

## The Construction of the Female Hero in Zusak's *The Book Thief*: An Archetype Analysis

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### Abstract

Heroic narratives in literature traditionally tend to be dominated by male characters with physical strength, dominance, and victory characteristics. In contrast, female characters often serve as passive and domestic roles. This study examines the construction of a female hero in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* through Christopher Vogler's (2007) archetypes and the hero's journey. Using a qualitative approach, this study reveals how the character Liesel Meminger builds her heroic identity through courage, empathy, and literacy in the middle of the Nazi regime's oppression. The findings show that Liesel represents a heroine who prioritizes emotional resilience and the power of words over physical strength. Other archetypes support her and follow the twelve stages of the hero's journey. The novel actively challenges traditional hero archetypes by presenting a heroic narrative that ends in loss, not victory, but is still full of meaning and strength. This research enriches literary and gender studies by highlighting the representation of female heroes in contemporary fictional narratives.

**Keywords:** *female hero, archetype, hero's journey, The Book Thief*

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, women have often been relegated to subordinate roles compared to men. Their roles have been primarily confined to the domestic sphere, while men have dominated the public sphere as leaders, warriors, and heads of families (Pati, 2013). Cultural norms have primarily contributed to the persistence of these disparities. According to Pamungkas et al. (2019), gender roles are created based on social agreements shaped by civilizational culture. As a result, these roles have suppressed women's contributions while encouraging male authority, as evidenced by limited educational prospects, economic engagement, and political marginalization.

Domestic and dominant roles between men and women have not only affected social structures but are also reflected in literature. As the highest expression of human life, literature is inseparable from reality (Rahayuningsih & Indriawati, 2019). These reflections emerge in the messages and content of stories, which often carry ethical values related to human life. Novels, in particular, frequently address gender issues, particularly power dynamics and roles between men and women (Wiyatmi, 2009). Female characters are often depicted as supporting figures in domestic and subordinate roles, while male characters are central, representing agency, authority, and heroic status. As a result, the concept of the hero has traditionally been associated with men, whose heroism is defined by physical strength and acts of conquest (Mir et al., 2022). This idea, rooted in classical epics and mythologies such as *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and *The Iliad*, associate's heroism with masculine traits such as strength, bravery, and dominance.

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In contrast, female characters in classical literature are frequently relegated to passive, domestic, and emotional roles. Conventional heroic theory minimizes women's potential, identifying female heroism with intelligence and mental resilience rather than physical strength (Mir et al., 2022, as cited in Edwards, 1979). However, the rise of feminism and gender studies has empowered women to pursue justice and demand equality (Syarif et al., 2023). These movements have reshaped literary representations, positioning female characters not as marginalized figures but as central characters. Feminist literary critics underscore this shift by highlighting the historical misrepresentation of women in the Western canon, while advocating for the recognition of women's writings and the critical analysis of female power within broader social, political, and economic contexts (Areqih, 2025). In modern literature, female is increasingly portrayed as heroes embarking on journeys filled with trials and transformations, equal to male characters. These heroines exhibit typical heroic attributes such as courage and sacrifice and represent ideals such as empathy, solidarity, and emotional intelligence that are frequently disregarded in classic heroic stories. According to Nelson (2024), the heroine archetype stresses relational strength and psycho-spiritual development, which reflect the path to self-actualization and collective consciousness. This shift in depiction not only reflects societal shifts in understanding gender roles but also enhances heroic narratives by including previously marginalized women's thoughts and experiences. This can be seen in some contemporary novels featuring complex female heroes, such as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, Circe in *Circe*, and Lisbeth Slander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. These characters embody strength, resilience, and emotional complexity, challenging and enriching the traditional hero archetype by centering women's experiences.

Another compelling example is Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), which portrays Liesel Meminger as a unique female hero navigating the horrors of Nazi Germany with courage, compassion, and resilience. Despite living under a totalitarian regime restricting access to books, Liesel learns to read and steals books as an act of resistance. Her journey highlights the power of storytelling as a means of resilience and resistance. *The Book Thief* has received significant international recognition, including the Michael L. Printz Honor Book Award and the National Jewish Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, and was adapted into a film in 2013 and became a New York Times bestseller.

