

“A Border is a Veil”: Death as a Border in *The Farming of Bones* and *The Book Thief*

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Within literature, death has always been a common theme. In this essay, death as a border in literature will be explored in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. *The Farming of Bones* follows Amabelle Désir, a young Haitian woman working in the Dominican Republic, and tells of the Haitian massacre in the Dominican Republic in 1937. *The Book Thief* follows Liesel Meminger, a young German girl living under the Nazi regime, and tells of life during World War II. Both Danticat and Zusak explore death as it appears in those tragedies, how it affects the people under those regimes, and how it creates a border. Death creates a border both physical and spiritual, rigid yet permeable, and one that is displayed through the personification of death by Danticat and Zusak.

When most people think of borders, they tend to think about physical borders: ones that separate countries, ones that separate the imprisoned from the free, and more. A border that is often forgotten, one that is both physical and spiritual, is the border between life and death. Death has long been a theme in literature and it has been explored in many ways. Death creates a border both physical and spiritual, rigid yet permeable, and one that is displayed through the personification of death in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle Désir is a young Haitian woman who works as a servant for a wealthy family in the Dominican Republic. She loses her parents to death as a child and later loses her other loved ones during the Haitian massacre. Amabelle survives the Haitian massacre in the Dominican Republic, what’s referred to as the Parsley massacre, and flees back to a Haiti she barely knows or remembers. In *The Book*

Thief, Liesel Meminger is a young German girl who is sent to live with a foster family during World War II. She loses her brother to death, her mother to the war early in her childhood, and then the rest of her loved ones over the course of World War II. Both Amabelle and Liesel are confronted with the reality of death due to genocide, as they witness their loved ones' deaths and the aftermath. Amabelle's and Liesel's lives are shaped by losing their family and friends to the other side of the border of death; or as Amabelle puts in *The Farming of Bones*: "A border is a veil not many people can wear" (Danticat 264).

The Farming of Bones

While death is more than just a physical border, the consequences of it as a physical boundary are usually the most prominent. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle Désir experiences the physical border of death when her parents die. While trying to cross the river from the Dominican Republic back to Haiti, her parents are swept away by the current while Amabelle stays waiting on the bank. One of the boys at the river, who stops her from jumping in after her parents, remarks on the finality of the physical boundary: "'Unless you want to die,' one of them says, 'you will never see those people again'" (Danticat 52). The physical border of death keeps her from her loved ones later in life as well, like with Sebastien, her lover.

The spiritual border of death becomes blurred for Amabelle. She spends the better half of the novel living as if dead on Earth. She admits this to Sebastien in one of her dreams, saying "I chose a living death because I am not brave" (Danticat 283). Although we know she lives for at least two more decades after returning to Haiti, it isn't really living. As Hewett states, "Amabelle lives like a 'ghost,' trapped somewhere between past and present" (132). She sticks to her routine of sewing and staying in the house as she struggles with feeling able to live after being surrounded by so much death. Death, although she is scared of it, is something she comes to welcome.

After living through the river-crossing that her fellow refugees, Odette and Wilner, did not, Amabelle was not comfortable with her own survival: "There was a stillness to it [Odette's face] I nearly envied" (Danticat 205). Not only did Odette die, but it was a result of Amabelle's actions. While they were crossing, Wilner was shot by a soldier and Amabelle covered Odette's nose and mouth to keep her from yelling. Odette was still breathing when they got to the shore, but since Wilner died "... she had already made her choice" (Danticat 202). Again, after more than two decades have passed, Amabelle describes sleep as a "comfort" for it "... was as close to disappearing as I could come" (Danticat 287). After Sebastien is gone, Amabelle seems to give up on living. Even before she lost Sebastien, Amabelle said "I am afraid I cease to exist when he's not there" (Danticat 2). That feeling

would only solidify once she had lost him for good. After losing so many people to the violent acts of genocide, Amabelle experiences a spiritual death; she is never fully living again.-fort” for it “... was as close to disappearing as I could come” (Danticat 287). After Sebastien is gone, Amabelle seems to give up on living. Even before she lost Sebastien, Amabelle said “I am afraid I cease to exist when he’s not there” (Danticat 2). That feeling would only solidify once she had lost him for good. After losing so many people to the violent acts of genocide, Amabelle experiences a spiritual death; she is never fully living again.

