

IDENTIFYING NARRATIVE LEVELS IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S *THE BOOK THIEF*

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Abstract: The present article aims at analyzing the historic fiction *The Book Thief*, by the Australian author Markus Zusak, under the light of the narratological studies. In order to verify the possible narrative levels detected in the alluded work, the theoretical tools are provided especially by the scholars Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, whose ideas help us to understand the narrative techniques which allow many levels of meaning.

Key words: *The Book Thief*, Narratology, Narrative Levels.

IDENTIFICANDO NÍVEIS NARRATIVOS EM A *MENINA QUE ROUBAVA LIVROS*, DE MARKUS ZUSAK.

Resumo: O presente artigo objetiva analisar a ficção histórica *A Menina que Roubava Livros*, do autor Australiano Markus Zusak, sob o prisma dos estudos narratológicos. A fim de detectar os possíveis níveis narrativos na obra mencionada, as ferramentas teóricas utilizadas são fornecidas especialmente pelos teóricos Gérard Genette e Mieke Bal, cujas ideias nos ajudam a compreender as técnicas narrativas que possibilitam vários níveis de significado.

Palavras-chave: *A Menina que Roubava Livros*, Narratologia, Níveis Narrativos.

1. On the object of the study.

The central object of this study is the book entitled *The Book Thief*, written by the Australian author Markus Zusak. It tells the story of a ten year-old girl called Liesel Meminger, who undergoes the horror experience of World War II. Liesel is a German girl who is sent to live with her foster parents in a small town, since her parents apparently had communist ideals. Death, which comes as a personified, soul-ripping entity, is the narrator of the story, and tells of its curiosity regarding the girl, who manages to survive while Death is doing its job of collecting souls. In one of these escaping moments, Liesel loses the book she had been writing (a metafictional story entitled *The Book Thief*), and Death constructs the narrative through its reading, which is complemented with personal considerations about the humankind. Since this

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narrative presents Death and Liesel telling and showing what is seen, as well as a lot of background information about other characters, it is relevant to pay attention to the different narrative levels contained in the book.

Embedded or interpolated narrative is a major component in *The Book Thief*. The French critic Gérard Genette conducted the inquiry about narrative levels in his *Narrative Discourse: An essay in Method* (first published in 1980). Nevertheless, the Dutch literary theorist Mieke Bal has developed Genette's basic descriptive model to a more refined theory (although controversial sometimes). Firstly, it is relevant to start with the three widely known concepts proposed by Mieke Bal in her book *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (first published in 1985).

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ('tells' the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. *A story* is the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and 'colouring' of a fabula; the fabula is presented in a certain manner. *A fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (BAL, 1997, p 05.)

In a broad sense, the term embedding is a literary device that shows a "story within a story". Its use dates back to ancient storytelling traditions, having also been used in other forms of art such as painting and cinema. This article follows the definition that Mieke Bal gives to the term and, consequently, the implications of its use. According to Bal (1981):

The verb *to embed* is a synonym of *to insert*. It signifies: "to insert one thing into another in such a way as to incorporate it" (Petit Robert, 1972). Three criteria can be deduced from this rather vague definition. 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. (BAL, 1981, p. 43).

The more embedded stories one can identify in a text (or fabula) the more complex the narrative becomes, as it produces changes in the narrative levels that affect the reader's attention and reaction to the reading. Therefore, the analysis of embedding in a narrative text is not just a matter of simply counting the quantity of stories; on the other hand, it is a matter of realizing their meanings in relation to the whole context of the literary work. As Nelles (2005, p. 34) states: "The relationship between the embedding and the embedded stories inevitably entails

significant interpretative consequences, as the reader can hardly fail to speculate about the dramatic and thematic connections between the two distinct yet conjoined stories.”.