Previous research on Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* has looked into a variety of aspects of the novel. Several academics emphasize literacy as a method of resistance and empowerment, with Liesel Meminger's book-stealing mirroring power dynamics and actions of resistance against Nazi oppression (Adyanti, 2016; Lavanya, 2022; Windratama & Prastiwi, 2019). Others focus on literacy as a coping mechanism for Liesel's trauma caused by loss, war, and propaganda (Geetha, 2025; Kushmi, 2024; Merdifa, 2018). The novel's historical representation of World War II and the Holocaust, enhanced by the unique narrative perspective of Death, has been praised for its accessibility, emotional depth, and ironic portrayal of human suffering (Berecz, 2021; Hollar, 2024; Johnson, 2015; Tysnes, 2009). Additionally, some studies note the novel's subversion of traditional gender roles, portraying Liesel's bravery and empathy as challenges to conventional norms (Bhandari, 2019; Windratama & Prastiwi, 2019), alongside its nuanced blend of historical accuracy and human compassion (Jessie & Prabhu, 2024). Although these studies provide valuable insights into literacy, trauma, narrative technique, and gender roles, there remains a gap in exploring how *The Book Thief* constructs the female hero archetype through Liesel Meminger's journey. This research seeks to address that gap by analysing the novel using Vogler's (2007) archetype and hero's journey framework.

Carl Jung's concept of archetypes provides a foundational framework for understanding the hero's journey, a narrative structure prevalent in storytelling across cultures and eras. Jung defined archetypes as universal forms of human thought or psyche that arise from the collective unconscious over time (Pangestu & Julianti, 2021). The hero archetype is a prime example,

representing common human experiences such as challenge, transformation, and ultimately achievement. Joseph Campbell's monomyth builds on Jung's theory by proposing a universal narrative pattern for the hero's journey, characterized by three phases: Departure, Initiation, and Return. Campbell describes the hero as one who ventures from the ordinary world, faces trials in a realm of wonder, and returns with a boon to benefit their community (Vogler, 2007).

Christopher Vogler (2007) adapts Campbell's monomyth into a practical framework for modern storytelling, defining the hero as an individual who prioritizes others' needs through sacrifice. Vogler delineates twelve stages of the hero's journey: Ordinary World, Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting with the Mentor, Crossing the First Threshold, Tests, Allies, and Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, The Ordeal, Reward, The Road Back, The Resurrection, and Return with the elixir. Additionally, Vogler identifies eight archetypes—Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shapeshifter, Shadow, Ally, and Trickster—that interact dynamically to shape the hero's narrative identity.

Based on the description above, this article examines the construction of the female hero in Zusak's *The Book Thief* through three main objectives, including 1) Identifying the hero archetypes represented in the novel *The Book Thief*, 2) Describing the stages of the hero's journey identified in the novel, and 3) Explaining how the narrative of this novel adapts or challenges the traditional hero archetype. By examining *The Book Thief* through this framework, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on gender equality in literature and deepen the understanding of women's roles as heroes in fictional narratives. The findings are expected to enrich literary and cultural studies by highlighting the significance of female heroism and its implications for contemporary representations of gender.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the construction of the female hero in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005). According to Creswell (2018), a qualitative approach focuses on an in-depth interpretation of social or humanitarian phenomena through textual or narrative data analysis. Given that the primary data in this study is literary text, the qualitative method is appropriate for comprehensively analyzing the narrative elements that shape the protagonist's heroic identity.

This study has two research objects, namely material objects and formal objects. The material object is the novel *The Book Thief*, which is the main source of data. The formal object is the construction of the heroine, especially Liesel Meminger's heroic journey. The data consists of primary data and secondary data. Primary data is the text of the novel *The Book Thief*, including narratives, dialogues, and descriptions that describe the archetype and heroic journey of Liesel Meminger. Secondary data includes scientific articles, journals, and books that are relevant to the topic.

