

# Innocence Amidst War: Trauma and the Quest for Peace in the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

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## Abstract

The 2008 movie “The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas”, directed by Mark Herman, offers a moving exploration of innocence in the time of war, focusing on the psychological pain caused by wars and the search for peace through human relations. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the narrative unfolds in the voice of Bruno, the child of a Nazi commandant, and his improbable friendship with Shmuel, a Jewish prisoner of a concentration camp. The film explores the issues of trauma, dehumanization, and moral blindness. This paper examines how the film visually and narratively analyses psychological and collective trauma, utilizing cinematic devices such as camera angles, and sound design to trigger emotional reactions in the audience. Using trauma studies and peace studies, the paper discusses how the film critiques institutional oppression and the effects of ideological indoctrination. The tragic conclusion is a strong commentary on the consequences of war and hatred, challenging the audience to consider ethical responsibility and historical memory. The impact of the film on peace education is also discussed, noting its contribution to empathy and awareness of human rights violations. By presenting trauma using the lens of childhood innocence, the film induces a critical understanding of war and the need for promoting peace within a war-torn world.

**Keywords:** Childhood Perspective, Cinematic Techniques, Dehumanisation, Holocaust, Ideological Indoctrination, Peace Studies, Systemic Violence, Trauma

All works of literature seek to narrate a story or share a pedagogical discourse but the two most prevalent ways to share a specific story to the masses are through a book or a film. Literature can be described as a range of written and oral pieces of enduring worth. Frequently considered 'a mirror', it is generally appealing, educative, entertaining and engaging. It has the capability of bringing about personal understanding and fostering social cohesion. Even with the influence of literature, the 21st century society is regarded as a media-dominated society. Media is used to describe the different avenues of communication that humanity utilizes for information and amusement, including the television, radio, newspaper and the web. Media and literature have a connection because they come in their great variety and emanative mode. Literature influences and gets influenced by society at a slower pace, whereas, the impact of media is prompt and quite often, instantaneous (Rao and Lakshmi 241). It is as Cardoso summarizes, “Literature and Cinema share a history of connections with close bonds and parallel routes; they unite genres, eras, countries and formats – demanding literary and cinematic analyses, technical considerations and ideological issues” (1).

Literature allows the audience to imagine and depict the characters within their mind. As for the media or film, the audience get a visual treat which extends their horizons of understanding the piece of art. The advent of internet and other technological advancements paved way to the acceptance of new media like films, digital media etc. Hence the relationship between literature and cinema is symbiotic in nature. As Linda Hutcheon points out, “. . . an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing . . .” (9).

The 2008 film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, written and directed by Mark Herman, is an emotionally powerful and thought-provoking movie about war's psychological trauma and the effect that it has upon childhood innocence. Set during World War II, the film chronicles the story of Bruno, the son of a senior Nazi commandant, and his ill-fated friendship with Shmuel, a young Jewish boy living in a concentration camp. It reveals the catastrophic consequences of dehumanization and indoctrination. The paper analyses how trauma and the pursuit of peace are represented through symbolism, narrative pattern, and cinematography, and its applicability in peace education and awareness of the past through the perspectives of trauma studies and peace studies theories.

The Holocaust, the most tragic genocides in history, is the background of the movie, but it is differently depicted. In contrast to other stories about the Holocaust, this film depicts the atrocities of war from a child's point of view, focusing on innocence, naivety, and moral enlightenment. By emphasizing Bruno's innocent perception of the world, the film underscores how ideology influences perception, and how children, even when protected, are not exempted from the effects of systemic violence. The story also illustrates how deeply rooted nationalism and racial superiority ideologies determined social and personal identities in Nazi Germany. The normalization of violence in Bruno's home is juxtaposed with the horror of the concentration camps in a stark contrast, highlighting the duality of reality for various social groups. The scars of war and conflicts are imprinted so deeply in human consciousness that it won't be erased across generations. The idea of trauma is widely explored in the movie through the characterisation of the children, Bruno and Shmuel. When the film opens, he is portrayed as an obedient kid who idolises his father and remains unknown to the atrocities around him. As he builds a friendship with Shmuel, the Jewish boy, his perspectives about the world shifts to a more complex level. This showcases his transition from childhood innocence to the harsh reality. His ultimate fate symbolises how ignorance and blind obedience can lead to deadly consequences.

