



Innocence Vs Cruelty: A Study of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

Blessi S.

PG and Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* masterfully juxtaposes the innocence of childhood with the stark realities of war, set against the backdrop of Second World War and the Holocaust. This paper takes us into the story of Bruno, a nine-year-old German boy, who moves with his family from Berlin to a house near a concentration camp during the Second World War. Bruno's family's relocation to (Auschwitz) which is miss pronounced by Bruno as "Out-With" exposes him to a world marred by prejudice, hatred, and violence. Bruno, the young protagonist, represents the innocence of childhood. His experiences gradually expose him to the harsh realities of the world, leading to a loss of innocence. The central theme is the profound impact of war in the children's psyche.

Keywords: innocence, Holocaust, prejudice, hatred, violence, psyche

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has been subtitled 'A Fable'. It is a fable about human beings, set in the era of Nazi Germany's Third Reich that perpetrated the Holocaust. The novel and its film adaptation afford a post-modern revisioning of the horrors of the holocaust through the eyes of a naïve, innocent and puzzled German boy. Holocaust literature refers to a body of written works that document, reflect and experiences the aftermath of the Holocaust, the systematic genocide of six million Jews and millions of other persecuted groups by Nazi Germany during Second World War. The majority of the story takes place in Nazi Germany and at a fictionalized version of the Auschwitz concentration camp, from the perspective of an innocent child, Bruno, to show how children might perceive such a horrific event without understanding it.

The important theme of the novel is the loss of innocence by the consequences of war. Boyne masterfully portrays the character's innocence in the beginning of the novel and explores how the innocence is shattered by the societal norms, prejudice and the consequence of war. The terms 'innocence' is defined as a quality of absence of sin, guilt, or moral wrongdoing. The children in the novel are considered innocent because of their

lack of understanding, pure friendship, curiosity, and exploration. Bruno's character serves as a lens through which the researcher examines the gradual erosion of innocence.

This paper raises an awareness of how war, and brutality affect the lives and well-being of children during the holocaust and to identify the traumatic experiences that happened to them by exposing the minds of innocent children to the fear and confusion in the world of War. It also explores how one's childhood innocence and ignorance of their ethnic circumstances ultimately led to their demise. While adults perished during the Holocaust, it is the innocent children who suffered the dual tragedy of losing both their lives and their parents. This loss is particularly poignant, as children are inherently reliant on their parents for support and guidance.

The critical method that highlights the connection between literature and its historical setting in Stephen Greenblatt's "New Historicism" aims to comprehend how literary works both represent and influence the political, social, and cultural currents of their day. Greenblatt's New Historicism is used to describe the problems in the book in connection to the historical setting and to analyse how the book depicts the history and cultural circumstances of Nazi Germany. Despite the fact that the novel is fictional, studying human's innocent behaviour may help to outline the reality we live in emphasising the innocence of children.

Boyne's novel, brought to life the story of children's innocence during the 1941–1945 Holocaust in Germany, serves as an example of how New Historicism is positioned within a literary text to conceptualise the concerns surrounding a historical reality. Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism served as the theoretical foundation for this investigation, which examined the problems in Germany that are reflected in the book.

The novel begins with Bruno, together with his family living in a luxurious home in Berlin. One afternoon, when Bruno returned home from school, he was surprised to find Maria, the family's maid packing his belongings. And we could find Bruno's innocence in the following conversation with his mother saying,

Mother, said Bruno, marching towards her, 'what's going on? Why is Maria going through my things?' 'She's packing them,' explained

Mother. ‘Packing them?’ he asked, running quickly through.... the events of the previous few days... whether he’d been particularly naughty... ‘Why?’ he asked then ‘what have I done?’.... ‘What is?’ he asked. Am I being sent away? (2-3)

Through the above lines we could find Bruno’s innocence in the troubled situation of his family, together moving from Berlin to Poland because Bruno’s father is promoted as the Commandant after a visit from Hitler himself. The family therefore relocates owing to the orders of the ‘Führer’ which Bruno mispronounces as “The Fury” (52). Bruno is not willing to leave his friends Daniel, Karl, and Martin and move to Out-With. In reality, “Out-With”

or “Auschwitz” concentration camp in Poland is the largest and deadliest camp during the Holocaust.