Even the idea of parsley, which is explored throughout the novel, is used as a symbol of both life and death. Amabelle’s community used parsley “... to wash a new infant’s hair for the first time and ... a corpse’s remains one final time,” along with culinary and medicinal methods (Danticat 62). When Amabelle, Yves, and Tibon are being beaten by the Dominicans and have parsley shoved in their mouths, instead of thinking about the impending death that was sure to come, she thinks of it as a way to survive instead: “I told myself that eating the parsley would keep me alive” (Danticat 193).

Death is personified in different ways throughout the novel. Amabelle is the narrator of her own story and so we, as readers, get to experience her thoughts, feelings, and dreams. Amabelle is haunted by “shadows” in both her waking life and her dreams: “When I was a child, I used to spend hours playing with my shadow ... There were many shadows, too, in the life I had beyond childhood” (Danticat 2-3). These “shadows” followed her around her whole life, representing the spirits of all the loved ones she would lose. Amabelle also refers to Sebastien’s absence as her “shadow” before she knows if he has died or not (Danticat 281).

Haitian folk religion is heavily linked to the Voudoun religion and it makes its appearance in the spiritual practices of the characters in the novel (Weir-Soley 168). The Voudoun religion has been notoriously misrepresented, especially in Western cultures, and is “... perceived as an illicit source of spiritual agency, is associated with death, darkness and the devil” (Weir-Soley 171). It has even become common to refer to it as ‘voodoo’ with all the negative stereotypes of ‘black magic’ instead of the real Voudoun religion. But as Weir-Soley explains, it couldn’t be farther from the truth: “Experts recognize Voudoun as a legitimate source of agency and transformation for the Haitian peasantry, perhaps even a spiritual reprieve from the abjectness of poverty and the oppression of political tyranny” (171). Like most communities, the Haitians’ religious ferocity helps them to stay sane and deal with the turmoil in their country.

While Voudoun is not part of the “dark arts” as modern media would have us think, it does still have ties to both death and life through healing. When Amabelle is sick,

her mother makes her a doll out of her favorite things; whether it be a spiritual doll or just for comfort, it helps. In her fever, she sees the doll get up and start jumping rope. The doll tells Amabelle, “I am sure you will live to be a hundred years old, having come so close to death while young” (Danticat 58). Since Amabelle comes so close to death again later in life, during the massacre, it seems the doll’s predictions come true.

The way that life and death are addressed in *The Farming of Bones* is also very cyclical. The final scene wraps up Amabelle’s personal experience with death neatly. As Amabelle gets into the river, “in the place of [her] original loss,” she finds comfort in her dreams and memories instead of pain (Hewett 141). She “has found a place where she can be at peace with her body and the violence of her past, at least temporarily” (Hewett 141). We, the readers, don’t know if Amabelle is simply reflecting on her life when she gets into the water or if she intends to end her life. Hewett reads the final scene of Amabelle as a reflection of her life and finally embracing what she’s gone through. At this moment when “Amabelle finally embraces all of the losses that have defined her identity and creates a new self out of loss,” there is a rebirth (Hewett 141-142). But perhaps Amabelle was not there to simply reflect on death, but to embrace it herself. It would be a fitting way for her to go: just as her parents did, just as when she first tried to join them in death.

The Book Thief

In *The Book Thief*, Death as a narrator and death as the idea and act itself are two separate concepts, and thus require distinct styles of capitalization moving forward. Liesel Meminger loses her brother to death as well. She and her brother are traveling with their mother to be taken in by a foster family, but on the train ride there, her brother dies suddenly. Liesel “could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead” (Zusak 20). With the death of her brother, she sees the physical border of death in action; at one moment her brother is breathing and conscious, and in the next, he’s simply a limp body sat next to her.

