

**May 2022**

**English B Extended Essay**

**Category 3: Literature**

**The Father Character; a Victim or a Villian?**

**How is the father potrayed in the novel “The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas”by John  
Boyne; a villian or a victim?**

**Word count: 3.927**

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## **I- Introduction**

The successful writer John Boyne's dramatic novel "The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas" narrates the tale of a child who unfortunately encounters friendship in a war zone which ends up unexpectedly, in other terms; dramatically. The book is depicted from the innocent child Bruno's point of view. Bruno's naivety about war and the brutality of genocide is significant to this novel as it associates with the father's role in the events that Bruno witnesses. Although the main character is Bruno, the father has a tremendous effect on the events that occur in the novel. The father is the commander at the German camp in Auschwitz. Therefore, we can consider how war has not only encapsulated him but also how war has corrupted him. As we examine the story from Bruno's perspective and investigate father's impact on all the characters, we start to question father's actions. Is he actually a villain or a victim of war?

This essay will focus on the relationships with each and every character that has contact with the father to determine if he is a product of war that made him what he is or if he is a victim of the war that led to his lovely son's death? We may doubt if he has anything to do with Bruno's death or is it inevitable that Bruno would die in the chamber no matter what? Therefore, I have decided to focus on the father and explore father's relationships with the characters in the novel exploring the features that makes him a villain or a victim. In the end, I formed my research question evolving around the father and his relationships with each character that moulded him into a villain or if he were a victim as a result of war.

## **II- The Effects Of War And How It Changes People**

Some people assume that war creates “strong men” but this cannot be farther from the truth, as war often causes severe traumas not only on the soldiers that fight on a battlefield but also on the innocent civilians that happened to be there for too long. War causes those in the army to do things that they would never normally do; to obey the orders given from their superiors forces soldiers to act accordingly to the orders no matter what they think. Wars affect everyone ending up with psychological disorders which may start as a mild depression but extend into PTSD. Wars have the role in which it creates a false sense of patriotism as well. This is done by leaders with the ability to manipulate crowds in which they control the crowds’ emotions. People who think that war creates “strong men” generally say so with the notion in mind that war makes you more disciplined and focused but these are only the short term effects and these people fail to see the potential long term damages that war creates. The psychological problems that are most likely to be the outcomes of war for those who spend time on the battlefield, especially if they are at the frontdeck.

## **III- The Father’s Character**

The Father’s character outside the effects of war suggests that he does have some kind of divisive mindset when it comes to people in the stripped pyjamas. Human rights issues are emphasized throughout the book. For instance, there is an example of him behaving in a way that may suggest that he has some kind of problem with people in the stripped pyjamas. He says “*Well, at least not as we understand the term,*” after mentioning that the people in stripped pyjamas are not people at all, which is no shock at all considering he was ordered by Fury himself to inspect these peoples execution. It might be argued that he does this because Fury ordered him and he cares about his career so much that he is willing to execute these people. However, this could not be further than the truth as someone who does not have

anything against these people would not have said this to his son, perhaps he is being affected by Fury's vision. The first time we encounter with the father in the novel is when we learn that he is not a person that expresses emotions but he is rather a distant man. *"father was not the type of man to give anyone a hug."* If we examine this quotation, we learn that Father had come to *"Aut-with"* earlier and set up while other family member have come sometime later, demonstrating no sign of empathy or emotion. Although the father formally shakes the little boy's hand he still keeps his distance. Of course, this does not mean that he doesn't love his son but this proves that he acts distant and formal in his personal life as well. Later in the chapter five we learn more about the fathers personality, *"But nothing seemed to be making father angry today-and if Bruno was honest with himself he would have admitted that Father rarely became angry; he became quiet and distant and he always had his way in the end anyway."* In this quotation it is outlined that father is generally emotionless and distant in similar situations like the verbal debate he has in with Bruno. Also, in an argument between Father and Bruno, it comes as a shock to him that Bruno, his son, does not enjoy history instead he calls it boring. *"Boring?"* said father, *"A son of mine calling the study of history boring? Let me tell you this Bruno, he went on, leaning forward and pointing his knife at the boy. It's history that got us here today. If it wasn't for history, none of us would be sitting around this table now. We'd be safely back at our house in Berlin. We are correcting history here."* Here we can interpret many things from this monologue from father. First it can be interpreted as he enjoys studying history as well as demonstrating his bigotted thoughts for his nation. His interest in history is also due to his connection with his profession. Also we can interpret that his nationalistic point of view allows him to be brainwashed and that may be the reason why he enjoys history. Adolf Hitler who was the leader of Germany at the time had a ability that allowed him to persuade big crowds into supporting his ideas and follow his vision without any doubt. Father was surely under the influence of Adolf Hitler, who he respected

