



The Boy at the Top of the Mountain as a Source of Axiological Ethics for Holocaust fiction

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to point out the artistic and other qualities of Boyne's publication *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*, especially in relation to what could be considered as a lack of scholarly reception of this artistic narrative. In summary, the transformation of Pierrot's mindset from a humanistically minded bilingual boy to an uncritical recipient of Nazi ideas over the course of the narrative is effectively portrayed. It should also be noted that the change in axiological values in the narrative is influenced by events that entered the child character Pierrot's life: for example, his stay in an orphanage or his long stay in a house on the top of a mountain owned by Adolf Hitler. Based on qualitative content analysis, the paper answers four questions: (1) How is Pierrot's change of mind portrayed? (2) How does Pierrot as a child perceive Nazi ideas? (3) To what extent is the war the driving force behind the plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*? (4) Is *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* suitable for children and young people to read at all?

Keywords John Boyne · The Boy at the Top of the Mountain · Intentional literature · Holocaust · Qualitative content analysis

Introduction

This paper aims to present the potential of John Boyne's *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* (2015) in introducing selected aspects of World War II to child readers of different ages. In the first part of the paper, I present the place of the selected

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World War II storyline in intentional literature, that is, artistic narratives that are implicitly addressed to child or adolescent readers. In the second section, I outline the methodology of the analysis of my selected publication and use the conquest aspects from this book to point out the possible connection between literary representations of events from the period of World War II, specifically the Holocaust and their embedding in the construction of the cognitive-emotional and axiological profile of readers. Although the core of the analyzed publication is the presentation of the possibility of influencing the perception of humanity and its values, I believe that it is through the depiction of the procedures of internalizing Nazi ideas that the novel's message can be internalized by implicit readers, in the sense of recognizing the procedures that lead to a change in a child's values. With these intentions, an "ethical approach" (Moisan et al., 2015) is postulated, which could lead readers to become aware of moral and ethical dilemmas in the context of the events of the Shoah (which is the Hebrew word for 'catastrophe'). The characteristics of the approach suggest that it corresponds closely with a multilateral view of the events of the Shoah (Moisan et al., 2015) or "human rights education" (Moisan et al., 2015), which views the issue through "power, rights and legislation as well as human dignity." (Moisan et al., 2015, p. 253) At the core of the "intercultural/antiracist approach" (Moisan et al., 2015) is the claim that "teachers who adopt this approach try to explain to students what racism is and in what forms and by what mechanisms it manifests itself. Thus equipped, students can recognize its manifestations [manifestations of racism] and ideally also avoid repeating them." (Moisan et al., 2015, pp. 253–254; compare Salmons, 2003) Mulders (2023) In relation to these approaches, notes that the visit to the Anne Frank House as one application is positively evaluated by the students.

The aim of all these methods of presenting literary depictions of the Shoah to implicit readers is to influence their axiological system, i.e. to shape their value ranking in a certain way, with a focus on the awareness of the importance of democracy, ethical and moral values, and the rights of individuals or groups.

On the basis of the fact that experts dealing with possible methods of implementing the topic of the Holocaust into teaching at various levels of education, I will argue that the chosen publication is suitable for the consolidation and interiorization of a shared axiological system of readers (i.e. a ranking of values that is recognized by the majority society in relation to respect for the rights of individuals and their groups, etc.) with a focus on the development of their humanitarian sensitivity or in relation to the development of their ethical (moral) values. Bell et al. (2022) point out that teachers are free to make decisions based on materials, standards and curricula, while relying on a student-centered approach to teaching about the Holocaust. For example, Kowaz (2022) presents an educational protocol template on the Holocaust to maximize student engagement and retention of information. Today, working with digital resources has become much more complex. For example, López-García (2022) notes that the use of historical documents and internet sources can promote critical thinking. The inclusion of digital technologies in the presentation of historical events is also emphasized by the aforementioned Kowaz (2022). Digital Holocaust memory projects have focused on victim-focused narratives and neglected important topics such as bystandership and complicity (Glouftsis, 2022).

It can be argued that the issue of the Holocaust is still relevant today, especially with the warnings that this aspect of the Second World War presents to us. Holý et al. (2011, p. 6) state that the issue of the Holocaust “contributes to the maintenance and renewal of historical and national memory. It is topical at a time of ‘oblivion’, which dominates a significant part of Czech and indeed European society, and which can result in indifference to, or even denial of, the Holocaust. There are no perfect legal or institutional mechanisms to prevent new genocides and totalitarianism once and for all. We must therefore rely on basic moral principles and on an awareness of this historical and cultural memory. The rise of anti-Jewish sentiment in European society is well documented (eg: Due Enstad, 2017). A total of 16,500 respondents who defined themselves as Jews/non-Jews participated in Enstad’s survey. A total of 85% of them stated that they perceived the rise of anti-Semitism as a serious problem (Mašát, 2019). However, the Holocaust has not received extensive critical analysis in mainstream sociology, which may be due to its inadequate attention in the field (Ray, 2022). The significance of the Holocaust for social theory is also being questioned, particularly regarding the involvement of local populations in mass murder and the financial gain from the Holocaust (Latour and Louis, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of Holocaust denial and the weaponization of free speech in the political climate have made it uncertain whether Holocaust denial is still confined to the far fringes (Banks, 2022). Overall, the Holocaust remains a relevant and important topic in various fields of study.

