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Exploring Moral Values: Readers' Responses to the Holocaust in
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

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Abstract: The Holocaust is one of the dark events in history that must be remembered. There are many works in contemporary culture or even literature that apply the Holocaust theme. Unfortunately, these works make the sensitive part of this dark history deviate from the truth, which is crucial for the generation who learn about the Holocaust. Therefore, this research examined a novel with a holocaust theme titled *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne. This novel is one of the novels that has become a reference for many people who want to know about the Holocaust and has even been used as learning material for young students yet received many harsh criticisms such as historical inaccuracy even though this novel is considered historical fiction. Thus, it is necessary to study this novel further in order not to mislead the readers. This research will examine readers' reviews on the GoodReads online platform. Because now is the digital era, many people are doing online reading activities and writing reviews on this platform. Analyzing reader reviews also determines the quality of the novel itself. This research will also use the transactional reader response theory by Louise Rosenblatt. Therefore, it shows how changes in meaning occur between the text and the reader's perception.

Key words: aesthetic stance, historical fiction, holocaust, transactional reader-response

Abstrak: Holocaust adalah salah satu peristiwa kelam dalam sejarah yang harus dikenang. Ada banyak karya dalam budaya kontemporer atau bahkan literatur yang menerapkan tema Holocaust. Sayangnya, karya-karya tersebut justru membuat bagian sensitif dari sejarah kelam ini melenceng dari kebenaran, padahal hal ini sangat penting bagi generasi yang mempelajari Holocaust. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini meneliti sebuah novel dengan tema Holocaust yang berjudul *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* karya John Boyne. Novel ini merupakan salah satu novel yang menjadi referensi bagi banyak orang yang ingin mengetahui tentang Holocaust dan bahkan telah digunakan sebagai bahan pembelajaran bagi siswa-siswa muda, namun mendapat banyak kritikan pedas seperti ketidakakuratan sejarah meskipun novel ini dianggap sebagai fiksi sejarah. Oleh karena itu, novel ini perlu dikaji lebih lanjut agar tidak menyesatkan para pembacanya. Penelitian ini akan mengkaji ulasan pembaca di platform online GoodReads. Karena sekarang adalah era digital, banyak orang yang melakukan kegiatan membaca online dan menulis ulasan di platform ini. Menganalisis ulasan pembaca juga menentukan kualitas dari novel itu sendiri. Penelitian ini juga akan menggunakan teori respon pembaca transaksional

oleh Louise Rosenblatt. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini akan melihat bagaimana perubahan makna yang terjadi antara teks dan persepsi pembaca.

Kata kunci: sejarah fiksi, holocaust, aesthetic stance, transactional reader-response

INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust, a tragic event during World War II, involved the systematic killing of six million Jews and other individuals. Mass burials, burning pits, and crematoriums were used to dispose of the bodies, with 2.7 million Jews massacred in five death centers (Bard, 2024). The National WWII Museum reports that Germans used gas chambers and subjected Jews to force labor in these camps. Escaped prisoners reported the conditions to media and government officials in the UK and US. The extent of the Nazi atrocities was revealed after the camps were freed, leaving an indelible mark on the collective memory of humanity. This reminds us of the events that are currently occurring in Gaza. There has been a repeat of the dark incident that has no empathy for humanity carried out by the Israeli army against Palestine. It is clearly a genocide, not a war like what the Holocaust in this novel tells us about.

Due to its horror, the Holocaust is often represented in the media. It mostly appears in novels with a Holocaust background and different perspectives. In November 2019, former Olympic ice dancer Tatyana Navka and Andrew Burkovslythat performed a Holocaust-themed show in Russia, using a striped pajama set and smiling, which was criticized for disrespecting Holocaust victims and being considered tasteless (Berberich, 2019,1). The Holocaust was also presented on TV, like the *Holocaust of 1978*; the US mini-series *Holocaust* brought the Holocaust to ordinary citizens, raising historical awareness but also introducing the ambiguous 'Holocaust entertainment,' appropriating historical trauma for financial gain (Berberich, 2019,3). Berbeich also states that the Holocaust now is being metanarratives in many forms for aiming commemoration of the Holocaust, which means representing the phenomenon without considering the origins of the event. From an educational perspective, it leads to problematic misconceptions (Gray, 2015).

