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Bachelor's thesis

# Historical Context for Young Adult Readers: Exploring the Hidden Meaning of the Novel and Film Adaption 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas'

Bachelor Thesis, ENG2502

June 2020

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## ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis investigates the historical context in the book 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas', and the film adaption with the same title, and shows how the different layers of meaning in the narration contributes to revealing the historical elements of the book/film. The book is a young adult fiction, adding a deeper level in the analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Young Adult Fiction (YAF) has emerged to be an important pedagogical tool when teaching Holocaust in schools. According to Vandana Saxena (2019, p. 156), YAF helps the reader get emotionally involved in the case and to become a part of the process of remembering. She also debates whether storytelling is a suitable way for young readers to bear memories of human rights abuse and genocide, or if it is just a way for the readers to get the feeling of all being a part of a story. Many scholars agree that it is important, and even a moral duty, for the future generations, to remember the past, and they also tend to be aware of the fact that a YAF can be too generic to cover all the complexities the Holocaust narratives bring (Saxena, 2019, p. 157). When imbuing Holocaust literature with moral and social obligation to the past, one helps the young readers to develop a sense of a collective responsibility and intersubjectivity on their way to becoming an adult (Saxena, 2019, p. 160). Over the last two decades there has been a growing focus on the Holocaust education. This has been accompanied by a rise of young adult novels about Holocaust (Saxena, 2019, p. 158). Saxena (2019, pp. 161-162) refers to research that include the need to integrate historical events, no matter how traumatic they can be, with the project of acculturation and socialisation that both is a part of guiding YAF. She continues by saying that the acts of reading critically, emphatically, and consciously, is a way to appropriate a memory not retrieved from the readers experience, this memory having the function to ensure that the event is not repeated (Saxena, 2019, p. 162).

This bachelor thesis will take a closer look into the importance of understanding the historical context of John Boyne's 2006 novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* for making sense of its plot, and the special challenges this poses for young adult readers. The version of the book used in this assignment is the paperback Definitions edition from 2014 (Boyne, 2014). What follows then is a discussion regarding the strategies used in the 2008 film adaptation of the novel, produced by David Heyman and directed by Mark Herman, of conveying the historical context that adds a new layer (Heyman, 2008).

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is the story of a young boy living in Nazi Germany with his older sister Gretel and parents. His father is a soldier who gets promoted to the job as a commandant in the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. This leads to Bruno and his family having to move from Berlin to Poland. Bruno is a boy who loves to explore, therefore one of the first things he does when arriving at their new house is to explore its surroundings. On this exploration he meets Shmuel, a young, Jewish boy living on the other side of the fence. Despite the barrier between them, the two boys develop a good friendship. Bruno struggles to understand why there needs to be such a big difference between what he is allowed to do and



what Shmuel is allowed to do. He is not acquainted with why his country hates the Jews, and for him Shmuel is just a boy his age that he can play with and talk to.

## EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF 'THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS'

In the book we see two layers of meaning in the narration, the first being Bruno, and what we see through his eyes, the second being the reader's actual perception of what really happens. Bruno's layer of narration is affected by Bruno's age, leading to the narration feeling quite ignorant and childish. This becomes clear when Bruno first meets Shmuel and sees that he wears an armband with a star on it (Boyne, 2014, p. 106). Both the swastika and the Jewish star appear as an image on page 127 to show which symbol Shmuel and his family had to wear and which symbol Bruno's father wears, thus making it clear which side of the divide either family belongs to (Boyne, 2014, p. 127). Here we see a passage that sheds light on the two different layers when Bruno talks to Shmuel about the different types of armbands Shmuel and Father uses:

'Yes, but they're different, aren't they?' Said Shmuel. 'No one's ever given me an armband,' said Bruno. 'But I never asked to wear one,' said Shmuel. 'All the same,' said Bruno. 'I think I'd quite like one. I don't know which one I'd prefer though, your one or Father's.' (Boyne, 2014, p. 127)

For Bruno the question whether to use the armband with the Jewish star or the one with the Swastika is not a question of wearing the symbol of a Jew or the symbol of a Nazi, which is the case if you see the passage through the second layer of narration, it is more a question of simply which one has the best aesthetic fit, correlating to the first layer of narration. In the film adaptation, Shmuel and the other prisoners do not wear an armband with a Jewish star on it, which is more in keeping with the practice in actual concentration camps, which may be familiar to viewers who have seen images from them in other contexts. Also, the father does not wear an armband with the swastika in the adaptation. On the other hand, the striped pyjamas, at least that is what Bruno's perception of it is, appears in both the adaptation and the book. The question why the screenplay author has decided to leave out the armbands but include the pyjamas is interesting to investigate. To leave out the pyjamas must be impossible due to the fact that the Jews in Auschwitz all used this outfit, replacing it with anything different would be misleading. Also, the name being *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* makes

the inclusion of the pyjamas completely inevitable. However, the decision to not include the armbands in the adaptation can be a sign of the producer seeing the armbands as an unnecessary detail, thinking that the pyjamas included enough symbolism on its own. A reader of a book with no pictures do not get the same visualization as a viewer of a film does. Perhaps Boyne felt the need to add this armband to achieve a clear distinction between the two boys.

