent. Death focalizes what is perceptible (appearance and actions) and imperceptible (feelings and thoughts) on Liesel, diving into her inner thoughts and sewing up his memories to hers. The only characters who receive such attention in *The Book Thief* are her foster father Hans, her Jewish friend Max and her best friend Rudy, although not to the same deep degree as Liesel's. Her

foster mother, Rosa, receives a lot of attention to her perceptible features, but the same does not apply to her inner thoughts. In fact, Rosa, as a focalized object, never has her real thoughts or point of view shown for sure. In the following extract, for example, Death describes her reaction after an argument between her husband and their son, a Nazi soldier:

With his son gone, Hans Hubermann stood for a few moments longer. The street looked so big. When he reappeared inside, Mama fixed her gaze on him, but no words were exchanged. She didn't admonish him at all, which, as you know, was highly unusual. Perhaps she decided he was injured enough, having been labeled a coward by his only son. (Zusak, 106)

The narratee is kept in suspense about Rosa's true feelings and opinions. Her personality is evaluated by Death according to her actions (or lack of), but not according to her thinking. When Death focalizes Hans, on the other hand, the narratee is allowed to have a glimpse of his feelings (more than Rosa's). However, even in such situations, character and narrator's discourses get blended and the narratee is not able to detect whose voice it is in certain moments. After the argument with his son, Hans get introspective and it is impossible to know who is asking the following questions, as they may belong either to the narrator or to the character:

For a while, he remained silently at the table after the eating was finished. Was he really a coward, as his son had so brutally pointed out? Certainly, in World War I, he considered himself one. He attributed his survival to it. But then, is there cowardice in the acknowledgment of fear? Is there cowardice in being glad that you lived? His thoughts crisscrossed the table as he stared into it. (Zusak, 106-7)

Although Death shows he has the power to scrutinize people's thoughts (he reports the Jewish prisoners' thoughts in Dachau), he affirms he cannot do it. When Liesel and her family and friends are hiding in a basement, Death reports only what Liesel thinks:

“Max, Hans, and Rosa I cannot account for, but I know that Liesel Meminger was thinking that if the bombs ever landed on Himmel Street, not only did Max have less chance of survival than everyone else, but he would die completely alone” (Zusak, 384). It is noteworthy the fact that Death does not speculate about Liesel’s thoughts; he asserts “I know”, which demonstrates how close the narrator is to this character. This kind of connection between the focalizer and the focalized object can be explained by Herman & Vervaeck:

On the emotional level, focalization can be detached or empathic. The relation between focalizer and focalized object is crucial in this respect. If only the outside of the focalized object is perceived, focalization is detached. If, on the contrary, there is constant speculation about the thoughts and feelings of the focalized object, then perception is empathic. (77)

Indeed, the narrator is very emotional in relation to Liesel, and one of the consequences of this empathic focalization is that he takes her side, painting a positive image of a poor child who copes with the misery of war thanks to the power of friendship and to reading. It is true that Liesel perceives the Nazi world around her through childish eyes, and is not capable to fully understand its social and political mechanisms. Yet, her lack of adult comprehension is compensated by the narrator’s comments and evaluation about what she experiences but is not able to assimilate. The narratee does not have access to what Liesel thinks and sees, but to what Death thinks of what Liesel thinks and sees. It may be supposed that there is a tendency to accept this positive view presented by the narrator-focalizer as “the reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character” (Bal, 146). One example of a very emotional focalization moment is the occasion when Death arrives on Himmel Street when it is bombed and finds Liesel in a state of shock watching her house destructed and her beloved ones dead:

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there. A mountain range of rubble

was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book. Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it— the safety of it, the home of it—but she could not move. Also, the basement didn’t even exist anymore. It was part of the mangled landscape. Please, again, I ask you to believe me. I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say: “I’m sorry, child.” But that is not allowed. I did not crouch down. I did not speak. Instead, I watched her awhile. When she was able to move, I followed her. She dropped the book. She knelt. The book thief howled. (Zusak, 211)

Mieke Bal says that “The way in which an object is presented gives information about that object itself and about the focalizer” (152). The empathic focalization that guides the narrator-focalizer towards Liesel’s fate reverberates on the way he presents the other characters that take part on her life. Liesel’s friends and family are also pictured as positive, and when the narrator focalizes them he makes the effort to show their qualities to attenuate their mistakes or bad actions. Liesel’s foster mother Rosa, for instance, constantly beats the girl up with a kitchen wooden spoon, to the point that Liesel cannot even move from the ground. Besides the constant physical violence, the girl also suffers psychological humiliation, such as being called offensive names. However, Death softens her actions towards Liesel by highlighting her good heart, especially in moments related to the hiding of Max. By showing how Rosa risks her life helping a Jewish man, Death shows that Liesel is not wrong in loving her foster mother and obeying her. When Rosa receives Max and tries her best to keep him well fed and alive, Death emphasizes in bold letters her good will:

What shocked Liesel most was the change in her mama. Whether it was the calculated way in which she divided the food, or the considerable muzzling of her notorious mouth, or even the gentler expression on her cardboard face, one thing was becoming clear.