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, written by John Boyne, an Irish novelist, is a historical fiction for young age readers. The novel garnered significant attention and popularity, leading to adaptations in other forms of entertainment, including a feature film, a play, a ballet, and an opera (source?). Another reason for choosing this novel as the object of this research is because this novel has gained numerous awards: Irish Book Award Children's Book of the Year, Irish Book Award People's Choice Book of the Year, Bisto Book of the Year, Que Leer Award Best International Novel of the Year (Spain), and Orange Prize Readers Group Book of the Year (source?). Because of its popularity, this novel is often used for teaching about the Holocaust to young adults. However, it has been criticized for its lack of historical accuracy and for potentially misleading young readers by simplifying Holocaust and Auschwitz's horrors, leaving readers with no knowledge of the actual events and the children of Nazis (Reinhold 2022).

The article titled *Young Adult Holocaust Literature: How is the Holocaust depicted and what is appropriate to teach?* by Hilbert (2022) explores the portrayal of the Holocaust in young adult literature, focusing on fiction and non-fiction in middle and high school English and History classrooms. She analyzes six novels: *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. These novels, presented from the perspective of a Jewish person

experiencing the Holocaust, are considered better than fiction novels like *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Based on their age range, those novels are fine for educational purposes –except for *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* because of their inaccuracies. Both fiction and non-fiction book have their lack for young readers. Fiction books can lead to a misconception about the Holocaust because it is not clear enough to present the true story, non-fiction books mostly make them scared and traumatized by the horror accident (Hilbert 2022, 11). It is better to mix fictional and non-fiction book to explore the knowledge and not let the students consume the Holocaust story by themselves (Hilbert 2022, 13).

As has been presented above, there are many forms of presentation of the Holocaust tragedy in literature. Most of them harm the presentation and impact knowledge about the Holocaust itself. That is what made this research carried out, what actually makes the presentation inappropriate, especially in this novel, because this novel is historical fiction, it definitely involves fictional characters who form the basis of the storyline in this novel. Therefore, this research investigated how the characters and plot in this novel form moral values and what aspects underlie a conclusion on moral values in the context of literature.

All literary works contain moral values inside the text regardless of being presented either explicitly or implicitly. The values of morality in literature, particularly novels, refer to the principles, standards, and beliefs that guide human behavior and decision-making. They are often conveyed through the novel's characters, plot, and themes, serving as a means of teaching readers about right, wrong, good, and evil.

Because this novel has a dark historical theme, it is necessary to ensure that the things conveyed do not deviate too far from what happened and do not mislead the reader. However, the reader's perception of the text can vary because of their knowledge and belief. Therefore, this research wants to find out how the author of this novel intends to convey morals and messages that can be taken away by readers. This research will also be carried out on readers' responses to find out how changes in meaning have occurred to the general public. Analyzing their responses is urgent because they can be a benchmark for the quality of the literature.

Based on the critiques made by both general readers and academics, the main issue in this literary work is how the novels represent the elements, such as story and characters, as well as how the readers perceive the content. A work of literature, such as a novel, can significantly affect a reader's perception. This process involves the interaction between the reader and the text, where their interpretation and understanding of the text are influenced by their personal experiences, beliefs, cultural background, and many more (Marhaeni, 2016). Because of that, this research has two objectives. The first one is examining the moral values toward the Holocaust represented in the novel and the second one is analyze GoodReads readers' responses to the novel's moral value issue. This process is included in reader-response theory, specifically, transactional reader response by Louis Rosenblatt (1988). This theory emphasizes the importance of the reader's subjective experience in interpreting a literary work. It suggests that the meaning of a text is not fixed but instead emerges from the reader's engagement with the text (Mambrol, 2016). This engagement can transform readers' perceptions as they encounter new ideas, perspectives, and emotions through the text. The text, in turn, can challenge, reinforce, or transform the reader's perceptions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory provides the foundation for understanding how readers construct meaning from the text, almost similar to the New Criticism Theory. The theory emphasizes the reader's active role in the reading process, highlighting the influence of personal experiences, biases, and perspectives on interpretation. This theory provides two stances for identifying the kind of reader or reading process, it is called efferent stance and aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1988). Generally speaking, an *efferent stance* is a "thing" that is "carried away" from the text. A book guide on using tools is one example of an efferent stance because the reader can get the information from the book. Meanwhile, an *aesthetic stance* is expected that readers can achieve a "lived through experience" associated entirely with the personal and respond to characters in a literary text.