Yudkin (in Abramovich, 2019, p. 9) characterizes Holocaust-themed literature as including “texts whose theme and point of departure is the war waged against Jews/Jewish people between 1933 and 1945. Although this starting point is firmly defined, the further development of the text is much less certain and ambiguous. The aftermath continues to unfold over time and the text can therefore go in different directions. The writer as narrator may be the main focal point of the narrative or may be reporting on a distant event. Such a text can be a chronicle in which the recorder is a major or minor actor. Alternatively, he may not be involved in the story at all.”

As a practising teacher, I am convinced that literary texts are an appropriate means of presenting the Holocaust to pupils and students at all levels of institutional education. In artistic narratives, both positive and negative patterns of behavior are presented to the recipients. Homolová (cited by Ortnerová, 1995 in Gejgušová et al., 2011, p. 47) notes that “children [identify] (...) with the heroes of stories and enthusiastically accept the ideas and suggestions offered for solving problems.” (Giambastiani, 2020) Giambastiani notes that “It is quite common for people to consider the subject inappropriate for a young audience, and it is also considered disrespectful to write inventive children’s literature about the death camps. Yet it seems necessary to inform children about such an important historical event. Moreover, stories written on the subject aim to introduce children to issues such as prejudice, discrimination and racism” (2020, p. 4).

It is important that the literature that students are introduced to is primarily intentional. I assume that this area of literature is adapted in its composition to the specific age of the readers, and therefore the impact of reading in terms of the acquisition of axiological system or patterns of behaviour may be greater based on the

reading of literature for children and young people by a defined range of recipients. Holocaust-themed literature has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for survivors and their descendants to clarify and disseminate their stories, as well as to shed light on the underrepresented or untold experiences of those who did not survive the Holocaust (Hertina, 2023). It is essential for non-memorial survivors who seek to write about the Holocaust to question the ethics of their actions and to engage with their grandparents' stories ethically (Scholfield-Peters, 2022). Literature can effectively represent traumatic memory and can address the trauma of the Holocaust as a second-hand experience, highlighting strategies for working with trauma and the role of memory and imagination (Vysotska, 2023).

Using literary texts to introduce pupils to a given historical reality entails the necessity to eliminate or neglect certain aspects of the phenomenon in order to effectively use literature as a means of presenting the events of the Shoah. On this point, Lindquist (2008, p. 28) notes: "Deciding on content is extremely difficult and problematic when it comes to developing curricula for Holocaust education. Educators must consider factors such as historical fidelity, topic selection, potential teaching materials (such as textbooks and literary texts), and visual documents (such as films and photographs) when planning Holocaust education. Carefully considered decisions regarding these factors will enable teachers to present historically accurate, appropriate, and meaningful content that conveys the story of the Holocaust in a way that is pedagogically sound and historically functional. Therefore, the author does not focus on the actual content that should be included in Holocaust education, but instead considers various factors that are important to the selection of content."

The selection of artistic narratives is a fundamental aspect for the educational impact on pupils in the field of literary texts: "When considering the selection of literature for children, it is inevitable to address the question of how suitable such gloomy themes are for such young people" (Russel, 1997, p. 267). With a degree of simplification, it can be said that two opposing views are currently being promoted within the scholarly community: one group of experts argues that children should be introduced to the Shoah at the youngest possible age, taking into account their cognitive and emotional development and so on. The second group takes the position that the Shoah is such a serious topic that, despite some adaptation of the presentation of the topic to the age of the pupils and their development, it is desirable that readers be introduced to the defined phenomenon at a more advanced stage of their development (such as at the earliest in the first year of the second stage of primary institutional education). The reasoning of experts advocating this view is based on the fact that this will go some way to ensuring that pupils are not emotionally disturbed by the events of the Shoah.

The choice of excerpts (or entire books) can fundamentally affect the overall outcome of the reception of these texts (Jauss, 2001). In connection with this claim, it should be mentioned that "teachers must carefully distinguish between historical truth and literary truth. Historical truth as an accepted factual record of a given situation must coexist alongside literary truth as a statement of the essence of a particular event, while giving sufficient room for literary license as a means of telling the story and conveying the reader's perspective on the situation." (Lindquist, 2008, p. 28)

The main impetus for the selection of this publication is the belief that its artistic merit is at least on a par with Boyne's more famous work, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2017). Unlike *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, in which the writer confronts the monstrosity of Nazi beliefs about superior and inferior races, culminating in the death of the son of the Auschwitz concentration camp commander, in *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*, the war is used as a thinking space to point out the relative ease with which children and adolescents are influenced, with children either deliberately or unconsciously adopting the ideas of people they respect, or who are role models for various reasons.