*** AN ATTRIBUTE OF ROSA HUBERMANN

She was a good woman for a crisis.

(Zusak, 211)

Death also focalizes those who treat Liesel badly or those Nazis who do not suffer from the poverty caused by war (like Hans and Rosa's son and daughter); yet, they do not receive the same focalization depth. They are either briefly focalized or not focalized at all (like the mayor). In general, they usually are taken as examples of behavior (being a Nazi) that highlight the good behavior of Liesel and her friends and family (being secretly against or suspicious of the regime).

2. Embedded Focalization

Embedded narrative (also known as interpolated or inserted narrative) is a major component of *The Book Thief*. Mieke Bal explains that "A phenomenon is embedded when there is: 1. Insertion: the transition must be assured; 2. Subordination: the two units must be ordered hierarchically; 3. Homogeneity: the two units must belong to the same class" (43). As Mieke Bal uses the word "phenomenon" to speak about embedding, it is possible to concentrate textual analysis not only on embedded narratives but also on the aspect of focalization. In the following extract Jong explains embedded focalization with more details:

It is one of the special characteristics of narrative texts that a primary narrator-focalizer can embed the focalization of a character in his narrator-text, recounting what that character is seeing, feeling, or thinking, without turning him into a secondary narrator-focalizer (who would voice his own focalization in a speech). Such embedding of focalization is explicit when marked by verbs of seeing, feeling or thinking and so on. (...) The embedding of focalization may, however, remain implicit when verbs of seeing and so on are lacking. (50-51)

In *The Book Thief* the narrator-focalizer constantly expresses not only his own perception but the perception of other characters. The most notable cases

of embedded focalization rely on Liesel's dream about Adolph Hitler and the frequent visions she has about her dead brother, the visions Max has about boxing against Hitler, and the nightmares both characters are afflicted with. Interesting to notice that the first time Death sees Liesel she is sleeping next to her brother Werner and their mother. Despite being busy taking the boy away, Death is able to pay attention to Liesel's dream, from which she wakes up and gets Death in the act of removing her brother's soul. Death describes her dream and hands the focalization over to Liesel:

Prior to waking up, the book thief was dreaming about the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-colored part in his hair and the perfect square of his mustache. She was listening contentedly to the torrent of words spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the smile and said, "Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir heute?" She hadn't learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that she would find out in due course. Just as the *Führer* was about to reply, she woke up. (...) Her brother was dead. One eye open. One still in a dream. It would be better for a complete dream, I think, but I really have no control over that. (Zusak, 20 - 21)

In this case, the narrator remains and the focalizer changes. However, the narrator jumps in and regains control of the focalization by adding information Liesel is not able to know at this point of the narrative. When he predicts "The reason for that she would find out in due course" (Zusak, 21), the narrator manipulates the narratee by keeping him in suspense as something about the future of the character is revealed. Besides, Liesel's dream allows the narratee a glimpse on Adolph Hitler in one of his public speeches, which helps situating the narratee in time and space. As Bal reminds her readers: "Embedding of focalization is a phenomenon that contributes to the meaning of a narrative text" (204). After this dream, which coincided with Liesel's first great loss, during the nights she is tormented by nightmares and during the day she has visions of her

brother. In both situations the primary narrator-focalizer shifts the focalization and Liesel becomes the secondary focalizer; however, she never becomes the secondary narrator as Death keeps rigid control over the facts narrated:

Every night, Liesel would nightmare. Her brother's face. Staring at the floor. She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boatlike in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. This vision didn't help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped. Possibly the only good to come out of these nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubermann, her new papa, into the room, to soothe her, to love her. (Zusak, 36)

Again, death gets the focalization back by commenting that "This vision didn't help matters" (Zusak, 36). The narratee is allowed to see what Liesel sees, thinks and feels; and these dreams, nightmares and daytime visions form a net of embedded units which reflect the frame narrative that embeds them. A significant fact in *The Book Thief* is that all narrative passages characterized by embedded focalization do not take more than four short paragraphs to deliver the message. Even Liesel, whose perception is normally on the spotlight, is not granted with very long descriptions of her cognition. Death concedes brief but frequent moments of focalization for the young protagonist. On the other hand, Max Vandenburg is granted four and a half long pages to have his vision of an imaginary boxing fight between him and Hitler. Here Death hands the focalization over to Max and does not intrude or make any of his sarcastic comments. The following extract serves as example:

He was twenty-four, but he could still fantasize. "In the blue corner," he quietly commentated, "we have the champion of the world, the Aryan masterpiece—the *Führer*". He breathed and turned. "And in the red corner, we have the Jewish, rat-faced challenger—Max Vandenburg". Around him, it all materialized.