Curthoys's (2021) article entitled "*The Construction of an Active Reader in Two Holocaust-themed Novels for Children: Hitler's Daughter*" (1999) "*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*" (2006) as Bildungsroman, argues the main characters, Bruno and his sister Gretel, lack the motivation and bravery to challenge the biases of the adults around them, thus portraying them as innocent. Curthoys (2021) criticized this novel, stating that Bruno is often seen as an impossible contradiction. He mishears Auschwitz as Outwith, thinks Hitler is called 'The Fury,' and does not understand the term 'Jew.' Curthoys mentions that Bruno would have been part of the Hitler Youth at his age, but this is not addressed. Bruno's family lived next to a concentration camp, but he did not know what was happening. This story suggests that other German children were unaware of the events during this time, but this is untrue. Curthoys dismisses the victimization of Jews to advance the victimization of others and the connection with Schmueel fails to illustrate the extent of the imprisonment within the concentration camp. The comment on GoodReads was cited positively, focusing on the book's portrayal of the Holocaust and its impact on readers rather than analyzing it from a reader-response perspective. The article also proposes that the novel can be interpreted as a Bildungsroman, depicting the protagonist's journey of self-expression, during which they develop several commendable qualities. It gives me insight into how the characters are portrayed in the novel. These include a curious and adventurous nature, unwavering and brave loyalty to friends, and an innate ability to determine moral values regardless of societal status.

One research on the same novel entitled *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?* was conducted using a reception study (Gary, 2014). It employed a hybrid research approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, with a sample size of 298 participants between the ages of 13 and 14. The codes were derived from the qualitative data by applying the concepts of emergent theory while also considering the findings of pilot studies and current literature. The article contended that the novel produces distorted moral messages, misunderstandings, and oversimplifications and requires revision from an educational standpoint. It seems that Holocaust education is viewed as a curse rather than a blessing. Addressing the widespread appeal of Holocaust teaching and mitigating its adverse effects on young people is a crucial task for the future.

"Sharing information through book reviews in blog: The viewpoint of Rosenblatt's reader response theory" by Savolainen (2019) is an article that will be used as a reference in responding to readers' reviews on GoodReads. This article provides a framework for responding to reviews of blogs using Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory. There are eight categories for efferent stance and six categories for aesthetic stance. Savolainen (2019) categorizes the efferent and

aesthetic reading experiences that can be elaborated for further research using Rosenblatt's theory. Savolainen gives steps for qualitative and quantitative research in responding to a review in this article. This article can be a tool for examining reader responses toward the aesthetic stance that Savolainen already provides.

METHOD

Data was collected by reading the novel and finding the aspects of the novel that underlie its moral value, analyzing how the novel portrays the characters and plot, and researching the author to understand more accurately how the author wanted to convey the message in this novel, such as watching an author's interview that discusses or talks about this novel.

On the other object, Goodreads is a prominent online platform known for its abundant reader reviews and discussions. It enables users to create as well as maintain connections with other users (Sabri, et.al., 2021). The first step in collecting the data was to create an account on the GoodReads platform (<https://www.goodreads.com/>). Once the account was settled, we could see the home page and search for the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. There are community reviews below the synopsis and the novel's author biography. It already shows the rating percentages on each star and the search bar for typing specific words in the review section.

A qualitative approach was adopted for the analysis phase by closely reading the novel and understanding the comments or readers' motives of this novel on the GoodReads platform. The novel was analyzed to find the moral values through the plot and characters. Next, we read the comments and chose 30 samples that reflect the whole kind of reader and how they implemented the moral values inside the novel. Also, to discover how they were classified as an aesthetic reader and how the aesthetic stance affects them. Both steps were conducted with Savolainen's (2019) six steps of responding to the aesthetic readers in an article titled "The viewpoint of Rosenblatt's reader-response theory".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Works of literary fiction, in general, have moral values that are communicated in either an explicit or implicit manner. Moral values can also be a benchmark for the quality of the story itself, so they are important. John Boyne, an Irish novelist who wrote *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* already knows about the criticism or controversy about his book since this issue is quite an uproar for readers. This was seen in the interview *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas Author on the Book's Criticism & His Upcoming Sequel* by Virgin Media Television in 2023, the interviewer asked how the author felt about the criticism thrown on his novel from the Auschwitz Museum statements since he is about to make a sequel from this novel. Boyne simply said that it is a little bit of unfair criticism because this novel is a fable.