Another example of the two layers of narration is shown when Bruno asks Lieutenant Kotler if he knows if there are any spare tires around the house, which he intends to make a swing out of. Lieutenant Kotler call upon Pavel, a Jew that works as a servant in Bruno's family's house, to get him to fetch the tire:

'Hey, you' he shouted, then adding a word that Bruno did not understand. 'Come over here, you—' He said the word again, and something about the harsh sound of it made Bruno look away and feel ashamed to be part of this at all. (Boyne, 2014, p. 75)

The first layer of narration is shown when the author points out that Bruno did not understand what the word means while the second layer of narration is shown when the author continues by saying that Lieutenant Kotler uses the word in a way that clearly make Bruno feel uncomfortable. This gives the impression that Bruno do not know what is wrong with the exact word Lieutenant Kotler is using, but that he understands by the way he is saying it that the word must be a bad word. Boyne has chosen to not include the word being said out loud, so that the reader must figure out the meaning for themselves. Knowing the history, the first assumption that comes to mind is the word Jew. I find it interesting that Boyne has used the word 'you' in addition to, what most likely must be the word 'Jew'. The words have a linguistic similarity which gives the reader an extra hint regarding the word the author deliberately has left out.

Also, the book describes a scene where Bruno's grandfather comes to visit. The family hosts a dinner where also Lieutenant Kotler is invited. Father is already upset with him due to the fact that he revealed that the Jews get burned inside of Auschwitz to Bruno's mother, something that will be discussed later in the bachelor thesis, which makes her very upset and angry with Father. During the dinner, Father learns that Lieutenant Kotler's father moved to Switzerland at the beginning of the war, which makes him a defector. One of the prisoners from Auschwitz, Pavel, is there to serve at the dinner party. Lieutenant Kotler is so stressed by being questioned by the Commandant that he accidentally bumps into Pavel while he is filling up his glass of wine. This causes a mess, and Lieutenant Kotler snaps at Pavel,

dragging him with him to the hall. This episode is described through Bruno's perspective in the book:

What happened then was both unexpected and extremely unpleasant. Lieutenant Kotler grew very angry with Pavel and no one – not Bruno, not Gretel, not Mother and not even Father – stepped in to stop him doing what he did next, even though none of them could watch. Even though it made Bruno cry and Gretel grow pale. (Boyne, 2014, pp. 148-149)

Nothing is said explicitly about what actually happens, and readers have to add for themselves what they think is going on. The adaption does not show exactly what happens either, but adds the sound of the attack, and this guide the viewer's interpretation and aids their understanding of the scene by making it more explicit. However, in the adaption we hear that Lieutenant Kotler beats and kicks Pavel (Heyman, 2008, 0:52:22). We do not get to know what the result of this is, but it is the last we see of Pavel. Here we see an example of the two layers of meaning in the narration in the film adaption. The first layer shows us what the family hears. The second layer shows us their face expressions, which tell us that what is going on is not pleasant to witness. If you combine these two layers, you can understand what situation is occurring, especially when knowing how the Nazis treated the Jews. This incident is also a good example of how one specific element of the story can be perceived completely different by adapting the book to the film screen. For an adolescent it can be traumatic to experience the incident in the way it is portrayed in the adaption, and it can be easier to read the description in the book and make up one's own perception of the story. On the other hand, it is important to remember that a book that includes a lot of historical elements, also must have some sort of realness to the story to not misguide young readers and give them the wrong impression of how the history occurred.

