POST-POSTMODERNIST HUMANISM, YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND THE HOLOCAUST
IN JOHN BOYNE’S THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS AND MARKUS ZUSAK’S THE BOOK THIEF

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1. Introduction

The Holocaust has been one of the most devastating events of the twentieth century, and it still remains a ubiquitous subject in literature. While a lot has been said about adult literature on the Holocaust, children’s and young adult literature is often overlooked in literary criticism. In this dissertation, I will examine how John Boyne and Markus Zusak, two authors that have written novels aimed at children or young adults, engage with post-postmodernism in their writing, creating narratives that offer a different way of approaching the Holocaust than what is common in children’s literature. I will focus on Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) and Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2005), to examine how they interject their narratives with a post-postmodernist concern with humanist issues and with a revaluation of notions of hope, faith, meaning, and the possibility of inter-human connections.

Children’s and young adult literature is often overlooked by academics and literary critics, mostly because it develops itself “in the shadows of the adult literature” (Ghesquière 20). Nonetheless, literary works for children and young adults should not be underestimated. They are a valuable tool in shaping children’s perceptions and notions of the world. In addition, the fact that the literary tradition for children develops itself at the margins of the academic field, provides it with a certain freedom to experiment. Thus, while children’s literature is often considered as quite conventional, it is actually a fruitful field for innovation and experimentation, for example in “the innovative fashion in which today’s young adult authors are bending the traditional definitions of genre” (Smith 43). The challenge for authors becomes even greater when writing for children on a ‘problematic’ subject, such as violence, death – or the Holocaust. As Hirsch mentions, “for virtually every discipline in the humanities, the Holocaust has provided some of the greatest challenges in recent decades” (6). In children’s literature, this is no different. The main challenges are finding a balance between protecting the child without diminishing or sugar-coating the events, and writing for children in an accessible, imaginative and engaging way while truthfully conveying history.

Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and Zusak’s *The Book Thief* are novels that challenge the general assumptions on children’s literature and the representation of the Holocaust and of evil. Their protagonists are non-Jewish, they offer a more complex construction of the perpetrator’s identity, and they play with literary conventions in a way that does not ‘stay true’ to
history in the strict sense. Boyne’s novel received both acclamation and mayor criticism, mostly because of its historical inaccuracy and the use of a German child as a victim (Gray 121). Zusak’s novel has received very positive reviews, but one might wonder whether the story is really about the Holocaust or just uses the setting of the Second World War. However, I believe that both novels engage with the Holocaust, be it from an unconventional perspective, relying on post-postmodernist devices. They use post-postmodernism to return to humanist issues and to emphasize a renewed interest in meaningful connections.

Postmodernism and post-postmodernism are useful frameworks to analyze Holocaust literature because they embody what is often referred to as ‘Holocaust impiety’, authors differentiating from the conventional ways of broaching on the subject and engaging with more deconstructive – postmodern – and reconstructive – post-postmodern – strategies. Postmodernism has been used in connection to Holocaust literature, because of the implications it poses in connection to history and reality. Eaglestone underlines that “the questions that postmodernism ask of history and historians are very strong weapons in the fight against Holocaust denial” (277). Thus, it is already recognized as a productive framework in analyzing novels on the Holocaust. Postmodernism strongly emphasizes the relativity of historical accuracy, which is present in both novels. As Eaglestone put it, “the past is not an account, but events, responses, and situations that have passed, and it is impossible to judge the accuracy of an account of the past by going back to the events, (…) it can only be judged by being compared to other accounts” (234). History is made of narratives, and these novels engage with that idea in providing their own narrative of the past, mingling it with fiction. In doing so, they mainly engage with post-postmodernism and its return to ideas of hope, faith and morality, countering the deconstructionist tendencies of postmodernism. This framework can be productive, because what the two novels convey is a sense of hope and possibility – be it not unambiguous –, even more relevant in the light of the Holocaust.

Firstly, I will look at the existing conventions within children’s literature, focusing on the issues of how to approach younger readers in an ‘adequate way’ and how to represent evil. Subsequently, I will develop a theoretical framework on postmodernism and post-postmodernism. (Post-)postmodernism is a term that covers a lot of ground, so my aim is not to provide a complete overview. Instead, I want to focus on some of the main tendencies within postmodernism and post-postmodernism, after which I will show how these concepts can be productive when studying Holocaust literature. In the third chapter, I will analyze John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped
Pyjamas. I will investigate how Boyne uses post-postmodernism to explore the Holocaust from a different angle, focusing on his specific use of language and silence, his parodying of the fable, the portrayal of German characters and on parallels between the Jewish character and the protagonist. I will explore how these features of the novel are used to engage with post-postmodernist issues of hope, morality and meaningful connections, without returning to a pre-modernist humanism. In the fourth chapter, I will analyze Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, exploring similar questions of how post-postmodernism is present. I will focus on the mingling of fact and fiction and the insistence on metafictionality, Death as the narrator, the ambiguous representation of the German, the only Jewish character and on the power of language. My main aim is to show how both Boyne and Zusak use post-postmodernist strategies to move beyond the deconstructionist tendencies of postmodernism, and how their revaluation of hope, morality and inter-human connections is valuable when writing on a subject as grim as the Holocaust.
2. Children’s and Young Adult Literature

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Book Thief are both novels frequently read by younger readers. Analyzing them therefore involves looking at the ways in which they engage with the already existing literary tradition of children’s and young adult literature. By shortly exploring the main tendencies within children’s literature, I want to provide a framework that the two novels engage with, and differ from, in a way that provides a productive dialogue with the topic of the Holocaust. Within the fields of literary theory and literary criticism, children’s literature is often considered trivial, and undervaluation is frequent when academics engage in a subject “situated in the margins of the literary tradition” (Ghesquière 20). Nonetheless, its value and its influence on the shaping of the adults of tomorrow has been noted. Moreover, children’s literature about the Holocaust in particular embodies a complex process: “Holocaust literature for young people attempts to weave together a variety of textual traditions – writing history generally, writing specifically about the Holocaust, writing for young readers, for portraying human lives – which do not always sit comfortably together” (Kokkola 9). I will address some of the main characteristics of children’s literature, and explain their relevance to Holocaust literature. After that, I will turn to common representations of evil in children’s literature, which I will compare with the representation of evil in Zusak’s and Boyne’s novels.

2.1. Children’s Literature in general

Children’s or young adult literature as a concept is a rather general term, which includes more than just the targeted reading audience. It encompasses both literature written for children, for young adults, or written by children (Ghesquière 10), and is often written with a broader audience in mind than just children or young adults. Along the same line, Kokkola questions how “we separate texts written for children from those written for adults? (…) I see no value in creating a sharp divide since it is clear that many sophisticated teenagers read more challenging forms of literature than most adults would choose to read” (7). Thus, children’s literature as a concept can include works of literature read by young adults and adults. One of the main functions of children’s literature is to
educate, and specifically to make children aware of certain norms and values (Ghesquière 16). In the 1960s, children’s literature was considered to confront its readers with reality, focusing more on marginalized groups and social issues (Ghesquière 124). Considering this, it seems only logical that children’s literature has broached on the subject of the Holocaust, as it is an event that immediately evokes questions connected to norms and values.

While it is important to consider these functions, children’s literature is also primarily a means of entertainment, providing pleasure to the reader and a freedom to use his/her imagination. Children’s literature is not supposed to be very frightening or disconcerting. Surely, younger readers imply specific limits and freedoms. Children as a group cover a wide range of ages, and it is up to the author to decide in which way he or she wants to approach his readers. The approach can be very direct, supporting the idea that children “ought to be educated as soon as possible” (Ghesquière 17), or the author could be more protective and avoid more serious subjects, considering the child as living in a closed world in which everything is still possible (Ghesquière 17). Both approaches can be useful, depending on the subject that the author wants to broach on. However, in most cases, children are expected to “be helpless, passive and powerless in the violent social and political worlds we have made” (Bosmajian xi). From this point of view, the protective strategy seems more logical.

When an author wants to write for children on a subject like the Holocaust, he has to take into account not only “the etiquette of writing about the Holocaust, [but also the] codes of practice for writing for children generally” (Kokkola 10). Thus, the Holocaust provides an extra challenge. While the most common approach is not to frighten children too much, it seems impossible to write a narrative that avoids horror - one can even question to which extent it is appropriate to avoid the frightening parts of the Holocaust. After all, the Holocaust is a frightening event, and pretending otherwise might be a distortion of children’s perception. Thus, “writing about the Holocaust for children breaks a strict taboo… [it] introduces children to a world in which parents are not in control, survival does not depend upon one’s wits but upon pure luck, where evil is truly present” (Kokkola 11).

Trying to entertain readers, without frightening them, while still addressing the reality of the Holocaust is a difficult exercise. The author has to offer a narrative in which he preserves a “precarious balance between presenting material that disgusts readers, yet keeps them reading” (Kokkola 129). To provide this sense of balance, most novels opt for happy endings, because they provide a “sense of psychological closure, preferably a return to normaley” (Kokkola 132). This
way, the reader is confronted with certain aspects of the Holocaust, while still feeling satisfied at the end of the novel, because the protagonist(s), in which he/she probably was invested emotionally, are spared. However, this type of ending, even if it might relieve the reader, is different from what usually happened in reality and, “if ‘feel good’ Holocaust narrative and film are the only Holocaust insight we offer young readers, we are miseducating them and ill-serving the memory of millions who perished and the remnant that survived” (Kremer 259). Rather than trying to conceal and mask reality, it seems more useful that “the young reader is to become conscious of the Nazi era and the suffering of its victims and, through the act of reading consciously, critically and empathically, appropriate a memory – or rather post-memory – that is not part of his or her experience but is supposed to ensure that ‘never again’ will there be a repetition of such a disaster” (Bosmajian xvi).

Indeed, protecting the reader by offering happy endings might be a way of misinforming. While such representations might not be truly harmful, in the sense that they can render the moral lessons of the narrative, they might distort the way in which the Holocaust is perceived, diminishing the suffering.

Even though children’s literature’s main function is to educate, it is a productive and interesting part of literature as a whole because of its profound influence on visions and perceptions during childhood reading (Reynolds 11). There is “a freshness and urgency to the storylines of children’s fiction that corresponds to the fact that their target readers are generally encountering ideas and experiences for the first time” (Reynolds 3). As Francis Spufford puts it, “the words we take into ourselves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking. Their potent images dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds” (qtd. In Reynolds 12). Thus, children’s literature helps children and young adults to form their own opinions and visions.

Moreover, children’s literature is an accessible medium to approach more complex subjects. When looking at children’s literature on more radical subjects (mostly social issues), Kimberley Reynolds has underlined that it is “a breeding ground for innovation” (15). “Many textual experiments are first given expression in writing for children” (Reynolds 15) because of a lack of visibility: Children’s literature is not considered part of high culture, which “contributed to the freedoms available to those who create children’s literature”, creating “a kind of wild zone” (Reynolds 15). Thus, writing about the Holocaust in children’s literature provides a certain freedom, and an escape from the sometimes-limiting influence of Holocaust piety, which attributes a sense of
sacredness and cautiousness to representing the Holocaust. In addition, according to Kidd, “there seems to be a consensus now that children’s literature is the most rather than the least appropriate forum for trauma work” (120). This is, he argues, in part because “we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child’s confrontation with evil” (Kidd 121), but also because of a “residual faith in literature as a form of identity, empathy, and community in a pluralist society” (Kidd 121). Instead of eschewing more problematic topics, authors are more willing “to explore, even in books for very young readers, dark emotions, damaged lives, disturbed behaviors, and characters whose distress is not relieved by the arrival of a fairy godmother or a fortunate twist of fate” (Reynolds 89). Consequently, children’s literature is a productive place to delve into the subject of the Holocaust.

2.2. Evil in Children’s literature

Evil in literature has always been present. One only needs to think of the Greek and Roman literary traditions and the Bible to come across narratives on evil in all shapes and forms. However, evil in children’s literature is often not approached in the same way as it is in adult literature. Linked to the two different ways of approaching younger readers, children can be confronted with or shielded from evil. Nonetheless, even if evil is addressed or represented in a more direct manner, the division between good and bad is rather clear-cut, or evil is conceived as something abstract. These strategies are the most frequent ways of approaching evil in children’s literature, but they might offer a distorted and incomplete image of what evil can comprise, especially when considering the evil of the Holocaust.

Ghesquière states that black-white images are used frequently when representing evil in children’s literature (146). As a consequence, the issues of what lays between the notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are often underdeveloped. Certainly, younger readers might be less capable of interpreting nuanced and ambiguous representations of good and evil. However, when considering black-white representations in connection to the Holocaust, these images might be too simplistic. Baer has underlined that literature on the Holocaust should “present the Holocaust in its proper context of complexity, even meaninglessness. The book should not shirk from making clear human agency in these events” (384). The event was far too immense and complex to draw clear-cut lines between good and evil. While black-white images can be useful in that they offer easy-to-grasp
representations for children, they also contain the danger of ignoring all the ambiguity in between. As a consequence, questions of responsibility and origin of evil are often neglected. Evil is seen as something external, avoiding the confrontation in children’s literature with “evil as a fundamental part of humans” (Ghesquiére 126). Baer suggests that a book “must grapple directly with the evil of the Holocaust”, an evil that “seems faceless and nameless (…) and of completely obscure origins (…), something irrational” (384). Here, Baer seems to support the representation of the evil of the Holocaust as something abstract, and indeed, the common black-white images imply that questions of human agency are often ignored or avoided.

However, this avoidance is not necessarily the best option. Nazism had an influence on an entire nation, meaning that a lot of the people that – actively or passively – participated in the systematic persecution of an entire race, were people like you and me. The enemy was not abstract or faceless, and ‘the enemies’ as such implied a heterogeneous and complex group. Baer suggests that the notion of evil might imply “the evil of which we are all capable” (379). Therefore, issues of human agency, compliance and culpability should not be avoided, because they can offer children a more nuanced and complete image of what the Holocaust implied, not only for its direct victims but also for the ordinary Germans living between 1940 and 1945. Khader, for example, underlines that “the ambiguity of the subject of human agency here makes it ostensibly possible not simply to assign diabolical motives to the perpetrators but to examine their behavior in its complexity and in the banality of its evil” (Khader 128). In the light of Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil (after the Eichmann trial), it seems necessary to try to psychologize “the perpetrators and problematize their (in)humanity” in order to develop an ethical project (Khader 128). Responsibility is not solely attributed to those in power, but can be questioned in connection to all Germans (and other nationalities) that did not actively resist.