deeply and also wanted to impress. We can say that Adolf Hitler was using father's nationalistic views to brainwash him as he did to most of the Germans at the time from the very beginning of his political career. So, father is brainwashed from the beginning in which Hitler's influence on him led him into saying they are correcting the history at "*Aut-with*".

The father, Ralf, once in an heated argument between him and the grandmother suggests that he is a complex character that does evil things, but just like any father he has infinite love for his son, this is not given directly in the novel but if we analyse the things he does, we can make a verdict that he has a smooth side for his family. But the question would be; "*Does that make him a good person, a hero?*" It gets more complex here. If we examine the relationship of Father and Grandfather we can make an assumption that grandfather has affected father to be more disciplined who knows his priorities. "*I remember when I was a child, said Father, there were things that I didn't want to do, but when my father said it would be better for everyone if I did them, I just put my best foot forward and got on with them.*"

This quotation gives information on father's relationship with grandfather. From this quotation it can be interpreted that father learned to consider how everyone will be affected before acting on a certain thing and also to look out for everyone's benefit from grandfather. Also, in chapter "*Why Grandmother Stormed Out*", Grandfather mentions that he is proud of his son for protecting his country, perhaps grandfather's nationalistic point of view affected father's decision to sign up for military. Grandfather when giving a speech about his son's promotion "*the great wrongs done*" to their country is similar to father's point of view of war. Grandfather said this when giving a speech about his son's promotion and he is referring to the Treaty of Versailles signed by Germany after the loss of World War I. This quote is evidence towards grandfather's views towards war in which shaped father's decision to become a soldier as well as his personality as who he is.

The Father character has proved to be a complex character with different morales with his actions making it harder to make a solid argument about his morale throughout the novel, whether he is portrayed as a victim or a villain. There are examples that make the reader view him like a villain, but there are also moments where he is shown as a victim. *“For now I better help my family settle or there will be as much trouble for me in here as there is for them out there, you understand?”* The words of father referring to the camp outside of “Out-with” is evil considering how he jokes about people suffering. This is an example of when father is portrayed as a villain. Also in the quotation *“Ah, those people said father nodding his head and smiling slightly. Those people...well, they’re not people at all.”* Specific details like *“nodding his head and smiling slightly.”* is an example of when father is portrayed as a villain in the novel as he seems to be satisfied with the sufferings of the Jewish.

#### **IV- The Relationship Between Father and Kotler**

Father and Kotler’s relationship throughout the novel has been a little bit distant because Father is at such a high rank among the soldiers at “Aut-with”. He is respected and feared by Lieutenant Kotler as well as others. We see an example of this when the father and Kotler have a stressful conversation about why Kotler’s father left Germany in 1938. Here he is shown as a villain because of how Lieutenant Kotler fears of him. *“And what reason did he give might I ask ? continued father , for leaving Germany at the moment of her greatest glory and her most vital need, when it is incumbent upon all of us to play our part in the national revival? Was he tubercular?”* As father continues integrating Lieutenant Kotler, he is constantly pressuring Lieutenant Kotler and making him uncomfortable. Later on he starts to make assumptions about him as well. This makes Kotler even more uncomfortable. *“Or perhaps he had... disagreements. Disagreements Herr Commandant with government*

*policy? One hears tales of men like this from time to time. Curious fellows, I imagine. Disturbed, some of them. Traitors, others. Cowards too. Of course you have informed your superiours of your fathers views, Lieutenant Kotler?* In this continuation of interagation of Lieutenant Kotler, we see an example of the fathers villian side, he is depicted as a villian in this brief quotation because he is using his power over Kotler to threaten him, make him uncomfortable. This quotation is relevant to my argument because this interaction between Kotler and father shows evidence about father and Lieutenant Kotler's relationship in general throughout the novel.