The book's plot describes how Pierrot, an orphaned boy, leaves his home in Paris for a new life with his Aunt, who is a servant in a wealthy household at the top of the German mountains. It is 1935, the Second World War is looming, and the house is the Berghof, the home of Adolf Hitler. An example of war as a thinking space can be demonstrated by Pierrot being kept in the Nazi-constructed building the Eagle's Nest so that his aunt could protect him from the horrors of the coming war, to shape him axiologically with an emphasis on a humanistic way of life. Paradoxically, a situation arises where the boy is directly confronted with the monstrous ideas of Adolf Hitler, which he internalises for various reasons, becoming one of Hitler's most devoted Nazis.

I am of the opinion that *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is to some extent suitable for implementation in teaching at various levels of education, but it is necessary to respect the age of the pupils, their cognitive and reading experience, or their preconceptions regarding the Second World War and the Holocaust. The claim can be supported, for example, by the results of Kirkland's (2023) case study, which concluded that before learning about it in history classes, most students had some ideas about the Holocaust, but these were commonly simplistic and fragmented. Students largely presented Hitler as personally responsible for what took place. They also referred almost exclusively to events that took place in the concentration camps, rather than other places of persecution. On the basis of the results of his research, Gray (2015) presents the claim that the book and the film have had a large influence on existing ideas and have helped to establish problematic misconceptions. As I point out below, *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* provides a greater interpellation space and possesses greater teaching potential in relation to its implicit readers. As already mentioned, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is built around the presentation of the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps, a subject matter that is sensitive and potentially not suitable for all groups of readers.

The Boy at the Top of the Mountain is not unique in the context of portraying the influence of Nazi ideas on the transformation of values and the perception of the current situation by children or adolescents. Anne Blankman's *Prisoner of Night and Fog* (2014) tells the story of the birth of the Nazi idea and its influence on the psychological, moral and ethical development of a teenage girl. Gretchen grows up in the environment of the highest representatives of Nazi ideology, under the protection of "Uncle Adolf". Her opinion is shaped both by the environment she lives in and by the story that her father was killed while protecting Adolf Hitler. Her comfortable life is disrupted by Daniel, a Jewish journalist, who provides her with a different possible perspective on her father's death, thus disrupting her uncritical acceptance

of the ideas of National Socialism. Edgar Feuchtwanger, the nephew of German writer Lion Feuchtwanger, has written his memoirs of his nearly decade-long stay in Munich in a house immediately adjacent to Adolf Hitler's residence. The memoir, entitled *My Neighbour Hitler. Memoirs of a Jewish Child* (2015), which he compiled together with Bertilo Scali, also depicts the development of a child's and then an adolescent's view of Nazi ideology shaped mainly by external factors. The story *Somewhere the Sun Still Shines: Childhood in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (2017), set in Czechoslovakia in 1939–1945, presents the life story of young Michael, whose experiences are the basis for the development of the implementation of persecutory and stigmatizing practices directed against people of Jewish nationality. The protagonist's view of the events taking place in Prague in the late 1930s changes from the young man's preoccupation with new and unusual stimuli after he witnesses the suicide of an elderly Jewish couple. After being transported to the Terezin concentration camp, he becomes a member of the Nesharim group, which begins to shape Michael's outlook on life, humanity and morality, which are constantly tested behind the walls of the Jewish ghetto. Coming of age in the shadow of the enforcement of Nazi anti-Semitic edicts is explored in Hannelore Grünberg-Klein's *Until There Are Tears* (2018). The friendship of two girls, Annemarie and Ellen, is told in *Count the Stars* (2015) by Lois Lowry. Based on the relationship between the two friends, the influence of anti-Semitic decrees on their friendship is portrayed, while the help of non-Jews to their compatriots is thematized.

The analysis of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How is Pierrot's change of mind portrayed?
2. How does Pierrot as a child perceive Nazi ideas?
3. To what extent is the war the driving force behind the plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*?
4. Is the publication of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* suitable for children and young people to read at all?

Theoretical Anchoring of the Questions

In formulating the question How is Pierrot's change of mind portrayed? I was guided by my belief in the primary mission of this publication. In my view, the transformation of Pierrot's mindset is central, and the writer uses this transformation to portray the possibilities of influencing children's axiological systems and the interiorization of different views.