The existing literary tradition concerning children’s literature on the Holocaust has been studied from the late 1970s and onwards (Sicher xv). Throughout the last decades, literary – and non-literary – production on the Holocaust has boomed, which has led to a more wide-spread awareness, but also to a trivialization: “Sensationalized Holocaust stories in films and fiction both strengthened the rise of the Holocaust novel and increasingly trivialized the Holocaust as a cheap cliché” (Sicher xiv). Fact is that in children’s literature in particular, it is easy to rely on ‘generally accepted norms”, which tend to favor the “long tradition of didacticism and tendency to protect children from the harsher aspects of reality” (Kokkola 9). Consequently, most authors will favor the more protective
and simplified approaches to the Holocaust, to avoid shocking the reader too much. Moreover, a didactic lesson on moral values comes across even better if black-white images are used, because they make the moral message more accessible. Indeed, when looking at the already existing approach in children’s literature on the Holocaust, black-white images and an abstraction or a diminishing of human agency are the most common strategies.

One of the most frequently used images connected to Nazis is that of ‘the Bogeyman’ (Kokkola 132). The Bogeyman traditionally was attributed specific racial features, and took part in diabolical practices, and this image was used by the Nazis themselves in their anti-Semitic propaganda (Kokkola 132). Reversing the scheme, the Nazi is often turned into the diabolical Bogeyman in Holocaust fiction. In this representation, Nazism is embodied by a devil-like figure, dehumanizing/abstracting it and making it a rather flat (black) image. By emphasizing military uniforms, dehumanization is even more palpable, and the characters usually lack any psychological depth (Kokkola 133). “Nazi characters tend to be neither round nor dynamic, and are almost always observed rather than internally focalized. Little humanity is associated with Nazi characters” (Kokkola 134). In addition, the protagonists in these novels are mostly Jews, and “references to non-Jewish victims are rare in children’s books” (Kokkola 8). Thus, the Jew is always associated with the victim and the other side necessarily becomes the victimizer. While ‘evil’ is associated with uniforms, victims are identified by recurring symbols such as stars, chimneys and grey striped shirts (Kokkola 68).

This clear division between victim and victimizer might make it very easy for the young reader to identify the ‘bad’ and separate it from the ‘good’, but it also implies that the reader will unconsciously draw a sharp division between the two, while this is often not the case in reality. Moreover, Khader has emphasized that very often, perpetrators are excluded altogether from Holocaust fiction. This is even more problematic, as it presents the Holocaust as an event dissociated from human agency, preventing young readers to understand the full span of who was involved – to a bigger or a lesser extent. Instead of stereotyping victimizers – and victims – or excluding them altogether, I am of the opinion that there should be an evolution towards the integration of a more varied and profound description of the perpetrator, as defended by Khader.
2.3. Conclusion

Children’s literature embodies a wide range of works for a wide range of readers. Its main function is to educate and to provide moral lessons, while also confronting readers with reality. Nonetheless, children are often considered vulnerable, innocent, and not supposed to be frightened. This can become problematic when authors want to broach on a subject such as the Holocaust. In that case, they have to preserve a balance between appealing to children and entertaining them, preserving their innocence and communicating the horrors of the Holocaust without frightening them. While happy endings are common solutions to achieve this balance, they are not always favorable. They might transmit the moral lessons, but they also might miseducate the reader, providing narratives that are all too different from reality. Nonetheless, children’s literature proves to be a fruitful place for writing on more disturbing subjects, because it is less controlled by canon and academic voices. When evil is addressed in children’s literature, it is done mostly by using black-white images or presenting evil as something abstract and faceless. However, describing the Holocaust in such terms proves to be somewhat problematic, because it neglects questions of human agency, and fails to take into account the complexity and ambiguity of the Holocaust. Therefore, representations of evil should take into account the culpability of humans, the questions of compliance and resistance, and the effects of Nazism on the German people in general, not just on those wearing a uniform. These approaches can offer readers a more nuanced and complete image of the Holocaust and its implications.
3. Postmodernism and Post-postmodernism

The last decades of the twentieth century have been marked by a debate on postmodernism and its legacy and failures that continue to influence the artistic production in the twenty-first century. The amount of words written on this is abundant, producing very different views on what ‘postmodernism’ and ‘post-postmodernism’ actually stand for. To include all the opinions and interpretations of (post-)postmodernism would be to no avail. Rather than trying to contain all that is said, I want to touch upon some of the main ideas on (post-)postmodernism that are of interest in the light of the analysis of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and The Book Thief. I will explain the most common perceptions concerning postmodernism and its techniques drawing primarily on the works of Josh Toth and Linda Hutcheon. The rather theoretical clarification of postmodernism will serve as the basis for my exploration of post-postmodernism, which I believe to be a productive framework to analyze the two selected young adult novels on the Holocaust. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter I will focus mainly on how postmodernism is continued and altered, relying mostly on the works of Toth, Irmtraud Huber and Joost Krijnen. It may seem a bit untimely to label a period that has only just begun and is far from defined in specific and cohesive terms, but post-postmodernism embodies some interesting ideas on the ways in which authors re-direct postmodernist legacy, valuing what postmodernism radically discarded: a faith in inter-human relationships, in communication and moral values, and in ‘making sense’ of the world. Lastly, I will relate postmodernism, and post-postmodernism in particular, to the Holocaust, to show that this framework can be productive when analyzing the Boyne’s and Zusak’s novels.

3.1. Postmodernism

3.1.1. General Theories on Postmodernism

When establishing a concise – and simplified - description of what postmodernism stands for, it seems logical to turn to the term itself first. Because of how much ground the term postmodernism covers, there is an “apparent lack of clarity and consistency in meaning in the use of the word” (Hutcheon, Politics 16). The most productive way to approach it seems to think of postmodernism “broadly and inclusively as a diagnostic term for the contemporary condition” (Krijnen 16), or to
think of it as “a continuous exercise of self-definition” (Hassan 17). Thus, the term postmodernism covers not only literary production, but contains an entire era.

The preposition *post* implies that this term stands for something that comes *after* its predecessor, modernism. Indeed, they follow one another chronologically. *Post* might imply a rupture between modernism and postmodernism. However, as David Rudrum mentions, we should “avoid the implication that the postmodern was a new and distinctive epoch following some moment conceived as the death or end of modernity” (336). Indeed, many of the “hallmarks of the modernity that postmodernity was said to supplant are in fact disconcertingly intact” (Rudrum 335). While (post)modernism and (post)modernity do not cover the exact same areas, the analogy between a continuation in both cases is applicable. Even if postmodernist movements and developments were originally “essentially anti-modernist innovations” (Krijnen 153), there still remains a continuity of certain aspects. The fact that postmodernism appears to be different from modernism is not to be attributed “to the ending of the modern era and the dawning of another era post-modernity”, but to the fact that “deep-seated paradoxes and ambiguities” were already present within modernism, which then were further explored by later artists (Rudrum 339). This idea of continuity and departure, and of inherent ambiguities within each ‘era’ will be relevant as well when we turn to post-postmodernism.

In a time of global change and challenges – the mid-twentieth century – postmodernism expressed the uncertainty that many people felt: “One of the strongest and most important impetuses behind the advent of postmodernism was a sense of crisis in identity – that is, a deep-felt need to assert plurality, multiplicity and diversity” (Rudrum 13). This feeling of destabilization is mirrored in what Hutcheon sees as postmodernism’s initial aim, which is to “de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life” (*Politics* 2). While still continuing some of modernism’s aspects, in Andreas Huyssen’s opinion, postmodernism resists “modernization because it views the possibility of a ‘privileged’ position of interpretation, truth claim, or critical response as having passed” (Toth 39). Postmodernism’s main digression from modernism is its disbelief in a Truth – an unshakeable, unified claim -, and the impossibility of a stable interpretation of reality and of identity. Postmodernism thrives “on challenging and deconstructing traditional certainties. It questions and subverts such notions as meaning, reference, knowledge, history, art, gender and identity, and suggests that these concepts do not refer to autonomous (or transcendental) regimes of
Absolute Truth or objective knowledge” (Krijnen 149). The main aim of postmodernism seems to be to problematize all those concepts that were never questioned before in a rather radical way.

Faithful representation is one of the main aspects that postmodernism challenges and deconstructs. Whereas representation of reality was long assumed to be mimetic, postmodernism challenges our “assumptions about [representation’s] transparency and common-sense naturalness” (Hutcheon, Politics 31). The straight line that runs from representation to reality is disrupted by postmodernism, to question how reality is actually perceived and known. “It is a critique both of the view of representation as reflective (…), and of the accepted idea of ‘man’ as the centered subject of representation” (Hutcheon, Politics 18). Postmodernism turns away from the idea of a transparent representation of reality by questioning the relation between reality and language.

Part of reality is history, and as reality becomes problematic, so does the way in which we know history. The past is considered as something that continues to influence the present: “Postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation” (Hutcheon, Politics 58). Thus, the presumed objectivity of historical representation is challenged. Hutcheon has underlined this as one of postmodernism’s main characteristics. “Documentary actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody” (Politics 7). Postmodernism reflects not only upon the status of reality, but also upon the status of language, of the text and of the subject itself. When looking back at history, a self-consciousness arises about “the distinction between the brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning” (Hutcheon, Politics 57). Eagleton addresses a similar point when noting that “history is made up of these events made significant in prose” (234). Facts usually are considered to be true, and are attributed a certain level of objectivity. In postmodernism, nonetheless, facts of the past are being constructed in the present, through representation – using language.

In line with the undermining of the notion of objective history, the concept of Truth is also challenged. While modernists value universal truths still as something accessible and consolatory, “postmodernism (…) refuses to posit any structure or (…) master narrative – such as art or myth” (Hutcheon, Poetics 6). Truth becomes a very relative notion that is connected strongly to the way in which a truth is presented. In this debate, narrative plays a central role. What is mostly interrogated by postmodernism is the idea of consensus. “Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been
questioned by the acknowledgement of differences” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 7). Those narratives that were always considered to be truths, are now revalorized in the light of “narrative (...) as a human-made structure” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 62).

Lastly, transgression is a key concept to describe postmodernism. Challenging all that is stable, postmodernism experiments and refuses “to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions”, turning to “hybrid forms and seemingly mutual contradictory strategies” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 37). Hassan also mentions this as a key aspect of postmodernism, naming in specific “fragments, hybridity, relativism, parody, pastiche, an ironic, sophistical stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp” (16). Postmodernism does not abide to the clear rules and conventions that were once established, but transgresses the boundaries between “genres, between disciplines or discourses, between high and mass culture, and most problematically, perhaps, between practice and theory” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 18). The range of fields in which postmodernism destabilizes the rules is so wide that it becomes clear how difficult it would be to settle on one, totalizing definition. This heterogeneity is mirrored in the works that postmodernism has produced, and unifying all of them under a fixed set of characteristics would be impossible, and not very useful. It is this great complexity and diversity that makes postmodernism so interesting.

3.1.2. Postmodernist Techniques: Parody and Historiographic Metafiction

Firstly, postmodernism destabilizes history and representation, and the problematic aspects of both are united and explored through parody, often in an ironic way. Parody in postmodernism does not confine to the official definition of intentional copying of someone’s style or of a particular situation, making features more noticeable in a humorous way (Cambridge Dictionary), and neither is it a nostalgic mode of looking back at the past. Instead, Hutcheon states that “postmodern parody (...) is fundamentally ironic and critical, not nostalgic or antiquarian in its relation to the past” (*Politics* 98). The addition of an ironic stance is important, because it distinguishes between intertextual references that can be seen as “simply academic play” and intertextuality that revisits but also revises and rereads the past, that “conforms and subverts the power of the representations of history” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 95). More than just using intertextuality in itself, intertextuality is revisited in order to question our knowledge of reality and the way in which reality is represented.
While some critics of postmodernism, such as Jameson, have called “postmodern ironic situation ‘pastiche’ or empty parody” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 94), parody is a powerful tool to subvert past conventions and traditions in a critical way. It offers a way of returning to the past, while at the same time acknowledging – through irony – that “we are inevitably separated from that past today – by time and by subsequent history of those [past] representations [that it cites]” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 94). Parody does not limit itself to ironic intertextuality with specific works, but applies as well to more general tendencies such as genre. Conventional genres can be inscribed and revised. Indeed, Krijnen mentions that “hybridization of genres and blurring of ‘high and low’ are characteristically postmodern strategies” (190). Using formal conventions and altering them or contrasting them with formal incongruences, parody brings to our attention “the ironized differences of both content and form” (Hutcheon, “Epilogue” 7).

Secondly, Hutcheon emphasizes that one of the main ways in which postmodernism manifests itself is in historiographic metafiction, “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5). Historiographic metafiction is related closely to her notion of parody. Postmodernism’s self-awareness and challenging of the way in which we know history forms the basis for historiographic metafiction, a “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” and “a working within conventions in order to subvert them” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5). The two main aspects of historiographic metafiction are history and fiction, which according to Hutcheon, have more in common than critics generally assume. “Both history and fiction are discourses, (…) both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 89). The relation between history and fiction and the status of historical knowledge is destabilized.

History is considered a construction, because “history does not exist except as text” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16). This does not mean that the past does not exist, but implies that we cannot know history objectively because all the knowledge we have, comes from (textual) sources, that have inevitably selected and interpreted the events. The distinction between *events* and *facts* is certainly present here: “It is historiography’s explanatory and narrative emplotments of past *events* that construct what we consider historical *facts*” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 92). This radical questioning of history does not necessarily lead to degradation. While postmodernism “problematises the entire notion of historical knowledge (…), the loss of innocence is less to be lamented than celebrated”
Rewriting the past in the present can lead to “open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (Hutcheon, Poetics 89). Mixing history and fiction can prove fruitful to prevent any version of history to become overtly dominant, and can give contemporary authors the chance of exploring other – less evident – angles and perspectives. Nonetheless, for postmodernism the danger always lurks of becoming too radical in its deconstruction and making any dialogue with history impossible.

3.2. Post-Postmodernism: Turn from or Continuation of Postmodernism?

When addressing the subject of post-postmodernism, it is useful to realize that the developments within this area are very recent and ongoing at the moment of writing this dissertation. No clear consensus has yet been established on what exactly is meant with this specific term, and when one realizes how many different opinions have been expressed when talking about postmodernism, any successive era will undoubtedly be just as difficult to grasp in a cohesive and summarizing manner. What I want to focus on are some of the main developments within literary criticism that have addressed a move from postmodernism into a new era, and the most common ideas that are useful for my further analysis.