White light lowered itself into a boxing ring and a crowd stood and murmured (...) Diagonally across, Adolf Hitler stood in the corner with his entourage. (...) In the basement of 33 Himmel Street, Max Vandenburg could feel the fists of an entire nation. One by one they climbed into the ring and beat him down. They made him bleed. They let him suffer. Millions of them—until one last time, when he gathered himself to his feet. (...) Dark. Nothing but dark now. Just basement. Just Jew. (Zusak, 251-55)

Such a long shift on focalization might be justified by the empathy Death feels towards the suffering of the Jews, whose inner voices he hears every time he goes to concentration camps or any other site where Jews are being killed. Nevertheless, Death assumes a neutral position in relation to this vision and refrains from making any kind of comment before, during or after this vision. It is relevant to say that Death, when collecting the souls of murdered Jews, does not make any of his sarcastic comments either, which might imply a respectful attitude towards the miserable situation Max is going through. It is clear, also, that the boxing scene functions as a metaphor of the current mass murder program instituted by the Nazis against the Jews. As Hitler cannot defeat the Jews by himself, he uses the power of oratory to instigate the nation against supposed enemies. As Death cannot give voice to the millions of Jewish souls he collects, he uses the boxing scene as a long embedded narrative that summarizes and mirrors their agony. Long after this vision, when Liesel was told about it by Max, the narrator offers another shift on focalization using the same boxing scene. Now Liesel is in a painting activity with max and her parents when, suddenly, she digresses and has a vision based on Max's vision:

As she started painting, Liesel thought about Max Vandenburg fighting the *Führer*, exactly as he'd explained it.

*** BASEMENT VISIONS, JUNE 1941 ***

Punches are thrown, the crowd climbs out of the walls. Max and the *Führer* fight for their lives, each rebounding off the stairway. There's blood in the *Führer*'s mustache, as

well as in his part line, on the right side of his head. “Come on, Führer”, says the Jew. He waves him forward. “Come on, Führer”.

When the visions dissipated and she finished her first page, Papa winked at her. Mama castigated her for hogging the paint. Max examined each and every page, perhaps watching what he planned to produce on them. Many months later, he would also paint over the cover of that book and give it a new title, after one of the stories he would write and illustrate inside it. (Zusak, 256-57)

The painting activity involves painting in white all the pages of Hitler’s autobiographical book *Mein Kampf*. Not by coincidence the attitude of painting and decharacterizing the book arouses Liesel’s memory about Max’s boxing vision. The two levels of narrative complement each other. Death, again, refrains from intruding with sarcastic comments, but regains control of the focalization by foreshadowing Max’s future plans for that book.

3. Perceptual Focalization

Although engaging the five senses, the term focalization tends to indicate visual activity. Jahn captures this fact as follows: “Perception, thought, recollection, and knowledge are often considered to be criterial features of focalization, and all these mental processes are closely related to seeing, albeit only metonymically or metaphorically” (243). There is a strong link between focalization and visually oriented activity; however, there are other sensory modes through which focalization is realized. Rimmon-Kenan, clearly influenced by the multiple-facet perspective theory of Boris Uspensky (57), proposes a typology of what she names “facets of focalization” (Rimmon-Kenan, 79), which covers the perceptual facet (the five human senses connected to time and space), the psychological facet (compromising cognition and emotion) and the ideological facet (the focalizer’s world-view). As the psychological and ideological facets are the subject of a heated controversy and debate for stretching too long the scope of focalization as proposed by Genette, the present discussion focuses only on the perceptual facet,

whose issues find relevant examples in the narrative of *The Book Thief*.

Rimmon-Kenan states that “the purely visual sense of ‘focalization’ is too narrow” (79). Therefore, the perception of the focalizer involves the five senses which are regulated by temporal and spatial dimensions that constitute the *locus* of the focalizer. On the matter of space the author explains:

‘Translated’ into spatial terms the external/internal position of the focalizer takes the form of a bird’s-eye view v. that of a limited observer. In the first, the focalizer is located at a point far above the object(s) of his perception. This is the classical position of a narrator focalizer, yielding either a panoramic view or a ‘simultaneous’ focalization of things ‘happening’ in different places. (...) A panoramic or simultaneous view is impossible when focalization is attached to a character or to an unpersonified position internal to the story. (79 – 80)

