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**Exposing the Real Enemy: The German  
People's Fear of Exploration in  
*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas***

*John Shoemaker*

**Abstract:** This essay critically and rhetorically analyzes the persuasive use of words in Mark Herman's film, "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas," which centers on a highly unlikely friendship between a well-to-do German boy and Jewish boy in a concentration camp. The controversy surrounding the film—specifically the rare and unpopular viewpoint of a German family's experiences during World War II—prompted a further in-depth analysis of the film's meaning. While Herman takes a unique viewpoint, I suggest that the film moves beyond the portrayal of a family unit and actually gives an explanation and object to blame for the atrocities associated with World War II. In analyzing the film, the rhetorical research findings are based on Kenneth Burke's cluster criticism theory, which states that by forming clusters of words, the text of an artifact and in this case, the screenplay of a film, are used to symbolize and or convey a key concept, message or idea. Furthermore, the significance of the contrast between god and devil terms used throughout the film (god terms being associated with high cultural acceptance and devil terms being associated with extreme cultural abhorrence) suggests that while Herman was not fully aware of the rhetorical force behind his artifact, the film promotes the concept that the German people are not to be blamed for the atrocities associated with the Holocaust and are not the enemy during World War II. Instead, I reveal and support that the German people's fear of exploration is the enemy. Even more significant is that "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" is one of the first films of its kind in setting the stage for future rhetorical research and discussion regarding the German people and the fear of exploration that crippled them during World War II.

"Childhood is measured out by the sounds and smells and sights, before the dark hour of reason grows" (Summoned by Bells). It is not only through the eyes of a child but through the heart of a child that society has the opportunity to see the world as it truly is. Unfortunately, only an elect few are allowed to determine whether society is allowed to see the world in this light.

British film director Mark Herman chose to reveal the eyes and the heart of a child's raw innocence and naivety through an 8-year-old German boy named Bruno in his 2008 film, "The

Boy in the Striped Pajamas.” The film was not a major release in United States cinemas and did not receive high critical acclaim. However, the film tied with “Slumdog Millionaire” for the Audience Choice Award at the 2008 Chicago International Film Festival and also received praise from the media tycoon, *The New York Times*, for being “One of the most moving and remarkable films about childhood.” The film fared well in Europe (The Internet Movie Database). The film received the award for Best Actress at the 2008 British Independent Film Awards and was nominated for Best Director and Most Promising Newcomer (British Independent Film Awards).

“The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” is a 94-minute film adapted for screenplay by the 2006 novel, “The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas,” written by Irish novelist John Boyne. The film follows an 8-year-old German boy named Bruno during World War II and his quest for adventure and exploration as the son of Ralph, a high-ranking SS officer in the Nazi party. Bruno is informed that his father has been promoted in the ranks of the Third Reich and is devastated when he and his family move from their mansion home in Berlin to the countryside. Unbeknownst to Bruno, his mother and 12-year-old sister believe the father’s promotion involves him being in charge of a Jewish labor camp close by. After Bruno assumes the concentration camp is a farm and the possibility of making friends with the strange people inside might be his only adventure, Bruno is strictly told by his mother and father to never venture past the walls of his home courtyard. Due to his non-existent social life, boredom soon takes over, and Bruno decides to explore beyond his home, despite his parents’ rigid rule. He becomes best friends with an 8-year-old Jewish boy named Shmuel, who lives in the concentration camp, and Bruno visits Shmuel almost every day. Through a number of events, Bruno’s mother realizes her husband is in charge of a death camp—not a labor camp—and soon after, requests that she and the children move away from the unsuitable environment. On moving day, Bruno visits Shmuel one last time and is convinced to change into similar striped pajamas in order to help Shmuel find his missing father inside the concentration camp. The family soon notices Bruno’s disappearance and immediately begins searching for him. Meanwhile, after mistakenly being placed with a unit of Jewish men, Bruno and Shmuel are marched inside a gas chamber. When Bruno’s family reaches the concentration camp, they discover what has happened. Bruno and Shmuel are gassed to death and Bruno’s family personally understands the meaning of Ralph’s “work” (The Internet Movie Database).