3.2.1. General Theories on Post-postmodernism

When talking about post-postmodernism as a successor, the same issues arise that were also part of the postmodern discussion. Is postmodernism a finished chapter or does it continue to live on? Although some critics, such as Hutcheon, have proclaimed postmodernism to be over, most critics seem to be favoring the idea of a continuation and altering of postmodernism. Josh Toth argues that instead of proclaiming postmodernism dead, it should be considered as still living on, be it under new conditions. Postmodernism was not replaced by an entirely new paradigm. “The death of postmodernism can also be viewed as a passing, a giving over of a certain inheritance” (Toth 2). What is emphasized in most works on postmodernism and post-postmodernism is that “we are not simply now within some new phase of the social or the aesthetic, one that is distinctly separate from postmodernism” (Stavris 349). There is a continuity and fluidity that makes it impossible to create
clear boundaries between two ‘eras’, which explains why it seems only logical that postmodernism continues to manifest itself in what follows.

The main reason for postmodernism’s ‘decline’ seems to be its extreme relativism. Postmodernism’s “persistent and eventually hegemonic focus on the impossible, the absent, (…) exposed the pointlessness of postmodernism’s own raison d’être” (Toth 96). Because of its radical destabilization, postmodernism “has been charged with having made impossible such concepts as meaning, reference, ethics and political agency” (Krijnen 17). While deconstructing norms might have been a very productive way of approach, it ultimately leads to “a point when the destabilization or destruction of meaning becomes an end in itself” (Krijnen 163-164). Moreover, while postmodernism at first had a subversive character, challenging what was conventional and institutionalized, “the final decades of the last century witnessed the institutionalization of the postmodern in the academy. (…) With this institutionalization came (…) a generalization of postmodernism into a kind of generic counter-discourse, paradoxically one well on its way to become a discourse” (Hutcheon, “Gone” 10). It is precisely at this point, when the subversive becomes the hegemonic, that postmodernism apparently ceases to be truly productive. “When the postmodern critique of a dominant cultural system becomes itself dominant, the nature of this critical force changes in a fundamental way” (Krijnen 166). Ultimately, one might say that postmodernism, due to institutionalization and excessive destabilization, had become unattainable. This idea is also underlined by Fluck, who mentions that radicalization of linguistic playfulness and experiments of dereferentialization “had become monotonous and, what is worse and eventually the kiss of death for any avant-garde movement, predictable” (65).

Although post-postmodernism steers away from postmodernism’s extreme relativism, Toth argues that post-postmodernism nevertheless “maintains many postmodern ‘traits’” (2). While post-postmodernism wants to abandon “the increasingly nihilistic (…) trajectory of postmodern metafiction, [it] simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically embraces the postmodern rejection of a distinctly modernist form of idealism” (Toth 89). Post-postmodernism does not return to the idealist notion of Truth and stable identity, nor does it lose itself in the extreme relativism of postmodernism. It continues postmodernism’s relativism, while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility of meaning and value. As Krijnen states, post-postmodernism mainly seems to configure postmodernism by using a softer approach, by “relaxing the rules” (180). Where Krijnen emphasizes the importance of a relaxing of the rules, Stavris underlines that “the desire for relaxation has been
replaced by the desire to formulate some kind of grip on reality, one which was challenged during postmodernism” (350). While Krijnen focuses on a relaxing of the strong relativizing and stern destabilization of identity and reality, Stavris focuses on a reaction against ‘relaxation’, by which he means the “Anything Goes”-attitude of postmodernism. Thus, both are pledging for a turn towards an artistic production that tries to ‘makes sense’, while keeping postmodernism’s legacy in mind.

In terms of language and representation, postmodernism had outrun its own limits, leading to extreme relativism. At the same time, people “finally dared to admit that they had continued to be interested in stories based on the illusion of a referent all along” (Fluck 65). Thus, reality becomes more accessible. Nonetheless, post-postmodernism underlines the impossibility of knowing reality in a profound way. “The central question (...) seems to be about how we can still know things and make sense of things through language and representation, while knowing at the same time the limits, perhaps even the impossibility of our knowledge” (Krijnen 167). Because of post-postmodernism’s interest in ‘making sense’ and in stories based on the illusion of a referent, recent literature “is starting to look elsewhere for topics, (...) [and] this ‘elsewhere’ frequently takes the form of a reinforced commitment to realism and to the responsibilities and difficulties of the intersubjective relations and communications” (Huber 22). A return to a form of realism is indeed noted by many critics writing on what comes after postmodernism. Huber underlines that this return to realism does not imply a regression and a “conservatist counter-reaction to postmodernist subversion” (23). “While unrepresentability is acknowledged, reconstruction does not stop at its invocation but searches for ways to accept and go beyond it” (223). Post-postmodernism counters the deconstructive tendency of postmodernism at its extremes.

Huber’s statement on a reinforced commitment to realism also mentions the importance of intersubjective relations and communication, which is a key aspect of post-postmodernism. Stavris mentions this, drawing on Adam Kelly: “Postmodernist tactics such as irony and skepticism have been rejected in favor of a renewed sincerity” (351). Krijnen talks about a “desire to establish a sense of inter-human or inter-subjective communication and connection” (18), and Toth emphasizes “a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere, (...) to re-energize literature’s social mission, (...) to have an impact on actual people” (112). In addition, Hassan underlines the “need to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes” (19) and Huber notes “a general agreement that literature is struggling to recover a sense of commitment and
sincerity” (24). Postmodernism’s extreme relativism made it impossible to establish meaningful connections. It “thwarted the human need to ‘make sense’ of the world. In this attack on the very possibility of meaning, moreover, postmodernism has manifested a glaring lack of responsibility and ethical sense” (Krijnen 165). Nonetheless, there has been a revival of interest in ethical questions, and inter-human connection and communication.

Post-postmodernism combines the postmodernist impossibility of absolute and stable notions with a renewed interest in humanist values such as truth and meaning. As Huber noted on the humanist perspective, “it is [in] this focus on the ability of the fictive to connect and communicate, to create meaning both on an individual and on an intersubjective level in spite of its inability to access or transmit the real, that the texts develop the doubtful optimism that I have mentioned” (222). Contemporary authors are fully aware of the fact that there is no such thing as stable notions of truth, faith, ethics and morality, but they are also aware that they “cannot give up these intrinsically limited notions and that it is therefore inevitable to continue using them in renewed forms” (Krijnen 168). Thus, while authors are aware of the fact that no belief can ever be absolute or stable, this knowledge does not prevent them from believing, because the possibility – even if there is no achievement at an absolute level – is a valuable notion. Ultimately, authors try to make sense of the world – rejecting postmodernism’s relativism – while inevitably making sense within the paradigms of relativism.

This change of focus makes authors’ attention turn to “other issues, more down-to-earth stuff, the grit of war and loss, human belief and betrayal and the endless variations of inter-human relationships” (Huber 22). Leaving the more deconstructionist themes behind, authors turn to recognizable and very human topics, focusing on ethics and questions of morality, because those are “a tool for establishing (ever more) equitable connections between (ever more) people to whom immediately felt, natural connections (like blood relations) are absent” (Krijnen 176). This turn to topics that express a sense of faith is mentioned by Hassan in the form of trust and truth. He ‘attaches great importance to re-establishing the concepts of trust and truth – trust being the precondition for a society founded on the mutual respect of difference” (Rudrum 13).

Hassan’s emphasis on truth and trust is connected to a return to some form of realism in order to do justice to the ethical claims of our increasingly complicated and fraught world. However, such a realism needs to be grounded on
pragmatism rather than in dogmatism: it should be a realism grounded on trust as much as on truth, and on subjectivity and identity rather than on external reference. (Rudrum 14)

This idea of pragmatism is also mentioned by Krijnen. Post-postmodernism paradoxically steers away and is compelled by postmodernism, and pragmatism can offer tools “to re-think, reformulate, and, ultimately, leave behind, some of the key problems that beset contemporary postmodernism” (171). According to Krijnen’s logic, postmodernism and pragmatism both reject a dualist kind of thinking – that is, a “split between the physical world of raw immediate reality (…) and of mind, reason and truth” (171). This denial of a dualist kind of thinking implies the denial of “such a thing as absolute, unshakeable Truth” (Krijnen 172). The biggest difference between postmodernism and pragmatism is situated in that which ultimately led to postmodernism’s defeat. Postmodernism’s extreme relativism never offered an alternative, an option to re-construct. In contrast, “pragmatism combines its critique of dualist, essentialist and foundational thinking with an alternative and more flexible (…) philosophical method, that is in principle self-correcting” (Krijnen 172). Thus, pragmatism is able to do what postmodernism failed to do after deconstructing, and that is to construct meaning.

Pragmatism also distinguishes itself from postmodernism in its take on reality. Both postmodernism and pragmatism deny “that language represents reality”, but while postmodernism does not offer any alternative to its deconstructionist views and has a “self-representational view” on language, pragmatism “offers an instrumental view on language” (Krijnen 174). What Krijnen wants to emphasize is that pragmatism offers the sense of hope and reconstruction that postmodernism was lacking. Fully aware of the fact that reality cannot be represented in a stable way, it sees language as a tool for “communication, or the process of constructing and exchanging the meaningful relations through which humans are able to manage the world around them to their own benefit” (Krijnen 174-175). While pragmatism accepts that language cannot offer a grounded version of reality, it does not fall victim to the extreme relativism of postmodernism that made any meaning seem illusory. Instead, it emphasizes a return to “the most basic moral questions about how people are supposed to live with each other” (Krijnen 175). This pragmatism is exactly what Huber seems to be pointing at when he mentions that post-postmodernism is characterized by “its pragmatic focus on communicative bonding”, mentioning that “metafiction no longer seeks to expose and deconstruct fiction’s underlying premises. Instead, it reconstructs fiction as precarious communication and focuses on the ways in which we draw on fictions to make sense of ourselves,
our past, our present, and our future” (221). In this sense, pragmatism perfectly embodies the post-postmodernist turn to humanism and to ethics.

3.2.2. Renewalism

One of the main theoretical developments within the broader developments of post-postmodernism is what Toth has coined ‘renewalism’ (3). What he refers to is a new approach to literature that combines some of the most important shifts mentioned previously, such as a return to realism and a renewed interest in inter-human communication and connection.

When postmodernism attenuated, critics noted “something like a renewal of the values realists have traditionally stood for” (Shechner 31). Nonetheless, this did not imply a return to traditional realism, but to “a new body of writing and a new kind of realism” (Fluck 67). According to Toth, a renewalist tendency “accepts the postmodern lesson that certain teleological ideals (communication, mimesis, shared understanding) are illusions of a now defunct project of modernity, [while] it simultaneously embraces the possibility, or promise of such ideals” (77). This stance is also emphasized by Krijnen, who mentions a return to realism that reconciles “realism’s teleological promises of definite answers with the opposing but equally teleological insistence of postmodernism that such promises in factuality represent false lures and utopias that can never be realized” (191). Thus, renewalism essentially tries to embrace both the possibility and the impossibility of those values rejected by postmodernism. It stresses “the very thing that continued to animate postmodernism: the necessarily possible and impossible nature of the certainly right decision, or narrative act” (Toth 122). Renewalism does not pursue realism as a mode to accurately represent reality, but neither does it indulge in a spiral of denying any reference to reality. Renewalism does not imply a return to pre-modern Enlightenment and its absolute “values such as truth, meaning and progress” (Rudrum 208). Instead, it steers away from foundationalist ideas, and turns to a “renewalist eclecticism of narrative forms and styles” (Rudrum 208).

Renewalism is provoked by a desire and an urgency to rediscover values – such as meaning, communication, connection – that had been ignored or rejected by postmodernism. Indeed, an increased “theoretical interest in the issues of community and ethical responsibility” can definitely be connected to the growing dominance of renewalism (Toth 3). Realism implies a concern with life, not as a purely referential notion, but life “as felt”, assuming “a meaningful connection between
the individual and the common phenomenal world” (Versluys 7-8). While postmodernism denied the idea of mimesis and absolute knowledge of reality, and therefore denied most human values, realism inherently evokes the implications of some sort of humanist concern. “Close to the heart of realism is a moral conception of humanism. Realism, still, has much to do with the representation of felt human experience and the sentient character in the realm of narrative art” (Bradbury 24). This return to a renewed realism highlights a faith in human values and a sense of hope connected to ‘making sense’. Moreover, it reflects a renewed faith in literature itself as a powerful tool to make sense. Literature is embraced, not to deconstruct, but as “a medium that facilitates a form of meaningful communication that is able to imaginatively connect people in ways not to be had elsewhere” (Krijnen 182).

3.3. (Post-)postmodernism and the Holocaust

When considering the interest of postmodernism in issues of representation and of the connection between reality and language, and its interest in destabilizing absolute notions, it does not seem so far-fetched to approach the Holocaust within this framework. Moreover, with the development of postmodernism into post-postmodernism, and the renewed interest in possibilities of meaning, inter-human relationships and moral values, this framework becomes even more interesting, as it might revalue those notions that are often seen as destroyed during the Holocaust.

The Holocaust definitely signified a turning point in the twentieth century, confronting humanity with a new form of evil. According to Sicher, “Auschwitz was a caesura of Western society, a turning point in conceptual as well as chronological parameters of postmodernity” (175). The literary response on the Holocaust initially focused on the veracity of stories, favoring testimonies, narratives from survivors and people connected directly to the events. Moreover, a certain degree of caution and respect was present, and authors avoided representations that might provoke dishonor. Nonetheless, direct narratives become less and less accessible. Therefore, authors start to explore different approaches in order to broach on the subject of the Holocaust without being accused of disrespect or appropriation. This is what Sicher points out when he connects a comment of Eli Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, to postmodernism: “What is needed, Wiesel tells us, is a new language that will admit its inability to communicate the inexpressible. This proposition would border on postmodernist concerns with the unrepresentability of reality and the fluidity of memory”
Indeed, the main aspect of postmodernism that was mentioned previously, its challenging of reality and all stable notions, seems to be echoed in Wiesel’s appeal for a language that will admit its inability to fully represent the events of the Holocaust. Moreover, postmodernism’s rejection of a direct relation between language and reality might protect authors from possible criticism that accuses them of disrespect. Because of postmodernism’s consideration that reality can only be known through language, it seems impossible to actually faithfully adhere to reality, and, as a consequence, nor is there a possibility of violating reality.

New – (post-)postmodernist – approaches on the Holocaust give authors more liberty to play around, revitalizing the subject by looking at it in a different way. When Krijnen discusses postmodernism’s link to the Holocaust, he writes that “a distinct trend has emerged over the past two decades in which the Holocaust is represented in ways that openly and seemingly self-consciously flout both the conventional, popular forms of Holocaust representation as well as the more ‘high cultural’ ones associated with Holocaust piety” (5). Recent literary developments have chosen less obvious paths, turning away from convention and tradition. This might be because contemporary authors are less closely related to the Holocaust, often receiving their knowledge from stories, movies, and not from direct experience or direct witnesses. Not only a temporal distance is implemented, but a spatial one as well. Authors of non-Jewish origins and from various countries engage with the legacy of the Holocaust.