The collection of data through several systematic stages. First, the researcher conducts an in-depth reading of *The Book Thief* along with relevant secondary sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the construction of the heroine in the narrative. Second, the researcher identifies specific parts of the text that reflect the hero archetype and key moments in Liesel Meminger's journey as a heroine. Third, the data are classified according to the types of hero archetypes and the stages of the hero's journey based on Christopher Vogler's framework. Fourth, the researcher analyses the classified data to trace how the narrative constructs Liesel's heroic identity. Fifth, the findings are organized and presented systematically to illustrate the novel's portrayal of the female hero. Finally, conclusions are drawn to highlight the significance of Liesel's characterization and the relevance of her heroic journey to real-life representations of female heroism.

## RESULTS

This section discusses the construction of the female hero in Zusak's *The Book Thief* through Christopher Vogler's (2007) framework of archetypes and the hero's journey. There are three main findings, including the hero archetype in *The Book Thief*, the stages of the hero's journey experienced by Liesel Meminger, and the novel's challenge to the traditional hero archetype.

### 1. Hero Archetypes in *The Book Thief*

#### a. Liesel as the hero archetype

Liesel Meminger embodies the central hero archetype in *The Book Thief*. According to Vogler (2007), the hero archetype is characterized by sacrifice, resilience, and transformation. Liesel's heroism emerges not from physical prowess but from emotional strength and defiance against systemic oppression. Her book thefts symbolize intellectual resistance to Nazi censorship, positioning her as a heroine who empowers herself and others through literacy. For example, at her brother's funeral she picks up a discarded *The Grave Digger's Handbook*.

*There was something black and rectangular lodged in the snow. Only the girl saw it. She bent down and picked it up, and held it firmly in her fingers. The book had silver writing on it (Zusak, 2005, p. 30).*

This excerpt signifies the beginning of her journey. The book becomes a tool for literacy and emotional survival, symbolizing Liesel's initial act of resistance and her desire to reclaim power in a world marked by loss. Furthermore, during a Nazi book-burning event, Liesel risks injury to steal *The Shoulder Shrug* from the flames. In doing so she transforms a scene of destruction into one of preservation, reinforcing her role as a heroine who empowers herself and others with knowledge. Vogler (2007) notes that heroes undertake high-risk actions to achieve transformation.

Liesel's heroism also emerges in her storytelling during World War II air raids. As the residents take shelter in the basement, Liesel reads aloud to calm them. Through this act, Liesel creates emotional solidarity and hope amid terror. She offers care and comfort with words when traditional heroes might wield weapons. Her ability to create meaning through words challenges traditional, male-dominated heroic paradigms. Her journey corresponds with Nelson's (2024) concept of the heroine archetype, which centres on relational strength and psycho-spiritual growth.

#### b. Archetypal characters supporting Liesel

Liesel Meminger's heroic journey in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is profoundly shaped by her interactions with various archetypes who guide, assist, or oppose her. Hans Hubermann serves as the mentor. Vogler (2007) defines the mentor as a guiding figure who trains and inspires the hero. Hans offers Liesel emotional security and intellectual empowerment by teaching her to read and helping her cope with trauma. His mentorship is evident during their midnight reading sessions, which begin after Liesel's nightmares about her family:

*"First things first," Hans Huberman said that night. He washed the sheets and hung them up. "Now," he said upon his return. "Let's get this midnight class started'" (Zusak, 2005, p. 67).*

In this moment Hans transforms Liesel's fear into learning. His patient teaching of letters and words in the basement not only gives Liesel the power to read, but also

comforts her grief. Hans's nurturing mentorship embodies the classical guide who equips the hero with knowledge and confidence.

