

# A Comparative Analysis of the Narration of the Anti-War Film “A Persian Lesson” and “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas”

Yuyan Tu

School of Humanities and Law, Nanchang Hangkong University, Nanchang, China

Email: 997113671@qq.com

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## Abstract

In recent years, many Western anti-war films are adapted from literary works and real historical events. Most of them continue the tradition of reflecting the war and analyzing human nature, and reproduce the social life environment during the Second World War with different events. This article will analyze the two anti-war films, “A Persian Lesson” and “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas”, to compare and analyze their differences in narrative perspectives, hostility in identity and position, the change of relationship, details in lens language and the metaphor of props. And this paper will show the plight of people’s existence and the good, evil, beauty and ugliness of human nature in the difficult social background, so as to provide a reference for future anti-war films.

## Keywords

Film Narrative, Anti-War Film, Human Nature, “A Persian Lesson”, “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas”

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## 1. Introduction

“The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” (2008) and “A Persian Lesson” (2021) were both adapted from literary works set during World War II. The difference is the former through the eyes of eight-year-old children’s, Bruno witnessed the crimes that German nazis destroyed the Jews. Because of the wire netting with spikes, Bruno and Shmuel, two children cannot touch each other. Until wearing striped pajamas to disguise prisoner, they overstep barbed wire and are excited to adventure new world. And they died for their ignorance and fearlessness. “A Persian Lesson” is adapted from the novel “the invention of language” written by

Wolfgang Kohlhaase, the prototype of story is a true historical event, which makes the film more authentic. From adult's angle, it tells the story of the Jews Giles had won a Persian book by exchanging sandwiches. He survived the subsequent massacre because he pretended to be a Persian. However, in order to roll with his lie, he had to make up a large number of Persian words through the names of the prisoners, and then teach them to the German officer Koch to save his life in the concentration camp. Film "Pajamas", by contrast, the children's emotion is as a narrative thread, and the striped pajamas is as the narrative clue throughout the film. From the perspective of children, Nazi Germany bullied and destroyed Jewish captive. But film "Lesson" is to "Persian" as the narrative clue and contradictions in the conflict. The prisoner Giles, disguising Reza played a trust game with Captain Koch, to show human nature of good and evil, beauty and ugliness. The adaptation of real historical events endows the film with authenticity and makes it thought-provoking.

## **2. The Narration of the Film Conveys the Silent Indictment of the Aggressors**

The narrative theme is the key to constructing the whole film. The films "A Persian Lesson" and "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" both take the anti-war and the excavation of human nature in the hellish concentration camp as the narrative motif. Film "Pajamas" uses a linear narrative approach, starting with the friendship of two 8-year-olds with hostile political positions in the social background of the time. As the relationship between Bruno and Shmuel continues to advance, the film gradually reflects the current problems caused by the influence of the social environment. The cause of the incident was that Bruno's father's promotion needed to move to the countryside. He had to goodbye to his friends in Berlin, so Bruno was depressed with his father's promotion. The originally warm environment was surrounded by soldiers. The knowledge taught by the professor is the history of Nazism with one-sided and strong political color. After learning the content of the lecture, the mother and her husband had a dispute to the education of the child, believing that the childhood should be pure and happy, not full of Nazi brutality and brainwashing. From this, it can be seen that even under the pressure of the German Nazis, human nature is still not numb, and the education of children should be comprehensive and fair. Different from the themes of education and childhood reflected in "Pajamas", "Lesson" is based on the "Persian" class taught to the German Captain Koch, taught by the Persian Reza, disguised by Giles, as a clue, showing a sincere expression. Fight against the human nature of pretense, trust and suspicion. At the beginning, in the Persian dictionary of key props, it is written that "Do not steal" is one of our commandments, which is very ironic, and the officer Koch repeatedly emphasized in the film that what he hates most is deceit and stealing, which is anti-war motif and the different social issues reflected in "Pajamas". Both "Pajamas" and "Lesson" define the word patriotism very one-sidedly and narrowly. Joining the ar-

my and the patriarchal family's support are the definitions of patriotism, and the lack of emotion of female characters can be seen in Germany during World War II. Low, men hold the right to speak in society.

