

The portrayal of Death in *The Book Thief* and *Meet Joe Black*

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There are many things people argue about throughout the day including money, appearance, family, ethnicities, language, toys, and jobs. However, movies and books are two common controversial topics of debate. They both compel a specific storyline that allows the reader to imagine themselves as the characters, even though they use very different methods of creation. These two forms of literature in the arts have many more similarities and differences that make them unique, yet alike. These features may include characters, structure, climax, detail, creativity, conflicts and solutions. One possible argument could be between, *The Book Thief*, and the movie, *Meet Joe Black*. *The Book Thief*, focuses on a very different theme, discussing a variety of historical events during World War 2, and the loss of loved ones throughout those hard times. Unlike the book, the film, *Meet Joe Black*, is about a character named Bill Parrish who made a deal with Death in order to receive more time on Earth. Although they have different narratives, there is a very large resemblance between two main characters throughout the storyline, commonly referred to as Death. In both stories, Death doesn't like his job but was pressured by his boss to complete those tasks. Their routines were hard and defeating, making their outlooks, understandings, and feelings identical. Specifically, Death's sympathy and compassion towards its victims, human-like appearance as well as personalities, and fascination with life on Earth, all convey the similarities between Death in, *The Book Thief*, and in the movie, *Meet Joe Black*.

One area to explore when comparing the portrayal of Death in, *The Book Thief*, and, *Meet Joe Black*, is their sympathy and compassion towards humans. During the 1930s-1940s in Nazi Germany, many lives were lost due to the rise in power of Hitler and his Nazis party, as well as, the bombs that came pouring down during the Second World War. Many of the victims Death had to carry away throughout this time period were innocent and loving souls that deserved more

time on Earth, especially the children. Death always carried these souls in different ways, depending on their age, personalities, and warmth in their hearts, as guilt and compassion for these victims grew inside of him. Death wasn't conveyed like most would expect; he was not cruel or selfish, he got his job done and only complained on the inside. Clearly, in the book, Death is portrayed as a sympathetic and guilty soul who didn't enjoy his job and always felt like there was an increasing weight on his shoulders for all the people he encountered. For example, he says, "Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks....I took them all away, and if ever there was a time I needed a distraction, this was it. In complete desolation, I looked at the world above" (Zusak, p. 350). This shows Death is sympathetic and compassionate towards all the victims he takes away because he is distraught over the sight of their empty bodies, and feels the need to comfort and warm each soul he retrieves, placing them delicately in his arms. Not only had Death felt conflicted about his job but struggled with guilt and shame for what his purpose in life was. For instance, Death stated

"So many humans. So many colours. They keep triggering inside me. They harass my memory. I see them tall in their heaps, all mounted on top of each other. There is air like plastic, a horizon like setting glue. There are skies manufactured by people, punctured and leaking, and there are soft, coal-coloured clouds, beating like black hearts" (Zusak, p. 309).

This only reminded him of how fatal and dull his responsibilities were. Death travelled to all the concentration camps, smelling the smoke, hearing the cries and seeing the bodies. Clearly, Death struggled with his job and the constant reminders of those who once lived, feeling sympathy and compassion towards each and every victim, as their memories continue to taunt him. Therefore,

Death feels sympathetic and compassionate towards the victims and encounters, needing to comfort each soul in order to reduce the shame and guilt he feels inside for all the lives he took.