While the story of Bruno and his constant search for adventure and exploration eventually brought him to his death, I believe this film’s unique use of a German boy and his German family makes for a powerful story retold from the perspective of the historically hated Germans regarding the Holocaust and the Jewish people during World War II.

The film was controversial because of the unique point of view taken by Herman. Some critics strongly voiced their opposition to the film: “See the Holocaust trivialized, glossed over, kitsched up, commercially exploited and hijacked for a tragedy about a Nazi family. Better yet and in all sincerity: don’t” (New York Times). Other critics were more outspoken against the film and its unique point of view:

“The crying faces we encounter aren’t Jewish. They’re Nazi ... The ending is still a cheap shot—a melodramatic sucker-punch that diminishes the movie and severs it, once and for all, from reality. Up [sic] till then it’s a work of fiction based on the facts of Holocaust, told from the other side of the fence. What a shame when it crosses over—and exploits it” (The Houston Chronicle).

Herman states his purpose for directing the film in an interview titled “Friendship Beyond the Fence.” “I think it’s misleading to refer to [The Boy in the Striped Pajamas] as a Holocaust film because it’s really so much more about a family,” he says. Herman also mentions the importance of showing the film through the eyes of a German child. Therefore, while Herman takes a unique position in his film by portraying a German family’s point of view of the Holocaust during World War II, I suggest the film moves beyond the family unit and actually gives an explanation and object to blame for World War II.

Contrary to popular belief, “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” states that the German people were not the enemy during World War II because race does not constitute a reason for hating a group of people. Instead, I believe the film reveals that fear was the enemy during World War II—a fear of losing oneself, a fear of being unpatriotic, and ultimately, a fear of exploring.

After viewing this film and studying its effect on my biased opinion of World War II, I have decided to rhetorically criticize the film by suggesting the following statement: “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” promotes the main concept that the fear of exploring is the demise of oneself, of relationships, and of a people.

In order to understand the meaning of a film and the worldview that the director, producer, and other leaders wish to reveal to their audience in the making of the film, it is important to intimately view each scene of the film in its entirety and explore their overall purpose. One way to accomplish this is to analyze the film using cluster criticism, a rhetorical theory made popular by the late Kenneth Burke, a rhetorical theorist and critic. Burke hypothesized that by forming clusters of words, the text of an artifact—and in this case, the screenplay of a film—is used to symbolize and convey a key concept, message or idea (Foss 63).

Many times an artifact or rhetorical act will assist an audience in different ways. “It may provide a vocabulary of thoughts, actions, emotions, and attitudes for codifying and thus interpreting a situation” (Foss 64). Also, while the rhetor understands that he is the writer of the text, in looking at this particular artifact, Herman actually adapted his writing from a novel, a completely different type of artifact. Therefore, while original author John Boyne intended his writing to reveal a certain imagery and message, Herman might have purposefully written text in a different style in order to enlighten a different symbol or meaning of his work.

Regardless of the rhetors’ purpose in writing, comprising and acknowledging all of the interrelationships involved in an artifact are not possible. As a result, the underlying meaning of an artifact used in the imagery, text, and situations might reveal itself without the rhetors’ recognition (Foss 66).

In order to prove this hypothesis statement, I will use cluster criticism to carefully scrutinize the term “explore” in every form of the word as well as the word “adventure.” In contrast, I will compare this cluster of words to a separate cluster of words, which include “duty,” “war,” “work,” “history,” and “fatherland.” Even though exploration eventually took the life of young Bruno, the tragedy caused a family to finally realize and understand that fear of exploring cripples oneself, the family unit and the German people.

By analyzing the film using cluster criticism, I found a deeper meaning. Furthermore, by using cluster criticism, I discovered a more powerful message that I would have missed had I analyzed and criticized the movie through Herman’s point of view.

By looking at the film using cluster criticism, I was able to analyze Herman’s main message and worldview that the fear of exploring causes the demise of oneself, of relationships, and of a people.