Liesel's closest companions play the Ally role. Rudy Steiner, her best friend, is loyal and courageous. He supports her adventurous book-stealing and even participates in playful resistance (for example, he imitates Jesse Owens to mock Nazi ideology). Rudy never abandons Liesel, exemplified when he helps her slip out to the mayor's library at night. Such devotion strengthens Liesel's resolve and gives her personal support. In addition, the Trickster archetype appears in the character of Rudy as well. Her antics and humor (like smearing himself with charcoal and pretending to be Jesse Owens) inject laughter into a dark world. By playfully mocking Nazi norms, Rudy undermines the regime's self-serious cruelty. His daring stunts and harmless subversions inspire Liesel to challenge injustice herself. The trickster's role lightens the hero's path and encourages creative resistance.

Another ally is Max Vandenburg, the Jewish refugee hidden by the Hubermanns. Max shares with Liesel a bond of shared hardship. Liesel brings Max newspapers and books each day, maintaining his hope and connection to the outside world.

*The Jew would smile as he accepted the package of paper and started reading in the rational light of the basement" (Zusak, 2005, p. 244).*

This moment demonstrates how Liesel, through her simple yet meaningful actions, maintains Max's hope and dignity. In Return, Max shares stories and illustrations with her, most notably *The Word Shaker*, which becomes a pivotal metaphor for resistance through words. Max helps Liesel understand the power of storytelling as a weapon against tyranny, further reinforcing her identity as a heroine grounded in emotional and intellectual strength.

Another important archetype in Liesel's journey is the Threshold Guardian, embodied by Frau Ilsa Hermann, the Mayor's wife and a client of Rosa Hubermann's laundry. Ilsa initially appears distant and emotionally cold toward Liesel, creating a barrier Liesel must face:

*Still there were no words, and when Liesel found the courage to face her, the woman wore an expression not of reproach, but uttered distance (Zusak, 2005, p. 132).*

Eventually, Ilsa grants Liesel access to her private library, signaling a pivotal transition. She becomes an enabler of Liesel's growth, transforming from obstacle to facilitator of intellectual empowerment. Similarly, Rosa Hubermann, Liesel's foster mother, fulfills a Shapeshifter role. Rosa initially appears harsh and strict, often scolding Liesel. However, Rosa later reveals a protective, loving nature. Her complexity deepens Liesel's understanding of human emotion and shapes her perception of strength, love, and loyalty.

The herald archetype is embodied by Mayor Hermann. His speech at the Nazi book-burning event exposes Liesel to the brutal reality of the regime's hatred and oppression. Through his words, Liesel realizes that her family was targeted and taken away because of their political beliefs:

*As the word communist seized her, the remainder of the Nazi recital was swept by either side, lost somewhere in the German feet around her (Zusak, 2005, p. 112).*

This moment is pivotal for Liesel as it makes her understand the true cause of her mother's disappearance and the threat posed by the Nazi regime. The Mayor's speech acts as the catalyst for Liesel's transformation, igniting her resolve to resist through her act of stealing books.

Finally, the novel's central Shadow archetype is the Nazi regime, embodied by Hitler and his propaganda. Their ideologies are the main oppressive forces that restrict



freedom and threaten Liesel's quest for knowledge. The regime's censorship and propaganda create a dangerous environment for Liesel's love of books and learning. This is exemplified during the book-burning event, where Nazi authorities publicly destroyed literature:

*They enjoyed a good book-burning, all right—which gave people who were partial to books the opportunity to get their hands on certain publications that they otherwise wouldn't have* (Zusak, 2005, p. 86).

This violent act symbolizes the regime's attempt to control thought and suppress dissenting ideas. Additionally, Liesel's personal loss, with her family taken away due to their communist background, intensifies her opposition to the Shadow. Thus, the Nazi regime acts as both an external and internal adversary, forcing Liesel to resist and assert her heroism through acts of intellectual rebellion.

Together, these archetypal characters create a network of support and challenge that shapes Liesel's journey. The mentor, allies, guardians, and even the shadow all force Liesel to grow. Hans's guidance and her friends' loyalty give her resilience; confrontations with hostility (from Nazis or the initial distrust of Ilsa) test and strengthen her convictions. Through these relationships, Liesel's role as a heroine is continually confirmed and deepened.

