

# A Requiem for Trauma: A Remembrance of Resilience, Courage and the Aftermath of Trauma

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## Abstract

Often viewed with a shattered glass, trauma in literature comforts the disturbed souls. Many times, it is portrayed as a wound of the mind, suffering in silence, anxiety, depression. However, for a few individuals, trauma can be a catalyst for personal development. It would allow them to work through their trauma and stand tall above it. The primary aim of this study is to emphasize the strengths of post-traumatic growth and its relationship with catharsis. Posttraumatic Growth reframes trauma not only as injury but as a potential catalyst for growth within five key domains: appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual or existential change. Thus, in the context of literature, tragedy precipitates trauma, catharsis facilitates emotional processing, and PTG illuminates the transformative potential that can emerge. This paper explores concepts of positive trauma, coping mechanisms, post-traumatic growth, and resilience against trauma in literature. Through the intersection of children literature and trauma studies, it examines how children are portrayed not as passive victims of trauma, but as actively healing through imagination, storytelling and finding meaning.

A requiem refers to an act or token of remembrance. Trauma may be defined as an original inner catastrophe, as an experience of excess that overwhelms the subject symbolically and/or physically and is not accessible to him. Recognizing this inner pain helps create a shared understanding, which allows the mind and body to begin healing. This leads to a different type of character arc, defining one's own mental strength. The emergence of an individual from trauma shapes them into a "self-made" being. They become a symbol of their struggle and, hence, a requiem for their trauma. This study further investigates such a requiem for the character in the selected novel, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, to which any and all can draw a pattern in real life. The new perspective of trauma in literature repositions the usual lens of trauma studies from the portrayal of suffering to charting a path to survival. It is not just a space to re-experience psychological horrors but rather a liminal space to a braver version of an individual.

Keywords: Positive Trauma, Trauma Studies, Coping Mechanism, Healing, Resilience in Literature, Catharsis, Self-growth.

Trauma Studies have long evolved from being traditionally focused on pathology and victimization. According to Cathy Caruth,

"Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (Caruth, 1996, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4):

At the heart of Caruth's idea is a paradox: trauma is both real and yet not grasped in the moment. It wounds the mind not only through violence or the shadow of death but also because it passes unassimilated when it first happens. Thus, it never heals. The concept of post-traumatic growth was developed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, which led to groundbreaking thoughts in clinical psychology.

“Traumas can significantly challenge and cause a serious re-examination of the major elements of a person's core beliefs that define the assumptive world.” (*The Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*, 2006, edited by Calhoun & Tedeschi)

At the heart of Calhoun and Tedeschi's idea is the belief that trauma, while deeply disruptive, can also be the ground for transformation. It unsettles core beliefs and forces a struggle that, through meaning-making, can lead to new strengths, deeper relationships, and a renewed sense of life. The literature is rich in trauma narratives that allow readers to connect with and re-examine their core beliefs, thereby undergoing narrative therapy. It not only depicts suffering but also traces the process of adaptation, reconfiguration of meaning, and the experience of self-renewal that follows such experiences. The literary texts selected for this study offer a repository of resilience narratives, signs of healing, and the possibility of recovery. The interplay between trauma and growth in literature shows that the aftermath of a catastrophe is just as significant as the event itself.

