

Foul Waters: Navigating “the torrent of words” in Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*

Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* creates a world in which language and signification is used to reveal the shift from one symbolic order into another. In Zusak’s text, the Lacanian symbolic order is duplicated and reversed, and in so doing it underscores the facility with which Nazi Germany and the Third Reich weaponized, through harnessing and then redefining, the series of phases that constitute entrance into the symbolic.

By the time we meet her, Liesel has already undergone the process of initiation to the symbolic with one exception: she cannot read or write. She possesses speech, but without the understanding of its power in World War II Germany. Zusak’s text shows how Liesel must occupy the dual registers of two competing symbolic orders: her originating one, which is further developed at the Huberman household, and the state-mandated one, created and enforced by Nazi ideology. This essay will explore Liesel’s double entrance and dual subjectivity as an illiterate, non-Jewish, female forced to navigate two competing orders, one of which is constructed by “the torrent of words spilling from his [Hitler’s] mouth,” as it shapes her journey into language (*The Book Thief* 20). The flow of language underpinning Nazi ideology is countered by the alternate acquisition and understanding of language provided by Hans, who teaches Liesel how to read from a double perspective. The essay will also examine the Lacanian phases of signification and the symbolic, governed by dual paternal signifiers (Hans Huberman/Adolf Hitler). Finally, as the last step in her journey, I examine her Birth of Desire and her righting the flow of language by asserting her own unique agency over it as the female subject, who according to Lacan, is barred (and thus disempowered) from full access to either the Real or the Symbolic by virtue of being female. Liesel, however, turns her Lacanian abjection into a position of power, and her occupation of two opposing symbolic orders fosters strength, power, and the ability to re-direct the current of words.