## 2. The Stages of Liesel's Journey

### a. Ordinary World

The Ordinary World shows the hero's life before the journey begins (Vogler, 2007). It is portrayed at the start of *The Book Thief*, Liesel travels by train with her mother and brother to be placed in foster care because of her parents' political ties. However, her brother's death during the journey becomes her first experience of deep loss and marks the beginning of her transformation.

*"The Book Thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to the foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it."* (Zusak, 2005, p. 26)

This quotation highlights the moment when Liesel loses her brother, signaling the end of her familiar life and the start of her journey into an uncertain new world.

### b. Call to adventure

Call to adventure introduces the challenge that drives the character to begin her journey (Vogler, 2007). As for Liesel, she steals her first book, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, at her brother's funeral. This book symbolically begins Liesel's connection to words and serves as a tool for her to cope with trauma and loss.

*The Book Thief had struck for the first time—the beginning of an illustrious career"* (Zusak, 2005, p. 35)

The quotation shows how this moment becomes a turning point, as Liesel's theft symbolizes both defiance and the start of her transformation into someone who finds strength in language.

### c. Refusal of the call

This stage is the hero's hesitation of the call to begin the journey (Vogler, 2007). This stage is evident in her struggle to read and write, as she can only recognize the basic alphabet while lacking any supportive environment to improve her skills. Her difficulties are compounded by the humiliation she experiences at school when her classmates mock and challenge her to read aloud despite her struggles.

*"I'm having trouble with this word. Could you read it for me?" He laughed. Clouds were filling in now, big and clumsy, and more kids were calling out to her, watching her seethe (Zusak, 2005, p. 81).*

This moment shows Liesel's shame and frustration, reinforcing her fear and hesitation to continue learning, which delays her acceptance of the journey ahead.

d. Meeting with the mentor

This stage introduces a mentor figure who guides and supports the hero (Vogler, 2007). Hans Hubermann fulfils this role for Liesel. When Hans discovers that Liesel has stolen a book during one of her nightmares, he responds with compassion rather than punishment. He patiently begins teaching her to read *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, using simple methods such as writing letters on sandpaper and reading together in the basement.

*In the left corner of an upturned piece of sandpaper, he drew a square of perhaps an inch and shoved a capital A inside it. In the other corner, he placed a lowercase one (Zusak, 2005, p.69)*

Reading soon becomes a shared ritual between Hans and Liesel to overcome her illiteracy and offer her a sense of security. The basement transforms into a safe space where she gradually builds confidence and finds her voice. Hans's mentorship is essential to Liesel's development, enabling her to face her challenges with resilience and hope.

e. Crossing the first threshold

This stage marks the point when the hero steps out of her comfort zone and begins to face real challenges (Vogler, 2007). For Liesel, this occurs as she develops a deep attachment to books, which become tools for coping with her trauma and loss. After receiving books both stolen and gifted by Hans, she starts to understand the transformative power of words. Besides that, The Book Burning Event is an influential event that emphasizes this stage. During the event, Liesel realizes that the books that have helped her survive are considered a threat by the Nazi regime. At this moment, Liesel steals her second book, *The Shoulder Shrug*, from the burning pile.

*When she reached her hand in, she was bitten, but on the second attempt, she made sure she was fast enough. She latched onto the closest of the books (Zusak, 2005, p. 121).*

This excerpt shows how Liesel makes a decision that endangers herself in order to get something meaningful. At this moment, Liesel is secretly watched by Ilsa Hermann, the Mayor's wife, as the threshold guardian who witnesses the theft. However, instead of stopping Liesel, Ilsa becomes an ally who provides access to her library. This is a sign that Liesel has successfully crossed the threshold.

f. Tests, allies, and enemies

This stage depicts the hero's tests, allies, and enemies on her journey (Vogler, 2007). For Liesel, this phase begins with the arrival of Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man seeking refuge with the Hubermanns. Hiding a Jew in Nazi Germany is a very high-risk and extremely dangerous practice.