2. The frame narrative

Since its first publication in 2005 *The Book Thief* has had many covers, following marketing trends to attract readers and buyers. Although different from each other, many of these covers kept the same tagline that ended up being famous in the publishing field: “When Death tells a story you really have to listen”. Indeed, even before knowing about the story of the text, the reader is warned about the unique nature of the narrator. As it will be clear while the story unfolds, the Frame Narrative, or Primary Story, is the one told and experienced by Death, entity that narrates and acts as a character. Here a preliminary remark is necessary. When speaking about narrators Mieke Bal makes this distinction: “[by] narrative agent, or narrator, I mean the linguistic subject, a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text. (...) this agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative.” (BAL, 1997, p.16). Taking into consideration Bal’s arguments, this article consider Death and his utterances in the text as the primary narrative. Immediately after the Prologue, Death presents himself, also addressing the reader. It is a constant habit of this narrator to call the reader by “you” every time he stops the narration to add his comments. According to Margolin (2011, p. 313): “When a narrator employs tokens of *I* and *you* in his discourse, these tokens automatically refer to him in his current speaker role and to his inscribed addressee as participants in the ongoing communicative transaction”. Developing his story through many analepsis and prolepsis, Death starts:

DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colors.
Then the humans.
That’s usually how I see things.
Or at least, how I try.

* * * HERE IS ASMALL FACT* * *

You are going to die.
I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely can be cheerful. I can be

amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the A's. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

* * * REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT * * *

Does this worry you? I urge you - don't be afraid. I'm nothing if not fair.

— Of course, an introduction. A beginning. Where are my manners? I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away. (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 03-04)

In a very dramatic way, Death interrupts his speech about colors to tell the reader he is going to die. To keep the suspense, he continues his description about his qualities and then returns to the “small” fact that the reader is going to die, just then explaining how it should happen. From that point on he will speak about his nature and job (collector of souls), about how he came to meet a young girl who called his attention and about how her autobiographical book (called *The Book Thief*) came to his hands. Finally, he reveals he has read this book many times and, therefore, he says he has an interesting story to tell based on what he has seen and on what he has read.

These elements allow us to say that Death is a homodiegetic narrator (borrowing Genette's term) or a Character-Bound narrator (Bal's term). It means to say he is a story participant. As so, he should have a limited knowledge of facts and situations, since, as participant, he is one of the characters. Nevertheless, he is an omniscient character due to his nature (being the personification of Death, the soul ripper). As this position gives him some kind of supernatural powers he is able to move in space and time, seeing and perceiving what human beings do, think and feel. Since he is attracted by the young girl Liesel Meminger, this girl becomes the focalizer, the “agent that sees” (BAL, 1997, p. 146). Death develops his story mainly through Liesel's eyes, through fragments of his memories (of the three times he saw her) and of his reading (when the narrative starts he had already read Liesel's book many times). However he also changes his focalization, following other characters that are meaningful to Liesel. Hence he indirectly gives the reader elements to put the pieces together and view Liesel's story as a whole while the story unfolds. Obviously, these changes in focalization will help the changes in the narrative levels, allowing secondary (embedded) stories inside the frame one. The frame narrative, to be more detailed, relies on Death's impressions about the contradictory nature of human beings, who are able not only of wonderful but also of terrible acts. These impressions

are based on his personal contact with the human kind and on his contact with the little German girl who witnesses the consequences of Nazism in Germany.

3. Embedded narratives

3.1. Max's arrival

Mieke Bal asserts that “the narrative text constitutes a whole, into which, from the narrator's text, other texts are embedded.” (BAL, 1997, p. 52). In *The Book Thief*, there are many embedded narratives, some of them clear to see and some not so easy to identify at first glance. This is noticeable right in the table of contents. There the reader can see that *The Book Thief* is divided into 10 parts, each one subdivided in 08 parts. There is also a prologue and an epilogue, each of them presenting other 04 parts. A careful look at this division shows some of the embedded narratives, since each part has its own title. In order to not to extend too much the subject, running the risk of losing focus, this article presents only the embedded narratives related to Max Vandenburg, a Jewish young man whom Hans and Rosa Hubermann hide in their basement as a way to keep a promise made by Hans in his past. In “Part I – The gravedigger's handbook”, subpart “The smell of Friendship” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 69), Liesel is lying on the grass with Hans Hubermann by the river, which “worked its way past, pointing in the direction of Dachau, the concentration camp”. (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 70). In this ludic but also melancholic scenario (due to the proximity of Dachau), Liesel listens her “papa” play the accordion while it was getting dark. Here the reader has the first clue indicating that Max will arrive since the narrator uses the device of prolepsis (narrating in advance what will happen later) to create suspense and a sense of fatality.