To postulate the question How does Pierrot as a child perceive Nazi ideas? I was led by the conviction that a child perceives (Nazi) ideas differently, especially without their adequate (respectively based on different arguments and knowledge of the social situation) reception. Moreover, portraying Nazi ideas from the child's position may be more appropriate to the reception of (not only this) publication. For example, Jennings, in *Holocaust Education and Critical Citizenship in an American Fifth Grade: Expanding Repertoires of Meanings, Language and Action* (2015), presents

the results of a study in which fifth grade children were educated year-round about rights, mutual respect (tolerance), and responsibility through Holocaust-themed literature. As part of this education, the children sought to understand its social, political and moral implications, with the study's findings suggesting the experience that the children gained through this educational process leads to their involvement in society.

Third question: To what extent is the war the driving force behind the plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*? was included because of the belief that war events are not the primary driver of the plot, but serve as a kind of backdrop to portray the transformation of the child's mindset and a relatively easy path to his/her value transformation.

Finally, is *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* suitable for children and young people to read at all? was given to confirm my premise that this publication is intentional, primarily because the narrative is told from the point of view of a child who perceives war and other events in an unbiased way, as they are happening at the time. He communicates the situation to his (immediate) surroundings, which he judges on the basis of the current situation without any overlap into the future or reminiscences of the past. This view can be supported by Barnes (in Goodreads, 2024): "We live with such easy assumptions, don't we? For instance, that memory equals events plus time. But it's all much odder than this. Who was it said that memory is what we thought we'd forgotten? And it ought to be obvious to us that time doesn't act as a fixative, rather as a solvent. But it's not convenient—it's not useful—to believe this; it doesn't help us to get on with our lives; so we ignore it." (2024, p. n.d.).

The Place of the Shoah in the Teaching of Literary Education

Literary representations of the Shoah have the potential to serve multiple purposes. They can transform survivors' accounts into cultural iconography and disseminate their stories to a wider audience (Hertina, 2023). The genre traits of the Bildungsroman (a genre of novel dealing with the spiritual, psychological, or social development of the hero, especially in the transition from child to adult, and usually aimed at children and adolescents) can be effectively employed in historical novels about the Holocaust, engaging young readers and allowing them to reject constricting modes of social conditioning (Canani, 2022). These novels can also provide a platform for exploring the complexities of the Holocaust and its impact on subsequent generations, as seen in the surge of literary works by French writers belonging to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors (Ulriksen, 2022). Overall, literary representations of the Shoah have the potential to educate, raise awareness, and foster empathy and understanding among readers. Kokkola (2003, pp. 2–3) argues that teachers who incorporate the Shoah into literary education should be rigorous critics of fictional narratives because "many works contain peritexts informing young readers how much of the text is based on historical evidence and how much is based on conjecture or imagination, thus mixing traditional historiography with fiction. These trends are not surprising—teachers are encouraged to use Holocaust literature to supplement history instruction."

Shoah-texts have the ability to present historical facts because “the reality of the Holocaust is the only reason why literature about it exists. Language arts teachers must allow all exploration of this event in literature to be conducted from the perspective of history” (Lindquist, 2008, p. 29). Texts on the subject can be seen as a suitable means of introducing pupils to the phenomenon of the Shoah. Jindráček et al. (2011, p. 109; Lederbuchová, 2004) mention the fact that “literature is (...) a reservoir of paradigms of human action, it offers alternative solutions to basic situations, it offers the possibility to judge the value of these solutions.” This implies that, given literary texts describe different models of human behaviour, which students can be inspired by in real life, they can compare negative and positive patterns of behaviour. Mavlyanovna (2023) goes so far as to state that “the essence of artistic creation is the phenomenon of spirituality and culture in the improvement of the person who is its owner” (p. 10). Currently, there is a significant development of literary work in the field of intentional Shoah literature ((Gajewska and Trzeciak Huss, 2023 or Malchow, 2023). It is suggested that teachers who incorporate the Shoah into literary education should be rigorous critics of fictional narratives because objective reception and subsequent reflection on texts can lead to the selection of appropriate literature.

I believe that literary texts with Shoah themes have the potential to engage primary school pupils, stimulate their interest, and thus appropriately influence young recipients in terms of axiological values. The issue of the Shoah can also be used to present the importance of democracy, highlighting the aspects that lead to the maintenance of this political element and the literary treatment of the Shoah can be used as a means of introducing pupils to a particular historical stage. Jindráček (2011) concluded in his research that activities that enrich literary education with historical and cultural context are among the most popular activities for students. According to Hník (2012, p. 143), working with the non-literary aspects of a work is valuable because it can “enrich the understanding of a text with extra-literary contexts: contemporary, ideological, biographical.” At this point, then, the Shoah-texts seem to be a suitable means of introducing students to one line of events of the Second World War, also from the perspective of history *sensu stricto*.