*When a Jew shows up at your place of residence in the early hours of morning, in the very birthplace of Nazism, you're likely to experience extreme levels of discomfort. Anxiety, disbelief, paranoia. Each plays its part, and each leads to a sneaking suspicion that a less than heavenly consequence awaits (Zusak, 2005, p. 197)*

This excerpt reflects the tremendous fear and pressure the Hubermanns experienced for hiding Max. During this period, Liesel pauses her reading lessons as the basement becomes Max's hiding place. However, Max soon becomes an important ally. Their friendship grows through their shared love of words. Liesel even regularly brings Max newspapers and describes the colour of the sky to keep him up to date with the outside world. Apart from Max, Rudy Steiner is also a loyal ally in Liesel's life. He constantly supports and defends Liesel in various situations, including their adventures in book stealing in the Mayor's library.

*Without complaint, Liesel undid the worn black laces and left the shoes on the ground. She rose up, and Rudy gently opened the window just wide enough for Liesel to climb through (Zusak, 2005, p. 283).*

This excerpt illustrates the deep trust and teamwork between Liesel and Rudy. His gentle and uncomplaining actions emphasize his loyalty and willingness to assist Liesel, even in risky situations.

In contrast, the enemy in Liesel's journey is the Nazi regime and their leader, Adolf Hitler. This realization comes when she listens to the Mayor's speech at The Book Burning event. She begins to connect her mother's disappearance to her affiliation with communism, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

*"Is my mother a communist?" Staring. Straight ahead.*

*"They were always asking her things before I came here."*

*"Did the Fuhrer take her away?"*

*"I knew it." The words were thrown at the steps, and Liesel could feel the slush of anger, which was stirring hotly in her stomach.*

*"I hate the Fuhrer," she said. "I hate him" (Zusak, 2005, p. 117).*

This quote shows the pivotal moment when Liesel realizes who her true enemy is. Those who have taken away her family and crushed her liberty of intellect through literary oppression. This stage shows Liesel's transformation from a passive child to an individual who realizes the power of words as an act of resistance.

g. Approach to the inmost cave

This stage describes the moment when the hero prepares to face a profound challenge that will test her deepest values and strength (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, this is evident as Liesel gains literacy and discovers the transformative power of words. Her growth emerges during her study sessions in the basement and her secret visits to Ilsa Hermann's library:

*Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now, when she sat on the floor, with the Mayor's wife at her husband's desk, she felt innate sense of power. It happened every time she deciphered a new word or pieced together a sentence. She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. How fitting that she was discovering the power of words (Zusak, 2005, p. 148).*

This passage underscores Liesel's transformation from powerlessness to self-determination through literacy. In a regime that relies on propaganda to control thought, her reading becomes an act of inner liberation. However, this growing power is tested when Ilsa fires Rosa from her laundry service, Liesel loses access to Ilsa's library. In response, Liesel begins to steal books—acts that symbolize both rebellion and survival. Some of books she stole are *The Whistler*, *The Dream Carrier*, *The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*, and *The Last Human Stranger*.

h. Ordeal



This stage describes the moment of deepest crisis in the hero's journey, when she faces the greatest fear, loss, or Death (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, this moment occurs when Molching is hit by a series of air raids. Liesel, her family, and their neighbors are forced to shelter in the basement, surrounded by the threat of destruction. Despite her own fear, Liesel chooses to read aloud from *The Whistler*, trying to calm those around her:

*"For the last twenty minutes, she handed out the story. The youngest kids were soothed by her voice, and everyone else saw visions of the whistler running from the crime scene. Liesel did not. The Book Thief saw only the mechanics of the words—their bodies stranded on the paper, beaten down for her to walk on"* (Zusak, 2005, p. 372)

This passage shows how reading becomes a means of survival and an act of quiet resistance. Liesel's voice provides comfort and a fragile sense of normalcy in the face of chaos.

The next ordeal comes when Max leaves the Hubermann family home because the situation is more dangerous. Max's disappearance is a devastating loss for Liesel, as she loses a friend and ally who has given her strength through stories and friendship. At the same time, Liesel also witnesses Hans overcome with guilt and fear after he helps a Jew who has fallen on the parade route by giving him bread—a seemingly noble act, but one that could prove fatal under the Nazi regime.

