

The social construction of childhood:

Explored with reference to 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' by John Boyne

Childhood is portrayed in many ways in both adult and children's literature and how this is represented depends on the author's perspective of childhood; this reflects how adults' perceptions of childhood shapes children's experience of being a child and their response to and engagement with the adult world (James and James, 2004:13). Recognising the importance of social interaction between adult and child, along with the impact of cultural, gender, class and ethnicity differences, helps understand how these interconnect to form the social construction of childhood (Aries, 1962:125). Through literature an author reflects the time and context the story was written in and therefore can be used to study childhood discourses. By studying 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' (Boyne, 2006) consideration will be given to why the author chose to set the story in World War II and explore the historical context of Hitler's Nazi ideology to understand the time leading up to the Holocaust. Further analysis of the novel provides representation of the Puritanical and Romantic discourses of childhood and how these competing discourses exist in the current dichotomy of 'fear of and fear for' children. Examining Bruno's interactions with adults provides further evidence of both discourses with reflection on how they can exist simultaneously depending on social context. The final section explores how play, even during adverse experiences such as war, contributes towards the social construction of childhood.

Boyne (2006), spent twenty years reading Holocaust literature trying to understand this time better. How the Holocaust happened within the lifetime of the generation

preceding his own fascinated him and to signify the closeness of this event chose his own father's birthdate as Bruno and Shmuel's shared birthdate. A shared birthdate also represents the author's belief in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (United Nations, 1948). However, these children are not equal due to their ethnicity and are experiencing very different childhoods. By setting the story at the time of the Holocaust the author uses this well-known historical event to highlight the existence of inexplicable and irrational hatred between people based on their ethnicity (Boyne, 2006). Despite awareness of the devastation war causes, persecution and prejudice based on religious beliefs continues in the world today (Haas, 2014:72). In 2006, as the author wrote this novel, the British forces were engaged in the Gulf War, and currently there is a war in Afghanistan and an escalating war in Syria (Lee, 2015). The 'fence', such as the one in the novel, symbolic as a barrier, prevents us from living together and these fences are unlikely to ever fully disappear.

The 'fence' in the novel is the perimeter of a concentration camp. Believing the Jews were aiming for world domination (Bytwerk, 2015:214), the Nazi ideology to cleanse their country of the 'parasite' Jews required concentration camps to imprison the Jews (Hennig, 2005:20). Examining the Nazi ideology and the rise of Hitler helps to understand the emerging social context of the novel's Holocaust setting. In 1918 after World War I, many Germans were disappointed at the country's leaders for surrendering from the war, signing the Treaty of Versailles and losing territory and this created political instability(Reference). German landowners, businessmen, judges and civil servants feared a Communist Revolution (Supple, 1993:56). An economic collapse followed; the German Mark depreciated so much a loaf of bread

cost over 200 thousand million Marks and workers used wheelbarrows to carry their wages home (Supple, 1993:59). Between 1919 -1932, the Nazi Party captivated the German public through its strong propaganda campaign under the swastika flag and Hitler's passionate and persuasive speeches (Hennig, 2005:20). Hitler promised to solve the economic and social problems and rebuild Germany and eradicate all non-pure Germans (Welch, 1998:25). Ironically, Hitler was born in Austria and only acquired German citizenship in 1932 (Welch, 1998:8). The 'Hitler Youth' saw indoctrination of German children on racial theory and anti-Semitism, any parents refusing to let their children join faced fines and imprisonment; enforcing the message from Hitler ' your child belongs to us' (Supple, 1993:87). The first concentration camp was built in 1933 and Hitler incarcerated immigrants, communists, homosexuals and instigated the 'Final Solution' pogrom on the Jews (Hayes and Roth, 2010:119). This provides some context to how the impoverished Germans, looking for a strong powerful leader to regenerate their country, opened the gateway for Hitler and his Nazi ideology to seek a pure race.

Looking back at the history of childhood, a major influence was Aries (1962:50), who proclaimed childhood was 'discovered' in the Middle Ages claiming adults were indifferent to the characteristics of childhood before this time. However, Pollock (1983:263) disagrees with this, stating Aries findings were based on an idealised Western view of childhood, and believes discovering children were regarded differently in the past does not mean they were not regarded as children. James and Prout (1997:35) believe childhood is socially constructed and therefore can be put together in diverse ways which means the definition of childhood is dependent upon the society it emerges from. Ultimately the combination of culture, class, gender and

ethnicity, impacts on social context which forms the social construction of childhood. It is the concepts and thoughts of the adults, at any given time, which create different social practices and perspectives on childhood, thus these different childhood discourses create different childhoods which means there can be no such thing as a natural childhood (James and Prout, 1997:24-26).