The viewpoint is the point of view from which the content of the story is told and observed in a narrative work (Feng, 1994). "A Persian Lesson" and "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" focus inward, and "Pajamas" shows the audience the world of children in the context of World War II from the "restrictive perspective" of the Bruno (He, 2005). Although Bruno, the protagonist in "Pajamas", is a descendant of a German Nazi, in the eyes of Bruno, there is no such cognition as "Jews are inferior and Germans are noble", people who can make friends and people who can't make friends. The film is to show the purity and innocence of the children's world from the limited perspective of children. There is no cruelty, scolding, and bullying in their world. This is a pure world that cannot be presented from the perspective of adults. Bruno paid with his life for Shmuel's promise to find his father. Although the narrative point of view of "Lesson" is also focused inward, different from "Pajamas", it is from the perspective of an adult, and the narrative is unfolded through disguising. The scenes echo from beginning to end. The director traps the protagonist in a closed and depressing environment such as a concentration camp, and shows the richness of the characters with the "restrictive perspective" of the Persian Reza, who is disguised by the protagonist. There is a comparison between Captain Koch's barbarity and suspicion and his diligence, gentleness, and eagerness to learn Persian. It is also an inward-focused perspective. Neither expresses the two films too much emotion in the scene of the war. The two films use the events that happened in the individual as the fuse, and show the war's impact on people and life in a small way.

The ending of the film is a metaphor for the future direction of the story. "A Persian Lesson" and "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" are anti-war films. The audience watches the films as a spectator of history. Knowing the ending of history, they can predict the fate of the characters and the ending of the film. The protagonist of "Pajamas" is an 8-year-old child who represents the future hope of Nazi Germany. The ending of his character is implied in many places in the film. Bruno has the characteristics of children's purity and curiosity. After his parents blocked him from entering the concentration camp, with the rise of his curiosity, and until the last time he meets his Jewish friend Shmuel, the bad weather and the loss of the sandwich all suggest Bruno's death. Is the child's innocence the fault of his life? The answer is already revealed in the narrative process of the film, the father's promotion is not a happy thing in the eyes of the family, and after moving to the new home, Bruno's mother washed her face in tears after learning about the evil deeds of the Nazis burning prisoners of war, and the death of his grandmother's. A series of tragic events, such as passing away, all hint at the ending of the characters and the defeat of the war. It is also a disguise. As an invaded in World War II, Giles, the protagonist of "Lesson", runs into the distance at the beginning of the film and echoes his escape from prison

camp at the end. After disguising, he changed the name of the prisoners of war in the concentration camp to “Persian” new words then taught to Captain Koch. These new words are bloody lives. Ironically, Koch wrote a poem used by “Persian”, which described the good life he yearns for (Liu, 2021). For example, “There are souls who yearn for peace everywhere”, reflecting the contradictions and struggles made by the characters in the heart of war. These words are piled up by the bloody flesh, forming a strong impact in the heart of the protagonist Giles, and the end of them are without saying.

The two films “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” and “A Persian Lessons” extend the sub-topics of innocence, friendship, trust, deception, and theft in the anti-war narrative matrix, and use an inward-focused point of view to show the eyes of different children and adults. The tragic and happy ending of the film reveals the result of the war, silently accusing the cruelty of the war.