In understanding the setting of the film, specific words carried direct connotative meanings with them. “As a result, such words can be powerfully persuasive tools for motivating people. This is especially true of ... ultimate terms, which are words or phrases that are highly revered, widely accepted, and carry special power in a culture” (Gass and Seiter 142). The film portrays god terms as carrying “the greatest blessing in a culture and demand sacrifice or obedience” (Gass and Seiter 143). Also, while Herman may not have consciously placed the use of devil terms in the film, I believe the devil terms contrasted his use of god terms. “Devil terms are perceived by a culture as associated with the absolutely abhorrent and disgusting. Because such terms represent what is evil or detestable to a culture, they can also be extremely persuasive” (Gass and Seiter 143).

Furthermore, after noticing a strong trend between the devil terms such as “explore,” “adventure,” and sometimes “friendship,” I clustered those terms and situations in which they were heavily prevalent to symbolize the importance of physical, mental and emotional exploration. I also noticed a strong trend between the god terms such as “fatherland,” “history,” “war,” “work,” and “duty” (Gass and Seiter 143). These terms formed clusters when linked together in speech and scenarios to symbolize the destruction of exploration, relationships and thinking as an individual.

The film does an excellent job of portraying the god terms and their direct contrast to the devil terms by intertwining the two repeatedly throughout the storyline in the same dialogue and or situation. Therefore, when specifically looking for these terms, the viewer is forced to compare the god and devil terms because of the opposite connotations that both clusters carry with them. This opposite cluster structure of terms also suggests that a major conflict exists between the two worldviews.

“The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” mentions the devil terms “explore” or “adventure” more than 30 times; the god terms “duty,” “war,” “work,” “history” or “fatherland” appear nearly 30 times. The significantly high frequency of the god and devil clusters of words and the fact that

both opposing clusters were coded a similar number of times strongly suggests that these clusters emphasized the key concept of each other because of their closeness in proximity.

The visuals and phrases using the term “stripes” hold an extremely close connection with the importance of exploration in its physical, mental, and emotional state. For example, railings, fences, walls, shutters and striped pajamas represent constraint and a fear of exploration. The railing on the staircase inside the new countryside home and the wall outside and the shutters on the windows symbolize fear—the fear that Bruno and his family might explore and encounter the “enemy,” the Jews. The absence of a fence surrounding Bruno’s old mansion home in Berlin provides a point in the film where Bruno was allowed to explore. Therefore, a movement toward this fear of exploration is shown after Bruno and his family move from this home and into isolation in the countryside. Also, the striped pajamas worn by Shmuel and eventually Bruno, as well as the fence at the concentration camp, symbolize the current state Shmuel and the Jews find themselves. They have no freedom. They have lost themselves. Their “nation” is crumbling. Even more specifically, they are not allowed to explore.

A visual fear of exploration was shown when Bruno first caught a glimpse of the “farm” from his bedroom window. He began to ask questions, and as a result, his bedroom window was barred shut. No longer was Bruno allowed to view the outside world from his room. While the “farm” was supposed to be a well-kept secret, known only to the most important German soldiers and officials, Bruno’s bedroom was the location of his first exploration. In his most personal and intimate location in the new home, Bruno began to explore. In addition, the common phrase of “seeing is believing” applies to the Germans point of view on exploration in this particular point of the film. If Bruno was not allowed to visualize the “farm,” it would be more difficult for him to ponder and question the mere existence of the “farm.” Exploration was feared.

A mental fear of exploration is especially highlighted in the beginning of the film when Bruno begins asking questions about the “farm” but is quickly silenced by his father who informs him that the only thing Bruno needs to understand about the “farm” is that it is off limits. Bruno is not allowed to ask questions about the “farm” or the work that his father is conducting. In his greatest passion of exploring, a boy is mentally and verbally cut off from his father. This begins the demise of the relationships within Bruno’s family unit.

Mental exploration is also silenced when Bruno’s mother discovers the true nature of her husband’s “work” through his constant reference to using the words “work” and “fatherland” as god terms. Elsa realizes that Ralph is actually in charge of a Jewish death camp and is completely devastated. After enduring an enormous fight, Ralph informs Elsa that she simply needs to understand that he was sworn to secrecy and his “work” is bettering her life, the “Fatherland” and the German people. He even attempts a strong form of persuasion by trying to convince her that his “work” is good and is a major part of “war” and him being a “soldier.” He tells her that his work is what she wants also.

