

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

Thinking philosophically and thinking about literary works are both activities that require high levels of sensitivity to the use of language. But are they compatible? Would deliberate philosophical thinking add anything to students' appreciation of literature or would it be a distraction in English lessons? The experience of many English teachers who have given over some time in their lessons to dialogue about philosophical questions is that it can complement the study of literary fiction. One example of this is in the application and exploration of concepts. Fiction writers employ concepts in their work; philosophers seek to explore, explicitly, the meanings of concepts, their relative importance and the consequences of their application.

We can illustrate this point by using a novel that is popular with key stage three students. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne (2010) describes the experiences of the nine-year-old son of a concentration-camp commandant. He is unaware of what is really happening to the prisoners and asks his father who 'those people' are. The story continues: "'Ah, those people,' said Father, nodding his head and smiling slightly. 'Those people ... well, they're not people at all, Bruno.'" (Chapter 5, p.53). Later on, in presenting Bruno's thoughts about the prisoners, his family and the camp guards, the writer uses the word 'people' no less than eight times in the space of a couple of paragraphs.

Bruno does not differentiate between the various groups as either people or non-people as his father does, and wonders innocently why none of them have been 'invited back to the house'. (Chapter 9, p.100) Five pages later he sees an approaching shape on the prison side of the fence and notices that '... the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person'. (Chapter 10, p.105) The writer's deliberate use of the terms 'person' and 'people' seems central to the meaning and moral significance of the book. In an encounter with the family's maid, Bruno 'looked across the room at Maria and realised for the first time that he had never fully considered her to be a person with a life and a history all of her own. After all, she had never done anything (as far as he knew) other than be his family's maid.' (Chapter 6, p.60).

In English lessons students might normally be asked to explain the father's attitude towards the people in pyjamas with supporting quotes from the text. They might be asked to identify the main themes of any of the chapters. They might be asked to write an imaginative response to the text such as pretending they are Bruno and writing a letter home to a friend. They might be asked for their speculations on the intentions of the author, and the author's uses language. However, there is a philosophical background to the theme of 'person' that could also be explored. The term generally signifies a human being with capacities to be an agent, to make life-plans, hold values and make choices with values and standards in mind. So students might choose to discuss questions like:

- Must you be free to be a person?
- If someone is not free are they no longer a person?
- What might be the consequences of not seeing someone as a person? Any examples?
- What might be the consequences of seeing everyone as a person? Any examples?
- What comes first: not seeing someone as a person and treating them badly or treating them badly and not seeing them as a person?
- Should we think of persons having certain 'rights' just because they are persons?
- What is the history of the term 'rights' and how is it applied in arguments about morality and politics?

In the process of discussing such questions, students will not only gain a deeper understanding of 'the intentions of the writer' in using the term 'person' in the way he does, they will also relate literature to life, past to present and future. And they will be doing what experienced readers of novels often do: appreciating a book as an imaginative work made out of language but also as a means of meditating on the human condition with reference to concepts and beliefs that are embedded in cultures. Philosophical dialogue helps students to explore those concepts and beliefs by making them visible and open to question.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: Activity One

Notes to students

In chapter five (p.53), Bruno asks his father who the people on the other side of the fence are. The story continues: “Ah, those people,” said Father, nodding his head and smiling slightly. “Those people ... well, they’re not people at all, Bruno.”

In chapter 10 (p.105) Bruno sees an approaching shape on the prison side of the fence and notices that ‘ ... the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person’.

In chapter 6 (p.60) Bruno ‘looked across the room at Maria and realised for the first time that he had never fully considered her to be a person with a life and a history all of her own. After all, she had never done anything (as far as he knew) other than be his family’s maid.’

Now read page 100 and underline the word ‘people’ when it arises.

After reading: Spend ten minutes ‘freewriting’ in response to what you have read.

Notes to teachers

Freewriting means writing continuously for a fixed period of time. After students have completed their freewriting, ask them to underline or otherwise highlight any thoughts they have had that they think could be worth pursuing and invite them to share those with their peers.

Then take their work away and read it. Don’t mark it but, instead, write a letter back to the whole class highlighting some of their thoughts and respond with some ideas and questions of your own using phrase like ‘I wonder ...’ You are not telling them what to think here, you are showing your active interest in their ideas. When you have read your letter, ask them to create questions they think would be interesting to discuss, negotiate the choice of a starting question with them and embark on a dialogue. Have one or more students summarise the main points of the dialogue orally or in writing.