### **3. The Relationship between Narrative Objects Shows the Good, Evil, Beauty and Ugliness of Human Nature**

The drivers of characters behaviour make the identity to change, implying the continuous advancement of the relationship of characters. Most of the two films “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” and “A Persian Lesson” focus on the narrative of the protagonists’ daily life. The three-dimensional and complex human nature is presented in the continuous advancement. The protagonist in “Pajamas” is Bruno, the son of a German Nazi officer. As an eight-year-old boy, he should have had a free and happy childhood, but the life became deformed because of the war. His father was promoted and moved to the countryside. In an unfamiliar environment, he lost his good friends. The lack of friendship and his adventurous nature drove him to explore the secrets of the “farm”. In the power grid of the Nazi concentration camp, accidentally, he found a boy of the same age, and the two little boys became friends. After Bruno kept inquiring about the real situation in the Shmuel concentration camp, he wondered at his father’s work. When facing Lieutenant Kotler’s loud scolding of the Jewish servant Pavel, he had a deep suspicion of Nazi officers. When he recalled what his father said “those people don’t even deserve to be called people”, Bruno was very hesitant in his heart, but for himself, there are only people of two types who can be a friend and cannot be a friend in his world. In the end, the innocence of children defeating the opposition of political stance, he doesn’t mind playing with the dirty Jews at all, he shares foods, toys with Shmuel. From then on, the two boys were equal, and Bruno put on striped pajamas and entered the concentration camp in the end. The reality is cruel. The status of the concentration camp is not as free as in his father’s movie. Facing the lie, Bruno has the idea of going home, but when Shmuel mentioned looking for his father, he still kept it. It can be seen that even during the war, the children’s innocent friendship still has no borders and political positions, and the brilliance of human nature is also revealed in the continuous advancement of the relationship between the characters (Zeng,

2011).

In “A Persian Lesson”, the protagonist Giles’ desire for survival forced him to pretend to be a Persian. The continuous advancement of events resulted in the multiple changes of Giles’ identity, and the relationship between the hostile characters was improved. The driving mechanism of the protagonist Giles’ disguise is survival, and the officer Koch wants to learn Persian. After the war, he goes to Tehran in Persia to run a restaurant. They take what they need, and the story unfolds. “Persian” is as the main clue throughout the film. The protagonist Giles entered the concentration camp as a prisoner, and then became a kitchen helper and officer Koch’s Persian teacher. As a registrar, the high pressure of the environment and the desire to survive forced Giles to continue to disguise. By coincidence, Giles began to make up the names of prisoners of war as “Persian” new words, risking his life and telling big lie. “Persian” is the biggest conflict point in the whole film. In a party of officers, Giles and officer Koch had a crisis of confidence. When Koch asked Giles about the Persian of “tree”, Giles made a mistake. After uttering the same word as “bread”, Giles was reassigned as a worker in a quarry after being beaten, and “nonsense” while he ill saved his life. One who survives a great disaster is destined to good fortune for ever after. After that, the officer Koch completely dispelled the suspicion of Giles.

Until Koch recited the poem in “Persian”, he asked Giles to call himself Klaus. The change implies that the relationship between officer Koch and Giles has gone further. They are on an equal footing. The relationship is no longer an officer and a prisoner when they first came to the concentration camp. Giles became Koch’s close friend. Koch also shows a gentle and amiable side at times. This kind of emotion is a beautiful existence in human nature that cannot be destroyed by war. The complexity of human nature is also reflected in the film. Giles give the injured mute brother a few canned meat to eat, and then the brother prevent Giles from revealing his identity. After the Persians were killed, Giles was glad that he could survive because the real Persian died, and at the same time felt guilty for the death of an innocent life. His lie was the fuse of this murder. It is ridiculous that be Jews may be a cause of mortality, the inner struggle of the characters reflects the complexity of human nature, and the banality and evil are vividly displayed in the context of war.

Aristotle put forward the “fault” of tragic characters. He believed that tragic characters are not very kind and very fair, and the reason why tragic characters fall into a tragic fate is not his wrongdoing, but for mistake (Luo, 2017). At the same time, Aristotle believed that tragic characters are generally famous and have a happy life. Bruno in “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” and the officer Koch in “Persian Class” are undoubtedly tragic characters in the two films, and their family background and living conditions are also very consistent with the definition of Aristotle’s tragic characters.