In *The Book Thief* the narrator expresses himself almost completely through optical activity, although shifting to the other senses. As he is Death personified, his vision is unlimited, allowing him to see beyond the frontiers of human eyes and perception. It is true he is telling a story based on a book he has been reading repeatedly for a long time and, for that, he would have the limited view of an internal focalizer. However, he is able to have a panoramic bird’s eye view as his supernatural nature allows him to be around during the past events registered on the book. Every time there was death in Liesel’s life, the narrator was there, watching the events as an omniscient external narrator. The next passage shows one of these moments, when Death arrives at a plane crash, collects the pilot’s soul and comes back through the crowd towards the sky, describing the scene panoramically:

I walked in, loosened his soul, and carried it gently away. All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear. As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble,

and disappearing fast. (...)The crowd did what crowds do. As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns. When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.(...) As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse—the recognition of another soul gone. You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colors that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies. I've seen millions of them. I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember. (Zusak, 10-11)

On the matter of time as an aspect associated to perceptual focalization, Rimmon-Kenan says that “External focalization is panchronic in the case of an unpersonified focalizer, and retrospective in the case of a character focalizing his own past. On the other hand, internal focalization is synchronous with the information regulated by the focalizer” (80). In *The Book Thief* Death owns a panchronic view, as he has access to the past, present and future of the characters. In the last chapter when he finishes the reading of Liesel's book, he recognizes: “Also, I can tell you what happened after the book thief's words had stopped, and how I came to know her story in the first place” (Zusak, 529). Besides the recurring visual activity (especially used to notice colors), Death employs his hearing not only to focalize perceptible elements, like the sound of approaching bombs or gunshots, for example, but also to detect thoughts from souls that call him.

The ability Death has of listening to the suffering souls is explored throughout the narrative, which increases the dramatic effect of the story, especially because the narrator, as focalizer, focuses only in the inner voices of those he considers the victims of the war, be them Jews, poor German citizens or soldiers who die in the name of an unfair political regime. Regarding the other senses, Death normally mixes them, which creates images close to poetry:

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be

caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps. The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying? Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see—the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax. (Zusak, 4)

This literary device of playing with the senses, exploring the perceptual focalization of the primary focalizer finds explanation in one of Zusak's interviews. When speaking about the language used by the narrator of *The Book Thief*, the author clarified: “I wanted Death to talk in a way that humans don't speak” (Interview, 62). It is relevant to affirm that the perceptual focalization would demand a bond to a corporeal existence, unless the focalizer is a bodiless entity whose omniscient presence in the narrative allows him only to observe events through sight and hearing, but not to experience them through the other senses. Yet in *The Book Thief* Death does not present himself as a human-like figure, but he implies it to his narratee when using verbs related to senses, like inhale (7), for instance. Besides, Death uses the senses not only to focalize but also to give clues about his own construction as a personified form. When describing the second time he finds Liesel he says:

She did not back away or try to fight me, but I know that something told the girl I was there. Could she smell my breath? Could she hear my cursed circular heartbeat, revolving like the crime it is in my deathly chest? I don't know, but she knew me and she looked me in my face and she did not look away. (Zusak, 490)

So far only the narrator-focalizer had his perceptual focalization analyzed. Nonetheless it is important to state that Liesel and those close to her also focalize, although never in the same degree of depth and meaning as the primary focalizer. When Death hands over the focalization to Liesel and to other characters

their perception of the world includes all the five senses, especially sight, hearing and taste. The last one is explained by the starvation they go through during the war, when food was not enough for everybody. Death, as primary focalizer, speaks generically about flavors. Liesel, on the other hand, is constantly in the kitchen and focalizes the world through taste and smell, especially Rosa's pea soup, the only kind of food her family sometimes has to eat within weeks. The same happens to Rudy, who is always searching for food.

Final Remarks

By presenting these reflections on the issue of focalization in *The Book Thief*, one can notice how important it is to detect the focalizer(s) in a given narrative. Those who orient the narrative have a decisive role in how events and attitudes are comprehended by the narratee, as their choices of what to show and what to say give space to specific interpretations. In *The Book Thief* the narrator, functioning as the main focalizer, guides the narrative through his omniscient view of events (as he is atemporal) and through his judgmental comments. His choice of showing Liesel, Max, Hans and Rudy in more detailed ways, making general, positive assertions on their good nature, leads the narratee to sympathize with them. Even Rosa gains space in the narration as Death makes the effort to show her as a good woman, although she constantly abuses Liesel physically and verbally. How Death focalizes the world, especially concerning Liesel's life, is poetically revealing, with the support of colorful imagery and imaginative syntax constructions that remind of idyllic poetry. This feature tends to make the narratee face Death as a welcome end to suffering, and the way he chooses to focalize things shows the narratee whom he needs to consider the victims and the villains of Nazism.

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