Physical exploration is shown once again when Bruno ventures past the back door that leads to the outside garden. His mother immediately informs him that despite his obsession with

exploring, Bruno must never explore anywhere but in the front of the house. If he wants to explore again, he should instead play with his sister, an extremely boring alternative.

Bruno's quest to mentally and physically explore is fueled by an old Jewish servant named Pavel. When Bruno learns that Pavel used to be a doctor but is currently peeling potatoes for Bruno's family, Bruno is extremely confused and in disbelief. Pavel counters this reaction with a question to Bruno, "What do you want to be when you grow up? I know, an explorer." Much to Bruno's surprise, Pavel is correct. This causes Bruno to like and trust Pavel and is a prime example in the film of the opposition and fear toward exploration. The fact that a Jewish man suggested a German boy would be an explorer is an idea and lifestyle that is in direct contrast with the Nazi party's values. Individuals were not allowed to explore because they might find something they should not—or even worse, they might realize that the Jews are not that different than the Germans but are human beings and should be treated as such.

For example, when Bruno questions his family's sudden move to the country, his father and mother sit Bruno and his sister down to discuss the issue. The film shows this to let the viewer understand that this family does "family" things like any normal family. They are kind and understanding to one another and the children are treated with respect. However, after Bruno's father tries to strategically persuade Bruno into believing that moving to the country will be like an adventure in one of Bruno's books, he uses god terms to ultimately persuade him.

Because the father understands that Bruno is more concerned with adventure and his family than the duty to one's country and serving without question, the father intertwines the god terms of "country" and "duty" with the fact that they are going somewhere unexpected—they are going on an adventure. Ralph uses an emotional and logical appeal in order to convince Bruno that the "family's" decision to move will be beneficial for everyone.

The German viewpoint of one's commitment to the country and their fear of exploration during World War II is summarized when Ralph explains to Bruno the reason for the family's move to the countryside: "The thing about being a soldier is that life is not so much about choices, but more about duty. So if your country needs you to go somewhere, you'll go. Now of course going somewhere else is much easier when you know that your family is delighted to go with you" (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas).

The film uses another powerful example of fearing exploration when god terms such as "fatherland" and "history" are strongly accepted by Bruno's sister, Gretel. She throws all of her dolls in the basement of the new house because "It's not right to play with silly toys while people are away risking their lives for the Fatherland" (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas). This action and overall mentality is a direct result of her obsession with a high-ranking German soldier as well as the "teaching" or brainwashing she has accepted. Bruno, however, has rejected the "teachings" taught by a tutor who has been hired by their father to keep the children current with German policy and affairs. Therefore, Gretel fears exploration because she has rejected the "devil" terms; instead, she has accepted the "god" terms. She has abandoned the "adventures" she had with her dolls and toys because she is afraid of what the German soldier might think if he found her

playing with them. Furthermore, Gretel represents a young German who desperately wants to be included in the German revival and wants to prove she is a dedicated citizen.

Gretel's acceptance of the tutor's lessons and ultimately, Germany's teachings, are shown when she says, "My people's destiny is my destiny. I must work and create for the resurrection of my Fatherland. The history of my people is great and glorious. Thousands of Germans have been made poor by the Jew; he is the enemy of culture" (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas). Bruno explores this idea and is confused because of his friendship with his Jewish friend, Shmuel. Bruno realizes that the Jews have done nothing wrong. The Germans were too afraid to explore themselves. They were made poor because of their wrong decisions but instead of exploring the true meaning, they blamed the Jew. Hating and placing blame on one person is easier than targeting an entire race of people.