I think it is important to clarify what the Auschwitz Museum said when they said that it should not be used as a teaching tool for those studying or learning about the Holocaust. Now I am a novelist I didn't write a schoolbook or a textbook or a university novel. I wrote I wrote just a novel a fable and they have never actually commented on the novel itself just the teaching of it and I think it's a reasonable point. And I think if you are going to study the Holocaust, I don't necessarily think

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is your starting point any more than *Animal Farm* would be your starting point for the Russian Revolution but it might be a good ancillary book. Do I expect some controversy? I generally do to be honest, I think there is a lot of negativity anyway in the world I just hope that readers who enjoyed *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and were moved by it will come to all the broken places with an open heart and still care about these characters and what happened to them. I still try to write the most honest authentic emotional novels that I can and I have to do that regardless of what controversy might come my way.

He also addresses that whenever he comes to visit some schools and introduces the novel, he always reminds the students that this story is a fable and recommends other books to study about the Holocaust.

In all the school visits I've done over the last 17 years and I must have done close to a thousand in different countries. I have always made it clear to children this is a fable and if you're moved by the story if you're interested in the subject here is the books you should now go on and read the same books that I read say from the time I was 15. When I first became interested in the subject so I do think yes it is I think it's a little bit of an unfair criticism.

It is true that writing a work of art is based on the author's creativity; there is no obstacle to that. But the author must be concerned with the message they deliver to the audience. It seems like John Boyne listened to his readers, but he might have been a little denial of the critics because he wrote a sequel to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* called *All the Broken Places*. He tries to make another plot but with the same character and different PoV which is Gretel, Bruno's sister, and the recent setting of time. It shows that reader responses are important to the author out there for making a better work. Thus, this research is conducted to know how the reader's behaviour in responding to such a controversial work.

The unique part of conducting reader-response research is this approach involves two objects: the novel itself and the readers' reception of the novel's storyline. The first object discussed in the previous subchapter shows how exactly the author wants to represent the holocaust issue, plot, and characters. However, some readers find something off and arguable in this novel since this is a literature work intended for young readers to learn about the dark history of genocide or the Holocaust. They throw critiques such as historical inaccuracy, lousy characterization, biased authors, and bad writing. Since this novel is intended for a young reader to start knowing about a sensitive issue in history and as an educational source for learning about the Holocaust, it is necessary to pay attention to the appropriateness of the story of this novel by considering criticism from readers. But still, this novel has gained numerous awards and praise, which means many people like it.

It also shows that the total number of ratings listed in GoodReads is 4.16 stars out of 5. This novel has 840,575 ratings, and this number will continue to increase, with 363,991 (43%) rated five stars, 302,766 (36%) rated four stars, 128,791 (15%) rated three stars, 30,967 (3%) rated two stars, and 14,060 (1%) rated one star from 37,650 reviews. The number of reviews is less than the number of ratings because many readers only write reviews and do not enter or forget to rate the novel. This data suggests that despite the novel's many controversies, most readers still enjoyed the story of this novel. To prove it, 30 samples of comments or reviews will be presented by filtering popular comments. Popular comments demonstrate that they provide

good reviews, whether in a good or a negative way, and many other readers interact by liking, commenting, and discussing the review.

The type of comments to be discussed in this research is the first 30 popular comments. Since this novel has a good rating, the most dominant rating is at least a 3-star rating or above. However, after the research, the data showed that readers were quite solid in rating this book regarding popular comments. The readers who liked this novel mostly rated it four stars, and when they did not like it, they rated it unequivocally as one star. Here, a pattern begins to form when readers respond to this novel. The following table shows the result in more detail:

Table 1:
Count of Rating

Rating	Quantity	Percentage
1 star	10	33.3%
2 stars	1	3.3%
3,5 stars	1	3.3%
4 stars	13	43.3%
4.5 stars	1	3.3%
5 stars	4	13.3%