Bruno never stops feeling lonely because, he and his sister Gretel are home-schooled, unlike in Berlin, he has no companions to play with. His curiosity drives him to explore the house as an innocent child explorer both in his earlier home, Berlin and also in Out-With, Poland. His curiosity as an innocent explorer is found in the novel when Bruno started exploring the two houses. Both the present and the past houses now stand as a stark contrast as, “The house in Berlin was enormous, and even though he lived there for nine years he was still able to find nooks and crannies that he had not fully finished exploring yet. There were even whole rooms – such as Father’s office’ which was Out Of Bounds At All Times And No Exceptions-that he had barely been inside.” (13).

Bruno finds his old home big and that he has never fully explored it completely, mainly the father’s office which was strictly banned for him to enter into. Whereas his new house Out-With has not reached to his expectations for exploring, as the ‘house’ was the exact opposite from his previous ‘home’ at Berlin, as described further, “He went upstairs and turned slowly around in a full circle, hoping he might find a small door or cubby hole where a decent amount of exploration could eventually be done, but there wasn’t one... ‘This isn’t home and it never will be,’ he muttered” (17).

One day as Bruno was trying to search whether there was anything that could be of

interest to him, one thing caught his eye. Over the corner of the room opposite to the door there was a window in the ceiling that stretched down into the wall. This window could be called as a ‘Portal to the Unknown’, a portal that opens Bruno’s eyes to a world beyond his sheltered existence, leading him to a harsh reality of what lies beyond. The window also represents Bruno’s misinterpretations and his gradual realisation of the truth.

The novel not only portrays the innocence of Bruno but also his elder sister Gretel, where both siblings share their own interpretation of what they see through the window. The novel showcase the innocent curiosity of Bruno’s first view through the window as he misunderstands the camp as a farm and the people in it as farmers, not understanding their true plight, whereas his sister Gretel who is naive, and mentioned as “She’s a Hopeless Case” (20) who begins to shed some of her innocence as she peers out of the window and expresses her own confusion and misinterpretation about the camp which she initially perceived it as an odd farm with strange activities as “But we learned in geography class that in the countryside, where all the farmers are and the animals, and they grow all the food, there are huge areas like this where people live and work and send all the food to feed us.’ She looked out of the window again...’ This must be it. It’s the countryside.” (35)

Boyne’s novel has also portrayed Gretel’s change of innocence as the story progresses. The innocence of Gretel is deteriorating, by learning the history of Nazi, their propaganda and her father’s position. Her perspective is influenced by her sudden shift in her interest from dolls to maps, symbolising her transition from childhood innocence to a more matured understanding of the war and its implications. Bruno, on the other hand, continues to be an innocent explorer which finally results in the terrible ending of the novel. The novel’s protagonist Bruno highlights his untainted view and pure-hearted curiosity of questioning, which often serves as a challenge to the adults, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths. For instance, Bruno’s father who is a high-ranking Nazi officer, is reminded of the moral implications of his actions which exposes Bruno to

understand more about the hypocrisy and moral decay occurring in his vicinity which is seen while he replies to Bruno's question. "Ah, those people, said Father, nodding his head and smiling slightly, 'Those people...well, they're not people at all, Bruno,' Bruno frowned. 'They're not?' he asked, unsure what Father meant by that... They're nothing to do with you. You have nothing whatsoever in common with them" (55). The words of Bruno's father when he refers to the prisoners as "not people at all" is a chilling example of dehumanisation.

Philosopher David Livingstone Smith is the main proponent of the idea of dehumanisation. He says that dehumanisation happens when persons are seen as "subhuman" regardless of their outward appearance—that is, as lacking a truly human nature. Dehumanization is a psychological process and as such it cannot be prevented from happening. Edmund Burke in Zimbardo states "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing" (313). It still carries a lot of meaning when it comes to genocidal dehumanization.

