

TO WHOM DEATH TALKS? THE NARRATEE IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S *THE BOOK THIEF*

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RESUMO: *O objetivo desse trabalho é analisar o papel do narratário na obra A Menina que Roubava Livros, de Markus Zusak. Utilizando os conceitos elaborados no campo da Narratologia, especialmente nas vozes de Gerald Prince e Grzegorz Maziarczyk, esse trabalho demonstra a relevância do narratário enquanto este é constantemente evocado durante a história. Percebe-se que o discurso do narrador é totalmente baseado em sua conversação com o narratário e, através de tal diálogo; é possível inferir suas características e funções. Embora os estudos narratológicos normalmente foquem na figura do narrador, nota-se que a presença do narratário também permite uma melhor e mais aprofundada compreensão da obra literária.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Narratologia, Narratário, Narrador.*

ABSTRACT: *The objective of this paper is to analyze the role of the narratee in The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak. Using the concepts elaborated in the narratological field, especially in the voices of Gerald Prince and Grzegorz Maziarczyk, this paper shows the relevance of the narratee as it is constantly evoked throughout the story. It is realized that the speech of the narrator is totally based on his conversation to the narratee and, through this dialogue; it is possible to infer its characteristics and functions. Although the narratological studies normally focus on the narrator, it is noticed that the presence of the narratee also allows a deeper and better understanding of the literary work.*

KEYWORDS: *Narratology, Narratee, Narrator.*

INTRODUCTION

It has been agreed that the figure of the narrator is one of the most relevant elements in a narrative. On the other hand, the same seems not to apply to the figure of the narratee. This term was briefly introduced by Gérard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse: An essay in Method* (1980) and later developed by his follower Gerald Prince in the essay “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee” (1980) and mentioned by Slomith Rimmon-

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**Revista Trama ISSN 1981 4674 - Volume 12 – Número 26 –2016,
p.298-310.**

Kenan in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983). At that time Rimmon-Kenan already concluded that: “Although only scanty attention was paid to narratees before the last decade, they are as indispensable to narrative fiction as narrators” (RIMMON-KENAN, 1983, p. 106). It is true that the subject of the narratee has received more attention recently, especially in the studies conducted by Grzegorz. Maziarczyk, such as the essay “From Zero to Hero: An Ourouborean Typology of Narratees Identifiable in Modern Fiction in English” (2011). However, even nowadays this subject lacks deeper analysis as there are only “few studies going beyond mere acknowledgment of its presence in the communicative structure of narrative” (MAZIARCZYK, 2011, p. 253). To better understand the concept of the narratee it is relevant the definition given by Gerald Prince in his *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987). According to the author:

Narratee: The one who is narrated to, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one (more or less overtly represented) narratee per narrative, located at the same diegetic level as the narrator addressing him or her. (...) Like the narrator the narratee may be represented as a character, playing a more or less important role in the situations and events recounted. The narratee – a purely textual construct – must be distinguished from the real reader or receiver. (...) The narratee must also be distinguished from the implied reader. (PRINCE, 1987, p. 57).

It has been a common sense in the literary field that the figure of the real author does not equal the figure of the narrator, since the latter is a real person inserted in the extradiegetic level, while the former is a literary construct within the diegetic level. The same may be asserted about the difference between real reader (or receiver) and narratee, or rather, between people in the extradiegetic level reading a literary piece of work produced

by a writer and the imaginary audience to whom the narrator sends his message. Genette explained: “Like the narrator, the narratee is one of the elements in the narrating situation, and he is necessarily located at the same diegetic level” (GENETTE, 1980, p. 259). Thus, as the narratee is the agent to whom the narrator speaks, the same criteria of classification must be applied to both constructs.

Usually the narratee is not personified and, in these cases, it is a common mistake the confusion between reader and narratee as, sometimes, both seem to share basic similitudes such as language, world knowledge, opinions, physical appearance, etc. Nevertheless, even when not personified, the narratee should not be taken for the real reader because a narrative “can have an indefinitely varying set of real readers” (PRINCE, 1987, p. 57). It is relevant to mention that some scholars also speak about implied author and implied reader (or authorial reader), but they are never to be confused to narrator and narratee, though located in the same diegetic level.

