



Holocaust in John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

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Abstract: *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a touching tale of an odd friendship between two boys in horrendous circumstances and a reminder of human's capacity for inhumanity. The 2006 novel is also adapted into a film, which created controversy over the fictionalizing of the Holocaust. During the Second World War, the Nazis murdered nearly six million European Jews, a genocide known as the Holocaust. The word 'Holocaust' comes from ancient Greek, meaning 'burnt offering'. Even before the Second World War, the word is used to describe the death of a large group of people, but since 1945, it has become almost synonymous with the murder of European Jews during the war. Jews also refer to the Holocaust as 'Shoah', which is Hebrew for 'catastrophe'.

Keywords: *Holocaust, Jews, Second World War, European, Nazi.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Holocaust has several causes, including the Nazis' desire to exterminate the Jews and their ability to do so. However, their lust for murder did not emerge out of nowhere. The anti-Semitic Nazi ideology must be considered in the broader context of age old hostility towards Jews, modern racism, and nationalism. Since World War II, there has been a broad definition of Holocaust literature that embraces a range of genres, subject positions, and literary traditions. It argues that such works both resist and embrace integration into the continuum of Jewish and Western thought and expression. It mediates life, survival, and memory during and after the war through indirection, fragmentary narratives, and other literary strategies. As Holocaust imagery increasingly permeates Western culture, literature offers not only an ethical discourse of mourning and commemoration but also metaphors for psychological states, social and political issues, and contemporary evil.

Bruno is a nine-year-old boy growing up in Berlin during World War II. He lives in a large house with his mother, father, and sister. One day, while returning from school, he finds his maid, Maria, packing his things in large wooden crates. He politely enquires about her actions as his parents have taught him to respect Maria. "What are you doing? He asks in as polite a tone as he can muster, although he isn't happy to find someone going through his possessions. "You take your hands off my things" (1). The family is set to move to the countryside; Bruno had confusion whether he has made any mistakes in the past. "Now, you don't have to worry, Bruno, Mother reassures him, sitting down in a chair. What is it? He asks. Am I being sent away? No, not just you, she replies, with a hint of a smile that quickly fades. 'We all are. Your father I Gretel and you. All four of us" (3).

Throughout the novel, Bruno asks numerous questions, but there is no valuable answer. Everyone around ignores him and provides with false reasons. His father is the head commandant of the Nazi party, so the house is often filled with visitors: men in fantastic uniforms, women with typewriters. There is a hidden character, Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Germany from 1934 to 1945, whom Bruno mishears as "The Fury" instead of "Führer". Bruno is unaware of his father's job and wonders about it. When he asks, his father sighs. The little boy faces various struggles, emotions, and memories as he had to leave the city of Berlin. "He opened his mouth to tell them, and then realized that he did not know himself. All he could say is that his father is a man to watch, and that the Fury had big things in mind for him. Oh, and that he had a fantastic uniform too." (5)

Upon reaching the new house, everything feels different to Bruno. He could not help but compare it with the old house in his mind. As he wanders around, his parents paid him no attention, so he sought solace in a conversation with Maria, who affectionately called him Master Bruno. "Oh, I'm tired of hearing about Father's job", said Bruno interrupting her. "That's all we ever hear about, if you ask me. Father's job this and Father's job that. Well, if Father's job means that we have to move away from our house, the sliding banister, and my three best friends for life, then I think Father should think twice about his job, don't you?" (18)

It's clear that Bruno remains unaware of his father's promotion to oversee the Auschwitz operation; his father depicts as a sincere and responsible officer dedicate his duties in the Nazi Party. "Your father is very serious too, Maria remarks. Yes, but he's a father," Bruno explains. Fathers are supposed to be serious. It doesn't matter whether they're greengrocers, teachers, chefs, or commandants, he says, listing jobs he considers respectable. And I don't think that man looked like a father. Although he is very serious, that's for sure."(20)

Gretel who is three year older than Bruno has many nasty habits and often teases him, earns herself the nickname "Hopeless Case". Feels lonely after their move, Bruno decides to spend time with her. He enters her room without permission, notices the disarray of her dolls but ignores it and talk to her. "Are you satisfied with coming to this place?" he asks. "I really miss our old mansion and the beautiful days we spent there." Gretel, with an intelligent nod, responds, "We are here for the foreseeable future." Although her words don't make sense to him, he agrees, "It's horrible." When Gretel mentions "Out-With" (26).

Despite Bruno's eagerness to learn more, Gretel ignores him though they discuss their hatred for the new house and the absence of their friends. He reflects on Gretel's friends, three bullies who often tease him. Bruno's room has a view of garden with full of flowers it creates a pleasant atmosphere, but there he notices a large wire fence surrounds the area, taller than the house, with barbed wire spiral at the top. The ground lacks grass, filled instead with sand-like substance, small huts, and smokestacks in the distance.