Choosing a Suitable Text

There is a considerable amount of material on the Shoah. For demonstration purposes, the educational application *Fleeing the Holocaust: My encounter with witnesses*, provides access to audiovisual testimonies of survivors and offers tasks based on original documents to deepen students' understanding (Johnson, 2022). *Hitler's Daughter* engages young readers through a development genre, allowing them to explore the experiences of a child from a perpetrator culture (Fink and Masungi, 2022). Additionally, there are books categorized by age groups, such as picture books for younger children, middle reader books for ages nine to eleven, and young adult books that address more mature themes (Warońska-Gęsiarz, 2022). When selecting those that we want to present to pupils in the second stage of primary school, teachers could bear in mind that the sources used should ideally have a

certain narrative value and should show the phenomenon as it happened, so as not to transform it prejudicially.

The selection of texts is a very demanding process, involving:

- texts that present the issue from different perspectives;
- avoiding preconceptions (see Kinloch, 2001);
- Shoah-texts making the history of the Jewish people more accessible to pupils;
- developing pupils' literary literacy, their skills and values through selected texts.

Fictional narratives in which the Shoah is viewed in a multifaceted way can serve to fulfil the potential of this literary theme. In my opinion, readers who are presented with Shoah-themed texts also with the aim of influencing their value-ladder in some way (see Hník, 2017; Jordan, 2004; Jindráček et al., 2011; Kokkola, 2003; Oliveira, 2017) or with the aim of familiarizing them with the relevant historical epoch (Sladová et al., 2016) should be introduced to precisely the multilateral view of the Shoah phenomenon. This not to deny the suffering of Jews, which stems from the fact that the Shoah was directed primarily against this group of people, yet events taking place in today's world are to some extent considering the different views and arguments at the level of the actions of the various stakeholders from the perspective of people persecuted by the Nazi regime (such as Jews, homosexuals, political opponents of Nazism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma, etc.), voluntary and forced members of the Nazi Party, or Soviet and Western European soldiers occupying Europe (Mašát and Sladová, 2021).

Methodology of Analysis

The narrative was analysed using qualitative content analysis. According to Kerlinger (1972, p. 528 in Klapko, 2013, p. 140), this method can be used to determine the relative dominance or frequency of different communicative phenomena, propaganda, tendencies, styles, content changes and readership. In addition, the goals of quantitative content analysis include understanding utterances in context and in procedural development. I focused on changes in the views of the speakers and the author in terms of communication with the reader. Prior to the actual analysis, the following research questions were set: (1) How is Pierrot's change of mind portrayed? (2) How does Pierrot as a child perceive Nazi ideas? (3) To what extent is the war the driving force behind the plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*? (4) Is *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* suitable for children and young people to read at all?

How is Pierrot's Change of Mind Portrayed?

At the beginning of the narrative, the great friendship between Pierrot and his Jewish friend Anshel is portrayed.

They spent most of their time together, digging in the mart fields and reading the same books. They were such good friends that Anshel was the only one who let Pierrot read the stories he wrote in his room at night. Not even Madame Bronstein knew that her son wanted to be a writer. (Boyne, 2015, p. 10).

Pierrot's mindset begins to transform when he sees a portrait of Adolf Hitler in a house on top of a mountain.

He turned around and noticed a portrait on the wall of an extremely serious man with a small moustache, gazing into the distance. He wore a yellow coat and had an iron cross on his breast pocket, one hand resting on the arm of his chair, the other pressed against his hip. Behind him hung a picture of trees and a sky covered with grey clouds, as if a storm were brewing. (Boyne, 2015, p. 73)

Over time, Pierrot becomes familiar with Nazi views in various ways and interiorizes many of them. The following quote can be given to illustrate this point:

He waited until a voice inside urged him to enter. Closing the door behind him, he marched straight to the table, knocked his heels together as he had done a thousand times in the past twelve months, and added the greeting that made him feel so important: he saluted with a raised right hand. "Heil Hitler!" he roared at the top of his lungs. (Boyne, 2015, pp. 127–128)

Pierrot's aunt and driver Ernst are involved in a movement whose main goal is to kill Hitler. Pierrot comes upon the plot and denounces the aunt and her associate to Hitler, whereupon he witnesses their execution. He makes excuses for what he has caused:

"And my aunt was a traitor, just like Ernst. And traitors must be punished. As the soldiers dragged her body away," Pierrot closed his eyes. Finally, he opened them again, expecting the space to have cleared in the meantime - only there was still one man standing in the middle of the garden, and like Beatrix a moment before, his eyes were fixed upwards, on him. "Adolf Hitler." (Boyne, 2015, p. 178)

The culmination of the transformation of Pierrot's thinking is the pledge of allegiance he makes to Hitler:

Pierrot clears his throat and smiles. In the presence of this blood-stained flag, lowered, which embodies our leader, I' pledge to devote all my energy and strength to the saviour of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to lay down my life for him, so help me God." (Boyne, 2015, p. 135)

The possibility of influencing the mindset of children and adolescents is portrayed through Pierrot's experience of the war. Initially, Pierrot is unaware of the consequences associated with Adolf Hitler's rise to power and the beginning of World War II. The turning point comes when he loses both his parents and is sent to visit his aunt, who serves at the Hitler's occasional residence. Here he encounters concrete Nazi ideas and gradually internalises them, not least because of his uncritical

admiration for Hitler. Boyne reveals to the reader the gradual transformation of Pierrot's thinking and the psychological practices Hitler uses to convince Pierrot of the rightness and necessity of (not only) the final solution.