The *Book Thief*, written by Markus Zusak, is a tale collected in Death's pocket, narrated by death itself. The symbol employed here adds a direct meaning to trauma, exploring an integral human experience - pain. Through the narration by Death and the events of death, Zusak exposes unique truths about pain and suffering: pain exists universally; life, not death, causes this suffering; and agony ultimately brings strength. Leisel Meminger is a book thief. Every pain she endured was etched into her soul because she stole the reminder of the scenes. When she was nine years old, the book thief stole her first book, "The Grave Digger's Handbook" at her younger brother's funeral, even before she could read words. It is the beginning of her hoarding of words and finding solace in them. The young girl is sent to Molching, a fictional small town in Nazi Germany, near Munich. She is placed with her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, who live on Himmel Street. Most of the novel's events - her friendship with Rudy Steiner, her basement reading with Max, and the bombing—occur in and around this street. At a very tender age, Leisel is forced to come to terms with her loss and displacement. She finds comfort in books and tries to read every day. Gradually, she is able to associate people close to her with how they make her feel. Her papa, Hans Hubermann, is an accordionist who plays sweet lullabies for Leisel. The music nights with him made her gravitate towards him for safety. She forms a close-knit friendship with the boy next door who had "Hair the colour of lemons". From racing him into the mud to stealing books with him, she had formed a companionship of love, something she never lacked. There were days when she overstayed at Ilsa Hermann's house while delivering laundry. That place had too many books that she read, destroyed, and conversed with. They healed her and opened her to more assumptive definitions that reframed her worldview. Another character of utter importance in Leisel's life on Himmel Street is Max Vendenburg, a Jewish soldier who saved Hans's life and, in return, is asked to be hidden in their basement. He becomes one of her closest friends, connecting through the stories they share and the words they scribble on the wall bolstering her individual growth. She fell in love with the skies, the words, the librarian who saved her life with books, the accordionist, the Jew in her basement, and Rudy, all of whom reached the brink of pain and some into death's arms. The bombing mentioned in the chapter 'The End of The World' literally ceased Leisel's heart when she found her Papa, Rosa and Rudy unmoving and dead. Being the

sole survivor only because she was editing her own book in the basement, she lost her words to Death that night. Until they met again.

As a German child, Liesel was taught to revere Hitler but initially lacked a clear understanding of his impact on her life. She knew her biological parents were taken for being communists but hadn't linked this to Hitler. Gradually, Nazi propaganda, public rallies, and events like book burnings forced her to confront the truth. Her awareness deepened upon learning that Max Vandenberg's suffering was a direct result of Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. Her defiance grew, secretly helping Jews. By the war's end, her opposition had become moral and personal, blaming Hitler for the loss of loved ones like Rudy, and recognizing language as his weapon. Conversely, she used words for healing and survival. From a posttraumatic growth perspective, Liesel's journey shows how trauma reshaped her beliefs, compelling her to challenge authority, assert moral agency, and transform language from passive absorption into active, healing creation.

Taking a closer look at how Leisel formed meaningful connections with words and humans, she initially acquired language under Hans Hubermann's guidance, reading in the basement at night, which became "a quiet ritual, just her and Papa and the words." She stole her second book, *The Shoulder Shrug*, on Hitler's birthday, from a Nazi book-burning pile as an act of defiance. Soon after, she steals a third book, *The Whistler*, from the mayor's wife's library, marking the beginning of her regular, secret visits to that library. It becomes a coping mechanism of sorts amidst her traumatic mindset. Her unconscious suffering is healed by these regular patterns of growth. "The words were in their way and when they arrived, Leisel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like rain." The above excerpt substantiates her desperate attempt to not fall apart under the weight of trauma but to resuscitate herself. After acquiring knowledge of language, she uses it to her will and wish, especially with the Jewish fist-fighter in the basement, Max Vandenburg. They share a vivid relationship, one with words strewn across the basement wall and one that rewrites *Mein Kampf* for Leisel. It was a tangible symbol of her posttraumatic growth, strengthening her core beliefs. She evolved into a character who reacted when needed, with words or silence. Their shared experiences of displacement, fear, and grief create an immediate emotional bond. His handmade book, "The Word Shaker," written on the pages of *Mein Kampf*, is a powerful metaphor that emphasizes the healing nature of words. Within the story, he describes a young girl who shook the words like apples from a tree, planted them in people's hearts so that they might grow into kindness and courage rather than hate. This idea empowered Leisel to see language as an active force to change her own story no matter how heavy the words were. When she later wrote her own manuscript, *The Book Thief*, Max's story resonated within her enough to plant seeds of memory, resilience, and love.

In the last chapter, *The End of The World*, Leisel loses everything she stood by and for. Max was taken to a camp and when she ran to him, they were both whipped. The pain made her aware of her emotions and reinforced her growth. The next day, she was in her basement editing her book manuscript when the bombing started. After all the noise halted, the sky was like a boiling red soup that stirred the humans. She found her Papa, Rosa and Rudy dead. She howled, piercing through Death. Her manuscript was stamped by others and thrown into a garbage truck. Years of healing and her journey of resilience led her to this event, where Death saved her this time. The manuscript has been in the pockets of Death ever since. In the epilogue, Leisel is in Sydney, Australia, finally meeting Death in front of her children, grandchildren

and husband. She had lived a happy life, having learned to cope with words. It is then that she also reunites with her manuscript of *The Book Thief*.