She saw it but didn't realize until later, when all the stories came together. She didn't see him watching as he played, having no idea that Hans Hubermann's accordion was a story. In the times ahead, that story would arrive at 33 Himmel Street in the early hours of morning, wearing ruffled shoulders and a shivering jacket. It would carry a suitcase, a book, and two questions. A story. Story after story. Story *within* story.” (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 71).

This passage starts making sense in “Part III - *Meinkampf*,” subparts “enter the struggler” (p. 138), “the struggler continued”(p. 157) and “the struggler concluded” (p. 168). It is

fully understood just in “Part 4 – The Standover Man”, subpart “The Accordionist, the secret life of Hans Hubermann” (p. 173). The narrator, in this case, keeps the reader in perpetual suspense by interrupting his narrative in order to show other simultaneous actions. Here, for instance, “enter the struggler” presents Max, a Jew, who first goes into hiding with the help of his friend Walter Kugler. When his friend leaves Max thinks of Hans in an almost delirious hallucination. Suddenly the narrative is paused and the reader finds two subparts: “The attributes of summer”(p. 142), about Liesel’s routine, and “The Aryan shopkeeper” (p. 164), about the woman that adored Hitler. Just after these subparts, the narrator comes back to the narrative about Max when he is in a train on his way to Molching, Liesel’s town. Again, the narrative is interrupted and subpart “tricksters” (p. 161) is presented, in which Death tells us about Liesel and Rudy (her best friend) in their moments of stealing apples from a farm together with a boys’ gang. As usual, the narrator embeds another narrative in this passage, a very brief one, in which he describes the death of one of the boy’s sister. As Mieke Bal points out, in some moments of the narrative there may be a “a disclosure on the part of the narrator which is not directly connected with the events” (BAL, 1997, p. 08).

One more time the narrator comes back to Max in “the struggler concluded” (p. 168) and at last he shows Max on Hans’ door. In “Part 4 – The Standover Man” (p. 171), Max knocks on Hans door carrying a suitcase on one hand and a book – *Meinkampf* (Hitler’s autobiography called *My Struggle* in English) on the other one. His two questions to Hans when the old man opens the door are “Hans Hubermann?” and “Do you still play the accordion” (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 173).

After all this patchwork it is possible to comprehend that Max is the one carrying the suitcase, the book and the two questions that the narrator mentioned about a hundred pages ago. However there is still the sentence “the accordion was a story” (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 71). It is understood just when the narrative of Part 4 unfolds and the narrator Death, using the device of analepsis (narrating what happened before the actual events), tells the reader that in 1914 Hans, a young twenty-two year-old man, served in the Great War and had his life saved by Eric Vandenburg (Max’s father). Eric used to play accordion and taught Hans how to play it too and when Eric died Hans took his accordion to his widow. Mother of a two year-old boy (Max), she gave the accordion to Hans, who promised to help her in case she needed. Therefore, in 1940, Max, and adult Jew running from the Nazis, knocks on Hans’ door to check if he was still willing

to keep his promise. To close the narrative, in subpart “A short history of the Jewish fist fighter”, still in Part 4, Death mentions how Max was raised, how he came to be friend with Walter and how he managed to escape from the Nazis until he found Hans Hubermann.

As one can see, the embedded narratives related to the arrival of Max are intricate but have a strict connection. On the chapter about the relations between primary fabula and embedded fabula Mieke Bal says that “...a possible relation between the two texts [is when] the two fabulas are related to each other” (BAL, 1997, p. 53). Analyzing the aspects referred to Hans past life and the reasons why he came to hide a Jew in such a dangerous historical moment it is clear that this narrative helps to explain the primary one, in which Death tells what happens to Liesel and gets horrified for the bad things humans are capable of. As this level of embedded narrative shows what happens to Max and the risk his presence implies to Hans family, including Liesel, this narrative is crucial to the construction of interpretation of the primary one.