As mentioned above, this research used Savolainen's (2019) approach to responding to readers' reviews of aesthetic reading. Six categories elaborate on what happens during the reading process, which is called aesthetic stance. This research uses Savolainen's (2019) article titled *The viewpoint of Rosenblatt's reader-response theory* to identify the responses as mentioned in the review of related studies section. The article provides information on how to apply Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory to blog reviews with subcategories in responses to efferent reading and responses to aesthetic reading, which this research only used steps to respond to aesthetic reading. Rosenblatt's framework was elaborated by specifying six categories of aesthetic reading: experiencing the narrative (1), experiencing immersion (2), experiencing emotions (3), identifying with characters and events (4), making associations (5), envisioning alternatives (6) (Savolainen: 2019). These steps identified each comment or review, thus producing a reader's response pattern to a literary work. There is also a difference between analyzing fiction and a non-fiction book regarding responses to aesthetic reading. Experiencing the narratives in fiction books is focused on how the author writes the novel or the author's writing style on one specific aspect, not the whole book, whether positive or negative, especially in terms of the clarity of the writing. Experiencing immersion is how the reader shows concentration in reading the novel. They describe the experience while reading the novel and explain the aspects of the novel or sometimes show uninterested specific parts of the novel. Experiencing emotions represents a significant process in aesthetic reading, such as positive or negative emotions that the reader experiences while reading the novel, whether explicit or implicit. Identifying with characters and events is how the reader identifies themselves with the characters in the event related to the novel, such as sympathy or antipathy towards the character. Making associations between the text and the world in fiction books is rarely described in the reader's response to aesthetic reading. However, it can be how they connect the novel's imagined event to the actual event in

real life. In this case, *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas* is classified as historical fiction, which the reader can respond to how exactly the Holocaust is. Envisioning alternative approaches to novels and non-fiction books is how the reader speculates a better plot for the novel. Below are presented data on the first 30 popular comments on the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* on GoodReads:

Table 2:
The Recapitulation of the Reader’s Responses

Responses	Rate	Narratives	Immersion	Emotion	Character	Association	Alternatives
Madeline	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Brandy	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Peter	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Hailey	3.5	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Federico	4	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Wayne	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Rowan	4	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Cecily	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Tamishly	4	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Lisa	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jessica	4.5	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Rebecca	4	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Arlene	5	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
David	4	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
Betsy	1	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Nanda	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Bibliophile	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Ahmad	4	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Baba	4	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Al Bita	1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Phrynne	4	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Felicia	4	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Julia	5	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Luis	2	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Nilton	5	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
JV Poore	4	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
Ann Marie	5	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Hamad	4	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Terrie	4	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Paul	4	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO

The researcher's first impression when quickly skimming the review is many people who rated low stars are very clear and strong with their opinion compared to those who rated high stars. It also draws a pattern toward reader behaviour. The most issues discussed or reviewed are about the appropriateness of the novel and how the moral issue formed in the story. The low-rated readers strongly argue is inappropriate to consider historical fiction, especially as a reference in learning about the Holocaust, and give some evidence toward their opinion. They even suggest other novels for the young reader that are better for representing the Holocaust issue without “lie” or “romanticising” it. It shows that they have deep knowledge and concern about the issue. While high-rated readers mostly commented about the tragic and deeply sad ending of the novel makes them burst into tears. However, few of them say that they know about the critics of the novel and still like the novel because it is just fiction anyway. It shows that they



are less aware of the Holocaust issue regardless the critics of the novel are true or not. They just enjoy the way the story and plot as a whole book. This statement can be concluded because it shows that high-rated readers mostly write long comments, while low-rated readers mostly just write a few sentences or even just a huge amount of cry emoticons.

CONCLUSION

To this point, we have presented how aesthetic reading has affected readers' behaviour during the process. Due to the different backgrounds and knowledge, some accepted that reading is merely leisure. However, others consider it not such an activity when reading a story about historical issues. Understanding one of the responses by a historical witness, Peter Kubicek, has enriched insights regarding the Holocaust. As a person living during the era, he argued that the author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is ignorant about the historical facts. He seemed to be against any of Boyne's imaginative ideas in constructing the storyline. Peter's suggested that writing about a tragic mass killing should demonstrate respect toward the victims and their families. Besides, he thought that the author should neither let the fictional aspects shape the characterization nor show parts that were not good for young readers. He claimed that the novel did not represent the truth. Louise Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reader response combined with Savolainen's framework has become a useful tool for future research focusing on analyzing readers' responses or behaviours.

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