Auschwitz is an example of the historical context being important for understanding the storyline. As a matter of fact, the name Auschwitz is not mentioned once neither in the book or in the adaption. Nevertheless, in the book we get a sense of Auschwitz when the word 'Out-With' is used. 'Out-With' is what Bruno think the place they are moving to is called. It is only Bruno who has heard the name wrong and therefore mispronouncing it every time. More direct hints that 'Out-With' actually means Auschwitz appears quite late in the book, when Bruno talks to Gretel about 'Out-With' and she corrects him saying "It's not called Out-With, Bruno" (Boyne, 2014, p. 181). But instead of writing in quotation what Gretel is saying

when pronouncing the name correct the author instead writes "... pronouncing the name of the camp correctly for him" (Boyne, 2014, p. 181), and the reader therefore needs to have some prior knowledge of the concentration camp in order to decipher the meaning of the reference. Revealing the truth about 'Out-With' so late in the book can be both useful, the readers can get a unbiased look at the story, not prejudicing Bruno and Shmuel's friendship at all, but also it can make the storyline difficult to follow. The second layer of narration is important in this case. Auschwitz being such an important symbol in the story, the importance of the historical context is huge, and we do not get that context through the first layer of meaning in the narration. Bruno is too young to understand what Auschwitz is, in fact he is too young to even manage to pronounce it correctly. He needs Gretel to explain it to him, and even then struggles to grasp the meaning of it. The second layer is crucial in understanding what the book actually is about, not knowing that Bruno's father is the commandant at a Nazi concentration camp leaves the historical meaning of the book unsolved. This do not correlate with the book being useless if not understanding the historical context, but it does make the storyline harder to follow.

With this in mind, it is natural to take a look at how much historical context adolescents in Norway holds. The main indication of what young Norwegian readers today know about Holocaust is what they have been taught in school, and that is specified in the curriculum. Norwegian pupils do not get education on Holocaust and World War II before lower secondary school. The old curriculum states that pupils should after finishing tenth grade "be able to discuss the reasons for and the effects of important international conflict during the 1900s and 2000s" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013, my translation). The new curriculum states that after finishing tenth grade, pupils should "be able to explain reasons for and consequences of terror and genocide, such as Holocaust, and reflect on how extreme attitudes and extreme actions can be prevented" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020, my translation). This indicates that Norwegian pupils should have some knowledge about Holocaust, especially based on the fact that the new curriculum added an own learning aim regarding Holocaust, which clearly indicates that this is an important aspect of the history to remember. In other words, when reaching the age of 15 or 16 Norwegian pupils should have heard about Holocaust and have a certain amount of knowledge on the case. YAF is aimed at 12- to 18-year-olds, and the adaption has a parental guidance of 13 years (PG-13). Therefore, it is safe to say that the odds are in favour of the youths having some knowledge about Holocaust prior to reading the book or watching the film adaption, but it is difficult to gauge

precisely what they know and whether they will be acquainted with all the contextual information that the novel and the adaption rely on.

For young readers and viewers, it is especially important to keep in mind that their memory is being created rather than invoked, in contrast to readers who are old enough to actually remember what is being represented in a book or a film (Saxena, 2019, p. 161). The prosthetic memories become important in this case. The prosthetic memories are not derived from the person's own lived experience but through engaging with a wide range of cultural technologies (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 25-26). These prosthetic memories are important for the generation that have no direct access to historical traumas and memories from World War II. (Saxena, 2019, p. 161) This is most certainly the case for both the book and the adaption. For some, the content of this book, or the adaption, can be the very first they learn about Holocaust, depending on the age of the reader or viewer.

In general, much more historical context is provided in the film adaptation than in the book upon which it is based. The very first thing that appears at the beginning of the adaption is the Nazi-flag with the swastika, an image that automatically signals Nazism for most viewers. Also, as smoke in the sky over the house is shown, Lieutenant Kotler points out to Mother that they smell even worse when they burn, it is clear for viewers in the know that 'they' refers to the Jews in the concentration camp (Heyman, 2008, 0:46:21). This is a case where the viewer must have the knowledge regarding the gassing, and burning, of the Jews to understand who Lieutenant Kotler is referring to when saying 'they'. How much to reveal and how much to conceal when writing texts about horrific events is two questions that authors have struggled with. According to Naomi Sokoloff, this is an especially pertinent dilemma for authors who write for a young audience (Sokoloff, 2003, p. 443). This may be something the author had in mind when writing this part of the story. It can be very traumatic to get all the details on how the Jews were treated as a 12-year-old reading the book. Exposing the horrific details of Holocaust can lead to the young readers being vulnerable to psychological stress, which they do not have the correct equipment to erase or handle (Saxena, 2019, p. 158). The demand to be accurate comes with the risk of tampering with the readers psychological wellbeing (Saxena, 2019, p. 160).