3.2. Max’s first book

The fabula of *The Book Thief* is not only communicated through a written narrative but also through a visual one. Along the text it is possible to find visual narratives in the form of images inserted throughout the narration. The most common analytical approach to these images inserted in *The Book Thief* is the discussion about motifs and symbols, consequently, their meanings and implications. However, as the general analysis on this article relies on the tools of narratology, they are discussed on according to their role of embedded narratives, since each of them tell a specific story with its own fabula. In order to better understand it the words of Bal (1997, p. 163) about how to view visual narratives in general are relevant:

In narrative discourse, focalization is the direct content of the linguistic signifiers. In visual art, it would then be the direct content of visual signifiers like lines, dots, light and dark, and composition. In both cases, as in literary stories, focalization is already an interpretation, a subjectivized content. What we see is before our mind's eye, it has already been interpreted. (BAL, 1997, p. 163).

In “Part 4 – The Standover Man”, in the last subpart “pages from the basement”, Max has nothing to give to Liesel for her birthday so he takes it upon himself to make her a book

about his own life. He calls it “The Standover Man” and gives it to her a week after her birthday when it was complete. In order to produce this book he gets the book he had about Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, and paints its pages with white paint that Hans gives him. Drawing and writing about his life, Max produces a thirteen-page outlet for Liesel to read. The images of Max’s book illustrate his inferior position as a Jew in society and his fear of who could be standing over him when he wakes up. At the end of his book, he implies that Liesel is the one who stands over him when he wakes up, realizing that she is the one who takes care of him and he is grateful for that. The subpart “pages from the basement” is one of the clearest embedded narratives in *The Book Thief*. First, it is interesting to note that from the beginning to the end of the pages that contain the illustrations and lines written by Max, there is no regular page number following the sequence of the text. The narratee, in this case the reader, is presented another book inside the book, with its own characteristics. Aside the lack of numbers, the page is painted in a way to give the reader the impression that these pages were really written over other pages. It is possible to visualize, especially on the image of Liesel standing over Max, words and extracts of sentences from the original book *Meinkampf*. At this point, the meanings evoked by this mixture of Max and Hitler’s story are varied. A possible interpretation is that Max is able to subvert the original message.

Aside that, the book “The Standover Man” that Max writes finally give significance to the title “Part 4 – The Standover Man” (p. 171). Just after its reading it is possible to understand that Max is terrified by the idea of waking up one day and see the Nazis standing over him. Therefore, one may conclude that the fabula of this embedded narrative review the events of the primary fabula in a chronological way, summarizing every important thing lived by Max up to his friendship with Liesel,. To conclude mentioning Mieke Bal’s words:

When the primary fabula and the embedded fabula can be paraphrased in such a manner that both paraphrases have one or more elements in common, the subtext is a sign of the primary text. (...) When a mirror-text has been added more towards the end of the primary text (...) the function of the mirror-text is no longer predictive, but retrospective. (...) Its function is mostly to enhance significance. (BAL, 1997, p. 58).

3.3. Max’s second book

In “Part 5- The Whitler”, subpart “Sketches” (p. 277), Max starts drawing sketches in the newly-blank pages of *Mein Kampf* in order to spend time. As in the following:

The idea was to write about everything that had happened to him—all that had led him to a Himmel Street basement—but it was not what came out. Max's exile produced something else entirely. It was a collection of random thoughts and he chose to embrace them. (...) The desecrated pages of *Mein Kampf* were becoming a series of sketches, page after page, which to him summed up the events that had swapped his former life for another. Some took minutes. Others hours. He resolved that when the book was finished, he'd give it to Liesel, when she was old enough, and hopefully, when all this nonsense was over. (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 279).

One day Liesel goes to the basement and finds Max asleep with the papers next to him. Curious about their content, she gets some of them at random and notices two cartoons. One of them shows Hitler singing before a saluting crowd with the caption "Not the Fuhrer - the conductor!" (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 279) The other one shows a couple standing on the top of a mountain of corpses looking at a swastika Sun; one says, "Isn't it a lovely day..." (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 280). After watching these two pages Liesel gets very scared and the subpart "Sketches" ends with her reaction:

Frightened by what she saw, Liesel placed the book back down, exactly as she found it, against Max's leg. A voice startled her. "*Dankeschön*," it said, and when she looked across, following the trail of sound to its owner, a small sign of satisfaction was present on his Jewish lips. "Holy Christ," Liesel gasped. "You scared me, Max." He returned to his sleep, and behind her, the girl dragged the same thought up the steps. You scared me, Max. (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 281).