What is essential to realize is that these authors do not intend to disrespect or flaunt the memory of the Holocaust. Their different ways of approaching the Holocaust are artistic expressions of new ways to engage with the memory of an event that ought to be remembered, without appropriating or trivializing its memory as such. They do not intend to “belittle or berate either the memory of the Holocaust or Jewish history and culture” (Krijnen 182) but engage with the Holocaust in a way that shows a “renewed sense of commitment to reestablish possibilities of (moral) signification in the wake of postmodernism” (Krijnen 182). Important to note here is the renewed interest of post-postmodernism in morality and humanist questions. Even though the Holocaust was a devastating and destructive event, authors seem to emphasize that “it is still necessary, possible and justifiable to continue to make sense of life and history, and to strive for some degree of interpersonal comity” (Krijnen 185). Thus, they might use postmodern approaches together with a renewed post-postmodernist validation of humanity and meaningful connections, in order to engage in new ways with the Holocaust. Without merely narrating history or appropriating
a memory, they underline the fact that there is still a need to ‘make sense’, to establish human connections, and that there is still a hope for moral values to survive and to be meaningful in the post-postmodern world.

3.4. Conclusion

While postmodernism and post-postmodernism are both vague concepts, we can nevertheless select some of the main – relevant – characteristics that have been mentioned. First of all, post-postmodernism depends on the legacy of postmodernism, but combines it with values that postmodernism rejected. A return to the real can be noted, but this does not imply a return to pre-modern literature. Postmodernism is incorporated, and postmodernist techniques are frequently used (Huber 32). Secondly, post-postmodernism focuses on communicative bonding, and novels attempt to evoke a sense of empathy and communication (Timmer 359). Literature and language become means of establishing a connection, tools of communication. As a consequence, processes “of identifying with others” and “restoring some faith” (Timmer 359) become valuable – while in postmodernism, they were considered useless and illusory. In post-postmodernism, however, a strong sense of “a need for a we” is expressed, and an emphasis is placed on ‘sameness’ – countering the focus on otherness of postmodernism (Timmer 359). This post-postmodern perspective focuses on “communicative bonds beyond the dictates of referentiality” (Huber 40). Rather than focusing specifically on a return to realism, the “change within fiction lies beyond the realism/anti-realism debate, in the return to commitment towards communication, connection and responsibility and revaluation of genre distinctions” (Huber 48). Thus, what the post-postmodern novel ultimately wants to assert is a “turn to the human”, asking the crucial question “what it means to be human today” (Timmer 359).

Postmodernism and post-postmodernism can be connected to the recent shifts perspective of authors in looking at the subject of the Holocaust. While postmodernism, and its emphasis on the relativity of language, offer a new way of engaging with history and with the reality of the Holocaust, post-postmodernism’s validation of humanist and moral questions offers a different, and a more hopeful perspective, addressing the atrocities while at the same time still considering a sense of hope and possibility. Both Zusak and Boyne engage with these legacies in their novels, offering
a narrative on the Holocaust that uses a different perspective and tries to communicate something more meaningful and hopeful than sheer destruction.
4. John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

John Boyne is an Irish novelist, born in 1971. He has written novels specifically for adults and novels aimed at younger readers, of which *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, published in 2006, undoubtedly is his most famous one. The novel tells the story of nine-year-old Bruno and his daily encounters at a fence with Shmuel, a boy of his age. Bruno’s father is a commandant and Bruno is forced to move, together with his family, because of his father’s job. While first loathing his new home, he comes to appreciate it because of Shmuel. As their friendship evolves, they turn out to have a lot in common, but their worlds are also vastly different. When reading *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, hints are dropped throughout the novel as to when and where the story is set. The reader can induce that Bruno’s father is part of the Nazi regime, and that Bruno has moved to a concentration camp, be it on the lucky side of the fence. Shmuel is the one who is imprisoned, even though Bruno is unaware of all of this during the entire novel. They start a friendship, which ultimately ends in a devastating way, when both of them are gassed.

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was written with a younger reading audience in mind, and Boyne turns to post-postmodernist features in order to exhibit a different side of the Holocaust and to confront the reader with moral issues and questions. He uses post-postmodernism to distance himself from the history of the Holocaust, engaging with its legacy without disrespecting it. By re-interpreting the genre of the fable, he constructs a narrative that is aware of its own fictionality and that focuses on morality and on humanist values without considering them as absolute notions. Through a play with language and silence and his depiction of German characters he challenges the readers’ clear-cut assumptions of good and evil, offering a more nuanced and complex image of the perpetrator.

4.1. Renewalism

One of the main critiques that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has endured is its lack of plausibility and its lack of historical accuracy. In an article on the novel in connection to education, Gray mentions that one of the main issues is “the sheer implausibility of the story” (121). Although these critiques are reasonable – the historical accuracy of the novel is far from perfect --, the question that
seems most reasonable is whether these critiques actually matter. Boyne’s classification of the novel as a fable might indicate that historical accuracy is beside the point of what he tries to communicate. By emphasizing the fictionality of his narrative, he precautionary counters criticism on the historical inaccuracy. Instead, I believe that his novel wants to convey a message that goes beyond a specific historical time frame, communicating a moral concern and a commitment to inter-human connections.

Boyne’s novel is a fictional novel, and this is stated clearly on the title page: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Fable by John Boyne*. The clear classification of the narrative as a fable seems to counterbalance any petition for historical accuracy. In his discussion of post-postmodernism, Huber underlines that “what is at stake here is no longer historical accuracy but the ability of the fictive to communicate and share dreams, to create and maintain illusions and to envision our own as well as alternative worlds” (158-159). While Boyne’s descriptions are rather realistic, the narrative in itself is improbable, and a great deal of details are not historically accurate – think for example of the improbability of a nine-year-old boy in the camps being able to walk freely to the fence, or being alive at all. Thus, his adherence to a realistic style of writing does not imply a realistic narrative in itself. What Boyne offers is not a mimetic representation of history, but a story embedded in a historical background, which emphasizes its own construction, a world we know “through language and layers of representation” (Huber 26). This can be related to postmodernism’s awareness of the fact that knowledge of reality is conveyed through language, and that “both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 89). Nonetheless, rather than indulging in postmodernism’s deconstruction of any possible link between language and reality, Boyne makes his fictional world somewhat “coextensive with experiential reality” (Huber 22), while simultaneously making the reader aware of the fact that his story is a construction.

Boyne seems to suggest that the language, out of which the story is built, will not faithfully represent reality, but that language can nonetheless be a tool for communication. The novel focuses on the relationship between two young boys, and on the interactions within a household, focusing on meaningful connections through conversations. Bruno engages in moral questions and tries to establish inter-human connections through conversations with Shmuel, with his sister, Gretel, and with other members of the household. It is through his conversation with Gretel, for example, that he unconsciously challenges her assumptions of the differences between them and the Jews, and it
are his conversations with Shmuel that make him identify with ‘the other’. When Shmuel tells about being forced to move, for example, Bruno immediately identifies by shouting “that happened to me too” (Boyne 128). The novel seems to underline that language can contribute to “constructing and exchanging the meaningful relations through which humans are able to manage the world around them” (Krijnen 174-175), and Boyne evokes a revaluation of the importance of connecting and communicating.

4.2. Language and Silence

_The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas_ is set in a concentration camp during the Holocaust, but very few explicit references are made to Auschwitz, Hitler, Nazism and the violence it embodied. Moreover, language is structured by repetition. These specific uses of language and silence could be connected on the one hand to the fact that he is addressing younger readers, which might imply a desire to protect while resonating with the musicality of children’s literature. On the other hand, the deliberate omission of references might tie in with post-postmodernism. The relationship between reality and language is consciously challenged. One of the main concerns of post-postmodernism is “how we still know things and make sense of things through language and representation, while knowing at the same time the limits, perhaps even the impossibility of our knowledge” (Krijnen 167). Language is no longer considered as something that mimetically represents reality, and when talking about a subject like the Holocaust, which has been claimed to be ‘un-representable’, language becomes even more relative. Moreover, the silence of language engages the reader, actively drawing him/her into a journey of exploration of moral issues.

The repetitive structure of the language in _The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas_ could be seen as a reflection of the musicality of children’s literature. The story is structured by recurring phrases that are connected to recurring subjects in the story. The description of the house in Berlin, for example, is featured multiple times and is almost always identical: the house is always described as having “five floors if you counted the basement and the little room at the top of the window he needed to stand on tiptoes to see through” (Boyne 99). Gretel is always referred to as A Hopeless Case, and the office of father is always Out of Bounds at All Times and No Exceptions. This repetition provides a certain pace to the story, connecting the chapters with one another. It also adds
This rhythmic and repetitive language ties in with the omission of any direct references, underlining the fact that this narrative is constructed. There is no explicit reference as to where the novel is situated. The words Hitler and Jew are each mentioned once, and all the other references are deliberate word-alterations on the part of the author. Bruno himself makes the mistakes unconsciously: Auschwitz becomes Out-With, and the Führer becomes the Fury. By not literally naming the exact environment in which Bruno is growing up, the novel distances itself from the historical facts, underlining its own narrative as fictional within the historical framework. Moreover, according to Kertzer, “Auschwitz has become for many adults the location of the unbelievable, the incommunicable, the place where no well-argued explanation seems complete enough to make those of us who were not there fully understand what it means” (49-50). Thus, the omission of explicit references can be tied to the difficulties of finding the right words to communicate and fully understand.

On the other hand, the use of terms that are not specific adds up to the novel’s concern with getting across a sense of morality. This is underlined by the last sentences of the novel: “Of course all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again. Not in this day and age” (Boyne 216). This statement is highly ironic in that it wants to communicate that division such as the one made by the fence are still very present. In that sense, the novel seems to remind the reader of the necessity to look beyond the fence, no matter where or when.

The omission of direct references can also be connected to Kokkola’s principle of the use of silence in Holocaust literature, and can be seen as a stimulation for readers to use their own imagination in filling in the gaps. The protagonist explores what is going on around him and the reader is encouraged to join the protagonist on his journey. Kokkola states that the Holocaust “defies the use of metaphor” because “the signified lies beyond the limits of our experience” (15). Most events that occurred during the Holocaust are hard to grasp for readers. Therefore, she suggests, drawing on David Patterson, a dialogue with silence. Engaging with silence draws the readers’ attention to what is unsaid. Thus, “silence becomes a communicative act” (Kokkola 23). In his novel, Boyne never explicitly mentions any violence or cruelty, but only hints at what might have happened, leaving the interpretation of events partly to the reader, and to Bruno. When Shmuel for example turns up at the fence with a black eye, the reader does not know what has happened, but
can imagine some of the possibilities. “Bruno assumed that there were bullies all over the world (…) and that one of them had done this to Shmuel” (Boyne 150). Bruno’s naivety makes him misinterpret the events.

Similarly, the concentration camp is never explicitly named, but is described through Bruno’s eyes. In a discussion with his sister, they first think it is the countryside (Boyne 34), but what they see contradicts their explanation. Moreover, the people behind the fence don’t look particularly cheerful, but Gretel, his sister, suggests that what they are seeing must be “some sort of rehearsal, (…) ignoring the fact that some of the children (…) looked as if they were crying” (Boyne 37). The explicit reference of her choice to ignore guides the reader’s interpretation of the scene: this is not a feigned crying. The avoidance of explicit references partly mirrors the naivety of the children, and the silence acquires an “ethical dimension”, as it takes into account “the readers’ responsibilities for making up their own opinion” (Kokkola 26).

While most adult readers will have the knowledge to fill in the gaps in a somewhat historically accurate manner, the fact that this book is aimed at younger readers makes the process of withholding information more complex. “Filling in missing information is a responsibility of the reader, but young readers are likely to lack the requisite historical knowledge” (Kokkola 26). However, in an interview Boyne stated his hope that, even though children might not be able to identify the specific details, they “will be able to grasp the point that the last we see of (…) [Shmuel and Bruno] is when they are holding hands. (…) The image symbolizes the friendship between the two boys, a friendship that is stronger that the hatred around them” (Al Senter). While the use of silence might make it more difficult for young readers to specifically situate the story, it also offers readers the possibility of drawing connections to other situations. In addition, the alterations of the references are not chosen randomly, but resonate with the qualities of what they name. Out-With disconcertingly refers to the aim of these camps, while Fury might hint at the character of the man it is referring to. For young readers, these words – even though they might not be able to immediately identify them – hint at how they could be valued or interpreted. The omission of specific names might be seen as not only offering a space to let young people use their imagination, but also to provide a moral that goes beyond one specific event, and that can be applied more broadly.
4.3. On Morals: Parody of the Fable

(Post-)postmodernism frequently returns to already established modes and genres, but revisits them in order to create something different. In doing so, “postmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history” (Politics 95). While postmodernism mostly focused on radical deconstruction, post-postmodernist tactics turn more to the self-conscious embrace of “formats of popular genre fictions”, which lead to a “hybridization of genres and blurring of ‘high and low’” (Krijnen 190), without the primary concern of disruption. In The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, Boyne uses the format of the fable in a new way to distance his narrative from factual history, and underline the fictionality of the story. Moreover, the atypical ending of the fable highlights the impossibility of a fixed moral truth, while at the same time acknowledging the need for meaningful connections.

The fable is considered one of the first types of children’s literature (Grenby 11). As a genre, it confirms to a rather fixed set of characteristics. First of all, the fable usually contains a moral lesson, embodying the didactic purpose of children’s literature in general. Grenby mentions that it usually is “a short fictional tale (with) a moral lesson to teach” (10). In addition, animals tend to take on the roles of protagonists (Grenby 10). Throughout history, the fable has become more extended, but it remains a fundamentally didactic form, “designed to draw in its readers through a compelling story and appealing, even cute, character, and to teach important lessons through allegory” (Grenby 11).

By choosing the format of a fable, Boyne distances himself from representing reality as such, and engages with the possibility of the improbable, underlining the fictionality of his narrative. The fable is characterized by non-realistic features such as talking animals. While his characters are all humans, the events within the story are highly improbable to take place in reality. This might be problematic when his aim was to write a historically accurate narrative, but it becomes less of a problem when realizing that the novel is meant to be a fable, in which improbable events can take place. Moreover, according to Vindt, the fable described an event that “has meaning not only in itself, [but also] serves as a symbol or a sign” (89). Thus, the events – as improbable as they are – do not necessarily serve to refer to a specific time and place, but are meant to resonate on a more general level. In addition, Boyne parodies the fable to a certain extent. Hutcheon mentioned that parody offers a way of returning to the past, while at the same time acknowledging – through irony
that “we are inevitably separated from that past today – by time and by subsequent history of those representations” (Politics 94). Thus, his engagement with the fable in an ironic way embodies a distancing from the past as such, and recognizes the difficulty of representing the past in a ‘faithful’ way.