#### **V- The Relationship Between Father and his Children**

Even though Father is generally portrayed as a villan because of what he does as part of his job, there are also times when he is being compassionate. One example of this is when Maria and Bruno are having a conversation about father. *"A few months later my mother became very sick and she needed a lot of hospital care and your father arranged it all."* This is one of the examples of kindness father shows. These examples make my argument more complicated as they prove that he is not shown as a villian all the time throughout the novel. There are examples of father behaving in a way that shows he genuinaly caring for his children, for instance, if we examine fathers relationship with Bruno and Gretel seperately we can make a verdict that he is not always shown as an villian. *"No, she's right,"* he said, speaking out loud but not looking at either Gretel or Bruno. *"She's absolutely right. You've been here long enough as it is. It's time for you to go home."* In this quotation he does what every responsible adult would do and decide for what his children need which is to be friends. This proves that he is indeed a good father figure. He also mentions that this place is not suitable for kids previously to agreeing to send them back to Berlin. *"He paused for a moment and looked out the window to his left- the window that led off to a view of the camp on the other side of the fence .When I think about it perhaps she is right.Perhaps this is not a place for children."*

From this quotation it can be interpreted that he may be feeling guilty of what he is a part of. He feels that he must take his children away from this place as it holds many dangers that will prevail themselves later on the novel. Fathers relationship with Bruno is a little bit distant and we don't see him and Bruno interact during the novel, this is because father is usually busy with his work. However when we examine the moments where they are interacting, we can see that there is love between them just as you would expect. Even though father one time lectures Bruno for not wanting to stay at "*Aut-with*" this still does not disprove the fact that these two love each other. When we examine fathers relationship with Gretel the same can be said, "*Gretel, who always spoke of Father as if he could never do any wrong and never got angry and always came in to kiss her goodnight before she went to she went to sleep which, if Bruno was to be really fair and not just sad about moving houses, he would have admitted Father did for him too.*" It can be interpreted from this quotation that father does love his children and he is not depicted as a villain here.

## **VI- The Relationship Between Father and His Parents**

We should also examine the fathers relationship with grandmother and grandfather separately. Throughout the interaction between the father and grandmother is limited; however the one time is when they had an argument about father's job is highlighted "*I wonder- is this where i went wrong with you Ralf?*" she said "*I wonder if all the performances I made you give as a boy led you to this. Dressing up like a puppet on a string.*" When we examine Grandmother there is a justification to her anger towards her son for becoming a high rank commander under The Fury, as she has been a musician that toured across Germany. Grandmother is disappointed with Father because she is a musician who is a humanist. As the argument between Grandmother and Father gets more and more heated, "*Ashamed! She*

called out before she left, that a son of mine should be- "A patriot," cried father." His mother blames herself for what her son became by supporting the Fury who leads the war that caused many innocent people's lives. She thinks she didn't stop him from taking this route. Grandfather on the other hand supports his son for becoming an high ranking commander who is "serving" his country. "I remember when the Great War began, said grandfather proudly, starring at the fire and shaking his head. I remember you coming home to tell us how you had joined up and I was sure that you would come to harm." In this quotation it is clear that grandfather is proud of his son as well as the trigger for being evil. "And now look at you", grandfather and grandmother have contradicting opinions about fathers achievement. "It makes me so proud to see you elevated to such a responsible position. Helping your country reclaim her pride after all the great wrongs that were done to her." this quotation prior to mother's intrusion is evidence that he is proud of his son unlike grandmother. Father also mentions his childhood during these few sentences he says "yes, but I also knew that my father, your grandfather, knew what was best for me and that I just accepted that." This quotation shows that there is a trusting bond between grandfather and father. Examining the relationship between father and his parents, he is not portrayed as a villain but rather a victim.