Again, this embedded narrative has no page reference, like the previous book Max wrote. It complements the primary fabula one by making the horrors of the Holocaust clear not only to the narratee but also to Liesel here acting as the focalizer of the events. As in most part of the narrative the focalizer is Liesel, a young girl, her understanding of the events she witnesses is limited to the mind of a child experiencing her coming of age. Therefore, the knowledge the narrator possesses is much bigger than hers. Max's pictures are the first clear reference to Liesel about what happens to people not considered "people" by Nazism. Her words "you scared me, Max" have double meaning. Either she is scared because he spoke suddenly or because she suddenly realized the mass killing around her. His cartoons are so closely attached to the primary fabula that, as Mieke Bal, states, "they resemble each other" (BAL, 1997, p. 55).

We speak of resemblance when two fabulas can be paraphrased in such a way that the summaries have one or more striking elements in common. The degree of resemblance is determined by the number of terms the summaries share. An embedded text that presents a story, which, according to this criterion, resembles the primary fabula, may be taken as a sign of the primary fabula. (BAL, 1997, p. 56).

This resemblance of Max's drawings as embedded fabulas in the primary one is even more noticeable when his sketches are finally organized in a book given to Liesel later. In "Part 08 – The Word Shaker", subpart "the hidden sketchbook", Liesel stays at home with Rosa Hubbermann while Hans is away fighting in the war. To make things more difficult to Liesel, Max had been captured by the Nazis while looking for a safer place to hide. Rosa, alone with Liesel, gets a book she carefully had hidden inside her mattress and give it to Liese. It is the sketchbook written by Max, entitled "The Word Shaker". It is interesting to realize that when Liesel reads the book, the word shaker just shows up at page 117, and a brief prologue is written on page 116. Here, the embedded narrative provides the narratee its own pages, differently from the pages in the text. Strangely, however, is the fact that the drawings from "The Word Shaker" have page reference that follows the ordinary sequence of *The Book Thief*, unlike the other book and sketch by Max.

She read in the kitchen. Red and yellow gaps in the stove. *The Word Shaker*. She made her way through the countless sketches and stories, and the pictures with captions. (...) Then came page 117. That was where *The Word Shaker* itself made its appearance. It was a fable or a fairy tale. Liesel was not sure which. Even days later, when she looked up both terms in the *Duden Dictionary*, she couldn't distinguish between the two. On the previous page, there was a small note.

PAGE 116

Liesel—I almost scribbled this story out. I thought you might be too old for such a tale, but maybe no one is. I thought of you and your books and words, and this strange story came into my head. I hope you can find some good in it. (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 444).

After this explanation, "The Word Shaker" is presented as an illustrated story of a little man who wanted to conquer the world and, for that, he used the power of words he grew as trees. As the trees were very high, he needed word shakers to shake them so they could be collected and put into people's minds. A girl, who was the best word shaker, once became friend with a man that was hated by everybody. As she cried a tear of friendship, it became a seed she planted and

grew as a very strong tree of words that were different from the others. At the end, her tree was cut down and the girl and the man walked into the forest of trees raised by the little man knowing that they started making a difference. The sketchbook written by Max tells the reader (both Liesel and the extradiegetic Narratee) the story of Nazism under a very ludic perspective, at the same time it summarizes the main events of the primary narrative so far. It causes suspense, since Max whereabouts are probably inside Dachau concentration camp, and it also helps Liesel to keep hope, as their fallen tree opened a path among the forest of words like “hatred”.

3.4. Max’s fantasy

In “Part 5- The whistler”, subpart “the gamblers (a seven-sided die)”, a series of events over the year of 1941 are described, each compared with the roll of a die. The narrative structure of this subpart is divided into seven sections that are presented with the picture of a die and its respective title in bold. The fourth die is a long embedded narrative lasting from page 250 to 255. It starts with Death focalizing Max, who would spend the long hours in the basement exercising and imagining himself in a boxing ring fighting against Hitler one-on-one.

