

EXAMPLE ARGUMENTATIVE THEME WITH EXAMPLES

Prompt: Sometimes authors surprise us by designing characters who turn out to be unlikely heroes or heroines. Review the novels you have read in the past year, and choose three examples of unlikely heroes (or heroines). Write an Argumentative Theme based on your research to explain why they are unlikely heroes (or heroines) and what they do to deserve the title of hero (or heroine). Include at least two quotations, in-text citations where needed, and a reference list.

TITLE OF PAPER: Unlikely Heroines

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An Awakening

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a novel set in Germany in the late 1930's and 1940's while Hitler is gaining power and during World War II. The main character is a girl named Leisel, who becomes so attached to reading books that she steals them; however, developing a love for reading is not the main message of the novel. The story begins with Leisel on a train with her mother and younger brother. Her brother dies on the train, and Leisel and her mother have to bury him at the next train stop. The reason for their train journey is that Leisel's mother has decided that she can no longer care for her children. Her intention is to put Leisel and her brother into a foster home. After Leisel's brother dies, they continue their journey until Leisel's mother turns Leisel over to a social worker who takes Leisel to the home of her future foster parents, Hans and Rosa Huberman. The novel recounts Leisel's stay with the Hubermans and how her understanding of the plight of the Jews under Hitler's reign evolves from ignorance, through growing awareness, to empathy, to joining hands with them.

Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, Leisel is totally unaware of the plight of the Jews. As a 10-year-old foster child, her brain is occupied with fitting into her new home, neighborhood, school, and community. She develops a close relationship with her foster father and with a neighbor boy named Rudy. She has difficulty in school, and she has fights with children who call her "stupid." Because all children are required to do so, she becomes a member of the Hitler

Youth. She wears the uniform and learns the “Heil Hitler” salute. She also learns to march, roll bandages, and sew clothes. With the rest of the town, she celebrates Hitler’s birthday with a day of marching, singing, and a huge bonfire. She learns that the purpose of the bonfire is to burn books and other propaganda of the enemies of the Nazi Party; however, she does not understand that the Nazi Party stands for certain ideas. When she steals a book from the bonfire, her action is related to wanting a book to read and not related to saving certain ideas from destruction.

Gradually, she gets hints that a dilemma faces German citizens related to the Jews and the Nazi Party. Because she has not heard from her mother, she suspects that Hitler has taken her mother away (but she has no idea why he might have done so). When she voices her hate for Hitler, her foster father slaps her and tells her never to say that again in public. She later learns that her foster father is not a member of the Nazi Party and that he has “been called ‘*der Juden Maler*’—the Jew painter—for painting Jewish houses” (Zusak 104). She also learns that her foster father, whom she dearly loves, has supported Jews by painting over slurs that have been written on their houses. Still later, she witnesses a fight between her foster father and his son, Hans Junior, which results in the son leaving the family home for good. Hans Junior calls his father a coward for not joining the Nazi Party. He says that “It’s pathetic—how a man can stand by and do nothing as a whole nation cleans out the garbage and makes itself great” (Zusak 104). When Leisel asks her foster father what Hans Junior meant by what he said, Hans Senior tells her to forget about Hans Junior.

Although Leisel’s awareness of the plight of the Jews in Germany is awakening, she does not meet a Jew until Max, a 24-year-old Jewish man, comes to live with her family. Max is the son of a man who saved Hans’s life during World War I. Thus, Hans feels compassion for him, and he is willing to hide Max in their basement at a time when the Nazis were sending Jews to

concentration camps. Leisel is sworn to secrecy about Max's presence in their home, and she becomes aware that her foster parents could be taken away and possibly killed if Max is discovered. The family sacrifices greatly to keep him safe. They share their meager food with him, and their peace of mind is shattered. Over time, Leisel gradually becomes more and more attached to Max. She shares her nightmares with him to help him with his nightmares. She visits him in the basement with a daily weather report. She and he share stories of their lives, and she brings him discarded newspapers to read. He makes her a book to read. She builds him a snowman in the basement. When Max gets very sick and goes into a coma-like state, Leisel reads and talks to him daily until he recovers. She also brings him "gifts," little things that she finds during her daily travels. All in all, Leisel becomes very attached to Max as an individual.

Nevertheless, Leisel does not become aware of the plight of the Jews in general until she sees Jews being paraded by the Nazis to a labor camp. As the Jews approach their neighborhood, their presence is announced by an old woman who lives in a tall apartment building: " '*die Juden*,' she said. 'The Jews'.'" (Zusak 390). They were a devastating sight:

When they arrived in full, the noise of their feet throbbed on top of the road. Their eyes were enormous in their starving skulls. And the dirt. The dirt was molded to them. Their legs staggered as they were pushed by soldiers' hands—a few wayward steps of forced running before the slow return to a malnourished walk. (Zusak 392).

Hans Huberman is so moved by their plight that he gives one of the Jews a piece of bread. As a result, a Nazi soldier whips the Jew six times and Hans four times. Hans is called a "Jew lover" (Zusak 395) by people in the watching crowd. Later, when Max hears what happened, he leaves the Huberman home because he fears that the Nazis will come to their house and

discover him. He does not want to endanger Leisel and the Hubermans because of his presence.

In the final sections of the novel, Leisel becomes more active in supporting Jews in several ways. She watches the parades of the Jews through town with interest. She is torn between hoping that Max has escaped capture by the Nazis, but she wants to see him again because she misses him. As time passes, Leisel and Rudy begin to put pieces of bread on the street that the Jews can pick up as they parade by. Even though they know that they are risking being caught and whipped, Leisel and Rudy defy the authorities. During the final parade of the novel, Leisel watches the Jews as they parade and empathizes with their pain. When she sees Max among the prisoners, she joins him as he marches down the street. When a soldier throws her out of the parade, she gets up and joins Max in the parade again. In the short time that they have together, she quotes from the book that Max wrote for her. Then they are both whipped by a soldier.

Thus, Leisel's awakening about the plight of the Jews is complete. At first, she is oblivious even to the existence of Jews. Then gradually over time, she becomes more and more aware of the existence of Nazis and their ideas. She learns that her foster father, a compassionate man whom Liesel comes to love dearly, did not join the Nazi Party, and she watches him as he treats Jews with kindness, risking his own well being in the process. After Max comes to live with them, she grows to love him and wants to protect him. Then later, as she watches the parading Jews suffer at the hands of the Nazis, she begins to act courageously to give them her support. She actually joins the parade when she sees that Max has been captured, and she suffers some of the same punishment that they have suffered. In the end, not only has she awakened to their plight, but she has joined hands and hearts with the Jews in their struggle.

Work Cited

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.