Similar to the sensitive and gentle personality the author portrays Death to have in, *The Book Thief*, Death (also known as Joe Black) in the movie, *Meet Joe Black*, had identical feelings towards humans and the encounters he had with them. Joe lands on Earth to make a deal with Bill Parrish, the protagonist in the film, wanting to explore what Earth looks like on the ground, as he previously only viewed it from afar. Throughout his experiences, he started to develop a close relationship with Bill and his friends and family. This made it harder for Death to take Bill from his loved ones who Death had grown fond of. Joe developed compassion and sorrow towards Bill, as they continued to bond and he realized the harsh impact of his job, not only for the victims but for those the victims left behind. This is shown at the end of the movie when it is time for Joe to take Bill to the next place. Joe was very hesitant and remorseful in the situation, wishing he didn't have that responsibility. Although, Joe tried to give Bill time to say goodbye and make the process as harmless as possible, reassuring him not to be afraid. For instance, when Joe says to Bill, "And would you mind if I express my gratitude....? For you. For the time you've given me. For the person, you are" (*Meet Joe Black*). When Bill asked, "I'm getting a little dizzy, I can feel my heart pumping -- Should I be afraid?" Joe replied by saying "Not a man like you." (*Meet Joe Black*). Death feels sympathy and compassion for his victims, and wants to assure Bill not to worry, understanding that it can be a scary process and feeling the need to comfort Bill, making the experience as painless as possible for him. In addition to the feelings of sympathy he had for those he encountered, he also felt the guilt and shame because of his job, especially when it involved kind-hearted souls like Bill's. As a result of this guilt, Death decided to wait until after Bill's 65th birthday party to take him away. He also helped Bill make a plan for his company before they left since the business is Bill's life-long accomplishment which

means a lot to him. Wanting to make up for interfering in Bill's life and taking it away from him, Death took it upon himself to get Drew, a business partner, fired because he was secretly working for a competing corporation. Another example of his sincerity, was when Joe met a lady in the hospital who recognized his true identity and asked him to take her to the after-life, hoping to relieve her pain. Joe felt pity for the old lady, however, wasn't able to help her since it was not her time yet. Instead, he showed her the next place where she would reside after dying, so she could look forward to the future and become hopeful again. Death feels sympathy and compassion towards his victims as he knows the damage he causes and tries to cope with these feelings of guilt and shame by making the victims feel at ease. Therefore, Death in both stories couldn't help but develop sympathy and compassion for the victims who desperately wanted to live longer and as a result of these mixed emotions, tried to make their departure was painless and comforting.

Along with his sympathy and compassion towards humans, the next facet to discuss when comparing the portrayal of Death in, *The Book Thief*, and, *Meet Joe Black*, is his human-like features and characteristics. Unlike theories in other parts of the world that describe Death as a ghostly, skeletal creature wearing a robe, the author portrayed him as more humane. In the book, Death had both a soul and heart that classified him as human, causing him to look like any other person would. Clearly, Death obtained all attributes that considered him human especially since his body was made up of human genetics. For instance, Death explains to the reader

“I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it's cold. And I don't have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look like? I'll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue” (Zusak, p. 307).

In the book, the author, Markus Zusak, perceived Death as a character like any other, the only difference was the job he undertook. Obviously, Death was depicted to look like all other people in society to create a more complex character and to make him more relatable to the reader because if anyone looked in a mirror, they would look the same as he did. Furthermore, just like his appearance, his personality was very human-like as well, capable of processing and understanding emotions about the society he was forced to view from above. Due to this, Death felt, and acted sincerely towards the victims he took. His personality was very complex and emotionally driven, identical to that of the human population. Death expressed many feelings including remorse, anxiety, devastation, depression, pain, and excitement throughout his everyday life. Specifically, sympathy and compassion towards those he met as well as anger as a result of his job. For example,

“They say war is death’s best friend, but I must offer you a different point of view on that one. To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible. He stands over your shoulder repeating one thing, incessantly: ‘get it done, get it done’. So you work harder. You get the job done. The boss, however, does not thank you. He asks for more.” (Zusak, p. 309).

Clearly, this shows how Death didn’t have superpowers or unwavering determination, he was human: he got tired, he got annoyed, and most of all, he grew frustrated. Obviously, Death is not human because of his job but he obtains all characteristics including the ability to process and understand stress, relief and remorse towards his job. Therefore, Death had a very complex understanding of human society and could generate his own feelings towards the cities he looked down on, helping to match his human-like appearance with his character traits to form the exterior and interior of a human.