In Hitler's Nazi party and idealistic world, the Aryan race was the purest race and they should work toward purifying itself by not intermixing with other races, including the Jew. The Jew was the object of attack during World War II "because of their inferior and precarious social position in the structure of German society, because they are the strangers and often the pariahs [and because they are] more vulnerable to attack and less capable of defense than any other social group" (Abel 163). Consequently, the German people were afraid to explore the possibility that they were to blame for their own mistakes. The acceptance of this fear and embracing of German ideology is shown through Gretel and her full acceptance of the god terms. She was wholeheartedly convinced that the Jew was the enemy of her German culture and only Hitler's plans could save the German race and their great nation. Abel explains the rationalization the German people accepted as a means to unite their race: "The lack of unity of the German people on vital questions affecting the national interest was attributed to a weakened race consciousness. And they saw the symptom thereof in a general indifference toward the race problem, as shown particularly in the neglect on the part of past governments to preserve the racial purity of the German nation" (Abel 155).

A moving example of the fear of exploration is shown when Bruno's mother discovers that her husband is actually in charge of a Jewish death camp. When accused of hiding information from his own wife, Bruno's father uses the following explanation, "I was sworn to secrecy. I took an oath upon my life. Do you understand? Elsa, you believe in this too. You want this country to be strong." Elsa immediately screams that she does not share values that require the murdering of Jews. Bruno's father firmly replies that he is a soldier and that soldiers fight wars; Bruno's mother argues that what he is doing is not war. Bruno's father unyieldingly responds by saying, "It's a part of it, a vital part of it. The Fatherland, we all desire, you included, cannot be achieved without works such as this" (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas).

Bruno's father stays true to his "work" and duty as a soldier. He does not question the German policy nor does he allow Bruno's mother a chance to discuss her questions. Instead, he silences her with firm responses that discontinue any exploration of the matter and persuades her to examine the bigger picture by directing her attention to the "work" that must be done to attain a



better Germany. The god terms such as “fatherland,” “soldier,” and “work” used in this scene promote the idea that exploration is in direct contrast with patriotism. As a dedicated citizen, a loyal German and a faithful wife of a high-ranking German officer, she should never explore. Instead, she must do as she is told and remain confused regarding the details of the war. After the dispute between Bruno’s parents and the beginning of the demise of their relationship, Ralph questions how Elsa learned of the death camp. The answer was discovered through the German officer Kurt, who was also horrified of exploration.

When Kurt (the officer who has attracted Gretel’s attention) accidentally mentions that his father is the professor of literature at a profound German university, an overwhelming fear is seen. Kurt hesitates in answering his officer, Bruno’s father, when asked about his father’s whereabouts. God terms are used when Ralph responds to Kurt’s answer of Switzerland.

“Strange that he should choose to leave the Fatherland in the very moment that needed him most, just when we’re all required to play our part in the national revival. Perhaps he was ill, unless of course he had disagreements, I mean, with government policy.” Bruno’s grandfather adds that most of those who have left the country are mentally disturbed or are cowards. Ralph finishes the conversation by saying “Presumably, if that was the case with your father, you would have informed your superiors, as is your duty” (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*). Kurt realizes what has occurred and instead of admitting his mistake of not informing his superior officer, he beats Pavel, the household Jewish servant—representing his fear of exploring his own decisions and the convenience of hating the Jews.

When Gretel asks the family about the whereabouts of Kurt, her mother responds, “Lieutenant Kurt was sent to the front lines because he failed to inform his authorities of his father’s lack of loyalty to the party.” Her father promptly replies, “Which was his duty” (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*). Sending Kurt to the front lines reveals two separate aspects regarding the fear of exploration.

First, Kurt is sent to the front lines as an example to other Germans who might decide to withhold information regarding “traitors” or those who have deflected and left Germany during the time of great need. The threat of being sent to the front lines—usually a death sentence—instilled a fear in Germans who might withhold information. The film indirectly implies that Kurt is killed. This scenario emphasizes that Germans must not explore beyond their duty, and this fear keeps everyone in line. Another aspect of fearing exploration is that by sending Kurt to the front lines, Bruno’s father physically removes the source of his wife’s mental exploration regarding her curiosity about the war and the handling of the Jews.