While a fable is supposed to communicate a clear moral lesson, the moral in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is far from clear or unambiguous. As Grenby mentioned, the difference between surface and substance is one of the most common lessons expressed in fables (25). This moral is definitely present in this novel, because what Bruno essentially does is not judging a book by looking at its cover. He befriends Shmuel, despite the fact that he is a Jew, considered inferior by Nazism. While this is a valuable moral lesson, Bruno’s sympathies for Shmuel eventually cause his death. The reader is left behind with a nasty feeling, because the consequences of Bruno’s empathy were negative.

In addition, the reader is also challenged to consider what might have happened to Bruno and Shmuel’s friendship if they hadn’t died. Chances are Bruno would eventually have become indoctrinated, and in that case their friendship was doomed to die. In letting his characters die, Boyne adds a dramatic ending, while at the same time preserving their innocent friendship, ambiguously preserving and destroying the moral in his novel. The novel does not return to an absolute truth or clear moral, neither does it provide a sense of closure. Once again, the last sentences of the novel ironically underline the fact that there are far too many fences up until this day. This does not mean, however, that we should just give up on any notion of faith or morality. Literature should focus on forging “meaningful connections between people” (Krijnen 189), which is precisely what Shmuel and Bruno succeed in doing. Thus, Boyne approaches this historical event from a different angle, constructing it as a fable to underline the importance and the necessity of an ethical and moral concern with humanity, even though absolute closure or morality is unattainable.

4.4. Ambiguity of the German

Boyne’s main protagonist is not the typical protagonist used in children’s and young adult literature on the Holocaust. In books or articles by, among others Kokkola, Sicher and Baer, most examples of children’s literature on the Holocaust feature a Jewish protagonist. However, Boyne’s protagonist is German, and moreover the son of a Nazi commandant. Consequently, many of the characters in
Boyne’s novel are German and are connected to Nazism. In focalizing his story through the eyes of a German child, and by introducing different Nazi characters, he underlines the fact that ‘the Nazi’ is not a fixed character, but that the reality is more complex. The characterization of the German characters deconstructs the conventional and rather absolute identification of the German with evil, denying that “there is such a thing as an absolute, unshakeable Truth” (Krijnen 172). Moreover, the focalization through the child offers the reader a new perspective on the radicalism of evil.

4.4.1. A German Child Protagonist

By using a German child protagonist, a different perspective is offered upon Nazism. Bruno is the child of a Nazi Commandant, and because this has been a part of his life since he was born, he has never questioned it. The reader gets a glimpse of the side of the perpetrators from the point of view of a child who is largely unaware of the implications of his father’s uniform and profession, offering a more nuanced image of the ‘evil’ side. Gray has denounced the implausibility of Bruno’s ignorance: “A nine-year-old son of a senior Nazi, educated in Berlin and no doubt a member of the Hitler Jugend, would surely not have such an accommodating and open-minded attitude towards a Jew. (…) His schooling would undoubtedly have shaped his world view and prevented the innocence and naivety” (122). However, as mentioned previously, the genre of the fable offers Boyne the freedom of introducing highly improbable elements. In addition, Bruno’s naivety is functional in that it makes it possible for Boyne to engage with questions of morality.

Bruno’s naivety offers an opportunity of critically looking at Nazism through the eyes of an innocent insider. He questions things that Nazism tries to institutionalize. Adams has mentioned this value of “the capacity of the child’s image to mediate between or collapse adult categories of difference” (167). For example, he tries to understand what the difference between him and Shmuel is by talking to Gretel. He asks her about the fence, and when she tries to explain what she’s been taught – that the Jews are inferior -, Bruno does not simply accept her explanation. Instead, he keeps asking more questions. “Are we Jews? (…) Why not? What are we then? (…) Don’t Jews like the Opposite then? (…) Why don’t we like them? (…) Can’t someone just get them together and…” (Boyne 182-183). Bruno questions the very foundation of Nazism’s dislike for Jews, and while Gretel was convinced of some crucial difference between herself and the people on the other side of the fence, she is not capable of explaining why they are so different. Similarly, in his innocence
he unconsciously confronts Nazi ideology with basic moral assumptions. He does not understand, for example, why Pavel would say he is a doctor while he is clearly working as a waiter, because he is unaware of Pavel’s forced move to the camp based on his Jewishness (Boyne 137). Bruno approaches all of these issues with a naivety that is almost uncomfortable, forcing the reader to reconsider the historical events of the Holocaust and confronting them indirectly with ethical and moral questions. Thus, Boyne investigates the moral justifications behind Nazi ideology, engaging with a post-postmodern concern for morality and ethics.

4.4.2. Representation of the Nazi

The representation of evil and of Nazism in specific is a delicate process. While a more nuanced and less black-and-white portrayal of good and evil is what many critics advocate, the common tendency in children’s and young adult literature remains to portray ‘the Nazi’ as purely evil. What Boyne does in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can be seen as a turn to a more nuanced and less flat portrayal of Nazism, even though he does not add this dimension to all of the Nazi characters in the novel. Young adult novels on the Second World War tend to transmute “the humanity of the Nazi Other” and to represent “evil still as nameless” (Khader 127). Kremer has warned that this avoiding of virulent behavior of the perpetrators can be seen as a failure, because it does not adequately “inform its readers of the disastrous history of Nazism and the Holocaust” (256). While this novel does not give any explicit reference to atrocity, and is very suggestive in naming what exactly Nazism embodied, I do not feel that it fails to address the issues. Rather than focusing on the violence, which can create an radical image of evil, Boyne highlights the confrontation between personal beliefs, love for one’s family, freedom of choice and indoctrination.

On the one hand, Boyne relies on the representation of evil that is quite common in children’s literature, the image of the ‘diabolical Bogeyman’. This is mostly present in the character of Lieutenant Kotler. As a young soldier, he is very eager to show off his engagement and his dedication to the Nazi regime. Bruno’s perception of Lieutenant Kotler is nothing but negative. After meeting him for the first time, “he knew he didn’t like Lieutenant Kotler. There was an atmosphere around him that made Bruno feel very cold and want to put a jumper on” (Boyne 71). The portrayal of Lieutenant Kotler strongly resembles the description of Kokkola on the bogeyman portrayal of Nazi characters, dehumanizing them by focusing on their external features such as their
military uniforms. What Bruno sees when looking at Lieutenant Kotler is an arrogant man “striding around in a uniform (…), his black boots always sparkled with polish and his yellow-blond hair (…) parted at the side and held perfectly in place” (Boyne 71).

However, the evil is not solely attributed to the fact that Lieutenant Kotler is a Nazi member. Bruno, who is unaware of what the uniform implies, bases his judgement on Lieutenant Kotler’s character itself: “There really was no other way to dress it up: he was just plain nasty” (Boyne 77). Kotler is furthermore portrayed as an aggressive and unfriendly person, particularly when he comes into contact with Jews. He is the one that severely punishes Pavel and Shmuel, and he seems so evil that Bruno is too scared to stand up for his friend: “He hated Lieutenant Kotler, (…) and all Bruno could think of was the afternoon when he had seen him shooting a dog and the evening when Pavel had made him so angry” (Boyne 172). However, the reader gets a glimpse of a different side of Lieutenant Kotler’s character when Bruno’s Father asks about Kotler’s father. It is “strange that he chose not to stay in the Fatherland”, and when Father asks what reason he gave “for leaving Germany at the moment of her greatest glory and her most vital need, when it is incumbent upon all of us to play our part in the national revival” (Boyne 146), Lieutenant Kotler is driven into a corner as to whether he has informed his superiors about his father’s disloyalty. Kotler did not inform his superiors, obviously. He is human enough to value his family, and to care for the well-being of his father. Thus, even the most explicitly evil character in the novel is not unambiguous.

The characterization of Bruno’s Father is more ambiguous, showing a man torn between his political beliefs, the love for his family, and what is expected of him. While “to the average child, the planning and implementation of mass murder may seem so irrational that it is seen as madness” (Gray 127), Boyne offers an image that is more complex. The father supervises a camp where horrible acts take place, and simultaneously tries to raise two children and protect them in the best way possible. The precarious balance between these two functions is explored throughout the novel.

The reason of the family’s moving is father’s new job, which seems to be very important because he wears a fantastic uniform and “the Fury has big things in mind for him” (Boyne 4). This first decision already highlights the balance that Bruno’s father has to maintain between caring for his family and obeying to his superiors. Father is definitely not the most affectionate and loving parent to encounter in a novel. The word ‘Father’ is always capitalized, which adds an air of importance and rigidity to his character. Moreover, he applies strict rules, and is not “usually the type of man to give anyone a hug” (Boyne 45). However, his rigidity is intertwined with a concern for his family,
and he tries at times to make Bruno feel better, or to make him understand the situation. “‘Bruno, sometimes there are things we need to do in life that we don’t have a choice in (…) and I’m afraid this is one of them. This is my work (…). Important to our country. Important to the Fury. You’ll understand that someday” (Boyne 48). This resonates with Lara’s assumption that “the moral problem of human freedom presupposes that we need the ability to choose to act or not to act” (15). It seems as if Bruno’s father tries to justify his actions by minimalizing his own freedom of choice. His father’s actions inside the household highlight the complexity of his character, expressing a “plurality, multiplicity, and diversity in the categories and terms used to describe our identities” (Rudrum 13). Even though he accuses Lieutenant Kotler of not reporting his father’s disagreement with the current politics, he has never officially informed his superiors of the fact that his own mother did not approve of his political choices, and he eventually decides that “perhaps this is not a place for children” (Boyne 191). Thus, father/the Commandant is a character that does not correspond to a unified identity, but to an identity that is fractured, being torn between the different roles that he has to perform.

As a nine-year-old boy, Bruno sees his father is someone to look up to, a good soldier. However, his conception is challenged throughout the novel by Shmuel and by incidents that occur. Shmuel claims that “there aren’t any good soldiers”. However, Bruno defends his father to be a good one: “That’s why he has such an impressive uniform and why everyone calls him Commandant and does whatever he says” (Boyne 140). Furthermore, the incident with Pavel and Lieutenant Kotler leaves Bruno wondering: “While Bruno realized that Father was generally a very kind and thoughtful man, it hardly seemed fair or right that no one had stopped Lieutenant Kotler” (Boyne 148). Bruno’s image of his Father is opposite to what Shmuel sees of the Commandant. When Bruno is on the other side of the fence and is forced to march somewhere, he wants to reassure everyone that “Father was the Commandant, and if this was the kind of thing he wanted the people to do then it must be all right” (Boyne, 210). Shmuel on the other hand, cannot help but wonder “how such a man could have a son who was so friendly and kind” (Boyne 196). Thus, the reader is confronted with a man whose identity is far more complex and deconstructed than a simplistic representation of evil would account for.
4.5. Parallels with the Jew

Shmuel and Bruno were never supposed to be friends according to Nazism. Bruno belonged to the superior race, while Shmuel was considered an Untermensch, making them as opposite to one another as possible. These oppositions were common in Nazi propaganda: “The socially constructed categories of the enemy are always culturally built according to their negative characteristics” (Lara 148). Jews were considered everything that Nazism was not. Bruno’s father states that they are radically different from Jews: “You have nothing whatsoever in common with them” (Boyne 53). However, Boyne does not portray the boys as opposites. He does not contrast them with one another, but creates connections between them, making them more alike than different. In post-postmodernism, this emphasis on “identifying with others” (Timmer 359) becomes more important, especially in connection to a renewed interest in “communicat[ing] bonds beyond the dictates of referentiality” (Huber 40). By connecting the two boys with one another, Boyne underlines this need for communication and meaningful connections.

From the very first encounter, the similarities between the boys are a point of identification and a way of starting the conversation. Both boys start off with a shy “hello”, and both boys turn out to be nine years old, sharing the same birthday, April the fifteenth 1934. “‘Isn’t that strange?’ ‘Very strange’, said Shmuel. (…) ‘We’re like twins’, said Bruno” (Boyne 110). They develop a friendship, in which they connect with one another, even though they live totally different lives. Boyne lets his characters establish a “form of meaningful communication that is able to imaginatively connect people in ways not to be had elsewhere” (Krijnen 182). While a friendship like theirs is unlikely to exist in actual history – the improbability of meeting someone at the fence of a concentration camp is clear –, Boyne creates a bond to engage with “the most basic moral questions about how people are supposed to live with each other” (Krijnen 189). Every day they are sitting at the fence in the same position, and it might be argued that the fence in a way doubles as a mirror, making each of the boys look back at its own reflection. This mirroring is once again a way of exceeding difference and hatred, and of establishing communication, realizing that, in the end, differences are very relative.

At the end of the novel, Bruno will actually enter the camp. In order to do so, he puts on a ‘pyjamas’ that Shmuel has brought him. “Shmuel turned just as Bruno applied the finishing touch to his costume, placing the striped cloth cap on his head. (…) It would have been difficult to tell
them apart. It was almost (...) as if they were all exactly the same” (Boyne 204). Interestingly, Bruno’s disguise is referred to as a costume, and he is reminded of the plays he performed with his grandmother (Boyne 204). Their adventure resembles a play, as if they were performing a narrative within the story. In engaging with their own narrative – in which Bruno takes on a role -, their appearances literally mirror the connections they have made. The title of the novel refers not only to Shmuel, but to Bruno as well, when both boys turn out to be the boy in the striped pyjamas.

Moreover, the friendship between Shmuel and Bruno and their joint death highlights the impact that Nazism had on people’s lives – Jewish or not. Gray has denounced the ending of the book, because ‘the reader’s sympathies and affections are principally attached to Bruno” (125). His character is developed more profoundly than Shmuel’s, and therefore, “the sadness which the reader feels at the end of the story is principally for Bruno. (...) It seems inconceivable that a book which is set in the Holocaust turns the murderers into the victims” (125). While these observations are certainly valuable, it might be argued that it is precisely this double victimization that makes the ending interesting. While it might be considered offensive to focus on a German non-Jewish victim while so many Jews died, “it is precisely [this] (...) impiety that provokes reflection upon the processes of remembrance themselves and upon the (changing) meaning of the Holocaust in the present” (Krijnen 7). In establishing a connection between a German non-Jewish boy and a Jewish boy, and letting them die together, Boyne does not want people to only feel sad for the German boy, but wants to expose the absurdity and cruelty of what harm the Holocaust, and symbolical fences in general, can cause.