We see another example of historic contextualization in the adaption when they get the message that Berlin has been bombed, and that Grandmother has died (Heyman, 2008, 1:04:34). Also, when Father speaks to Bruno and Gretel regarding them moving away from their new house, he says that it is impossible to go back to Berlin until it is safe (Heyman, 2008, 1:09:41). When knowing the history, you know that the bombing of Berlin is at the end

of the war and that it happened at a point where Germany was beginning to lose the war. Nevertheless, none of these two episodes are mentioned in the book, instead the complete opposite is the case for the returning to Berlin: “And so the decision was made. (...) Father announced that Mother, Gretel and Bruno would be returning to Berlin within the week.” (Boyne, 2014, p. 192). For the case of the death of Grandmother, the book only mentions that “Grandmother had died and the family had to go home for the funeral.” (Boyne, 2014, p. 176). The reason for her death is not revealed, meaning that the bombing of Berlin can be the reason, but Boyne has not explicitly pointed that out in the book. For the readers, it can just as well be due to the fact that Grandmother was quite old, hence sickness can be a natural cause of death. The adaption gives a concrete reason for Grandmother’s death, one with a lot of historical context. Why the author of the screenplay has chosen to include this despite of it not being a part of the book can correlate to the movie having an older audience than the book. The book is specifically aimed at adolescents, while the adaption has a parental guidance of 13, this just inflecting that you must be 13 or older to watch it, but not that it is a teenage movie.

Also, a scene in the book describes that Bruno’s family have a dinner with Hitler and his wife before moving to the other house. Before the dinner, Bruno and Gretel get some ground rules from Father, one of them being the following: “...If the Fury ignores you then you do not say anything either, but look directly ahead and show him the respect and courtesy that such a great leader deserves.” (Boyne, 2014, p. 120). This is one of the clearest historical contextualisation being provided during the entire book, saying straight out that the Fury is the leader of their country. This dinner is not a part of the adaption. In fact, Hitler does not appear at all in the adaption, just the Heil Hitler-greeting, until Bruno’s grandmother is buried, and we see a flower with Hitler’s name on it on the coffin. Hitler is the biggest symbol of World War II and Nazism which makes it somewhat surprising why he is not a bigger part of the story than he is. This can have something to do with the fact that Hitler did not visit Auschwitz much and that the commandant did not speak much to Hitler directly, or that him appearing in a film would be shocking and could contribute to steal the focus of the storyline.

Another aspect of the film adaption, shows that Gretel clearly gets inspired by Lieutenant Kotler and the surroundings they now live in. We see her go from a sweet girl who plays with dolls and wears dresses to having posters of the Swastika and Hitler in her bedroom and wearing the Hitler Youth uniform. The book, in contrast, does not take her enchantment with Hitler and his ideology this far, rather showing the readers her new interest in geography: “Gretel had decided that she didn’t like dolls any more (...). In their place she

had hung up maps of Europe that Father had given her, and every day she put little pins around constantly after consulting the daily newspaper” (Boyne, 2014, p. 180) Nevertheless, it is not explicitly mentioned that she is not becoming a part of the Hitler Youth. The author of the screenplay may have interpreted Gretel’s transformation in the book to be familiar with the changes adolescents went through during the Hitler regime. As an adolescent that has no knowledge or references to the Hitler Youth, Gretel’s transformation in the adaption can be difficult to follow. The Hitler Youth is not something that is commonly associated with World War II and Nazi Germany. Of course, many people have learned about it and has a certain amount of knowledge on the subject, but to think that an adolescent have all the references they need to understand the underlying meaning in this case is unlikely. This means that the second layer of meaning in the narration is crucial, also in this case, to fully understand the situation. The detail of Gretel being strongly influenced by the Nazi way of thinking may be something that can remove the attention of the main storyline, since the struggle to understand the situation can hinder the viewers focus.

## CONCLUSION

The historical context of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is crucial for understanding the layers of meaning in the narration. The first layer gives the story a childish point of view on an important aspect of the world history, which can be a refreshing viewpoint on something that normally is quite dark and depressing. Nevertheless, it is also important to remember that Holocaust is such an important historical event that we must not forget, in order to not repeat the horrific tragedy in the future. Therefore, the second layer of meaning is important to reveal the historical context of the story, making it a pedagogical tool for young adult readers. A YAF with an historic focus or storyline can be an adolescent’s way to educate itself on the world history, which make the historical contextualization in the book very important. Here it is important to keep the story reliable and as close to reality as possible to not misguide the reader. It is also important to remember that adolescents have not experienced these events on their own, and that they must gain their prosthetic memories through cultural approaches, such as YAF and films (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 25-26).

The historical context also plays a vital role in the storyline in the book’s film adaption, and the amount of concrete historical context provided is unquestionably much higher for the film rather than the book. The adaption also shed a new light on aspects of the book that we only see through Bruno’s eyes in the book, the incident with Pavel being an excellent example

of this. Not only does the film adaption visualize the entire book, it also adds some extra material that both eliminates important aspects of the book, but also adding some new and exciting viewpoints to elements of the book not yet explored.



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