He was twenty-four, but he could still fantasize. “In the blue corner,” he quietly commented, “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 (...) Adolf Hitler stood in the corner with his entourage. (...) Words were whispered to him from his trainer, Goebbels. (...) “Undefeated!” the ringmaster proclaimed. “Over many a Jew, and over any other threat to the German ideal! Herr *Führer*,” he concluded, “we salute you!” The crowd: mayhem. Next, when everyone had settled down, came the challenger. (...) No robe. No entourage. Just a lonely young Jew with dirty breath, a naked chest, and tired hands and feet. (...) (ZUSAK, 2005, p. 251)

In his fantasy, he can take hours of several punches, and then he is able to beat the Fuhrer in just seven blows. Yet Hitler gives up fighting and announces to the crowd that Max is a threat to the Germany, commanding them to defeat him. His whole imagination is narrated by Death who describes what is going on in the characters minds. In many other moments of the book Death describes people’s feelings and mental states, but here, due to the length and the content of the narrative, it is clear the importance of this embedded narrative for the primary one.

The particular story event, which finds itself embedded in narrative, is not just given focus for aesthetic reasons – rather, this scene is vitally important for the characters involved. This moment of personal crisis, which reverts into fantasy, is still referred to in three other moments. First, when Max tells Liesel about his fantasy (p. 255), when she is in the basement and has her own vision of Max fighting Hitler (p. 257) and when Liesel asks Max who wins the fight (p. 265).

On a purely structural level, this fantasy (what Max imagines) is emphasized by its contrast with reality (what Max lives). As a result, it is also emphasized for the narratee. On the other hand, an attentive analysis shows relevant historical facts that are implicit in the narrative. Paul Joseph Goebbels, for instance, was one of Hitler's main associate and follower, widely known for supporting the extermination of the Jews and organizing the burning of books in Germany. Very soon, he got the position as Propaganda Minister arranged by Hitler. Another point to consider in Max's fantasy is that it shows Max as both a winner and a loser. Since he is able to defeat Hitler, he also proves how dangerous Jews are considered at that time. As he still manages to keep alive, although in such a hostile environment and in such precarious conditions, he is winning the fight, in a metaphorical sense.

4. Final thoughts

On close analysis of these embedded narratives, it becomes apparent that these sections of text give detail not solely of dramatic events, but they also contribute to expand the understanding of the primary narrative. The books Max writes, for instance, add information about the situation the Jews were submitted to. Although Death shows it in other passages as well as makes comments about it, the subhuman conditions applied to the Jews are also hinted in the embedded narratives. Besides, the character-bound focalizer, Liesel, knows little about the real horrors that surround her childhood at the time of the events, and the narrator, due his odd nature, has an almost unlimited knowledge about those events. However, as Death cannot "tell" Liesel what is really happening, other situations are unfold to her, as Max's books, which attempt to alert her and at the same time to give her hope without shocking her. Through a narratological analysis of the narrative structure, it can be said that the narrative construction of *The Book Thief* is not meant to be understood in one sitting. It carefully spreads hints about present, past and future events everywhere, most of the times with a great interval between them. This use of

analepsis and prolepsis, together with the acid comments of the narrator, is responsible for the suspense of the book. Besides, the narrator, who keeps calling the narratee to share his story, makes a strong impression on the reader. As his construction is not only based on how he describes himself but mainly on the idea that each reader has about Death, he may be interpreted in many ways. However, these considerations are only possibilities open in the complex structure of *The Book Thief*. A longer and deeper analysis would reveal many other possible embedded narratives but, as said in the beginning, the present article focused only in the events related to Max, in order to keep this article brief. It is just a proposal that can be expanded and developed. To conclude using Mieke Bal's words:

An interpretation is never anything more than a proposal ('I think that the text means this'). If a proposal is to be accepted, it must be well founded ('I think, on the basis of the data shown, that the text means this'). If a proposal is based on a precise description it can then be discussed, even if, in practice, the intuitive interpretation preceded even the first step of the analysis. (BAL, 1997, p. 11).

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