How does Pierrot as a Child Perceive Nazi Ideas?

Pierrot perceives stereotypic and anti-Jewish ideas in his family because of his father, who blames his poor financial situation on the Jews.

“Everybody is just a scrooge. Especially the Jews, they’re the worst. And yet it’s the Jews who come, because they say that Madame Abrahams makes the best *gefilte fish* and *latkes* in all of Western Europe”. “Anshel is a Jew too”, Pierrot remarked quietly, for he often saw his friend going to the synagogue with his mother. “Anshel is one of the good ones”, murmured his father. “They say that in every barrel of apples you find a rotten one. And it’s true for me too...” (Boyne, 2015, p. 18)

Pierrot is sent to an orphanage after the death of his parents, where he also encounters anti-Semitic views that contribute to his transformation in thought and ideas. This narrative line is most represented by another orphan? Josette's thoughts:

You know why Hugo has such long hair, don't you, Pierrot? Josette turns to him. Because he has horns underneath. [...] I bet if you pulled down his pants, he'd have a tail. (Boyne, 2015, p. 47)

Anti-Jewish laws are also portrayed from a child's perspective. As Pierrot travels on the train, he doesn't understand why one man is banned from an empty compartment:

Don't you want help with that?" Pierrot offered. "I'll pick up your suitcase for you." The man smiled and shook his head. "I think you'd be wasting your time," he replied. "But it's very kind of you." By then the woman had returned with the conductor. He looked around the compartment and pointed to the old man. "Out. You can stand in the corridor." "But the seat is empty," Pierrot said. "The conductor," he thought, "must think that Pierrot was travelling with his mother or father, and that the old man had taken their seat. (Boyne, 2015, p. 58)

Further evidence of his childhood perception of Nazi ideas, which he compares with his own life and other experiences, can be found in the following excerpt. The passage emphasizes Pierrot's acceptance of some Nazi ideas and his internal (perhaps unconscious) effort to protect himself from these ideas, not least because his friend is Jewish. Due to the influence of the environment in which he finds himself, Pierrot gradually adopts Nazi ideas, which he is moved to internalize, thanks to the fact that Hitler appoints him his assistant and recorder, where the highest ranks can participate in a meeting with representatives of the Nazi party at the Berghoff. Pierrot, a *tabula rasa* in this way of thinking, is thus deliberately influenced and confirms

that the events he witnesses on the Eagle's Nest are the only correct ones. Boyne does not emphasize the moment when Pierrot's transformation in ideological thinking takes place, the readers observe this change implicitly, based on the description of Pierrot's actions and behaviour, while over time the readers realize that they have witnessed the formation of a new young and ardent supporter of the Nazis.

Before the Führer left for Berlin after this visit, he gave Pierrot one more book from his private library. Pierrot carefully read the title aloud: *International Jew*, pronouncing each syllable carefully. *A world problem*. And the name of the author: Henry Ford. Yes, an American, Hitler explained. ... Pierrot picked up the book and tried not to think about the fact that the Jew is also Anshel, yet he shows no signs of what the Führer described. For the time being, he put the volume away in a drawer in his bedside cabinet and returned to the book *Emil and the Detectives*, which always reminded him of home. (Boyne, 2015, pp. 140–141)

Pierrot eventually adopts the global Nazi view of people of Jewish descent that is constantly being imposed on him. This is evidenced by his treatment of the last letter he receives from Anshelm. Pierrot's failure to read the letter, in which Anshelm describes Nazi practices of persecution and stigmatization against persons of Jewish descent, demonstrates his absolute identification with Nazi theses. "I am writing in haste, for there is a great noise coming in from the street, and my mother says it is time to leave. She's packed us some things, the most important things. The suitcases have been sitting by the door for weeks. I don't know exactly where we're going, but Mom says it's not safe for us here anymore. ... How are you at all? Why didn't you answer my last two letters? Everything has changed in Paris. If you could only see how... Pierrot read no more - he crumpled up the letters and threw them into the fireplace." (Boyne, 2015, p. 160)

At the end of the war, when the fate of Nazi Germany is sealed, Pierrot has a conversation with Herta, the maid in the house on top of the mountain, asking where she is going as she flees.