The above language refers to the Nazi ideology that sought to strip Jews of their humanity. This is followed by an innocent and a confused question by Bruno, "They're not?" which reveals his inability to comprehend such cruelty. Bruno is a curious explorer who eventually finds a back door and breaks free one day into the forest, where he encounters a Jewish boy, Shmuel by a barbed-wire fence. They are the same age and have the same birthday. Being able to play with at least one new friend makes Bruno very happy. He sneaks out the back door to meet his new companion by the barbed-wire fence every day after class. They both share a conversation about the signs which is differs from one another which the children probably dose not know what it meant for, their conversation are as follows,

I came home from school and my mother was making armbands for us from a special cloth and drawing a star on each one. Like this.' Using his finger he drew a design in the dusty ground beneath him. 'And every time we left the house, she told us we had to wear one of these armbands.' 'My father wears one too,' said Bruno. On his uniform. It's very nice. It's

bright red with a black-and-white design on it. Using his finger he drew another design in the dusty ground on his side of the fence. ‘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. (130)

It emphasises the stark contrast between Bruno and Shmuel’s lives as well as their innocence. The privileged and naive son of a Nazi commandant, Bruno displays his German ancestry through his father’s uniform. In the meantime, the Star of David, a physical and figurative symbol of tyranny, is worn by Shmuel, the Jewish kid who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. Bruno is incredibly innocent and ignorant about the war, Nazism, and even the reality of impoverished people in his immediate vicinity. Even though he never truly understands what is going on in the battle, he hopes to join the military like his father when he grows up.

Then the two friends converse upon how they both ended up in Berlin. Then Shmuel informed Bruno that they were being transported to Auschwitz by train, an inadequately ventilated train. Bruno declared loudly that he and his family had purchased a car and that he did not think Shmuel’s predicament was any different from his having to leave Berlin. While Bruno views Shmuel’s story as an adventure, Shmuel finds it to be painful. Bruno’s constant melancholy stems from the fact that he must leave his pals behind, and that Shmuel and all the other Jewish youngsters must dwell in concentration camps and ghettos. His existence as a prisoner is challenging. Unlike Shmuel, Bruno consumes a lot of the food and is accustomed to always having more than enough. In contrast to Shmuel, who is constantly hungry Bruno consumes a large portion of the meal, as seen by their conversation. “Chocolate,” said Shmuel very slowly. “I’ve only ever had chocolate once”. Bruno replied with utter confusion, “Only once? I love chocolate. I can’t get enough of it although mother says it’ll rot my teeth” (135).

The novel shows Bruno’s helping tendency where, Bruno offers to cut Shmuel some and he eats it quickly. Shmuel likely receives little to no food in the camp, which is why he is so thin and naturally asks Bruno if he has any food with him. Shmuel lives in constant fear and is reluctant to defy their commands as Nazi Germans treat their

prisoners, the Jews, with no pity. The difference between the lives of slave owners and slaves can be traced back to the early era like how the Germans punished the Jews by stealing, destroying, and confiscating their possessions.

The author uses a child's perspective to explain the Holocaust because he understood that the experience was indefinable. Bruno asks Shmuel, "Why do you wear pyjamas all day?" as a metaphor for his inability to comprehend the mass killings committed by Nazi Germans (157). During the Holocaust, racial hatred was evident, but it came from the system rather than the heart. Bruno is even naive that he cannot understand why Shmuel lives in a concentration camp.

At last Bruno's final exciting adventure with his secret companion to cross the fence with striped pyjamas and to look for Shmuel's lost father in the Concentration camp. Unfortunately, they couldn't locate him and when the troops came, they took the two youngsters along with a mob and were thrown into a long, cosy room. Bruno apologised to Shmuel for not finding his father, and both clutched their hands in fear and everything was over. Just before dying, Bruno admitted that Shmuel would always be his best buddy.

While Shmuel was taken as a prisoner, his youth and innocence were taken away from him; he was meant to enjoy his childhood, learn, and play with his friends. His mother, father, brother and grandfather all were taken away from him and imprisoned. He had little freedom and was constantly hungry where he was beaten by the Germans in the camp. So the results of war will always be catastrophic. This incident had a detrimental effect on all, particularly the youngsters, Bruno and Shmuel.

Bruno befriends Shmuel out of innocence and the horrors of the concentration camp highlights the devastating impact of war on the human psyche resulting to a heart breaking conclusion. As a powerful symbol of innocence and humanity overcoming prejudice and hatred, Bruno's friendship with Shmuel, a Jewish boy imprisoned in the concentration camp, highlights the tragic loss of innocence in a world consumed by conflict. Their innocent interactions stand in contrast to the cruelty and ignorance of the adult world.



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