THE NARRATEE IN *THE BOOK THIEF*

In *The Book Thief* the narrator refers to his audience in you-form when constantly discussing the accounts he is presenting. As Jong states: “An internal primary narrator usually has no corresponding internal primary narratee, but tells his story either to no one in particular or to an external primary narratee” (JONG, 2014:28). Thus, the narratee, in *The Book Thief*, is an extradiegetic (external) one with no participation at all in the events narrated. Explicitly evoked, it plays an important role, although

not being a fully visible fictional character in the diegetic level. The dialogues the narrator keeps with the narratee produce the impression that the narrator is calling, at the same time, for no one and everyone. Any person can be the narrator's imaginary audience as no concrete specific trait is given to the narratee aside the narrator's projections of what he thinks the narratee knows, ponders and feels. Although lacking specific and more detailed characterization, it is important to reiterate the relevant position the narratee in *The Book Thief* occupies both for a clearer comprehension of the narrator's beliefs and for more refined interpretation of the events narrated. That brings the discussion about the functions of a narratee, mainly postulated by Prince. According to the author:

The narratee can, thus, exercise an entire series of functions in a narrative: he constitutes a relay between the narrator and the reader, he helps establish the narrative framework, he serves to characterize the narrator, he emphasizes certain themes, he contributes to the development of the plot, he becomes the spokesman for the moral of the work. (...) the narratee will be more or less important, will play a greater or lesser number of roles, will be used in a way more or less subtle and original. (PRINCE, 1980, p. 23)

One way of reconstructing the functions exercised by the narratee in *The Book Thief* is to look for the references that are narratee-revealing or, using Prince's words, "the signs of the you" (PRINCE, 1982, p. 17). According to him: "Some of these signs may function indirectly. (...) But some - we may call them signs of the 'you' - function more directly and represent the narratee (and his situation)" (PRINCE, 1982, p. 17). The signs that indicate the presence of the narratee and its function are explicit in *The Book Thief*, since it is an essential part of the narrator's rhetoric to develop the plot based on his one-sided conversation with his audience which only pays attention and never replies. These you signs, as enumerated by Prince

(1982, p. 17-19), consist in the use of direct address through the second person pronoun you and the third person pronouns, questions or pseudo-questions, negations, affirmations and use of metalinguistic or metanarrative explanations.

The most apparent you sign in *The Book Thief* is the direct address, as the narrator addresses the narratee innumerable times. Death specially marks the position of the narratee as a recipient which is receiving the story by explicitly inviting his audience to pay attention to what he has to say. In the beginning pages the narrator determines the narratee is about to have a story told: “Here it is. One of a handful. *The Book Thief*. If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 14-15). Using the exact same technique, the narrator, when approaching the middle of the story (also the middle of the book), reinforces his invitation, as a way to keep the narratee attention: “I plow through my library of stories. In fact, I reach for one now. I believe you know half of it already, and if you come with me, I’ll show you the rest. I’ll show you the second half of a book thief” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 310). At the end of the narrative (in the Epilogue), the narrator, again, directly addresses the narratee to make sure it will listen to the story finale: “Come with me and I’ll tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 544). Maybe one takes these direct addresses in the form of invitations a little overemphasized, even a redundancy. Still, if one reflects that these invitations are systematically located at the beginning, middle and end or the narrative, one could assume it is only a matter of style (author’s, probably).

The narratee in *The Book Thief* is also addressed to through the use of another pronoun: we. This one include the two agents of the narrative instance, both narrator and narratee. The pronoun we (or us) shortens the distance between the interlocutors since it put them in the same level of understanding about the events unfolding, aside transforming the narratee into an accomplice which supposedly shares the narrator's perspective following his narrative guidance. In the following passage, for example, the narrator decides to stop speaking about Hans' son and informs he will return to this point of the narrative later: "We'll give him seven months. Then we come for him. And, oh, how we come". (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 128). It is a worthy note that one cannot fail to notice how threatening this statement is, especially because it is proclaimed by death.

The same effect of making the distance between narrator and narratee shorter can be accomplished without the explicit use of the pronoun "we" and its correlates; however, the identification between the agents of the narration becomes clearer when it is explicitly applied. In *The Book Thief* the narrator employs the third person plural mainly in two situations. On one hand, he sets the guideline to the story, playing with the order of events and deciding what should be presented and when. In the following extract, he also uses "we" to better convince the narratee to follow his instructions as narrator:

Now for a change of scenery. We've both had it too easy till now, my friend, don't you think? How about we forget Molching for a minute or two? It will do us some good. Also, it's important to the story. We will travel a little, to a secret storage room, and we will see what we see. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 127)

On the other hand, the narrator emphasizes the narratee's prior knowledge about facts previously described in the diegetic level or facts whose understanding relies on information located in the extradiegetic level. An example of the emphasis on the previous knowledge of the narratee is the sentence: "The book thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it" (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 19). It is important to say that, although the pronoun "we" is used, the narrator in *The Book Thief* recurs to other grammar forms to get his narratee closer through expressions like "you and me" and "let's".