In addition to the humane characteristics Death possess in, *The Book Thief*, Joe Black also appeared as more human than anything else. In order to be on Earth, Death took the body of another human who just recently died. As a result, he looked like a human since he was in a human body. Along with his appearance, he also had a soul like others did which allowed his exterior and interior to match. These aspects of Death developed a sense of understanding from the audience as he became more realistic. Furthermore, Death was a human even though he possessed a power that no other person would. For instance, Joe was easily able to deceive those around him as he wasn't recognizable to most people and only Bill knew of his real identity because he showed him. Susan, Bill's daughter, who develops strong feelings for Joe and becomes very close to him didn't find out his real identity until he revealed himself at the end of the movie. However, when Joe tried to show Susan his true identity she wasn't ready and became too afraid. Susan says "What's going on, Joe? I feel like we're lifting off" and when Joe replies saying, "I'm still here", Susan says, "But you're not. You're somewhere else. You're someone else" (*Meet Joe Black*). Clearly, Joe was able to hide his identity really well and easily be mistaken for a human since he looked the part. Death not only looked human but acted, felt and thought like a human, as he possessed identical characteristics. It is obvious that his job conjured emotions as a human would. This is not only because he saw empty, warm-hearted bodies lying lifeless on the ground all day, but also because he gets the opportunity to explore Earth and very quickly understands the dynamic of humans. Joe had a complex personality with a brain and heart that allowed him to quickly learn how to behave in Bill's society. Death was able to help out with Bill's company and understand the structure, interactions, and bonds within the business. Joe Black also experienced love which is an emotion only a real being could feel, not a spirit of any kind. For example, Joe explains to Bill "I love her, Bill. She is all that I ever wanted, and I've never wanted for anything because I've never wanted anything before if you can

understand” (*Meet Joe Black*). Joe Black understood the complexity of his feelings, including love which he has for Susan, and the ability to act like other humans do, allowing him to blend in at Bill’s work and house. Therefore, Death behaved, talked, communicated, and understood humans, especially shown when Joe accompanied Bill to work everyday and was able to communicate normally with Susan, which is only possible if you are a human yourself.

The final similarity to compare besides Deaths human-like appearance and personality in, *The Book Thief*, and, *Meet Joe Black*, was his fascination with the protagonist of the story and what society was like on Earth. Throughout the book, Death continued to look down on society from above, captivated by the function of humans and the life they live. One of Death’s fondest curiosities was the protagonist of the story, Liesel Meminger. Liesel was a 10-year-old girl who Death first witnessed when her little brother died while on a train to her foster parents in Munich, Germany. That was the very first time Death had seen her, however, it was certainly not the last. Since Death was the narrator to this story, he watched over Liesel many times and followed her as she continued to overcome challenges along her path and grow from her experiences. For example, Death explains

“Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legions I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt- an immense leap of an attempt-to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (Zusak, p. 15).

Clearly, this shows that among other humans who intrigued him, Liesel was one who remained a common theme throughout the book. Death continued to watch over her for many years, calling her “The Book Thief” because she stole numerous books to assuage her desire to read. He was intrigued by her continuous fight for what she believed was moral in society and what was not.



Liesel didn't agree with the opinions and beliefs of the Nazi Party and when they began to create problems in her life, she struggled to let her voice be heard. Obviously, Death found many things about the way Liesel thought, acted and felt fascinating since she is the main character in the novel and Death the author, as Death continued to watch and wait for the moment they could finally meet. Not only does Death grow curious about Liesel's story, but about many others on Earth, as he followed Liesel hoping to understand and feel what it would be like in her society.

For instance, he stated:

“I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race-that rarely do I ever simply estimate it. I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant...I said it to the book thief and I say it now to you. I am haunted by humans” (Zusak, p. 550).

Death unfortunately was constantly reminded of the lives he took from his victims as their memories flashed before his eyes when he reached for their soul. However, these numerous encounters created a growth of curiosity, concern and intrigue to know more about each life, developing a desire to continue searching and remembering. Death was not human, however had many attributes that made him similar, thus, feeling the desire to learn and watch the way humans operate and grow. This demonstrates the thesis point because Death was fascinated with how society functioned and what humans were like on a more deeper level after being reminded of them constantly and catching a glimpse into their life when they died. Therefore, Death's job created an intrigue to know more about the people he met and those who survived the war as he looks down on a society he will never reach, but will never stop watching.