"I'll never speak of this place again," Pieter. "And you'd better keep your mouth shut, too. You'd better leave now, before the troops arrive. You're still young. No one needs to know how much you've done. How many terrible things we've all done. Those words buried themselves in his heart like a bullet," she said. "The things that were discussed in the Führer's office? None of us will be forgiven. But I was just a child," Pieter defended himself. "I didn't know anything. I didn't understand." [...] "Don't try to pretend you didn't know what was going on. You have eyes and ears. And many times you sat in that room and took notes. You heard the whole thing. You knew everything. And you know what you've done." [...] "All the dead you have on your conscience. But you're still young, you're only 16. You have plenty of years to deal with your guilt in these things." (Boyne, 2015, pp. 218–219)

As the excerpt makes clear, Pierrot (Pieter) is inwardly aware that he was a direct witness to Nazi horrors. Nevertheless, he tries to justify his complicity in

the extermination of the Jews by his age and by the fact that he did not participate directly in the killings. This is a thematization of a controversial issue, where some (in)direct participants in the Nazi extermination machine excused their actions precisely because they were either unaware of the consequences of their actions or did not participate directly in the killings. Thus, Boyne in a certain way indicates and thematizes the issue of so-called collective guilt (Vangshardt, 2022 or Ronca, 2022), the application of which can currently be seen in some world political representatives in connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In my view, therefore, the situation goes beyond the historical stage of the Second World War.

To What Extent is the War the Driving Force Behind the Plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*?

A hint of anti-German sentiment in Pierrot's family (his father is German and his mother French, so he is a practising bilingual) is expressed in his mother's opinion of German, a language she considered a disincentive for Nazism.

If he wanted to show off something at a party, he would first sing Marseillaise in German and then the French version of *Das Lied der Deutschen*. This skill sometimes embarrassed the guests. You won't sing that anymore, Pierrot, she announced to Pierrot's mother one evening, after his performance had aroused the mild displeasure of several neighbours. (Boyne, 2015, p. 12)

Emphasising the need to stay safe, Pierrot's aunt Beatrix explains to him how to behave in Hitler's home, including what he can and cannot say, in relation to his mixed identity.

"Beatrix turned sharply towards him, and the smile faded from her face. You were born in France, it is true, she said. And your mother was French. But your father, my older brother, was German. Which makes you German too, you understand? You'd better not mention where you come from from now on.'Why not? Because it's safer, she explained. And there's one more thing I wanted to talk to you about. Your name. My name, he frowned at her. Yes. Beatrix hesitated for a moment, almost as if she couldn't believe what she was about to say. I don't think we should call you Pierrot anymore. Pierrot opened his mouth in surprise. He had the feeling that perhaps his hearing was playing tricks on him. But no one calls me anything but Pierrot, he said. It's... It's my name! But it's very French. I thought maybe we could call you Pieter. It's the same name, just a German version. It's not so different.'" (Boyne, 2015, pp. 92–93)

In the early days of Adolf Hitler's rise to power, the German song, or rather German, was regarded as a language symbolizing terror, the language of the Nazis. Throughout the narrative there are reminiscences of the First World War, in which Pierrot's father fought and from which he brought traumas that he can only overcome with alcohol. Pierrot empathises with and, in a way, covers for his father:

Sometimes Pierrot would wake up because he needed to go to the toilet and find his father sitting at the kitchen table with his head on its wooden top, mumbling something to himself, and an empty bottle lying overflowing beside him. Whenever this happened, the boy would run barefoot downstairs and throw the bottle in the yard trash can, so that his mother wouldn't discover it in the morning. (Boyne, 2015, p. 14)

Paradoxically, he has this conversation with the Führer:

So your father was a soldier, eh? The Führer hissed. Better than mine? Better than the Duke's? Do you think he was braver than me when he was dead? No, mein Führer, Pierrot gasped, the words rising in his throat. His mouth was terribly dry and his heart was pounding in his chest. I can trust you, Pieter, can't I?. (Boyne, 2015, p. 156)

This passage refers to the fact that Pierrot saw his father as a hero who gave his life for his country during the First World War. As we know, Adolf Hitler also fought during World War I, during which he was decorated for heroism. In Hitler's eyes, only those who survived the conflict are heroes. The text demonstrates that, out of fear, Pierrot agrees, suggesting the disturbing conclusion that a child can replace the love and admiration for his father with an uncritical admiration for Adolf Hitler. Its values and axiological ranking is transformed in its very essence. Another crucial moment influencing Pierrot's mindset is the conversation he has with his aunt and his chauffeur. At the heart of the conversation is a debate about his Jewish friend Anshelm. Pierrot still does not make all the connections in the correspondence to Nazi ideas.

What is it? It's about your friend Anshel Bronstein. What about him? Pierrot frowned. ... I need you never to speak his name again in the house on the mountain top. Do you understand? Pierrot stared at him as if Ernst had gone mad. (Boyne, 2015, p. 96)

Beatrix's later pleas for Pierrot to stop writing to Anshel. "Anshel's letters could get you into trouble. You can't imagine. And me too. If his name had been Franz, Heinrich or Martin, it wouldn't have mattered. But Anshel?" She shook her head. "They wouldn't like to see a letter from a Jewish boy." (Boyne, 2015, p. 104)

This passage describes the influence on the change of Pierrot's thinking that those closest to him, not only Adolf Hitler, but Pierrot's aunt (who tried to protect the boy and herself from possible punishment with anti-Jewish advice and orders) emphasize the necessity for Pierrot to break his ties with his Jewish friend. As can be seen from the quote, it was not primarily about the content of the letter that Anshelm addressed to Pierrot, but primarily about his typically Jewish name. So the war is the trigger of censorship practices.