Shmuel's invisible trauma is the other essential characterization in the movie. The terror of war finds its expression through Shmuel's weak frame and quiet persona. Shmuel, in contrast to Bruno, knows exactly his subordination, representing the trauma of the past and common agony. In fact, it keeps in line with the theoretical postulations of Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience wherein trauma turns out to be usually unsayable but indelibly experienced. His own silent resilience becomes symbolic of silenced victims and incalculable psychological tolls of systematic violence.

Bruno's mother also suffers from secondary trauma. Although she is complicit at first in her husband's war role, her increasing knowledge of the atrocities troubles her. Her anguish is an example of vicarious trauma, where people who are not the direct victims nevertheless experience psychological repercussions from seeing brutality.

The movie makes use of some cinematic methods in order to deepen the emotional depth of its storytelling. Muted colour schemes resonate with the dark nature of war and with the disparity between Shmuel's misery and Bruno's sheltered life. Close-up photography details the facial expressions of characters, portraying them as being anxious, confused, and sorrowful. Sound engineering, especially

with the incorporation of silence in specific scenes, underscores the forcefulness of the heartbreaking conclusion. The composition of the scenes is most effective in capturing Bruno's increasing loss of innocence. At the beginning, wide, light shots highlight his free-spirited childhood. The more he knows about the concentration camp, the darker and closer the cinematography becomes, mirroring him being trapped in a world he once disregarded.

The movie is a critical exploration of the risk of dehumanization. The fence between Shmuel and Bruno is used as a metaphor for ideological and physical separation. Nazi propaganda through Bruno's father and tutor shows how hate is nurtured and made commonplace. The gas chamber scene, based on dramatic irony, presents an unforgettable lesson on the indiscriminate brutality of war. The movie also depicts Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" in which mundane people get drawn into systemised atrocities by mindless authorities because of an implicit obedience to command. Bruno's father, as he claims to love his family, realizes this notion of executing tasks in a non-normative ethical manner.

The movie converges with theories of peace studies focusing on how violence gets reproduced and on how peace comes about. Johan Galtung has rightly remarked, "By peace we mean the capacity to transform conflicts with empathy, without violence, and creatively- a never-ending process". Structural and cultural violence by Galtung is witnessed with the Nazi state enforcing domination and propaganda for its cruelty towards the Jews. Negative peace (no direct violence) is also exhibited in Bruno's household as it contrasts with what happens in war outside. But genuine positive peace (justice and equality) is not present, as revealed by the institutionalized persecution of Jews. Reardon's feminist peace theory denounces patriarchal institutions, pointing out the ways in which militaristic and authoritarian ideologies mould young minds to perpetuate patterns of violence. The movie also criticizes war by illustrating how even the privileged (Bruno's family) are eventually touched by the violence they perpetuate. This highlights the interdependence of war's effects, illustrating that peace is not merely a matter of stopping physical fighting but of healing fundamental social and ideological cleavages.

Despite its tragic conclusion, the film carries significant lessons for peace education. Empathy as a peace catalyst is at the core of the narrative, as Bruno and Shmuel's bond breaks down socially constructed barriers, highlighting the potential for human empathy. The film also condemns those who obey violence and discrimination blindly, prompting the audience to be aware of their moral duties. Learning about past atrocities helps avoid future conflict and promote reconciliation, in accordance with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which prioritizes awareness as a means towards social justice.

The film is an exceptional tool for provoking debate on historical memory, moral responsibility, and the consequences of blind obedience. By showing the eventual moral collapse of Bruno's mother and Bruno's untimely demise, the film strengthens the message that silence and inaction in the wake of injustice can lead to devastating consequences.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is a poignant film examination of trauma, innocence, and the destructive power of war and hate. In its depiction of the Holocaust from a child's perspective, the film emphasizes the importance of historical education, moral accountability, and peace education. The integration of trauma studies theories explains the psychological impact of war, and peace studies theories offer a theoretical framework for understanding the systemic violence and the need for reconciliation. The tragic demise of Bruno and Shmuel is a poignant reminder of the cost of blind ideology, compelling modern audiences to consider the role of empathy and reconciliation in a world torn apart by conflict. Through the depth of its emotional involvement and provoking story line, the film continues to be a major text in war,

trauma, and peace discussions. The film's most powerful message is: history will not be forgotten, and peace will be cultivated to avert future atrocities.

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