Still in the account of pronouns, it would be an over-simplistic view to consider all you pronouns as unequivocal narratee-revealing marks, since this pronoun may appear in the text with no entity indexed to it, like a generalized you, as in the conclusion: "You don't always get what you wish for. Especially in Nazi Germany" (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 196). One needs to be alert to the fact that a "you" pronoun reveals a communication between narrator and narratee "only when it appears in the context of expressions whose structure presupposes the presence of an addressee to whom they are directed" (MAZIARCZYK, 2011, p. 257). The scholar David Herman, paying attention to the narrative use of "you", explains its use detached from the narratee indexed notion.

Here the customary address functions of you subordinate themselves to the referential (one might well say "anaphoric") functions of the pronoun. You now operates as a sort of syncategorematic term or discourse particle, whose chief function is to establish cohesion amongst the various narrative units uttered, lived, and interpreted in closed-circuit diegesis by the fictional protagonist herself. (HERMAN, 2002, p. 356)

Another strategy that says a lot about the narratee is the use of questions. Prince clarified: “Sometimes, when questions or pseudo questions emanate from the narrator, they are not addressed to himself or to one of his characters but rather to his narratee, a narratee whose opinions and experiences are thus partly revealed” (PRINCE, 1982, p.18). The narrator of *The Book Thief* dedicates great part of his dialogue with the narratee employing rhetorical questions that, although sounding like questions addressed to himself, in fact are either asking the narratee to agree or expecting him to share his point of view. The following is such an example of: “How could that woman walk? How could she move? That’s the sort of thing I’ll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 25). One must be alert to the inherent ambiguous feature of questions, because “Sometimes, these do not emanate from a character or from the narrator, who merely seems to be repeating them. They can be attributed to the narratee” (PRINCE, 1982, p.18). Of course, sometimes it is impossible to point out when the narrator himself is asking the question or when he is just repeating what the narratee supposedly said, showing an interaction between these agents. The next excerpt is a clear example of a narrative that is interrupted by many questions that cannot be surely attributed either to the narrator or to the narratee, since both of them could have asked them, which, on its turn, changes the effect of the narrative. If they are the narrator’s questions, there is a suspense creation, since he interrupts the narrative to play with the narratee curiosity. If they are the narratee’s questions, then there is a

dialogue in which the narratee interrupts the story like someone anxious to know what happens next.

“I knew it.” The words were thrown at the steps and Liesel could feel the slush of anger, stirring hotly in her stomach. “I hate the *Führer*,” she said. “I hate him.” And Hans Hubermann? What did he do? What did he say? Did he bend down and embrace his foster daughter, as he wanted to? Did he tell her that he was sorry for what was happening to her, to her mother, for what had happened to her brother? Not exactly. He clenched his eyes. Then opened them. He slapped Liesel Meminger squarely in the face. “Don’t ever say that!” His voice was quiet, but sharp. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 115)

Aside pronouns and questions, other signals of the “you” in the narrative come up as negations, affirmations and metalinguistic explanations. On negations, Prince says that they usually “contradict the beliefs of a narratee; they correct his mistakes; they put an end to his questions” (PRINCE, 1982, p.18). That is plainly noticeable when the narrator of *The Book Thief* contradicts the hints he had given previously about the next book about to become part of Liesel’s collection: “*** THE NEXT BOOK *** It’s not the *Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*, as you might be expecting. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 365). An Affirmation, on its turn, “underlines what his narratee believes” (PRINCE, 1982:19), like in the passage: “The boy was gone. Yes, the boy was gone, and I wish I could tell you that everything worked out for the younger Hans Hubermann, but it didn’t” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 105). Finally, metalinguistic or extratextual explanation “are for the narratee’s benefit and function not only as signs of the ‘I’ but also as signs of the ‘you’” (PRINCE, 1982, p. 19). In *The Book Thief*, the following passage serves to illustrate this point:

In the beginning, it was the profanity that made an immediate impact. It was so *vehement* and prolific. Every second word was either *Saumensch* or *Saukerl* or *Arschloch*. For people who aren’t familiar with these words, I should explain.