4.6. Conclusion

In The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, Boyne plays with the conventions of the fable to construct a narrative in a post-postmodernist way, conscious of its own fictionality yet relating to history, engaging in a concern for human connections and moral and ethical issues. Using language in a very specific way – combining silence and repetition –, he effectively addresses a younger reading audience. Moreover, the lack of specific references ties in with post-postmodernism’s challenging of the relationship between language and reality. The ‘unrepresentability’ of the Holocaust is explored, while at the same time distancing the narrative from actual history. Moreover, the use of silence ties in with a concern for moral and ethical issues, shifting the narrative to a more general
level. In addition, the gaps in the story stimulate the reader to actively engage with the story, which resonates with post-postmodernism’s faith in the power of “literature as a medium that facilitates a form of meaningful connection” (Krijnen 182). The use of the genre of the fable enables Boyne to take freedom with improbable events, underlining the narrative’s fictionality. Moreover, by parodying the fable – in particular the idea of a fixed moral – he highlights the impossibility of a fixed moral truth, while still underlining the need to value moral issues and meaningful connections. By focalizing through a German child, Boyne offers a new perspective on the ideology of the Nazis, and simultaneously shows that the division between good and evil is not as clear-cut. The Nazi-characters themselves are not unambiguous either. Boyne plays with the tensions between personal beliefs, the love for one’s family and freedom of choice in the depiction of the Father. Evil is described as far more complex than it is usually portrayed in children’s literature. Lastly, by connecting Shmuel and Bruno, Boyne emphasizes the “need for a we” (Timmer 359), and the importance of inter-human connections.
Markus Zusak’s The Book Thief

Markus Zusak is an Australian writer, born in 1975. His parents, a German mother and an Austrian father, moved to Australia in the 1950s. With six published books, his literary oeuvre is quite limited. Nevertheless, he has gained international recognition, mostly because of his novel The Book Thief (2005), which has been a bestseller in countries all over the world. The novel narrates the story of a young girl, Liesel, as she grows up in a small town, Molching, in Nazi Germany. The reader follows Liesel in her personal development, in her relationships with her foster parents, Hans and Rosa, her friend Rudy and the inhabitants of the town, and in her development within the larger historical framework. Moreover, she befriends Max, a Jew that is hiding in the basement of her house. In his novel, Zusak applies post-postmodernist characteristics in order to convey a different and more nuanced perspective on Nazi Germany, as well as to bring across a more universal message on what it means to be human. He uses renewalism and a renewed approach to historical fiction to tell a story that is aware of its own fictionality. By letting Death narrate the entire novel, he enhances this fictionality, introducing a fantastic element. In addition, the engagement with renewalism can be tied to the concern the novel expresses with ethics. The novel brings up moral dilemmas, and expresses a strong concern with how people embody both the worst and the best.

5.1. Historiographic Metafiction and Humanist Concerns

Zusak’s novel resonates with Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon has coined this term to refer to postmodernism’s challenging and deconstruction of history and facts, questioning the straight line that is assumed to run from history to historical narration. Hutcheon emphasizes the distinction between “the brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them” (Hutcheon, Politics 57). Zusak’s novel is constructed within a historical framework, and the author has taken his precautions in being as accurate as possible when it comes to conveying this historical reality. The story unfolds itself along a couple of dates, and the specific dates that are mentioned in the novel mostly refer to events that really took place. One example can be found in the chapter “The Parisians”, where the narrator mentions: “on June 23 1942, there was a group of
French Jews in a German prison, on Polish soil” (Zusak 358). On this day, the first selection of Jews to enter the gas chambers in Auschwitz was made from a train from Paris. Both Stalingrad and the bombing of Munich are also part of history.

However, Zusak makes the reader aware that he is not trying to write a historical and objective report. He is far more interested in the idea of history as a narrative, as “a human-made structure” (Hutcheon, Politics 62). The city of Molching, where the story is situated, is a fictional city, and so are its inhabitants and the main characters of Zusak’s novel. Thus, he combines history and fiction. Nonetheless, his novel is no traditional historical novel. In general, combining fact and fiction is not a rare phenomenon in literature. On the contrary, according to Huber, “both the imaginary and the real are necessary for the fictive to exist, since the former would be evanescent, formless and without intentionality without the material basis of the latter. Conversely, the real would be restricted in its determinacy and unable to develop complexity of meaning without the explosive force of the imaginary” (68). When applying this to Zusak’s novel, it can be deduced that The Book Thief needs the historical context in order for the fictitious side of the novel to acquire a certain significance. However, he does not combine these opposites out of pure need, nor does he wish to deconstruct history to the bone, as postmodernism often tends to do. Instead, he uses the hybridity of fact and fiction in a more post-postmodernist way, combing the postmodern deconstruction of the relation between language and reality with a view on language as a tool for communication, or the process of constructing and exchanging the meaningful relations” (Krijnen 174).

Thus, Zusak presents a “renewed sense of commitment to reestablish possibilities of (moral) signification in the wake of postmodernism” (Krijnen 182). In her article on post-postmodernism, Holland emphasizes the stance of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who defends “the necessity of notions of good and bad, right and wrong”, underlining that these notions are what enable human beings to act morally. At the same time, there is no such thing as a universal moral, and Appiah recognizes the “need for multiplicity and uncertainty”, uniting both in his idea of “universality plus difference” (7). Holland herself, in addition, underlines the fact that “literature of the twenty-first century seeks to salvage much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning and investment in the real world and in relationships between people” (10). Zusak’s novel engages with the subject of the Holocaust, but chooses a non-Jewish protagonist and a German village and its inhabitants as the main components of his novel. In doing so, he focuses on the relationships between people within a community and on connecting and communicating. Zusak explores how people react on the war,
and how they try to survive and stay hopeful. It are Liesel’s words, for example, that convince Frau Holtzapfel, her neighbor, of choosing life over death when the bombs arrive (Zusak 492). Moreover, the appearance of a Jew in the novel and the polarization of people in favor of and against the Nazi regime address more universal questions about ethics and morals. Hans Hubermann’s decision to not follow Nazism, for example, is based on the fact that “he was a man who appreciated fairness. A Jew had once saved his life and he couldn’t forget that” (Zusak 188).

In engaging with a realist and historical background, he places a direct emphasis on humanist concerns. As Bradbury mentions, “close to the heart of realism is a moral conception of humanism. Realism, still, has much to do with the representation of felt human experience” (24). What is also important to realize, is that historiographic metafiction highlights its own fictionality. Narratives and literature in general acquire a more prominent role, not as means of deconstruction and destabilization, but as a powerful tool: post-postmodernism seems to “embrace literature as a medium that facilitates a form of meaningful communication that is able to imaginatively connect people in ways not to be had elsewhere” (Krijnen 182). The very title of Zusak’s novel already draws attention to the importance of literature, and throughout the novel, narrative – the novel in itself, as well as narratives within the story – claims an important role in establishing meaningful connections.

5.2. Death as the Narrator

_The Book Thief’s_ most remarkable feature is probably its narrator. The story of Liesel is told by a narrator who is the furthest away and yet the closest to human beings. Death guides the reader through the novel, narrating Liesel’s story based on the book that she wrote herself. Zusak’s narrator could be identified as a rather post-postmodernist one. He makes the reader constantly aware of his own presence – using metafictional comments -, and insists on his own imagination and the limits of his knowledge. Moreover, he reveals the dramatic ending of the novel at the very beginning, seemingly uninterested in suspense, but more engaged with the relations between human beings. The figure of Death is portrayed in an all-too-human way, ambiguously soothing people’s fear and confronting them with the inevitability of meeting Death. Moreover, it reminds the reader what humans are capable of. Death’s purpose of telling the narrative is a post-postmodernist one, because
he wants to highlight the possibilities of hope and signification, even during a period as grim as the Second World War.

Death makes the reader constantly aware of the narrative character of the story. He does not eliminate his own presence, but repeatedly draws attention to himself and his act of narration, underlining the metafictional character of the narrative. In post-postmodernist literature, the narrator and metafictional awareness are key components. In renewalism, literature “reclaims its fictional world as coextensive with experiential reality. Nevertheless, it always remains aware of the constructed nature of its testimonial claims, emphasizing at all times the mediating role of the storyteller” (Huber 22). In other words, the narrator becomes a more prominent character within the realistic framework, in order to underline the fictionality of the literary work. The prologue to the novel consists of 3 chapters, in which Death already reveals the three encounters he will have with Liesel. It is in these chapters that he introduces himself explicitly, and the actual chapters of the novel start after the announcement: “I will tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (Zusak 24). Closing the circle, Death ends his story with almost the exact same words: “Come with me and I’ll tell you a story. I’ll show you something” (Zusak 548). Both at the beginning and at the end, the reader is confronted with the fictionality of what he/she is about to read or has just read. Moreover, Death and Liesel meet at the very end and have a conversation, in which Death hands her the book she wrote. By literally handing her the book, Zusak makes the narrator symbolically close the narrative.

In addition, the story he narrates is not the exact story Liesel wrote down. Death uses his imagination as well: “Often, I wonder what page she was up to when I walked down Himmel Street in the dripping-tap rain, five nights later. (…) Personally, I like to imagine her looking briefly at the wall, at Max Vandenburg’s tightrope cloud, his dripping sun and the figures walking towards it” (Zusak 532). The novel thus not only presents a fictional narrative, but a narrative that insists on its own fictionality, in which the narrator admits his retreat into imagination at certain points of the story. The postmodern narrator never mirrors a “subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty” (Hutcheon Poetics 117). Death’s use of his imagination clearly indicates that even he does not know everything, as does his mentioning of the fact that he weaves the story from bits and pieces (Zusak 427), and his use of verbs such as ‘guess’, ‘wonder’ and ‘ask’ when contemplating on human issues.
Moreover, Death is an atypical narrator: he does not fulfill the conventional role of a narrator eager to tell an exciting and surprising story. He seemingly does not care about building suspense or creating mystery. Conversely, he is almost blunt when it comes to revealing what will happen.

Of course, I’m being rude. I’m spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don’t have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me. I know what happens and so do you. It’s the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest and astound me. (Zusak 253)

Death is not interested in the narrative mechanics of suspense. However, he does take quite some time – 500 pages – to elaborately tell Liesel’s story. Thus, he is an unreliable narrator in the sense that what he expresses contradicts his actions. However, the elaborate narrative can be tied to the fact that he is primarily interested in what happens during humans’ lives, and in their decisions and the consequences. As a narrator, he takes a post-postmodernist stance in his preoccupation with humans and their relations, their motivations and their occupations. As Huber emphasized when addressing post-postmodernism, “attention is turned to other issues, more down-to-earth stuff, the grit of war and loss, human belief and betrayal and the endless variations of inter-human relationships” (22).

In addition to this lack of interest in mystery, these early disclosures could be attributed a different explanation. “Again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps it’s to soften the blow for later, or to better prepare myself for the telling” (Zusak 501). By announcing beforehand what is going to happen to the characters, the narrator seems to prepare not only himself, but the young reader as well, which is a main characteristic of children’s and young adult literature. Still, writing about the Holocaust is a narrative act which breaks taboos, as it introduces readers to a world in which happy endings and hope are not self-evident (Kokkola 11). Thus, even though Death’s statement seems to suggest a mechanism of protection, it might generate the opposite effect. Death’s various references to the fate of his characters might not “form part of the ‘cushioning’ of atrocity for adolescent readers (…), but instead have the effect of repeatedly confronting the reader with the novel’s refusal to bend historical actuality to meet the reader’s desire for a happy ending” (Adams 159). In this case, Death’s remarks serve an opposite purpose to what one would expect from children’s literature, and the novel acknowledges the importance of making the “young reader (…) become conscious of the Nazi era and the suffering of its victims” (Bosmajian xvi). Consequently,
Death’s revealing of the plot is not a way of protecting children, but of confronting them with the reality of the historical period in which the novel is set.

Zusak’s narrator is not one-dimensional or stereotypical. The figure of Death is usually associated with skeletons, scythes, and long black cloaks. None of this seems to apply to Zusak’s creation. The first announcement that Death makes to the reader is not exactly the most cheering thought: “Here is a small fact. You’re going to die” (Zusak 13). However, the narrator directly emphasizes that he can be amiable, and throughout the novel, he portrays himself more as a human-like figure than as a macabre myth. “A reassuring announcement (…). I am not violent. I am not malicious. I am a result” (Zusak 16). Death simultaneously underlines the unfounded fear people usually feel while at the same time indicating the inevitability of an encounter. In addition, “I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it’s cold. And I don’t have those skull-like features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look like? I’ll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue” (Zusak 317). While it might be reassuring to perceive Death as a figure that is not so much like a nightmarish image, Zusak’s alternative seems almost more unsettling. Death becomes an all-too-human figure, recognizable in all of us. While underlining the inevitability of human fate, it also sinisterly suggests what humanity is capable of, touching upon questions of morality.

With a narrator like this, it is inevitable to touch upon the subject of death. Contrary to what one might expect from Death, the descriptions do not suggest a narrator that enjoys his profession: “To me, war is like the boss who expects the impossible” (Zusak 319). On the contrary, when talking about dying humans, his tone becomes melancholic, almost sad. In the very first chapter, he dedicates some lines to the impact of humans on his mood:

It’s the leftover humans, the survivors. They’re the ones I can’t stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs. (Zusak 13)

Ultimately, Death is not the one who haunts humans. “I am haunted by humans” (Zusak 554), the novel concludes, and it reflects the essence of Death’s characterization. Instead of focusing on the ‘supernatural’ presence of the narrator, Zusak uses his narrator to engage with humans and inter-human relationships. This is strongly emphasized by Death’s motivation for narrating Liesel’s story.
“That’s the sort of thing I’ll never know, or comprehend – what humans are capable of” (Zusak 33). The narrator’s aim is “to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (Zusak 24). Combining this sense of hope in the possibility of communication with the subject of the Holocaust, could be seen as problematic, because the Holocaust as an event is often associated with cruelty, hopelessness, violence, and other detrimental concepts. However, Krijnen has argued that post-postmodernism invests in “a renewed sense of commitment to reestablish possibilities of (moral) signification in the wake of postmodernism” (182), conveying of the “memory of the Holocaust [as] (...) a powerful stimulant to search for means of making sense in ways more meaningful, human and moral than those offered by postmodernism” (184). Thus, Death’s purpose could be seen as the author’s purpose in that Zusak’s novel focuses on the possibility of hope, despite the unfavorable historical circumstances. The precarious balance between the possibility of hope and goodness and the evidence of its opposite is made clear by the narrator when he analyses the human race: “I’m always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugliness and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both” (Zusak 495). Engaging with human and ethical issues, Zusak approaches the Holocaust in a way that steers away from sheer desperation. Using Krijnen’s words, Zusak “underlines the ultimate fragility and precariousness of existence and civilization” (185), but at the same time he strongly valuates the power of communal bonding and communication.