Her brother’s death is not the only one she experiences, as she again witnesses the death of everyone close to her at the end of the book. Her foster father, Hans Hubermann, foster mother, Rosa Hubermann, and best friend, Rudy Steiner, all die in a bombing that she survives. She loses almost everyone. Literary scholar Débora Almeida de Oliveira states that “of all people who know Liesel, just three are able to survive and share her life” (49). Death separates Liesel from almost all her loved ones. Mass death is often described by Death through his narration, but in simple ways. Not only does Liesel witness her brother’s, foster parents’, and friends’ deaths, but Death does as well. Death often uses numbers to relay to the readers the violence he’s seeing in an impersonal way, like “just over two hundred

murdered souls” (Zusak 488). For Death’s own “sanity,” he creates a boundary between himself and the dead by trying to see them simply as numbers and not as the complex humans he knows they are.

Liesel is haunted by Death, as he follows her and tells her story, but she is also haunted by death, especially her brother’s. She often wakes up to terrible nightmares about her brother’s death, waking up “swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets” (Zusak 36). As Johnson explains, “Swimming while drowning symbolizes life—a painful struggle that ultimately ends with death. Liesel’s dream further demonstrates this innateness of human suffering because Werner’s death haunts only the living Liesel” (3). In her sleeping hours, the border of death becomes more permeable. Her dreams feel real and show her struggle with letting her loved ones cross that border. As Johnson says, only Liesel experiences the terror that Werner’s death came with because she is the one who is alive (3). When she’s asleep, the deaths that Liesel has experienced haunt her, while Death haunts her waking hours. Death sees Liesel’s interactions with death, the act, and has her own interactions with her, like picking up her diary after she threw it away (Zusak 539).

While Liesel is haunted by death itself, Death is also who narrates her story. To fully understand *The Book Thief*, “it is necessary to view *The Book Thief* as a double story: it is Liesel’s story, but it is Death’s story too” (Oliveira 37). Not only that, but one must understand that Death is both a character, narrator, and a border. Zusak wrote the narrative style in such a way that Death, since he is omniscient, can share the details of Liesel’s life, as well as her thoughts. But even Death experiences borders and is limited to only insight into Liesel’s mind. He says “Max, Hans, and Rosa I cannot account for, but I know that Liesel Meminger was thinking that if the bombs ever landed on Himmel Street, not only did Max have less chance of survival than everyone else, but he would die completely alone” (Zusak 384). While Death has the ability to travel around, he is entranced by Liesel once he first sees her, when he is collecting her brother’s soul: “I buckled — I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched,” and he continued to watch and share her story (Zusak 7).

Death is personified, as he is given feelings and opinions of his own, but he is not made human. Throughout the novel, colors. Then the humans,” while he ends the novel with “I am haunted by humans” (Zusak 3; 550). But he is not unmoved by all the tragedy he sees, often using the colors of the sky to distract him from the violence and keep his focus away from the humans who survive, “the leftovers” (Zusak 4). He takes no joy from collecting souls but even more so dislikes the whole experience of his job: “When Death takes someone away, he feels a great discomfort by noticing the behavior of those who stay” (Oliveira 26). In a convoluted way, he experiences death as a border as well; he never

is shown interacting with or even seeing the souls he carries away again. It is simply his job to carry the souls and they are permanently on the other side of the border once he's taken them away.

When he first introduces himself as what humans will meet at the end of their life, he makes sure to explain there is no choice in it, saying “Please, be calm, despite that previous threat. / I am all bluster— / I am not violent. / I am not malicious. / I am a result” (Zusak 6). While the explanation comes because he is desperate to make clear that bringing death is not his choice, the contrast of himself with humanity makes the border clear. As much as Death follows Liesel's life, the border of death keeps him from taking part in life at all.

Conclusion

Amabelle and Liesel both lived through genocides and experienced death all around them. Amabelle, like Liesel, is also haunted in dreams, often with imagery or memories of death. Although they have managed to evade death on multiple occasions, they are still surrounded by death in their waking life. Their stories take place only years apart, in 1937 and 1939 respectively. Death separated them from their loved ones, first as a physical boundary and then as a spiritual one. They both lost their immediate family early in their childhood and then the majority of their loved ones later in life, because of the genocidal acts. Death becomes permeable for them at times, like Amabelle with the doll during her fever dream and Liesel having Death narrate her story. At the end of both their stories, they themselves cross the border of death: Amabelle in the same river that took her parents and Liesel to finally meet her old friend face-to-face.

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