In 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas', the author represents the Puritanical and Romantic discourse and examples provided of how these discourses, through the character's perspective of childhood, impact on the social construction of childhood. Puritanical discourse perceives children to be born full of sin needing strict training and discipline to prevent them falling into evil ways (Smith, 2010:21). Parents hold absolute power over their children who have no rights or power of their own (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:11). The novel demonstrates a Puritanical perspective of childhood in the following ways, firstly Bruno disobeys his father by going to the fence with disobedience being a characteristic of an 'evil child' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:10). Secondly, Puritans view children as being wilful and demonic, which correlates with the German's view of Jews who are classed as parasites and the German's aim to break their will, including the children (Cunningham, 2005:60).

The Romantic perspective of childhood, strongly influenced by Rousseau (1712-1778), is one of innocence and natural goodness with children learning through their own interests in natural environments whilst being protected by adults from the risk and prejudices of society (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:13). Gabriel (2010:144) notes that after industrialisation into cities, the child became a symbol to adults representing innocence and the 'nature' they lost from the countryside. The Romantic view empowered the child promoting them to the status of a person with

specific needs, desires and rights (Rousseau, 1979). In the novel, Bruno's desire to play, explore and have adventures portrays a Romantic perspective on childhood and his innocent oblivion of what was happening in the concentration camps.

When comparing the Puritanical and Romantic discourse they are two opposing views of childhood which contradict each other (Lowe, 2004:67). These two discourses continue to compete with each other in the current dichotomy of 'Fear of and Fear for' children (Jones, 2009:105). The Puritanical perspective of children being sinful and dangerous feeds the 'fear of' children and what they are capable of and an image of 'youth crime' is projected into society through media coverage (Jones, 2009:107). Research by Anderson et al (2005) shows adults' perception of youth crime is much higher than the actual crimes committed. Subsequent research (NatCen, 2010) reports how young people feel unfairly labelled by adults as criminals, when their actions, such as being on the street with friends, feels a 'normal' thing to do; this ambivalence leaves them feeling alienated from adults. Alternatively, from a Romantic perspective, when parents 'fear for' their children and what could happen to them it increases their propensity to protect (Jones, 2009:106). One of parent's main fears is 'stranger danger' (Boyland, 2007), however, this fear may be based on a genuine growing threat or a reaction to media coverage. Subsequently this anxious rhetoric leads to actions which prohibit children's freedom as parents keep their children within the safety of their home rather than playing outside on the streets (Jones, 2009:109). However, the Byron Review (2008) states creating a 'risk averse' culture for children will lead them to play out their developmental drives to socialise and take risks in the digital world. Parents should respect children's right to take developmental risks, by playing video

games or surfing the internet, whilst ensuring their children do it in an informed way (Byron Review, 2008).

Further analysis of the representation of the Romantic discourse in the novel reveals the influence of key adult relationships in Bruno's life which impact on the social construction of his childhood. Bruno's father is the Nazi Commandant of the concentration camp, Bruno tries hard to abide by his strict rules. As a father, he displays a Romantic perspective of childhood believing children are innocent and require protection (Rousseau, 1979). He demonstrates this by protecting his son from what actually happens at the concentration camp. However, by restricting his knowledge of the concentration camp, his father overlooks Bruno's need to understand his new environment and diminishes Bruno's ability to make wise decisions (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010:3). Subsequently, Bruno seeks his own understanding and explores his new environment where curiosity takes him to the other side of the fence and his demise.

Another Romantic influence in Bruno's life was his grandmother who nurtures Bruno's development through play and structured activities through performances to the rest of the family (Wood, 2013:2). His grandmother embedded creative thinking within Bruno of 'what else is possible', a seed for his passion of adventure and exploring. His need for exploration took Bruno to his final adventure to the other side of the fence, whilst changing into the striped pyjamas he recalls his grandmother's expression 'you wear the right outfit you will feel like the person you are pretending to be' (Boyne, 2006:212). This final adventure demonstrates Bruno's own Romantic perspective on his life, his overwhelming desire to play and explore coming to fruition; pretending to be a person from the other side of the 'fence' was

just a game and this Romantic perspective made him oblivious to the realities beyond the fence.