Identical to the intrigue and fascination Death in the book had with life on Earth and the people he looked at from afar, Death in the movie also shared many of those curiosities. Joe Black purposely took over someone else's body to be on Earth and introduced himself to Bill

Parrish as a real person. After introducing himself to Bill he made a deal with him, allowing Bill to stay on Earth a little longer. The only price is that Joe must accompany Bill on his daily trips, hoping to explore what society on Earth was really like. Clearly, Death was drawn to Bill as he could have chosen anyone to propose the idea to, however, grew intrigued by Bill's lifestyle and characteristics, ultimately choosing him. This is proven when Bill confronts Joe out of anger and concern as to why he chose him and Joe said, "I picked you for your verve, your excellence, and for your ability to- how shall I say- instruct. You've lived a first-rate life. And I find it eminently usable" (*Meet Joe Black*). Obviously, Death is fascinated with the protagonist, Bill, because out of the millions of humans Death could have picked to start his journey on Earth, he chose Bill. In addition to Death's obsession with Bill Parrish, he also developed an attraction to other humans in society and what living on Earth felt like. Death's job was all about human life and bringing their souls to the "afterlife", making sure they are put in the right place. In doing so, he clearly grew a strong desire to see more than just the final memories that flashed before the victims eyes as Death came closer. Thus, he made the deal with Bill to explore land saying, "I want to have a look around before I take you.....show me around. Be my guide" (*Meet Joe Black*). Evidently, Death wanted to explore Earth so he could decide what was so special about the human population and specifically, what these jobs on Earth were, as Joe's job was quite heavy. Joe believed making the deal would allow him to get all his answers about his incessant curiosities. Joe Black was a very curious soul as he decided to go against his boss and his job, disrupting the cycle of life for many, in order to understand humans and their structure. Furthermore, Joe Black had a very strong desire to understand the human population and see what their lives were like, taking the opportunity to do so when he made the deal with Bill. Therefore, in both stories, Death grew eager to know more about the society he loomed over and took from every day, as the victims only made their curiosities grow stronger.

In conclusion, in this debate between the movie, *Meet Joe Black*, and the book, *The Book Thief*, it is very clear there are three prominent similarities. Specifically, Death's empathy and compassion towards his victims, his appearance and characteristics to that of the human race, and his obsession with human society, all convey the similarities between Death in *The Book Thief*, and in the movie, *Meet Joe Black*. There is no doubt that Death felt sorrow for the job he did and for the fact that many of his victims weren't ready to depart. The victims' memories were exchanged from them to him but only included a trailer into the innocent and deserving lives they once lived. Carrying them away wasn't a delightful experience, as the weight of their hearts and souls hung on his shoulders, constantly reminding him of his guilt. In addition, Death's identical bone structure and appearance to the human race was very revealing as to what his personality was like. Being around humans all the time including Liesel Meminger, Bill Parrish and many other fond victims, allowed Death to understand and feel emotions like any person would. Unlike Death's job which developed many views of his appearance, he didn't look like a spirit or scary creature, but instead portrayed similar looks and personality traits like humans do. Finally, these two characters had a strong passion for life and living creatures, mainly humans, even though their job perceived them to dislike humankind. Throughout each story, they became fascinated with the main protagonists and found the way they lived intriguing. They continued to look down on society, however, grew captivated by the human community. Clearly, when looking at the qualities that make them unique, it is obvious they were more similar than different. As a result, there is no need to argue about the differences between the movie and the book since they already have a strong similarity that needs little proof.

Markus, Zusak. *The Book Thief*. New York: Penguin Random House LLC., 2005. Print.

Martin, Brest, director. *Meet Joe Black*. Universal Pictures, 1998.