

'The Book Thief'

Minor Character Study

- Michael Holtzapfel

- Read the extract
- Identify and highlight any phrases that tell us how the war affected Michael

They came through twice in ten days, and soon after, the anonymous, prune-faced woman on Munich Street was proven absolutely correct. Suffering had most definitely come, and if they could blame the Jews as a warning or prologue, they should have blamed the Führer and his quest for Russia as the actual cause – for when Himmel Street woke later in July, a returned soldier was discovered to be dead. He was hanging from one of the rafters in a laundry up near Frau Diller's. Another human pendulum. Another clock, stopped.

The careless owner had left the door open.

☪ JULY 24, 6:03 AM ☪

The laundry was warm,
the rafters were firm,
and Michael Holtzapfel
jumped from the chair
as if it were a cliff.

So many people chased after me in that time, calling my name, asking me to take them with me. Then there was the small percentage who called me casually over and whispered with their tightened voices.

'Have me,' they said, and there was no stopping them. They were frightened, no question, but they were not afraid of me. It was a fear of mucking it up and having to face themselves again, and facing the world, and the likes of you.

There was nothing I could do.

They had too many ways, they were too resourceful – and when they did it too well, whatever their chosen method, I was in no position to refuse.

Michael Holtzapfel knew what he was doing.

He killed himself for wanting to live.

Of course, I did not see Liesel Meminger at all that day. As is usually the case, I advised myself that I was far too busy to remain on Himmel Street to listen to the screams. It's bad enough when people catch me red-handed, so I took the usual decision to make my exit, into the breakfast-coloured sun.

I did not hear the detonation of an old man's voice when he found the hanging body, nor the sound of running feet and jaw-dropped gasps when other people arrived. I did not hear a skinny man with a moustache mutter, 'Crying shame, a damn shame...'

I did not see Frau Holtzapfel laid out flat on Himmel Street, her arms out wide, her screaming face in total despair. No, I didn't discover any of that until I came back a few months later and read something called *The Book Thief*. It was explained to me that in the end, Michael Holtzapfel was worn down not by his injured hand or any other injury, but by the guilt of living.

In the lead-up to his death, the girl had realised that he wasn't sleeping, that each night was like poison. I often imagine him lying awake, sweating in sheets of snow, or seeing visions of his brother's severed legs. Liesel wrote that sometimes she almost told him about her own brother, like she did with Max, but there seemed a big difference between a long-distance cough and two obliterated legs. How do you console a man who has seen such things? Could you tell him the Führer was proud of him, that the Führer loved him for what he did in Stalingrad? How could you even dare? You can only let him do the talking. The dilemma, of course, is that such people save their most important words for after, when the surrounding humans are unlucky enough to find them. A note, a sentence, even a question, or a letter, like on Himmel Street in July 1943.

❧ MICHAEL HOLTZAPFEL: ❧
THE LAST GOODBYE

Dear Mama,

Can you ever forgive me? I just couldn't stand it any longer. I'm meeting Robert. I don't care what the damn Catholics say about it. There must be a place in Heaven for those who have been where I have been. You might think I don't love you because of what I've done, but I do.

Your Michael.

It was Hans Hubermann who was asked to give Frau Holtzapfel the news. He stood on her threshold and she must have seen it on his face. Two sons in six months.

The morning sky stood blazing behind him as the wiry woman made her way past. She ran sobbing to the gathering further up on Himmel Street. She said the name Michael at least two dozen times, but Michael had already answered. According to the book thief, Frau Holtzapfel hugged the body for nearly an hour. She then returned to the blinding sun of Himmel Street and sat herself down. She could no longer walk.

From a distance, people observed. Such a thing was easier from far away.

Hans Hubermann sat with her.

He placed his hand on hers as she fell back, to the hard ground.

He allowed her screams to fill the street.

Much later, Hans walked with her, with painstaking care, through her front gate and into the house. And no matter how many times I try to see it differently, I can't pull it off...

When I imagine that scene of the distraught woman and the tall silver-eyed man, it is still snowing in the kitchen of 31 Himmel Street.