At the same time, Bruno's tutor holds a Puritanical view of childhood represented by his teaching style. The tutor stipulates that Bruno should only learn what he deems important, referring to history and geography facts (Boyne, 2006:100). Such an approach was probably influenced by Locke (1634-1704) who promoted the historical belief that children are born with empty minds and are blank tablets – *a tabula rasa* (Postman, 1994:57). This Puritanical view promotes adult superiority over children, valuing what the adults know as more important than what the child knows (Wood, 2013:2). Educationists now recognise the benefits of children learning through their topics of interest and play (Bruce, 2010:55).

Returning to Puritanical and Romantic discourses contradicting each other (Lowe, 2004:67), Bruno's father provides an example of how the discourses compete according to social context. As a father, he demonstrates a Romantic perspective by being protective towards his own children, however, as a Nazi Commandant, he holds no protective views towards the Jewish children. He is quite happy to see them die, believing the Jewish children are parasites (Cunningham, 2005:60). This move to a Puritanical approach to childhood from his previous Romantic approach towards his own children demonstrates how social context influences people's perspectives of childhood.

Analysing the Puritanical and Romantic discourses in relation to play, Smith (2010:21) explains how a Puritan's perspective of play is linked to animal instinct which needs to be restricted into more appropriate civilised behaviour and

Romantics view play more positively as a natural expression of childhood that should be nurtured. Both discourses of play were experienced by Bruno: his Puritanical tutor wanted to restrict his access to storybooks and deemed art as useless whilst Bruno's grandmother showed a more Romantic perspective by nurturing his imagination through play (Boyne, 2006:92:100). Play is an important part of Bruno's life and the move from Berlin to 'Outwith' left him lonely with nowhere to play and no one to play with. On meeting Schmuel, the reader may start to think Bruno has found a new play-mate, however, the author develops their friendship through talk, rather than play. Bruno's frustration at not playing is sensed through his comment 'we've been talking to each other for more than a year and we never got to play once' (Boyne, 2006:203). There are several possible reasons why the author chose to deprive the boys from play; firstly to maintain the empathy of sadness as showing the boys happily playing together, unaffected by the war, lessens the impact of the story. Additionally, by stripping Schmuel, of his innate and innocent motivation to play the author damages the Romantic ideal of children naturally wanting to play which deepens the reader's compassion for Shmuel's misery and deprivation. Finally, the author realises play requires more energy and Shmuel's malnourished state lessens his physical ability to play (Smith, 2010:104). Further research reveals children did play during the war, Hayes and Roth (2010:221) share recollections of how children in the concentration camps played role play games pretending to be German guards or prisoners in games such as 'Roll call' and 'Camp elder and block elder'. They explain how through self-preservation the children adapted to make sense of their new environment and reshaped their pre-war games to incorporate their new reality. Sutton-Smith (1999) claims children rearrange their worlds,

through play, to make them either less boring or less scary and the rules within games provide a safe place to experience emotions without the consequences they might bring in the 'real' world (Lester and Russell, 2010). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) recognises play as a fundamental human right represented by Article 31 'A child has the right to play' and educationalists now recognise the benefits of learning through play (Wood, 2013:2). Burghardt (2005) believes only by understanding play can we understand how to improve the destinies of human societies in an equally dependent world.

In conclusion, this essay has identified how childhood is socially constructed and demonstrated how it is the values and beliefs of adults, at any given time, that create childhood discourses. Through analysis of 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' recognition was given to how the social context of war impacts the social construction of children. It demonstrated how the lives of two boys born on the same day can experience such different childhoods. Puritanical and Romantic discourses were identified in the novel with examples of these provided through the author's characters. Puritanical perspective through the attitude of the Germans to the Jews and Bruno's tutor dictating what knowledge was important to learn. Romantic perspective was demonstrated through Bruno's father protecting him from the truth of the concentration camp and his Grandmother's nurturing approach providing play opportunities. It was also identified that despite contradicting each other, these two discourses can exist simultaneously and this was shown through Bruno's father having a Romantic approach towards his own children whilst being able to kill other children because of their ethnicity. The final section focused on the author's choice for the boys not to play together and how this was probably done to

deepen the reader's empathy of the boy's situation. However, research showed that even in adverse circumstances children play games which helps them adapt to new environments and changes in their world (Sutton-Smith, 1999).

Although the story is about two nine year old boys it is not a story for nine year olds and to fully appreciate the context of the story some knowledge of the Holocaust is required. Using children as the main characters engages the reader's empathy more; the author wants the reader to feel a strong connection to the two boys, accompanying them on their journey and having a strong emotional reaction to how their story ends. At the end of the story, the obvious empathy is for Bruno behind the 'fence' by mistake, however, on reflection no one should be behind the 'fence'. Sadly, ethnic prejudice continues in the world today, Boyne hopes his story inspires others to recognise these fences and destroy them.

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