If questions about *concepts with a history* such as ‘rights’ comes up, encourage the students to research and reflect on the concept and do the same yourself. Keep the dialogue going and record responses. That is the essence of philosophical learning: teachers and pupils enquiring together over time into questions and concepts that matter and that tend to return in life and literature.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: Activity Two

Notes to teachers

Read out a short list of questions one by one. Ask students to raise thumbs if they would answer 'yes', lower thumbs if they would answer 'no' and do nothing if they cannot decide. Choose a selection of pupils and ask them to give reasons for their choices. Allow others to question them and to agree and to disagree using reasons of their own. The questions could be:

Must you be free to be a person?

If someone is not free are they no longer a person?

Should we think of persons having certain 'rights' just because they are persons?

Should everyone should have the same rights?

Does everyone have the same rights?

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: Activity Three

Notes to students

Read the following quotes and think about the book as a whole.

"Of course," said Gretel, who always spoke of Father as if he could never do anything wrong and never got angry and always came in to kiss her goodnight before she went to sleep which, if Bruno was to be really fair and not just sad about moving houses, he would have admitted Father did for him too.' (p.25)

Maria tells Bruno that her grandmother had worked for his father's mother and that:

" ... when times were hard ... your father offered me a job, the first I ever had. A few months later, my mother became very sick and she needed a lot of hospital care and your father arranged it all even though he was not obliged to. He paid it for it out of his own pocket because she had been a friend to his mother. And he took me into his household for the same reason. And when she died he paid all the expenses for her funeral too. So don't you ever call your father stupid Bruno. Not around me. I won't allow it ... he has a lot kindness in his soul, truly he does." (pp.61-62)

'And 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 Kohler getting so angry with Pavel, and if that was the kind of thing that went on in Out-With then he'd better not disagree with anyone any more about anything; in fact, he would do well to keep his mouth shut and cause no chaos at all. Some people might not like it.' (p.149)

Notes to teachers

Introduce students to the idea of an 'opinion line'. One end of the imaginary line represents 'Strongly Agree', the other 'Strongly Disagree'. Ask the students to arrange themselves on the line in response to the statements that follow. It is often best to use small numbers of pupils in turn so they can be questioned by the rest of the group. Ask them to give reasons for their positions, respond to questions and then confirm or change their position with good reasons.

The Commandant was a good father but a bad person

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The Commandant was a good person because Maria said it was true that he had
'kindness in this soul'

You are a good person if you care for people who are close to you.

The Commandant deserved to lose his own son. It was just.

Good and bad are very general terms expressing moral approval or disapproval. The idea is to get pupils to support their initial judgment of the father with some reasons incorporating specific examples of acts that could be judged as 'good' or 'bad' and also to weigh those examples against each other and to judge some to be more significant and serious than others. You might ask them whether the terms 'true' or 'fact' are appropriate to any of the statements they have discussed. The aim here would be to explore ways that some moral judgements can be justified and held to be truer than others.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: Activity Four

Notes to students

Read the following extracts from chapter five.

"I remember when I was a child," said Father, "there were certain things that I didn't want to do, but when my father said that it would be better for everyone if I did them, I just put my best foot forward and got on with them." ... "I was just a child and didn't know what was for the best. Sometimes, for example, I didn't want to stay at home and finish my schoolwork; I wanted to be out on the streets, playing with my friends just like you do, and I look back now and see how foolish I was."

“So you know how I feel,” said Bruno hopefully.

“Yes, but I also knew that my father, your grandfather, knew what was best for me and that I was always happiest when I just accepted that. Do you think that I would have made such a success of my life if I hadn’t learned when to argue and when to keep my mouth shut and follow orders? Well, Bruno? Do you?” (pp.48-49)

What opinion is the father expressing here and how many reasons does he give? Can you sum up the opinion and reasons in single short sentences? Are there different kinds of reasons given?

In groups, imagine situations of adults speaking to children where such an argument would seem reasonable to you. Is the above one of those situations? Then think of situations where such an argument would be unreasonable.

Then imagine situations of adults speaking or writing to other adults where similar arguments seem reasonable and unreasonable.

Notes to teachers

Students would need to know that ‘argument’ here means an opinion supported by reasons and that you are looking for similarity of the form of the argument. This is an ‘argument from authority’ used to persuade one person to follow the command or advice another because:

- a. the other person is better qualified to give the command
- b. following the command will lead to good consequences (in the case above, happiness and success)
- c. while not following an order from a powerful person can get you into trouble.

Requesting that people follow orders and take advice from people who ‘know better’ is often very reasonable; sometimes it is not.

The activity for students described above requires that they think about those general principles that would help them discriminate between reasonable and unreasonable uses of arguments from authority rather than whether Bruno or anyone else could be expected resist.

At the same time, a further and valuable discussion could emerge about power, courage and practical wisdom. After all one of the most important questions in life

is: 'When should I refuse to follow where others lead and command?' This could be a question for ongoing dialogue through writing, discussion, reading and viewing.

References

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