Analyzing the above narrative with respect to catharsis, it must be established that one can find trauma in tragedy. While the end of Leisel's life wasn't a tragedy, there's no denying that she was subjected to it. Thus, traumatic. The tragic events in Leisel's life raised her emotions of pity and fear for herself, which purified her emotions and resulted in catharsis. Confronting pain leads to renewal. Through the act of storytelling, by the Death itself, within the novel and for the reader, there emerges a cathartic release. This emotional purge facilitates post-traumatic growth, transforming suffering into meaning and hope. Ultimately, *The Book Thief* stands testament that through resilience, connection, and the transformative power of storytelling, trauma can become a catalyst for growth, hope, and renewed humanity.

Calhoun and Tedeschi define Posttraumatic Growth as “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, p. 3). Leisel’s journey in *The Book Thief*, which is ultimately her own story, reflects her travel across the five domains given by Calhoun and Tedeschi. After the loss of her brother and the abandonment of her mother, she is frightened at Hubermann's house. Gradually, she learns to **appreciate life** through the harsh realities of her surroundings. She cherishes the time when Papa reads to her, she gets out to play with the kids on the street, and even helps Rosa with laundry services. She is able to **relate to others**: humans and words, in the way a traumatized person would begin healing. She forms a deep friendship with Max Vandenburg. Although he was a Jew and she was German, they connected emotionally through the suffering they both experienced. Years later, she reunites with him. Leisel had a unique way with words: “I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right”—her last line in her manuscript of *The Book Thief*. She stole books with words that intrigued her, such as “The Dream Carrier.” Her ability to relate to anything around her made her feel less alone in her journey of posttraumatic growth. She discovers remarkable **personal strength**, surpassing her initial vulnerability as a frightened child to become a figure of quiet resilience and courage. Her understanding of language as a seed of kindness, instilled by the Jewish fist-fighter, made her view Hitler from a different perspective. She seemed to have a hatred towards words as they were sometimes too true and naked, exposing her, which implied how real her healing progress was. She formed her own opinions and acted on them. It gave her a sense of purpose and satisfaction in reforming her comprehension of things. She is open to **new possibilities**, such as defying Hitler in public. In the black book with blank pages waiting to be filled, she starts scribbling the stories she has been holding inside. This very act is new to her and a huge transition from a book thief who never knew how to read or write to a girl who told her own story of resilience, courage, and growth. Her story haunts Death himself. The **spiritual/existential change** in Leisel is seen twice: once when she is reunited with Max, the Jew who drastically changed her life for the better, and the other is wholesome when Death (The Handover Man) has come to Sydney to collect her, and they take a walk. She is reunited with the manuscript of her own story, *The Book Thief*. She goes through the journey of her life in her old age, remembering all that she has loved and lost. It is nostalgic, like a walk down memory lane, and the expression “A few cars drove by, each way. Their drivers were Hitlers and Hubermanns, and Maxes, killers, Dillers, and Steiners...” refers to her trauma fading. She is now whole and healed. She has accepted everything that happened. This existential change helped her attain peace after confronting her trauma.

Markus Zusak’s narrator of *The Book Thief* has ended with the words so damning and brilliant “I am haunted by humans” marveling at their beauty and brutality, rarely ever estimating the human race. It is

in the nature of human beings to perceive and experience events differently. Leisel will be remembered not for suffering the war but for overcoming the trauma it caused. Her story is a requiem for the trauma. Usually associated with unhealing open wounds, trauma is now repositioned as a constantly healing and altering experience that is lodged in one's memory. Leisel's consistent attempts to seek understanding of her surroundings and herself with words healed her trauma without storing it unprocessed. The interplay of the five key domains of posttraumatic growth, as seen in *The Book Thief*, can surely be used to draw a parallel in every individual's life. Trauma will no longer be a dark, negative, depressing factor that holds one back from peace. But rather, the confrontation of it will be a requiem for the trauma.

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