

The boy in the striped pajamas as a genuine fable



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For an author portraying a topic as precarious and momentous as the Holocaust, perhaps the only adequate approach is through a fable, such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. In this novel, John Boyne creates main characters and a narrator that match the criteria of a fable, among other fable-like subject matter choices. Through language and textual features, Boyne weaves a genuine fable that successfully portrays and universalizes a sensitive social topic.

By creating characters that are vague in description, match archetypes or stereotypes, and partake in extraordinary incidents, this novel satisfies the main principles of a fable. The protagonist, Bruno, fits into the archetype of 'the innocent child' while the antagonist, Lieutenant Kotler, matches the stereotype of a Nazi soldier but also seems like a folktale villain. ' He [Lieutenant Kotler] wore the same type of uniform as Father... and looked very serious. ... Bruno could see that he had very blond hair'(pg. 19). Most characters lack definitive portrayals: for example, Mother's and Father's real names are never given. Also, the realistic likelihood of two protagonists from opposite ends of a social hierarchy meeting every day for almost a year, across the fence of a concentration camp, is very low. Nonetheless, ' Every afternoon ... Bruno took the long walk ... and talked with his ... friend [Shmuel]' (pg. 138). In light of the real-life social tensions that would have arisen, it is very unlikely for such circumstances to occur within reality.

In depicting the Holocaust through the eyes of an innocent child, who is oblivious to the evil that lurks within his society, as well as making language choices that are suitable for a child, John Boyne has even created an innocent fable-like tone that avoids addressing the historical and moral

complexity of the Holocaust. Through the innocence and ignorance of the young narrator, the novel indulges in language and vocabulary that is appropriate for children and is almost naïve in description. For example, Hitler is referred to as 'the Fury' (pg. 3) and the concentration camp, Auschwitz, is pronounced as 'Out-With' (pg. 25). The text avoids the disturbing details of the Holocaust, instead delivering a short fictitious story that views historical torture from a safe distance.

Finally, Boyne is able to present the sensitive topic of the Holocaust by focusing on characters who do not have especially clear historical models. One of the aspects of a fable is the unmistakable appearance of fiction, and although the Holocaust is not a fictitious event by any means, the circumstances and characters within the text are fabricated; there is no evidence to prove that Bruno or Shmuel ever existed. Also, fables are not concerned about being realistic or accurate; instead, the subject matter is used to communicate a moral, which in this text is 'treat others as you would like to be treated'. The ignorance and innocence depicted allow Boyne to withhold detail. For example, Shmuel is first described as 'the dot that become a speck that became a blob that became a figure that became a boy' (pg. 107). Fundamentally, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* includes subject matter choices that assist in holding the reader at a fanciful, fable-like distance.

Using language and textual features, John Boyne presents his novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* as a well-defined fable. Vague in description and made to represent archetypes or stereotypes, the characters are apt personages for a fable. Furthermore, the ignorant and innocent narration

results in language choices suitable for a fable, while the delicate subject matter of the Holocaust is presented in a way that blunts its impact. A fable, after all, is meant to be an escape from the hardships of reality, not a stark reminder of history at its worst.