*"Liesel heard the repeated sentences several times, and it took a lot to stay by the door. She'd have loved to comfort him, but she had never seen a man so devastated. There were no consolations that night. Max was gone and Hans Hubermann was to blame"* (Zusak, 2005, p. 389)

This quote shows the depth of Liesel's emotional suffering. She loses Max and sees her protective figure at his most fragile and guilty. In addition, Hans later receives an acceptance letter to join the Nazi army. Although this saves him from being punished for helping the Jews, Hans' departure is another loss for Liesel. She is forced to say another goodbye to the person who means so much to her, adding to the emotional burden and deepening the suffering at the heart of the Ordeal stage.

#### i. Reward

This stage describes the moment when the hero gains a reward as a result of enduring the most profound crisis (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, the first form of reward emerges after the air raid on Molching, when Liesel reads *The Whistler* aloud to soothe her terrified neighbors. Her storytelling leaves a lasting impression, particularly on Frau Holtzapfel, a neighbor previously known for her stubborn and distant demeanor. After the air raid, she asks Liesel to continue reading regularly, offering a bag of coffee as payment. This gesture acknowledges the power of Liesel's words and her growing influence within her community.

*She read for forty-five minutes, and when the chapter was finished, a bag of coffee was deposited on the table* (Zusak, 2005, p. 378)

This passage highlights how Liesel's skill in storytelling has become a meaningful contribution, transforming her into a source of reassurance and connection during a time of fear.

The second reward comes when Hans, who had been conscripted into the German army, returns home after being injured. Hans' return was the greatest gift for Liesel as she regained the father figure who had been her protector. Hans' presence brings peace in the midst of the difficult times that are still unfolding.

*Now, it was Hans Hubermann's turn. He knocked four times, and The Book Thief answered. "Papa, Papa." She must have said it a hundred times as she hugged him in the kitchen and wouldn't let go (Zusak, 2005, p. 477).*

This quote shows the depth of Liesel's love and gratitude for the return of the person she loves the most. Hans's return symbolizes the unquenchable hope in the midst of darkness and confirms that Liesel's struggle was not in vain.

j. The road back

The Road Back stage marks the hero's return to ordinary life with new awareness (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, this occurs when Liesel returns all the books she had stolen from Ilsa Hermann's library, showing remorse and maturity. In response, Ilsa gives her a blank notebook. Liesel is no longer just a thief but a creator of stories. She chooses to write about her life, her loss, and her strength to survive in a harsh world.

*Every night, Liesel made her way down to the basement. She kept the book with her at all times. For hours, she wrote, attempting each night to complete ten pages of her life (Zusak, 2005, p. 508).*

This quotation reflects Liesel's inner journey from a child who seeks meaning through reading to someone who creates meaning through writing. The basement that was once a place of hiding and fear is now a space of creativity and reflection, where Liesel writes her story, *The Book Thief*.

k. Resurrection

The Resurrection stage brings the hero's deepest crisis and symbolic death (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, this stage happens when the final air raid destroys Himmel Street, killing nearly everyone, Hans, Rosa, Rudy Steiner, and other neighbors. Liesel is the only person who survives because, on the night of the bombing, she was asleep in the basement while writing her story. Her almost accidental survival became a reflective moment and an emotional turning point.

*"Rudy, please." The tears grappled with her face. "Rudy, please wake up, Goddamn it, wake up, I love you. Come on Rudy, come on, Jesse Owens, don't you know I love you, wake up, wake up, wake up..." (Zusak, 2005, p. 517).*

In this excerpt, it is clear how deeply Liesel feels love and loss towards Rudy, who has been her loyal friend and secretly loved her.