## **VII- The Relationship Between Father and Mother**

If we view father's relationship with Mother, there are not many occasions in the novel where these two characters interact directly. One of the few times when their interaction is given directly is in the chapter "The Fury" where their interaction is given in interruptions as it is given from Bruno's perspective who happened to be listening through the door. In this interaction between husband and wife they are arguing over Father's orders to go to "Aut-with": "...to leave Berlin. And for such place ..." mother says, "...no choice, at least not if we want to continue..." said father, "...as if it's the most natural thing in the World and it's

*not, it's just not...*” said mother. “...*what would happen is I would be taken away and treated like a...*” said father. “... *expect them to grow up in a place like...*” said mother. “...*and that's an end to the matter. I don't want to hear another word on the subject...*” said father. This argument gives us an opinion on father's role as a husband. He is unwilling to compromise as a husband and fails to communicate properly with his wife. With the quotation “*It's horrible, just horrible. I can't stand it any more.*” “*We don't have any choice. This is our assignment and-*” “*No, this is your assignment,*” said mother.”*Your assignment not ours. You stay if you want to.*” It can be seen that father does not care about the needs and wishes of other family members. His relationship with mother is affected by this because of how he ignores her wishes of leaving “*Aut-with*”. His relationship with mother shows father as a man who is not a good husband and does not listen to his wife. However, as he having no other choice implies he is the victim of war not a villain.

### **VIII- The Relation Between Father and Pavel**

Pavel is a former doctor, but because of the conditions of war he started to serve for father as a waiter. These characters do not interact often in the novel, this can be interpreted as father not seeing Pavel as equal to him and looks down on him. The only time these characters interact is in the chapter “*The Bottle Of Wine*” when Pavel fails to deliver the bottle of wine: “... *Father calling pavel again “What's the matter with you tonight?”* He asks as Pavel uncorks the new bottle. “*This is the fourth time I've had to ask for more wine.*” In this chapter it is given that Pavel is not feeling well and obviously is not in the optimal condition to serve however father does not see this; this is proof that father sees Pavel as a object rather than a person as he clearly does not show any kind of attention to Pavel's condition. Even though Pavel is older than father and he is an educated man, Father does not show him any respect because of his view for Jews and as a commander he does not respect his Jew waiter. When Kotler beaten up Pavel he does not stop him even though he outranks Kotler and he could

have just ordered him to stop. This further proves the fact that he really does not care what happens to Pavel. His relationship with Pavel portrays him as a villain. This is due to the way father acts around Pavel, how he looks down on him because he is a Jew.

### **IX- The Relationship Between Father and Fury (Adolf Hitler)**

In the chapter "*The Fury*", Father and Adolf Hitler's interaction is given directly. However we see many times throughout the novel that father is a fan of Adolf Hitler and that Hitler has big things planned for him. At the beginning of the chapter father is excited to announce the news of Hitler's self invitation to a dinner on Thursday to his wife. This reflects that father is glorified of the attention Hitler gives him because he cares a lot about his career. Father also has respect for Hitler which clouds his judgements. He does not question how rude a person he is in his personal life especially towards Eva in the novel. Also when he unpolitely sits in Father's seat without asking for permission Father still does not say a word. Another example is when father accepts the job he has been tasked without even discussing it with his wife. He does all this in order to get the attention of Hitler so he would pursue in his career. In Father's relationship with Adolf Hitler, he is portrayed as a villain. This relationship shows father's side that does not care about how many more people must be killed, just to "*correct*" a "*wrong*" done to his country.

### **X- How war conditions affected Father**

The harsh conditions of war has effects on father and this is clearly shown in the novel. These conditions have pushed him into having prejudiced opinions on Jews. He clearly does not like Jews as shown in his relationship with Pavel, as well as he working as a commander at a concentration camp. It could be shown as a counter argument that father works at a concentration camp because he is forced by Hitler but there are examples that show he is actually excited about working at a concentration camp as he sees this job as an opportunity to

correct history by committing genocide. This is because the war has allowed him to be brainwashed and inevitably caused him to be prejudiced about Jews. This portrays him as a villain because of his ideas and prejudices about these people.

## **XI- Conclusion**

To conclude, in the novel the way Father is portrayed changes depending on the person he is interacting with. In the novel when Father is interacting with people from his family, he is not portrayed as a villain. However, when the father interacts with people that are not from his family he is portrayed as a villain. When the father interacts with Pavel he is portrayed as a villain because of his prejudice towards Jews. Also the effects of war have unfortunate effects on him. The effects of war causes him to dehumanise the Jews and hate them. When the father interacts with Lieutenant Kotler he is portrayed as a villain because he is depicted as a person who does not tolerate anyone who questions the war.

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