Is *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* Suitable for Children and Young People to Read At All?

As I have indicated several times, all the events that Pierrot experiences are seen from the position of the child and his context. This approach is—in Lindquist's (2008) argument—one of the most appropriate for de-abstracting the events of the Second World War. Moreover, with a few exceptions, such as when Pierrot witnesses the execution of his aunt Beatrix and his driver Ernst, it does not contain a cruel depiction of wartime events. These are hinted at in the narrative, even, for example, in the planning of the Nazi concentration camps or in the metaphor of the cook killing chickens in the mountaintop mansion.

I would argue that this publication is particularly suitable for children by representing the change in Pierrot's thinking which is portrayed implicitly. Readers can therefore become familiar with the mechanisms of these procedures in an empathising and non-violent way, without accentuating the educativeness. The perception of Nazi ideas is also related to the application of procedures influencing Pierrot's axiological system. He comes to Berghoff determined not to break his relationship with his friend Anshelm. Gradually, however, he stops reading the letters he receives from him, and even burns them (evoking the Nazi's widespread book burning acts of 1933). He commits this act under the influence of Nazi ideas, the application of which he is party to at the Eagle's Nest (where, for example, he participates in the negotiations of Nazi representatives on the final solution to the Jewish question). Readers can realize the effect that seeing success or trying to be part of "something big" can have on us. Based on this infatuation, we then eliminate our values or replace them with others. Boyne's novel is not, in my opinion, a war novel, but a psychological one, as I have tried to point out. In it, war is used as a space that places people in borderline situations in which the actions of each of us are unpredictable. It is in this borderline situation that the transformation of Pierrot's personality takes place.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to point out the artistic and other qualities of Boyne's *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*. I have sought to answer four questions: (1) How is Pierrot's change of mind portrayed? (2) How does Pierrot as a child perceive Nazi ideas? (3) To what extent is the war the driving force behind the plot of *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*? (4) Is *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* suitable for children and young people to read at all? In summary, the transformation of Pierrot's mindset from a humanistically minded bilingual boy to an uncritical recipient of Nazi ideas over the course of the narrative is effectively portrayed. It should also be noted that the change in axiological values in the narrative is influenced by events in Pierrot's life: for example, his stay in an orphanage or his long stay in a house on the top of a mountain in the company of Adolf Hitler.

Pierrot perceives Nazi ideas through the prism of his life and other experiences. At first he does not understand the consequences of his surroundings, but over time he begins to assimilate, especially on the basis of Hitler's influence. It is this development of thought, coupled with the gradual interiorization of Hitler's ideas, that I believe has the potential to make this disturbing experience accessible to child and adolescent readers.

The war in *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* serves primarily as a space or backdrop for the presentation of the transformation of a child's ideological and axiological thinking, for which particular events of the Second World War are selected by the author. There are various allusions to certain aspects of this war's conflict (e.g. the debate about concentration camps, Aryanization, etc.), but these are more or less another space for portraying the influence of the environment on the child's mind. It can also be noted that Pierrot's father fought in the First World War, as did Hitler's father. As we have shown, the exploration of this earlier war is used to prove Pierrot's loyalty to the Führer. The events in question are viewed through a different prism than the one that has been mainstreamed in this strand of literature, where some aspects of the Second World War are viewed primarily from the Nazi position, multilaterally.

In the analyzed publication, the war is a pivotal aspect that affects the transformation of Pierrot's mindset, values and opinions. How opinions and beliefs can be influenced and changed is also depicted, which is one of the strengths of the publication: readers can trace the procedures used for this change, they can recognize them in their surroundings and they can respond to them sensitively. It is therefore not a work simply depicting the era of the Second World War, but rather that the war serves as a basis precisely for the possible acquisition of the skill to recognize certain manipulation techniques and the ability to defend against them. It is on this point that I find the urgency of this story and its relevance to contemporary society and the individuals living in it.

Naumova and Drobnaya (2022) conclude that an integrative approach is important for the development of an axiological approach, whilst Enachi-Vasluianu and Malureanu (2023) argue for stories as an effective way to transmit moral values. In conclusion, I believe that *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* is highly suitable reading for children and young people, in relation to the development of their axiological system and democratic mindset, with the ability to recognize the germs of anti-Semitism, racism or xenophobia and, of course, empathetically considering certain ways of acting and behaving in the contemporary world, all of which is encouraged through story.

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