*Goodbye, Papa, you saved me. You taught me to read. No one can play like you. I'll never drink champagne. No one can play like you (Zusak, 2005).*

This quotation is a heartbreaking farewell for Hans Hubermann, the father figure who has been her protector, teacher, and source of comfort. These words underscore that Hans's greatest gift was literacy, the very skill that enabled Liesel's emotional and spiritual survival.

l. Return with the Elixir

The return with the Elixir stage is the end of the hero's journey, where she returns to the ordinary world with new knowledge, experience, or power gained from the journey and crisis she has gone through (Vogler, 2007). In *The Book Thief*, Liesel survives the destruction of Himmel Street and is adopted by Ilsa Hermann. Though she finds physical safety, her grief remains, and she often revisits the places filled with memories of her loved ones.

A pivotal moment in this stage is Liesel's reunion with Max Vandenburg, whom she believed had perished. Their meeting affirms that even after unimaginable loss, hope

can be restored. Liesel also recovers *The Book Thief*, the black notebook she wrote in the basement. This book becomes her personal testament to everything she has endured and learned.

*With great trepidation, she opened The Book Thief and turned the pages. 'I can't believe...' Even though the text had faded, she was able to read her words. The fingers of her soul touched the story that was written so long ago in her Himmel Street basement (Zusak, 2005, p. 528).*

This excerpt illustrates how Liesel touches back to the heart of her journey- an elixir- in the form of a story she wrote herself. In the end, Liesel grows into a woman who not only survives war and loss but also carries the legacy of words and the power of stories. She becomes the symbol of human resilience in the face of cruelty and a symbol of the triumph of hope and love over destruction.

### 3. The Book Thief Novel in Challenging the Traditional Hero Archetype

*The Book Thief* constructs a heroic narrative that departs significantly from traditional male-centered archetypes. As Mir et al. (2022) note, classic heroism is often linked to masculine ideals of physical strength and conquest. By contrast, Liesel Meminger embodies a subtler form of heroism grounded in emotional courage, literacy, and resilience. First, Liesel's courage does not emerge through combat but through personal and moral acts: stealing books as resistance, caring for Max Vandenburg, and reading aloud during air raids. These actions align with Vogler's (2007) concept of heroism as sacrifice and transformation. As Zusak writes,

*"For the last twenty minutes, she handed out the story... The Book Thief saw only the mechanics of the words—their bodies stranded on the paper, beaten down for her to walk on" (Zusak, 2005, p. 372).*

This illustrates how words become her means of empowerment even amid fear.

Second, literacy itself becomes Liesel's primary form of defiance against Nazi repression. As Adyanti (2016) and Windratama and Prastiwi (2019) observe, her thefts are not simply criminal acts but symbolic assertions of agency. Through reading and eventually writing her own story, she overcomes the marginalization of women historically confined to silence (Pati, 2013; Pamungkas et al., 2019).

*"Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now... she felt an innate sense of power..." (Zusak, 2005, p. 148).*

Third, unlike traditional heroes who achieve victory and recognition, Liesel's journey culminates in devastating loss. Yet, her decision to keep writing affirms what Nelson (2024) calls "psychospiritual development"—a form of heroism rooted in survival and meaning-making rather than conquest.

*"Every night, Liesel made her way down to the basement... attempting each night to complete ten pages of her life" (Zusak, 2005, p. 508).*

In this way, *The Book Thief* not only redefines the female hero but also broadens the concept of heroism itself to encompass empathy, memory, and the courage to continue. The novel demonstrates that resilience and the power of words can be as transformative as any traditional act of triumph.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes by demonstrating that Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* reconstructs the hero archetype by emphasizing Liesel Meminger's emotional resilience, empathy, and the transformational power of literacy. The novel presents language as a tool and a symbol of resistance, enabling Liesel to assert agency in the face of Nazi oppression rather than elevating

physical prowess or a victorious triumph. Her journey highlights how true heroism might appear through small acts of defiance, compassionate leadership, and courage to protect human dignity through stories. Overall, this redefining of heroism contributes to literature and gender studies by confirming female-centered narratives that challenge traditional male-dominated paradigms. It encourages future studies to look into how contemporary fiction continues to transform the idea of what it means to be a hero—one whose greatest triumphs may not be in conquest but in the eternal power of words to heal, connect, and inspire.

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