Sau, of course, refers to pigs. In the case of *Saumensch*, it serves to castigate, berate, or plain humiliate a female. *Saukerl* (pronounced “saukairl”) is for a male. *Arschloch* can be translated directly into “asshole.” That word, however, does not differentiate between the sexes. It simply is. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 32)

Not all the explanations serve to give extra information to the narratee, though. Some of these explanations demand a share of extratextual historical knowledge, as when death refers to the bombs the Allies throw at German cities. ““You’re well aware of exactly what was coming to Himmel Street by the end of 1940. I know. You know. Liesel Meminger, however, cannot be put into that category” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 142). As it is indicated, the narrator expects the narratee to be familiar with this information, which portrays the narratee as someone who knows the context of the war.

About the signals that reveal the narratee, as they have been formulated by Prince, it is relevant to add two more features stipulated by Maziarczyk (2011, p. 258) who includes emphatic formulaic insertions and projections of possible objections, such as in the following: “Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born” (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 350) and “Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a color (...) Well, I’m here to tell you that it is. White is without question a color, and personally, I don’t think you want to argue with me. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 06). Maziarczyk, deepening Prince’s assumptions about the narratee, contributes to remember that the narratee may be either a potential reader or a potential listener, depending on the representative techniques used to evoke him.

As in the case of the narratee-potential-reader, the narratee-potential listener's presence is evoked in the text by means of direct address to the "you." However, whereas the role of the reader is sometimes directly attributed to the former type of narratee by the narrator, there do not seem to exist examples of the "dear listener" convention. Thus, the narratee's role as listener is indicated by less obvious, though equally cogent, textual signals. He/she is attributed the role of the listener if the text in which he/she is evoked displays the characteristics of *skaz*, that is of a narrative imitating spontaneous speech. (Maziarczyk, 2011, p. 260-261)

The way the narrator presents the story gives the impression he is talking to somebody in *The Book Thief*. The narratee is evoked as someone who will listen to a story that is being read by the narrator, who inserts his comments as the book plot develops. As Maziarczyk (2011, p.261) states, this "addressee is not a specific interlocutor concretized on the level of the presented world; he/she is just a possible listener. (...) the *skaz* creates the illusion of the "you" being present at the narrator's side, which is a prerequisite for oral communication." Other signs of oral communication rely on the use of colloquial expressions like "you see", "you know" and verbs that refer to orality like "tell", "say" and "mention", which make part of an "engaging strategy" (Maziarczyk, 2011, p. 261), creating the atmosphere of an oral conversation, is clear in the following passage:

On many counts, taking a boy like Rudy was robbery—so much life, so much to live for — yet somehow, I'm certain he would have loved to see the frightening re it. In the darkness of my dark-beating heart, I know. He'd have loved it, all right. You see? Even death has a heart. (ZUSAK, 2007, p. 242)

FINAL REMARKS

Although *The book Thief's* main feature is the uncanny narrator personified as Death, it is clear that the role of the narratee in this work is crucial not only for the understanding of the narrator itself but also for the

creation of empathy, since the reader may identify himself with the narratee, which is constantly addressed to by the pronoun “you”. Besides, the portrait of this narratee in general human characteristics, which contrast with the ones belonging to the non-human narrator, enhances the empathy, since all readers are humans who inevitably will meet death one.

The narratee in *The Book Thief* is an extradiegetic, meaning it does not take any part in the events narrated or in the narration. The signals of the narratee, as seen in the previous extracts, are spread throughout the text mainly in direct form, or rather, through the use of direct address when the narrator explicitly calls the attention of his imaginary audience. However, the narratee is also referred to through the use of questions, pseudo-questions, negations, affirmations and generalization. When the narrator says something as “Desperate humans often seem able to do this” (p. 373), it contains a sign of the narratee, since the narrator frequently mentions his supernatural nature and, in this context, “humans” are the narratee. It is important to notice that in the text the narrator addresses to his narratee speaking either of humans or a human, which broadens even more the possibility of reader identification.

It is true that *The Book Thief* grand effect is its narrator. However, one should take into consideration that most of the cunning and sarcastic remarks made by the narrator (whose language is also object of study by many scholars) have been stated during his dialogue with the narratee. His judgments and comments are mostly based on his opinions about the humans and, consequently, about the narratee itself. That said, the relevance of the narratee in *The Book Thief* is undeniable.

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