Finally, any mental explorations regarding the Jewish camp are silenced with a Nazi propagandist video entitled “Der Fuehrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt” or “The Fuehrer Gives the Jews a City,” which portrays the Jews inside a camp. The propagandist video states that “at the end of their day ... the workers can enjoy the many forms of pastime that the camp has to offer” (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*). This film was used throughout the Nazi party and heavily focuses on the kindness of the Fuehrer and the god term it entails (the glorification of

Hitler) as well as the amazing lives the Jews led inside these camps. Because Bruno secretly watches the film while it is shown to his father and German officers, Bruno is persuaded to believe that his Jewish best friend, Shmuel, is living in a wonderful, entertaining camp. Bruno's conflict of interest in accepting his father as a great soldier and his honorable work for the country of Germany with his disbelief that the Jews are treated poorly by the Germans is put at ease by this video. While this knowledge does not stop Bruno from physically exploring and visiting the camp, the video is successful in ceasing Bruno's mental exploration of finding a reason for Shmuel hating soldiers and him being taught that Jews are the root of all evil.

## **Discussion**

"The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" does an excellent job of capturing the ideology of the country of Germany and the German people by specifically focusing on an extremely important German family and specifically, an 8-year-old German boy. The film shows that even though exploration eventually took the life of Bruno, it caused a family to finally realize and understand the power that fear can have on an individual, a family and a people.

The high frequency and similar count of the two clusters supports my argument that the fear of exploration was the demise of oneself, of the family unit, and of the German people. Because god terms and devil terms accompanied each other throughout the movie, they revealed an enormous conflict between the innate human desire to explore and the German opposition to explore because of fear.

German sociologist Norbert Elias provides a strong argument for the stated hypothesis: "Our dear soldiers can't be blamed—only the leadership are at fault—for they give their utmost. It breaks your heart when you read so often how they're fighting for the homeland" (Elias 397). Though Germany is often charged with the horrors of the Holocaust, it was actually an elect few in the German government that are to blame for instilling fear and more specifically, the fear of exploration into the masses.

According to Elias, "One of the strongest impressions ... is that of an obedient and anaesthetized people whose members have lost the capacity and the possibility to organize themselves and to grasp the initiative for common action independently of or against the official representatives of their state" (Elias 400). Hitler and his authoritative power instilled a fear inside the German people that caused the country to do as mandated. Germans feared individual exploration, their relationships with each other, and the current state they found their country in during World War II. The enemy was the fear of exploration.

Bruno's mother, who had finally started to allow herself to explore, is the first to notice that Bruno is missing. Gretel is informed second, and Bruno's father is informed last. This makes sense. Bruno's father is a dedicated soldier. He tends to his duty and the betterment of the Fatherland—nothing more. Gretel is enamored with a German soldier and completely brainwashed into the Nazi propaganda and its power to better the lives of the German people and the Fatherland. The mother, on the other hand, is closest to Bruno. While the family is hurrying

about in preparation for moving again, they stop and desperately search for Bruno. For the first time, the family explores as a unit. Ironically, this fear of exploration that the Father instilled in the family has ultimately led to Bruno's death.

The film shows that the German people lost their sense of exploration—if they had explored, the killing of more than six million innocent people would likely not have occurred. Bruno, however, directly contrasts this concept. As an 8-year-old German boy, Bruno discovers the freedom of exploration and its importance. Bruno discovered the truth: the Jews were not the enemy; the Germans were not the enemy. The fear of exploring was the enemy. Conclusively, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* provides strong evidence to suggest that instead of blaming a particular race of people, the fear of exploration was the real enemy of World War II. This fear corrupted the individual, the family unit and the German people.

Furthermore, besides the previous argument supported by an analysis of god and devil terms using cluster criticism, I believe the film offers itself on a much larger scale. Though criticized by some for an unrealistic story line, director Mark Herman reveals an extremely uncommon point of view of the situations that took place during World War II by allowing the viewer to see through the eyes of an 8-year old German boy. "*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*" is one of the first films to set the stage for future rhetorical research and discussion regarding the German people and the fear of exploration that crippled them during World War II.

Although this worldview is new and controversial, as consumers and critics of rhetoric, we should never fear the possibility of discovering a different side to the story by analyzing and examining the rhetoric further. Now is the time to explore. An adventure awaits us.

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