The narrator focuses on the story of Liesel, a German girl, living in a small town and on her personal developments. Nonetheless, the novel also addresses the Holocaust. While the presence of a Jew in the basement of Liesel’s house is probably the clearest link to the Holocaust, Death’s intermezzos address the event in a different perspective. The description of Death carrying Jewish souls is a rather ambiguous one: “Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their French words. I watched their love-visions and freed them from their fear” (Zusak 358). Their deaths are being described with tenderness, using the image of being reborn and mentioning ‘love-visions’ and a freeing from fears. This might evoke a sentiment of alleviation and consolation, protecting (young) readers from the cruelties of the Holocaust. However, the novel insists on its own fictionality and the narrator is a personification, a mythical figure. “The novel undoubtedly offers a mixture of consolation and confrontation (...)”. However, to the reader able to identify the consolation as supernatural, these redemptive possibilities are troubling rather than complacent in their offer of a form of consolation that cannot be accepted” (Adams 156). Therefore,
whatever consolation might be suggested, is denied at the same time by the very character of the narrator and of the novel. Thus, the novel’s formulation of death follows a rather post-postmodern approach, trying to access the possibility of hope/consolation, while at the same time recognizing the impossibility. In doing so, fiction is proposed as a mediator to connect or to create meaning, and *The Book Thief* seems to retain a “doubtful optimism” (Huber 222).

5.3. Ambiguity of the German

Similar to John Boyne, Zusak also chooses to focus on German characters in his novel, illuminating a different and less explored part of the Holocaust. While Boyne situates his child protagonist in the proximity of an active Nazi-member, Zusak chooses to focus not on the more powerful members within German society, but on the average German citizen. By portraying the daily life within a small German community, he touches upon questions connected to active resistance, compliance, acceptance, group-pressure and ethics. In doing so, Zusak distinguishes between characters that are rather flat, portraying a certain stance in relation to Nazism, and characters that develop themselves. Moreover, the lines between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ characters are rather blurry, as moral questions connected to freedom and personal will are raised implicitly.

5.3.1. A German Child Protagonist

Zusak’s protagonist is a German girl. A child protagonist is not uncommon, and it proves useful in children’s young adult literature because the author usually has to maintain a balance between addressing the Holocaust without concealing reality, while at the same time not scaring the readers. “If authors are to get their message across to their young readers, they are going to have to provide them with material that keeps them turning the pages” (Kokkola 132). A child protagonist allows for the author to perhaps focus less on the atrocities and cruelties, but instead “emphasize acts of ingenuity and kindness” (Kremer 254). In *The Book Thief*, the narrator’s main aim is to show the goodness of humanity, and Liesel as a character supports his intention. She comes to embody a sense of selflessness and goodness, even though her character is no purely virtuous and innocent one. However, she is, especially in the first half of the book, young enough to look at the world in a more open-minded and naïve way. Meeting a Jew and befriendimg him makes her unable to actually
believe the propaganda that she is being taught. While this type of protagonist might evoke sentiments of hope and consolation, the novel’s ending underlines how ambiguous and complex the situation really is. When looking at criticism on children’s literature, the common tendency is that “unhappy endings remain atypical” (Kokkola 11). However, Kremer has argued that happy endings make it difficult for the young reader to imagine the tragic narratives that were part of reality (256). Zusak’s choice of ending can be seen as assembling both of these stances. Liesel and Max survive, providing a ‘happy ending’ for them. However, most of the people that were dear to Liesel die during a bombing of Himmel Street. Thus, the novel might soften certain aspects of the Holocaust by selecting a child protagonist, but an overtly optimistic stance is definitely not presented.

In addition, choosing a child protagonist eases the process of identification for the reader, which in turn can be considered important when looking at the aims of Holocaust fiction according to De Pres, Kokkola and Baer. Literature on the Holocaust should support the principle of “we must not forget”, and should make the reader aware of fascism, and of ways of resisting (Kokkola 11). Thus, the reader should develop “a sense of personal responsibility regarding prejudice, hatred and racial discrimination” (Baer 385). Liesel’s attitude towards Nazism is colored by her own upbringing and experiences, and bestows upon the reader an idea of how to go against the stream. When Max wants to thank Liesel, he is torn because “he had nothing to give, except maybe Mein Kampf and there was no way he’d give such propaganda to a young German girl. that would be like the lamb handing a knife to the butcher” (Zusak 229). However, precisely these pages – full of hatred – will strengthen the friendship between Max and Liesel, diverging Liesel’s own way of thinking from what Nazism propagandized. Moreover, one of the narrator’s claims regarding the reason for telling the story of Liesel is the following one: “Say something enough times and you never forget it” (Zusak 533). It is said by the narrator who wants the reader not to forget what humans are capable of – a hopeful purpose -, but it can also be interpreted on a metafictional level, as if the author himself wants to assess the imperative of writing on the Holocaust, to make sure people do not forget.

5.3.2. The Bystander

The other inhabitants of Molching hardly can be identified as exclusively evil characters, diabolic Germans hunting down Jews. What Zusak portrays, is a far more nuanced, but nonetheless
disturbing image of German society. He chooses to focus on the ordinary German, questioning the concepts of the bystander, of compliance and of resistance. While it is clear that not everyone in Molching agrees with the Nazi ideology, very little active resistance is present. Zusak wants to address the issues of freedom of choice, of morality and humanity, while at the same time underlining the limits of personal freedom in a country inflamed by antisemitism. As Lara mentions, “the moral problem of human freedom presupposes that we need the ability to choose to act or not to act” (15). This vital mechanism is suspended in Zusak’s novel. Molching, and Germany as a whole, is controlled by Nazism, and choosing to act against its norms does not go unpunished. This issue of human freedom and morality versus power is present throughout the entire novel, and is recapitulated by the narrator as he points out, “you don’t always get what you wish for. Especially in Nazi Germany” (Zusak 203). The inhabitants of the town could be divided into two categories, even though boundaries cannot be drawn clear-cut. As is common in post-postmodernist literature, the characters are complex, fractured, and their identity is not unequivocal.

The majority of the small town supports the Nazi regime, be it mostly in a rather passive way. There are some active participants present, such as Frau Hiller, the shopkeeper whose “refrigerated voice and even breath (…) smelled like Heil Hitler (…). She lived for her shop and her shop lived for the Third Reich” (Zusak 55), and occasional descriptions of soldiers or officers, mostly characterized by their uniforms. “You didn’t see people. Only uniforms and signs” (Zusak 118). However, Zusak also steers away from conventional descriptions of evil by focusing on ordinary citizens. Khader and Sicher both emphasized that evil was often constructed as incomprehensible, as carried out by inhuman beings. Nonetheless, when addressing the question of human agency – as Lara has done -, one cannot ignore the importance of the German people. This has been noted by Baer as well, who argues for the need of confronting “the evil of which we are all capable” (379). Most of the inhabitants can be considered bystanders, as that includes “not only those who are physically present during a genocide, but also distant spectators who did not intervene early enough and thereby allowed genocidal acts to occur” (Vollhardt 7). The compliance of most citizens is underlined during public events, such as the celebration of Hitler’s birthday: “Some kept faces contorted with pride and rally like Frau Diller, and then there were the scatterings of odd-men-out, such as Alex Steiner, who stood like a human-shaped block of wood, clapping slow and dutiful. And beautiful. Submission” (Zusak 67). While people might not support all of the ideas advocated by Nazism, resisting is far more difficult than complying silently. That is made clear when Alex
Steiner scolds Rudy for painting himself black. “You shouldn’t want to be black people or Jewish people, or anyone who is … not us” (Zusak 66). Steiner is no evil man, but the ideas he expresses are ambiguous. However, when Nazism wants to take his son, he is capable of actively refusing.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are characters such as Hans Hubermann and Liesel, who try to resist the Nazi regime without becoming victims of it. They symbolize a moral and ethical consciousness, a sense of humanity that surpasses the rules of society at the time. However, even their actions are calculated within the system. When Liesel openly swears against the Führer, Hans “slapped Liesel Meminger squarely in the face. (…) Liesel had no idea that her foster father (…) was caught in one of the most dangerous dilemmas a German citizen could face” (Zusak 121). While Hans does not support Nazism, he is fully aware of the dangers of publicly expressing disagreement.

Loyalty to humanity and disloyalty to the Party tears families apart, and does not go by unpunished. Hans’s son, a proud Nazi member, accuses him of being pathetic: “How a man can stand by and do nothing as a whole nation cleans out the garbage and makes itself great” (Zusak 111). Eventually – and ironically - , it is Hans’s open support of Jews during a march through Molching that causes the departure of Max, and Hans’s employment within the German army. Hans is torn constantly between the desire to act morally while protecting himself and the ones he loves. Similarly, Liesel rebels within the system, by stealing books, and by befriending a Jew. However, when she openly shows support, she is confronted with the rest of her community. “When she was able to get up, she looked at the shocked, frozen-faced Germans, fresh out of their packets (…) Most of them were mute. Statues with beating hearts” (Zusak 519). Thus, the writer blends resistance with compliance, focusing in specific on ethical dilemmas: the reader cannot help but wonder what he/she would have done in the case of Hans and Liesel. Hirsch mentions this as one of the important effects of Holocaust literature: “Students are in fact drawn to consider the position of perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers, wondering whether they would have been capable of resisting had they been alive in Nazi Germany or whether they would have collaborated” (16). Zusak does not eliminate responsibility from the citizens of Molching, but he puts their position and their relative freedom in perspective, underlining that there is no such thing as an absolute truth.
5.4. Appearance of the Jew

The only Jewish character that is developed in the novel is Max Vandenburg, the son of an old friend – and life-saver – of Hans Hubermann. Zusak develops this character in a way that shows the similarities between Liesel and Max – German and Jewish – defying the logic of differentiation and insisting on a connection between human beings beyond classified differences. Moreover, he also explores the ambiguity and complexity of Max’s thought process and of his emotions. Postmodernism’s main aim was to subvert traditional values such as identity as a stable truth (Krijnen 149). An impulse of “crisis in identity – that is, a deep-felt need to assert plurality, multiplicity, and diversity in the categories and terms used to describe our identities” (Rudrum 13) complicates and destabilizes the idea of a fixed identity. Characters are ambiguous, uncertain, and changeable. However, post-postmodernism combines this destabilization with “remarkably hopeful, ‘un-postmodern’ stances with regard to the possibilities of narrative and representation, regeneration, identity, and not least, love” (Krijnen 150). Zusak explores this balance between an ambiguous and complex identity and a sense of hope and communication.

The analogies between Max and Liesel are mentioned explicitly in the novel: “As time passed by, the girl and I realized we had things in common. Train, dreams, fists” (Zusak 240). Both arrive by train in Molching, and both are connected to the Führer while travelling. Liesel’s brother dies as she is having a dream about Hitler: “she was listening contentedly to the torrent of words that was spilling from his mouth. (…) Just as the Führer was about to reply, she woke up” (Zusak 28). Similarly, Max is travelling to Molching while reading Mein Kampf: “My struggle. The title, over and over again, as the train prattled on, from one German town to the next. Mein Kampf. Of all the things to save him” (Zusak 167). Both Liesel and Max travel accompanied by the Führer’s words, who are essential to the efficacy of Nazism. However, these characters are not influenced by his words.

Both have terrible nightmares in which they relive parts of their past. Liesel reimagines the death of her brother, Max his departure from his family. Their familial bonds are being cut, and the idea of family is destabilized for both characters. According to Holland, within post-postmodernist tendencies, the idea of the family is being recuperated, and characters are being dropped in destabilized worlds to emphasize the “possibilities for family connections and for family as a context for constructing and understanding the self” (11). Both Liesel and Max have been deprived of their
family, but in their encounter on 33 Himmel Street they establish some kind of renewed connection with the concept of family. Liesel comes to value her foster-parents, and Max could be seen as a lost brother. Interestingly, the concept of family that they connect with is a constructed one, and the idea of a family in this case relies on a fictional bond. Thus, a narrative is employed within a group of people to create a family, a narrative is used to “facilitate a form of meaningful connection” (Krijnen 182).

Thirdly, both are fist-fighters. However, violence is not the solution when it comes to subverting the system. Instead, they unite and use the power of language to rebel. Post-postmodernism values the importance of communication and of evoking a way “of identifying with others”, underlining the “need for a we” (Timmer 359). In the context of a novel on the Holocaust, communicative bonding and a sense of sameness is indispensable when wanting to convey a message of hope and possibility. It is precisely this bond that Max and Liesel seem to establish and symbolize. In addition, as Huber has mentioned, connections within literature are of great value because “in the encounter with the fictive we can briefly step outside of ourselves and perceive our own irreducibility to what we know about ourselves” (67). Thus, Zusak’s novel can challenge the reader’s presumptions and prejudices.

Max internal processes are narrated at times, and offer a glimpse in the thoughts of a surviving Jew. Max is saved by an old friend of his, but he is forced to leave the rest of his family behind. He is relieved to be alive, but simultaneously hates himself for feeling any relief, being tortured by a feeling of guilt for being able to hide. “This was no time for hope. Certainly, he could almost touch it. He could feel it (…). There was also the scratchy feeling of sin. How could he do this? (…) How could he be so selfish?” (Zusak 176). Max is torn between his desire to be alive and his guilt for actually being alive. Through Max, the reader is also confronted with the absurdity of the situation: “Hang on a second. He was German. Or more to the point, he had been” (Zusak 166). Being Jewish was “a ruinous piece of the dumbest luck around” (Zusak 224). It is this small piece of his identity that forces him to hide, and causes him to leave Himmel Street eventually.

Zusak does not limit his mentioning of Jews to this one character. Liesel is confronted with other Jews during the marches through Molching. These descriptions are a lot harder to read: “their eyes were enormous in their starving skulls (…) the suffering faces of depleted men and women” (Zusak 399). They embody hopelessness, a deep sadness and horror. “She understood that she was utterly worthless to these people. They could not be saved” (Zusak 400). However, this strongly
nihilistic view is countered in an – almost naïve – way, by the actions of Hans, Rudy and Liesel. The three of them act against the Nazi regime during one of the marches. Hans tries to feed a Jew, creating a “small, futile miracle” (Zusak 401), and Rudy repeats his attempt by spreading pieces of bread on the road. Liesel, lastly, accompanies Max when she recognizes him during one of the marches (Zusak 514). Their deeds are almost ridiculous in their insignificance, but the actions are valuable moments within the novel. They are small sparks of hope in an utterly dark period. Following the post-postmodernist need for a renewed sense of hope and human interrelations, Zusak lets his characters act upon moral principles. Significantly, this first encounter between Max and Liesel after he left Himmel Street embodies the same sentiment of hope, not only in Liesel’s actions but in Max’s as well. “It was not so much a recognition of facial features that gave Max Vandenburg away. It was how the face was acting – also studying the crowd” (Zusak 513). Despite the situation, Max Vandenburg dares to hope.