Aristotle believed that only a tragic plot caused by the fault of a good man can truly trigger the sympathy of the audience. Bruno, the German boy in “Pajamas”, did not dare to admit that it was the snack he gave to the Jewish boy Shmuel be-

cause of the loud scolding of Lieutenant Kotler, and lied that Shmuel took it himself and caused to be beaten. Because Bruno's lie caused his mistake, he finally wanted to make up for his mistake by crossing the iron fence to the concentration camp to help his friend Shmuel find his father. In addition to the factors of Bruno's tragic ending and the social environment, his father should bear a great responsibility. Because the films of the concentration camp shown by his father were all whitewashed, the fate of the prisoners in the actual concentration camp was tragic. It was Bruno who saw the scene in the film that led him to dare to take risks, and finally entered the concentration camp and was treated as a tragic ending of the burning of prisoners. The same is true for the officer Koch in "Lesson". As an officer, he misunderstood the prisoner Giles. Starting from the change of name called, Koch began to a tragic ending step by step. Ironically, the trust that the officer Koch valued most eventually pushed him into the abyss of death, and it was precisely because of his fault that his tragic fate was indirectly caused.

The two films "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" and "A Persian Lesson" promote the development of the story through the three-dimensional shaping of the narrative objects and the transformation of the characters' identities. When the characters are in the choice between life and death, the good and evil of human nature is also gradually appearing.

#### **4. The Details Reflect the Symbolic Metaphor of the Lens**

Symbol is a science of expressing the meaning of things. Visual image symbols are the audience's first impression when watching a film. Image symbols in movies can be divided into three categories: human images, real images, and pure virtual images created by animation technology (Li, 2012). In the two films "The Boy in Striped Pajamas" and "A Persian Lesson", there are physical image sandwiches as the key turning point of the narrative. The physical image in the film is the key point of the important link, and it can also be the key to show the meaning of the film symbol. Sandwich as a real image in "Pajamas" is the hint of the final tragic fate of Bruno. On the way to see Shmuel for the last time, Bruno lost his sandwich. In addition, the force majeure, such as bad weather all suggest that the fate of Bruno's death. The sandwich in "Pajamas" plays an important role at the beginning of the film. Giles, the protagonist, exchanged half sandwich for a Persian dictionary, thereby disguising himself as a Persian, in order to escape the Nazi massacre. The difference between the sandwiches in the two films lies in their function. The sandwich in "Pajamas" pushes the protagonist to the end of death, while the physical image of the sandwich in "Lesson" saves the protagonist, but the same image symbol creates different endings. The second type of physical symbols is not limited to the shape of the physical objects. The meaning expressed by these symbols is not only the meaning of the objects themselves, but also have deeper meaning, and they play a pivotal role in movies. As the "striped pajamas", pajamas in children's cognition are comfortable and

free clothes at home, but in contrast, “striped pajamas” in concentration camps are work clothes that assimilate prisoners of war’s ideas and hard-working. Numbering the “striped pajamas” to enslave people shows the brutality and ruthlessness of the German Nazis. “Striped pajamas” is the clue of the whole film and a key point to promote the development of the story. “Pajamas” is not only represented the hard life of prisoners at war, but also help the final protagonist’s tragic ending. In “Lesson”, the language “Persian” also plays a vital role as a physical symbol. “Persian” is the starting point of the story, and the film even named after it. The meaning of this language not only represents the protagonist’s life. It also carries the bloody lives of 2840 prisoners of war.

The character image is one of the visual image symbols. In the film, the character image symbol is a positive presentation of the character and detailed description, such as the use of the character’s body language to express the director’s intention. For example, in “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas”, Bruno often opened his arms while running to imitate a fighter jet flying through the slipway in the sky, and at the same time made a roar of a simulated fighter jet. The detailed shots of the child’s running movements appeared many times, which pointed out the social background of the event is during World War II, which also implies the subtle influence of war to children.

All in all, as a comprehensive art, any kind of image symbol in the film is meaningful. As Hegel said, “existence is reasonable”, film and television creators can assign new meanings to anything and becoming symbols, giving them different meanings.

## 5. Conclusion

Anti-war is the theme of films “A Persian Lesson” and “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas”. In the narration, through the extension of motifs and the difference of viewpoints, they show the fate of characters from different positions. They show the brilliance of human nature through the depiction of the relationship between characters, endowing different image signals with the color of war and human nature. It reveals the subtle emotional changes of people at war, and under high-pressure environment, the good, evil, beauty and ugliness of human nature in audio-visual language and narration. The pain of war will pass away, may peace remain forever. Through the analysis of the narration contrast in the above two films, it will provide some favorable reference for the films of related themes in the future.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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