In Britannica which provides additional information about Auschwitz Concentration Camp, detailing its construction and capacity of house for prisoners:

Auschwitz Concentration Camp opened in former Polish army barracks in June 1940. Twenty brick buildings were adapted, with two-storey and single-story blocks. Prisoners began adding second stories to single-story blocks by the end of 1940. In the following spring, eight new blocks were erected, completing in the first half of 1942. The majority were two-storey blocks, mainly used to house prisoners. Each block typically had two large rooms upstairs and several smaller rooms downstairs. Though designed for about seven hundred prisoners each after the addition of second stories, they often housed up to Thousand two hundred.(70)

Gretel and Bruno engage in a heated discussion, both have and confusion on their new surroundings. Gretel confidently declares that it must be the countryside, contrasting it with bustling Berlin. "When we're at home, in Berlin, we're in the city. That's why there are so many people and houses, and the schools are full."(34)

Bruno observes the absence of farmers and animals in Out-With, and the soil did not appear fertile. Gretel agrees as they watch hundreds of people below, some stand in groups, others hobbled on crutches or carry spades. They observe soldier who commands them to form group, to push wheelbarrows and wear bandages. Children's cry and laugh amidst the chaos, they look dirty and disheveled. Bruno notes that everyone wore the same grey striped pyjamas and caps, it looks extraordinary. After arriving at Out-With, Bruno had not seen his father, but now he decides to seek him out. His father is busy so he, promise to meet him later. Bruno waits patiently. When he finally arrives Bruno asks about the people outside, Father initially seems confused but then explains that they were soldiers, secretaries, and staff workers and instructs Bruno not to worry about them.

"Who are all those people outside?" he said finally. Father tilted his head to the left, looking a little confused by the question. 'Soldiers, Bruno,' he said 'and secretaries. Staff workers you've seen them all before, of course. "Father continued. 'But you should not be worrying about them right now. They're nothing to do with you. You have nothing whatsoever in common with them. Just settling your new home and be good that's all I ask" (55).

Bruno inquires about the people outside, in the huts. Father, who then clarifies that, is not issue to Bruno. He urges him to settle into his new home and behave.

Lieutenant Kotler's behavior incites hatred in Bruno, exacerbated by Gretel's admiration for Kotler. Frustrated and in need of a tire for the swing, Bruno asks Pavel for help, but the effort ends in an accident, leaving Bruno injured.



Pavel swiftly scoops him up, comforts him with his quiet voice, and carries him back to the house, settling him in the kitchen on a wooden chair. Bruno recounts the incident, while Pave! reassures him and tends to his injuries.

“I don’t know what happened,’ he said. ‘It didn’t seem dangerous at all. You were going to high,’ said Pave! in a quiet voice that immediately made Bruno feel safe.’ I could see it. I thought that at any moment you were going to suffer a mischief. And I did, say Bruno you certainly did Pavel carried him across the lawn and back towards the house, taking him into the kitchen and settling him on one of the wooden chairs.” (81)

After Pavel administers first aid to Bruno’s injury, Bruno feels it is serious, but Pavel reassures him it not too severe. When Bruno asks if Pave! is a doctor, Pave! remains silent and resumes peeling vegetables. Pave! appears small and skinny, with long fingers and angular features, older than Bruno’s father but younger than his grandfather. “I don’t understand, Bruno said, seeking clarity. If you’re a doctor, why are you waiting on tables? Why aren’t you working at a hospital somewhere?”(85).

Pavel, a Jew from the camp assigned to be a kitchen hand in the commanding officer’s residence, is a doctor before the Nazi occupation of Poland. However, as a prisoner, he is maltreated by the Nazis, forced to stop practicing medicine and instead peel potatoes. Despite his work, he received no payment and endured verbal abuse, labeled ‘filthy’ by young soldiers like Kotler.

Bruno sees going under the fence as one last adventure to enjoy with his friend before returning to Berlin. His shaved head allows him to blend in with the prisoners, and he and Shmuel look nearly identical, except for Bruno’s heavier weight. However, Bruno quickly realizes that the reality of the camp is far from what he had imagined. Instead of cafes, shopping centres, and playing children, he sees groups of people with expressions of profound sadness. Bruno, having only known a life of wealth and comfort, struggles to comprehend the horrific conditions in which the prisoners are forced to live.

As the boys are rounded up in a march, Bruno confronts the harsh reality-of the camp. The reality differed greatly from what Bruno had imagined. Instead of cafes, shopping centres, and playing children, he saw groups of people staring at the ground with expressions of profound sadness. Bruno, having only known a life of wealth and comfort, struggled to comprehend the horrific conditions in which the prisoners were forced to live. As the boys were rounded up in a march, Bruno whispered. “What’s happening? What’s going on? It’s a march, whispered Shmuel. They make people go on marches, said Bruno, appalled. I can’t go on a march. I have to go home in time for dinner. Its roast beef tonight, Shmuel said, putting a finger on his lips. Don’t say anything or they get angry” (217).

Bruno & sperately wanted to go home, but he and Shmuel f’nd them swept into the march and then into a long, warm room. Fnghtened, the two boys hold hands. “You’re my best friend, Shmuel, Bruno said. My best friend for life.” The soldiers closed the doors to the room, and everyone gasped. The room went dark, but Bruno continued to hold Shmuel’s hand, determined not to let go. Nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let it go” (220).

2. CONCLUSION:

In the end, they are led into a gas chamber, where they are killed by lethal gas without ever knowing what is really happening. Though the ending is sudden and grim, it reflects the reality of how millions of people lost their lives during the Holocaust. In the concluding chapter “Holocaust” the stark reality of the Holocaust hits Bruno and the readers with full force. As Bruno unwittingly ventures into the concentration camp where Shmuel resides, the horrific truth of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust becomes painfully apparent. It underscores the need for remembrance, education, and vigilance against the seeds of hatred and intolerance that can lead to such unimaginable suffering. Through the innocence of Bruno and the tragic fate that befalls him, the novel leaves a lasting impact, urging readers to confront the past and strive for a future built on compassion, acceptance, and understanding.

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