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**“Their Finest Genre”:
the Moral Relevance of World War II in Contemporary Literature**

My research project analyzes contemporary literature written about WWII and the Holocaust in terms of social memory of these events, seventy years later. I read contemporary fiction—I define contemporary here as the year 2000 or later—and mark how these fictions change our perceptions of these events.

My research asks, “How do contemporary novels potentially normalize or sentimentalize WWII/Holocaust memory?” I define normalization using Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s words: “at its most abstract level, normalization entails the replacement of difference with similarity”. Normalizing novels represent WWII events as unremarkable, muting the moral value we might take from them. To use a popular example, we can’t say the phrase “Never again!” about the Holocaust if the Holocaust is no longer extraordinary. Sentimentalization is more complicated; in this case, it involves the appropriation of sentimental tropes to create sympathy for something previously unremarkable, thus doing something that seems opposite from normalization’s effect. Although initially my instinct was to dichotomize normalizing and sentimentalizing forces and view them as always opposing in the texts I read, this was rarely the case. They are almost always working simultaneously, complicating whatever ethical value might be drawn from these contemporary Holocaust representations.

The central works for my project are Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, Anthony Doerr’s *All The Light We Cannot See*, and Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier And Clay*. Though I did read more widely, I chose these books for the bulk of my analysis because they were the most widely read. Doerr and Chabon’s novels are both Pulitzer Prize-winners and *The Book Thief* appears on many popular reading lists.

Since my research involves close reading and analysis, my research design emphasized the literature review. I read a brief survey of literature on not only normalization and sentimentalization but also the ethics of Holocaust representation and traumatic memory theory. This helped me better identify the stakes of my research. Novels about the Holocaust published in the last seventeen years are unique because as Jessica Lang puts it, they’re written by “third generation” writers. This means that these writers neither dealt with the traumatic memory of the Holocaust first-hand or dealt with the postmemory as a witness to those who *did* survive the Holocaust, like first and second generation writers respectively did. The distance here is what makes this literature exceptional: writers still grapple with issues of representation even seventy years after the original event.

In order to better understand this third-hand memory, I turned to Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory. According to Rothberg, memory displays many narratives of the same event instead of conforming to one linear dialogue of memory—this latter is known as competitive memory. I apply this concept to these novels by viewing each narrative as a different strand of memory. Instead of measuring how well these narratives represent one competitive memory, I analyze their value as diverse representations of an event that cannot be represented accurately in words if at all, as years of Holocaust studies and representation theory argue. As Rothberg says, “pursuing memory’s multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space”, and I’m evaluating these novels in terms of what they bring to this space.

In this presentation, I will focus my analysis on *The Book Thief*. The book follows Liesel Meminger, a German girl who steals books throughout her childhood as she watches World War

II progress. I first read for normalization. Rosenfeld describes various processes by which normalization occurs: these processes include relativization and aestheticization. Relativization involves the relativizing of Holocaust past so that it seems less extraordinary as compared to other pasts. The ethical dilemma here is in how it makes the Holocaust seem relative and therefore not as unique. Meanwhile, aestheticization creates an aesthetic out history, sacrificing possible ethical representation for payoff in terms of narrative beauty.

While *The Book Thief* doesn't universalize the Holocaust because Markus Zusak makes no overt point about current events, the book often relativizes and aestheticizes aspects of Holocaust history. For example, the Jewish man Liesel and her family hide in their basement, Max, has vivid fantasies in which he boxes Adolf Hitler. This portrayal of Hitler undermines Hitler's presence during this time in Germany and relativizes Hitler's evil; he becomes nothing more than a metaphorical opponent for Max. Although this metaphorical opponent provides redemption within the text by allowing Max to overcome his oppressor, this narrows the scope of Hitler within the novel. A similar image from *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* has the same effect: the eponymous protagonists put their superhero The Escapist punching Hitler on the cover of their first comic book for shock value. Picturing Hitler as a comic book villain relativizes him within this novel. The use of Hitler to sell comics takes away his power as the fascist ruler of Nazi Germany. Thus, these two novels normalize the Holocaust by relativizing the impact of Hitler.

The Book Thief also aestheticizes the Holocaust through lyrical prose. For example, the narrator describes the wartime sky: "the sky was now a devastating home-cooked red... Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth." Here, the word lovelily stands out. It's not a common word and while it is indeed a word, it describes something so beautiful that it incites love as it performs an action. The narrator describes the burned remains of cities as being so beautiful they incite love as they fall. This creates aesthetic pleasure out of these destroyed towns in Nazi Germany, further normalizing the suffering of thousands of people so that we as readers can enjoy the slow, apparent beauty of ashes falling from a sky described as "home-cooked". This sort of aestheticization—creating an aesthetic out of history and ignoring its value—occurs in numerous places throughout the book.

However, the same lyrical prose that aestheticizes the Holocaust can also contribute to sentiment in the text. According to Jennifer A. Williamson, twentieth century sentimentalism in literature involves the appropriation of sentimental tropes to create a radical new object of sympathy. These tropes include the building of a family structure, a system of symbols to alert readers to deeper meaning, and also lyrical prose, much like the prose we see in *The Book Thief*. Of course, that same lyrical prose already normalizes through aestheticization, as discussed. This is an example of how my terms of analysis remain mixed instead of dichotomous. In *The Book Thief* there are symbols in Liesel's father's accordion and Liesel's books, and Liesel gains a new family structure when she is adopted by the Hubermans. But while there is a radical object of sympathy in Liesel, who is not Jewish but instead German and therefore an odd figure for sympathy in Holocaust literature, we as readers also feel sympathy for words themselves.

Consider this quote from the end of Liesel's "memoir" that she writes about her years on Himmel Street: "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right." The emotions being invoked—hate and love—are produced and addressed to words themselves, not any specific character. Of course, we also feel sympathy for Liesel, who wrote these words. So not only do we have feelings for words like Liesel does, we have feelings for the

character that most heavily interacts with words by reading and writing. So there is radical sympathy for literacy through a focus on Liesel's relationship with books and words. This phenomenon of sympathy for literacy in occurs across contemporary Holocaust fiction. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, we sympathize not only with Josef Kavalier who writes these Escapist comics but also with comics as a narrative form. Chabon describes how comic books as a genre have been displaced and marginalized in literature, similar to how Josef Kavalier as a Jewish immigrant feels marginalized in America. In *All The Light We Cannot See*, we sympathize with Marie-Laure, who learns how to read Braille, and with Jutta, who writes touchingly naive letters. These authors often lead their readers to sympathize with some form of literacy, or notably literate characters.

To conclude, I've traced normalizing and sentimentalizing forces, marking how they intersect and separate; I've also noticed the focus on reading and writing within these texts, denoting a fixation on narrative itself. So while these works may normalize and sentimentalize simultaneously, they also belie a concern with narrative representation. By using narrative to represent memory, I would like to make the claim that these contemporary novels are concerned with advocating for multiple memories instead of one dominant one; they support Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory by the way they introduce other forms of narrative and draw the reader's sympathy toward these narratives and those who create them. These narratives represent the stories that go untold in a world of competitive memory, complicating possible moral messages we can take from these events instead of simply normalizing them.

My next steps will include reading more widely into memory theory, incorporating more of Rothberg's texts and also more criticisms of Holocaust representation. I would also like to include more fiction in my research. But on the whole, I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to do research as a SURF Fellow this summer; I would like to thank the SURF Program, the Anselm Foundation, and my mentor, Professor Snyder. Like Liesel Meminger, I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I look forward to further exploring them in my senior thesis.