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The Boy in Striped Pyjamas

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The Boy in Striped Pyjamas

Abstract

This is a review of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008).

Portraying one of humanity's greatest modern tragedies from the eyes of an 8-year old boy, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* attests to the heartache and transgressions that occurred under the Nazi regime, in war-torn Europe. Starkly unlike the archetypal Holocaust/Shoah film, director Mark Herman, presents a relatively sanitized narrative which, despite its lack of blood and brutality, resonates with audiences in a thought-provoking and profound manner.

In the film's opening scene, audiences meet Bruno, a fun-loving German child who likes to run around with his friends and pretend he's an airplane. We see the children happily zooming past stern-looking soldiers and buildings draped with conspicuous Nazi-flags, completely oblivious to the Jewish civilians who we briefly see being forced out of the ghettos and loaded into tarped army vehicles. This paradox of goodness and innocence coexisting side by side with evil is one that will continue throughout the film. Viewers discover that Bruno and his family must leave their comfortable lives in Berlin and relocate to the countryside, due his soldier-father's promotion. Their new home turns out to be barren and cold-looking with Nazi soldiers constantly wandering in and out of its doors, hardly a place for children. The outer yard is completely off-limits to Bruno which, of course, only kindles his inquisitiveness. Bruno, one day while looking outside of his window, notices children playing on what he believes is a neighbour's farm. Curiously, though, they are all wearing the same striped "pyjamas." Upon knowledge of his

discovery, Bruno's parents board up the window, preventing him from finding out anymore about their neighbours. One day, however, Bruno wanders off their property and comes to an electric barbed-wire fence behind which a young boy with a shaved-head is sitting. Bruno learns that the boy's name is Shmuel, he is eight years old and he is Jewish. The two children become friends and Bruno slowly begins to understand the severity of Shmuel's circumstances. Learning more about the men who are in charge of the farm, Bruno begins to question the righteousness of his Commandant-father. The forbidden friendship has startling consequences, not just for Bruno and Shmuel but also for their families. Climaxing with an unexpected finale, viewers are left in a state of anxiety. What just happened? Did the film really end like that? It took me an entire evening to get over the conclusion, not due to its shock-value but rather because of its convoluted nature and its near-reduction of the Holocaust to a mere plot device. Nevertheless, despite the unfitting British accents of its German main characters, the film does just what it was intended to do: make people think.

As mentioned, the contrast of good and evil is the most cogent theme of the film. Innocent children are compared to the corrupt Nazi soldiers, the doting mother is weighted against with the absentee-father, the kindness of Shmuel contrasts with the anti-Semitic propaganda Bruno is taught, and young Bruno even naively mistakes the prisoner numbers of the camp inmates as a sort of game that he wishes

to participate in. The film creates a plotline of consequences, prejudices and dominant assumptions that are continually overturned by protagonist Bruno. As viewers, we simultaneously sympathize with and admire the child who, although unaware of the horrors occurring behind the fence, understands the fundamental value of human life.

While *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* lacks clear religious connotations, something perhaps a bit peculiar for a Holocaust film, Bruno's character through his actions is implicitly elevated from child-status to that of a Messianic dreamer. Although he cannot aid in the plight of the Jews, he questions the prevailing ideas of what it means to truly love thy neighbour and teaches his family about their own values and vulnerabilities, as well as the effects of their beliefs. The child protagonist thus becomes a pivotal character, representing hope for change of the future and the root of subsequent pivotal action. Unlike the adults, who symbolize the crooked world, Bruno possesses an innate sense of integrity which prevents him from turning his back on his morality and his friendships. In this sense, and in a doomed Messiah-like fashion, Bruno is fated to have to make a sacrifice.

Additionally, the laws of moral causation, or karma, are also fiercely depicted in the film as Bruno, in an ironic plot twist, suffers the same fate as the thousands of Jews who were put to death by Bruno's father. Although his wife continuously expresses discontent both with living so close to the concentration

camp and with the realities of her husband's work, the Commandant slowly comes to the realization that indeed he has reaped what he has sown. Only once he realizes that his son has died do audiences see remorse in his eyes.

The theme of betrayal also permeates throughout the film, as Bruno's father, like all of the Nazis, is depicted as treacherous and disloyal. Bruno's mother, a docile and loving woman, views her husband with contempt after discovering that he lied to her about what is really transpiring on the nearby "farm." From this point on in the film, she feels she can no longer rightfully love or trust her husband. Likewise, Bruno feels deceived by his father when he realizes that he is no longer the good soldier that he believed him to be. Unlike typical religious narratives where forgiveness follows a betrayal, this film offers audiences no explicit exoneration. Rather, viewers are hopelessly left believing that nothing can redeem the actions of the father.

Casting the plot neither on historical fact nor context, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* is rather a drama which uses the Holocaust as a dialectical tool, focusing not on the plight of a religious/cultural community, but rather on the predicaments of one German family. Staged almost entirely from his point of view, the film has a fairy-tale quality to it, focusing on the emotions and interpretations of Bruno, and his interactions with other people. While, to some, such a portrayal of the Holocaust may be too flippant or trivializing of very serious issues, others will find the film

refreshing in its ingenuity and innocent demeanour. Well-suited for those who prefer not to see the “blood and guts” of wartime-stories, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* is a well-written, evocative film appropriate for teenagers and adults, not for young children Bruno or Shmuel’s age.