5.5. The Power of Language

One of the most notable characteristics of postmodernism is its focus on language and fictionality. What is written is not seen as a faithful rendition of reality, but as one of multiple possible representations. However, in post-postmodernism the focus has shifted from self-conscious wordplay to an emphasis on representing the world we know, without losing the idea that we know the world through language (Huber 26). In The Book Thief, Zusak uses stories and language as a tool to emphasize the novel’s fictitious character and the relativity of knowledge on the world. More importantly however, he shows how language becomes valuable in inter-human relationships and in the search of ‘making sense’ and creating meaningful connections.

The story is packed with metafictional remarks and references to stories, narratives and language. First of all, the words within the novel are structured in a very specific way, leaving blank spaces, singling out certain sentences, attributing an almost poetic feel to the novel’s layout. In addition, the novel is structured by books. Each part is connected to a book that plays a significant role for the book thief at that specific moment, and within the novel, two other stories are embedded: The Standover Man and The Word Shaker. Moreover, Max’s arrival on Himmel street is described as a story: “it would carry a suitcase, a book, and two questions. A story. Story after story. Story
within story” (Zusak 76). Zusak plays with the idea of our lives being constructed by and known through narratives, as well as with the embedding of stories within stories.

In his description of language, words acquire human-like properties. They become visible to the reader: “the painted words were scattered about, perched on their shoulders, resting on their heads and hanging from their arms” (Zusak 210). Words are referred to as agents, as powerful tools: “she was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her” (Zusak 503, emphasis added). The words seem to possess a certain power, which can be connected to the idea of post-postmodernism in which language becomes a tool for communication, “constructing and exchanging the meaningful relations through which humans are able to manage the world around them” (Krijnen 174-175). Language becomes present on a physical level as well: Words literally stain Hans’s chest: “his sweat had drawn the ink onto his skin (…). The news was also stapled to his chest” (Zusak 79). Similarly, when Liesel steals a book, it physically affects her: “beneath her shirt, a book was eating her up” (Zusak 128). Words are not only used to build the novel, but become a separate character, influencing the plot of the novel.

This insistence on words, and on the power of language, can be connected to a concern of post-postmodernism with a restoration of values such as faith, hope and community. Huber mentioned that this turn in literary production “reconstructs fiction as precarious communication and focuses on the ways in which we draw on fictions to make sense of ourselves, our past, our present, and our future” (221). Along the same line, Krijnen has emphasized that “literature is a medium that is able to forge meaningful connections between people” (208). In Zusak’s novel, language and literature become tools to rebel against the Nazi regime, and even more important, to establish connections between people. Words are one of the most powerful tools during the Nazi regime, and Liesel is aware of the harmful power that they can have: “The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn’t be any of this. Without words, the Fuhrer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or worldly tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words?” (Zusak 525). However, those same words are what give Liesel the power to surpass the Nazi ideology in her friendship with Max. She learns how to read from her father, establishing a close friendship with him through their nightly reading sessions. Slowly, the stealing of books becomes some sort of rebellious act that helps Liesel cope with the reality surrounding her.
Literature achieves an even more powerful role when she starts reading out loud, using words to connect to other people. When Max is sick, Liesel reads to him: “it became a mission. She gave *The Dream Carrier* to Max as if the words alone could nourish him” (Zusak 337). She does so as well to Frau Holtzapfel, and when the inhabitants of Himmel Street are all sheltering in the basement because of an air raid, Liesel’s voice and her words are capable of calming the people, providing a sense of security and hope. “By page three, everyone was silent but Liesel. (...) A voice played the notes inside her. (...) The youngest kids were soothed by her voice, and everyone else saw visions of the whistler running from the crime scene. (...) The book thief only saw the mechanics of the words – their bodies stranded on the paper, beaten down for her to walk on” (Zusak 389). Liesel is aware of the fact that words can become powerful tools, and more importantly, she is aware of the fact that literature “saves and salvages” (Krijnen 208). “Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now, (...) she felt an innate sense of power. (...) She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. How fitting that she was discovering the power of words” (Zusak 154).

When Max imagines himself fighting the Führer in the basement, an example of the use of words by the Nazi ideology is shown:

>You see that what we face is something far more sinister and powerful than we ever imagined (...). He is plotting his way into your neighbourhood, (...) he’s infesting you with his family (...). Will you simply stand there and let him do this? Will you stand by as your leaders did in the past, when they gave your land to everybody else, when they sold your country for the price of a few signatures? Will you stand out there, powerless? Or (...) will you climb up into this ring with me? (...) In the basement of 33 Himmel Street, Max Vandenburg could feel the fists of an entire nation. (Zusak 264 -265)

The language use is capable of convincing an entire nation, but is nevertheless countered by people like Liesel. Post-postmodernist authors choose to restore the “faith in the power of literature” (Krijnen 182). That is exactly what is symbolized by the story that Max writes for Liesel. By writing *The Word Shaker*, he imagines a fable about the power of words, which comprises the narrative of the novel itself in a more condensed way. The story is reinvented within the story. The Führer is depicted as a man who hypnotizes people with his “finest, ugliest words, hand-picked from his forests” (Zusak 451). Max imagines Liesel as a word shaker, aware of the power of words, but choosing to use that power in a new way. “The tear was made of friendship – a single word – which dried and became a seed” (Zusak 451). This small act of kindness grows into a tree, and when the
Führer wants to destroy it, he is unable to do so, because the girl is guarding the tree with her life. The tree represents the power of friendship and of human connection which, however small and insignificant it may seem, turns out to be a greater power than one imagined.

One of the criticisms of this story within the novel is the fact that it is a simplification of human responsibility, “focusing on the de-emphasis of German responsibility, (…) the burden of guilt placed entirely on Hitler himself” (Adams 171). For young readers, this might be deceiving. However, the description of the characters in Molching offers a wider perspective, providing representations of bystanders and ordinary German people. Moreover, the story is an allegory, seen as “a fable or a fairytale” (Zusak 450). Thus, it “self-consciously acknowledges its distance from such reality” (Adams 172). It does not insist on historical representation, but on the moral and ethical values of narratives.

Ultimately, what Zusak’s novel does is not only sustain the idea of the power of literature to communicate within the novel, but he also communicates to the reader a need for ‘trying to make sense’, and he wants to offer his readers valuable lessons when it comes to humanity. As Toth has said on post-postmodernism, authors share “a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, to re-energize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people” (112).

5.6. Conclusion

_The Book Thief_ is a novel embedded within a historical framework, but Zusak strongly emphasizes the fictionality of his narrative, considering it as “a human-made structure” (Hutcheon, _Politics_ 62). He combines fact and fiction in a post-postmodernist way, not deconstructing history to the bone, but using language as a tool, showing the possibilities of language to forge meaningful connections and moral signification. The story is narrated by Death, a narrator that is explicitly present. He underlines the metafictionality of the novel, insisting on his own presence and involvement (through the use of his own imagination). He has no interest in creating suspense, but nevertheless creates an elaborate narrative, in which he focuses primarily on the interaction between humans. Revealing the ending is moreover ambiguous when considering that the novel is read by a children or young adults: it might prepare the reader (protecting him/her), or it might confront the reader with the inevitability of death during the Second World War. Zusak rejects the happy ending, common in children’s
literature. In addition, Death is very human, reassuring but also unsettling, reminding us of the capability of death in all of us. Death can be considered a post-postmodernist narrator, because his motivation for narrating is to show what human beings are capable of – in a positive way. Nevertheless, he does not steer away from showing both the good and the bad, underlining the fragility and the ambiguity of the boundaries between good and evil.

Zusak focuses on German characters, offering a different perspective on the Holocaust. The protagonist is a German child, which offers more possibilities of identification for the younger readers. Moreover, she is innocent enough to offer a fresh perspective on the events in Molching, embodying a sense of selflessness and goodness that counters Nazi ideology. Most inhabitants are bystanders, and Zusak explores issues of freedom of choice and the (im)possibility to resist during the Nazi reign. He focuses on the dilemma between personal freedom and morality in times of overpowering politics. The only Jewish character that is developed in the novel is Max. Zusak draws connections between Max and Liesel, engaging with the post-postmodernist need for a connection between humans. Max’s inner thoughts reflect the fractured identity of (post-)postmodernist characters, as he is being torn between a sense of relief and a sense of guilt for being alive. Both Liesel and Max become part of a ‘family’, which is a constructed bond, based on a ‘narrative’, underlining once more the importance of narratives in connecting to one another. Some characters try to rebel against the Nazi regime through – ridiculous – small acts, which symbolize sparks of hope in dark times.

Lastly, Zusak engages with language to show the fictitious character of the novel. In addition, language acquires a role of its own, becoming a character in the novel with a physical impact. Language becomes a powerful tool in establishing inter-human connections and in ‘making sense’ of the world. Moreover, the novel is structured through narratives on different levels, and stories are created within the main story. Zusak wants to restore values such as hope, faith and community, using the main weapon of Nazi ideology – words – in a way that counters the destructiveness. Words become a tool to connect to the other – Liesel & Max connect – and to people within the community, and narratives embody the power of friendship and empathy.
6. Conclusion

Boyne and Zusak have both written a novel for a non-adult reading audience that incorporates postmodernist and post-postmodernist characteristics, in order to diverge from the conventional choices in children’s literature on the Holocaust. They productively use children’s literature’s freedom to experiment and create narratives that explore less obvious perspectives. Boyne and Zusak rely on postmodernism in their deconstruction of the direct relationship between language, reality and history. In doing so, they highlight “the ability of the fictive to communicate and share dreams, to create and maintain illusions and to envision our own as well as alternative worlds” (Huber 158-159).

Boyne uses the format of the fable and a conscious interplay between language and silence to distance his story from the historical framework in which it is set. The result is a narrative that is not very plausible or historically accurate, but that is not the main point of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas. Boyne’s ‘fable’ moves beyond the issues concerning the mimetic representation of reality, and instead focuses on more humane issues such as meaningful connections, morality and ethical questions. In doing so, Boyne engages with post-postmodernism’s return to humanism combined with postmodernist relativism. His novel is not supposed to be read as a historical account of the Holocaust, but as a fictional narrative that engages with the memory of the Holocaust. Being written for younger readers, he seems to want to spark an interest in his readers for the Holocaust and its history. Moreover, the novel critically questions Nazi ideology, and thus adopts “an ethical position that fosters resistance to fascist philosophy” (Kokkola 11).

Zusak discards the relationship between language and reality by introducing a supernatural, slightly unreliable narrator. Death highlight the metafictional character of the narrative, while Zusak’s fictitious story is embedded within a larger historical framework. He uses the Second World War in Germany as a framework for his narrative. However, the setting does not function as a plain background. Zusak’s narrative engages with the historical timeframe in which it is set, as he introduces a Jew, and touches upon the implications of Nazism on ordinary German citizens. The narrator explains his – and Zusak’s own – objectives for narrating the story of Liesel, which is to show what humans are capable of. This way, Zusak also combines his postmodernist blending of fact and fiction with a rediscovering of humanist values.
Both authors introduce a German child protagonist, who interacts mostly with other German characters. In doing so, Boyne and Zusak evoke a different perspective than that of the commonly used Jewish protagonist. The reader is confronted with the side of the perpetrator, which offers a far more nuanced and complex image. Their protagonists are useful in children’s and young adult literature because they ease the process of identification, which stimulates the reader’s critical engagement, and which supports the main aim of most literature written on the Holocaust, which is remembering. The other German characters are no black-white representations of the stereotypical perpetrator, but embody a range of different stances towards Nazism, from actively supporting, participating or complying, to passively or actively resisting. In doing so, both authors interconnect postmodernism’s deconstruction and challenging of stable identities with post-postmodernism’s concern with ethics and morality. The hazardous balance between personal beliefs, politics, familial and non-familial love, and freedom of choice are explored by Boyne in a very subtle way, focusing mostly on Bruno’s father and the tension between his role as a soldier and as a father. Zusak focuses on the ordinary German citizen and the way in which people (don’t) try to resist while protecting the ones they love.

Both Boyne and Zusak play with language and narrative. Boyne’s repetitive language use resonates with the musicality often found in children’s literature. The omission of explicit references can be tied to the fact that Boyne wants to underline the fictionality of his narrative, distancing the story from the specific historical background. On the other hand, the omission of references ties in with post-postmodernism’s return to ethics and morality. By omitting references, the narrative exceeds the specific setting, and can be seen as conveying a more general message. In addition, children reading this novel might not have the adequate knowledge to fill in all the gaps, but will nevertheless – because of the connotations of the altered references – be encouraged to join Bruno on his journey and explore the moral issues he encounters. Moreover, Boyne uses the narrative format of the fable, but parodies it. The formal characteristics of the fable are altered in Boyne’s narrative – there are no animals –, and while there is a moral lesson to some extent, Boyne’s ending convolutes this. He simultaneously suggests the possibility of morality and of meaningful connections, while at the same time problematizing the notion of a stable moral lesson. Nonetheless, the death of his characters preserves the moral of the story in a way, because Bruno as a teenager would have likely indoctrinated by Nazism.
Zusak engages with language and narrative to emphasize language as a powerful tool for communication, and the power of fiction “to forge interpersonal and moral connections” (Krijnen 206). He plays with the presence of narratives within the main story, underlining the fictionality of his novel and the fact that his life itself is constructed through narratives. In addition, *The Book Thief* underlines the importance of language in shaping one’s worldview, and the power of language in connecting people. This is contrasted to the way in which language was used as a propaganda tool during the Nazi regime. Zusak’s protagonist explores the importance and the power of words in establishing relationships, connecting its power also to issues of morality.

Both authors essentially engage with post-postmodernism to play with the line between reality and fiction, using a fictional narrative to engage with the memory of the Holocaust. “Through an imaginative investment in fiction, the forces of oblivion can be countered, while the distance between themselves and this history can nonetheless be respected” (Krijnen 228). In the twentieth-first century, a distance from the Holocaust as such is inevitable. Nonetheless, that does not imply that literary production becomes unnecessary or impossible. The scale and the impact of the Holocaust has largely shaped the twentieth century, and its memory has not been dismissed, on the contrary. Authors are exploring different ways of engaging with the memory of the Holocaust, taking into account the implications of spatial and temporal distance in a world marked by uncertainties and relativism. Both Boyne’s and Zusak’s novel can be considered as “the linchpin to highly complex and mediated explorations of history, identity and the possibilities of literary art itself in a period of destabilizing uncertainties” (Krijnen 2). While their representations of history are not without ambiguity, their narratives transmit valuable concepts, turning to a post-postmodernist humanism and a revaluation of meaning, making sense, and communicating and connecting.
7. Works Cited


