

**ESCAPING TRAUMA  
THROUGH A  
DREAMWORLD:  
FANTASY AND THE  
EVASION OF PAIN IN  
JANE YOLEN'S *BRIAR  
ROSE* AND JOHN  
BOYNE'S *THE BOY IN  
THE STRIPED PYJAMAS***

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“[W]e are made up of stories. And even the ones that seem the most like lies can be our deepest hidden truths.”

Jane Yolen, *Briar Rose*.

*Abstract*

Fiction has always been part of human beings, accompanying them even in the most difficult situations of life. In fact, certain victims of acute trauma may tend to mask and evade the pain they suffer by creating their own fictional world as a means of escaping from reality. This has become a recurrent theme in contemporary literature, as in the cases of Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, whose characters would respectively block a traumatic memory by replacing it with a fantasy

*Resumen*

La ficción siempre ha formado parte del ser humano, acompañándole en las situaciones más difíciles de la vida. De hecho, algunas víctimas de grave trauma psicológico pueden enmascarar y evadir el dolor que sufren creando su propio mundo de ficción para escapar de la realidad. Esto se ha convertido en un tema recurrente en la literatura contemporánea, como en *Briar Rose*, de Jane Yolen y *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* de John Boyne, cuyos protagonistas, respectivamente, bloquearán una memoria traumática sustituyéndola por una fantasía o se negarán obstinadamente a

or stubbornly refuse to see the painful reality in front of their eyes choosing over it a less harsh fictional alternative. Through the analysis of these two books, this article will compare and contrast these two different ways to deny a traumatic reality and will highlight the necessity to recover those repressed memories not only to work through past traumas, but to give voice and pay homage to those overcome by them.

*Key Words:* Trauma, Holocaust fiction, Work through, Repression, Memory, Jane Yolen, John Boyne.

ver la dolorosa realidad, optando por otra imaginaria y menos dura. A través del análisis de estos dos libros, el presente artículo comparará y contrastará estas dos formas diferentes de negar una realidad traumática y enfatizará la necesidad de recuperar la memoria reprimida, no sólo para superar traumas del pasado, sino para dar voz y homenajear a aquellos que fueron devastados por ellos.

*Palabras clave:* Trauma, Ficción sobre el Holocausto, Proceso de superación del trauma, Represión, Memoria, Jane Yolen, John Boyne.

Stories, as the above quotation suggests, constitute a fundamental part of human beings, their evolution and their conception of the self. It is for this reason that men have always made use of them in all aspects of their lives, either positive or negative. Therefore, fiction –even lies– and fairy tales have always accompanied men and helped them hide (from) the most unpleasant parts of their surrounding environment or even themselves. Mythologies, for instance, were born in antiquity in order to fill in the void of a given cultural emptiness; be it the lack of certainty about the origin of man or the order of the universe. Just as Jack Zipes points out in his book *Spells of Enchantment*,

both the oral and the literary forms of the fairy tale are grounded in history: they emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors. (1991:xi)

Similarly, victims of acute trauma often tend to mask the underlying effects of their terrorizing experiences in order to escape the suffering that those entail. Or, as Jeffrey Alexander argues, “[w]hen bad things happen to good people, [...] they can become so frightened that they can actually repress the experience of trauma itself” (2004:5). Such repression can occur in two different ways; it can be automatically exerted by the psyche itself as a mechanism of defence, as Freud maintains, or it can be a conscious and wilful process. This way, trauma can be voluntarily blocked by the individual in question as an attempt to either avoid remembering a series of painful past recollections or to evade himself from a traumatic present. In some cases, the trauma victim may even choose to

construct an alternative –fictional– world that would replace the actual –real– experience rather than facing the consequences of the trauma, which is what, as the following article proposes, both Gemma and Bruno achieve in, respectively, Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* and John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Before being applied to mental illnesses, the word trauma, deriving from the Greek word *traumatizo*, was firstly used to refer to a “bodily injury caused by an external agent” (Luckhurst 2008:1). Centuries later, Freud extended this definition to cover also those wounds inflicted upon an individual’s mind, or, to quote his own words, “[s]uch external excitations as are strong enough to break against the barrier against stimuli” that protects the mind (Freud 1922:34). The pleasure principle, Freud continues, is in charge of keeping the amount of those excitations to a minimum (1922:81), and, although checked by the reality principle in normal circumstances, (1922:5) it can, at times, become dominant and completely block out pain. As a consequence, when those external excitations become too strong for the psyche to bear them without producing immense pain, a series of mechanisms will be immediately put in action in order to protect it, including that of repression. However, although blocking the painful event does momentarily soothe the mind, those forgotten memories are bound to reappear in a series of symptomatic manifestations that would haunt the victim and keep the trauma alive until it is properly worked through. Freud called these symptoms “the return of the repressed” (1939:164). As a consequence of this, it could be argued that trauma is not –or at least not exclusively– the blow inflicted to the mind, but also, and most importantly, the subsequent symptoms derived from it.

The majority of those –namely nightmares, repetitive compulsions, melancholia, sense of fragmentation, etc.– are a direct result of these blocking processes. As has already been said, repression cannot only be this automatic psychic defence, but also a wilful process carried out by the affected individual him/herself which, understandable as it may be, hinders nonetheless the necessary path to recovery. Victims may, therefore, either completely block the painful memories, choosing to turn a blind eye to their traumatic experiences, or mask them under a layer or fictional substitutive remembrances built around a fantasy. Reality, in many cases, can be far too painful to bear, and individuals may therefore prefer to invent parallel narratives in order to soften its dramatic impact. Of late, this particular characteristic of the workings of trauma has been used in an array of different written and filmic plots. Kurt Vonnegut, for example, would present Billy Pilgrim, the main character in *Slaughterhouse 5*, as a “peculiar” character that constructs his post-traumatic self around the delusional idea that he is able to travel back and forth in time as well as to the distant planet of Tralfamadore. Similarly, in Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*

(1997) Guido creates a whole story in order to protect his son from the ugly truth during their stay in a Nazi concentration camp.

Both instances are samples in which the individuals consciously –perhaps more clearly so in Guido’s case– build up those fantastic realities in order to block painful experiences, only, for Billy’s part those are *past* memories and in *Life is Beautiful*, the disguised truth is happening at the time of the blockage. In John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Bruno, its protagonist, also feels the necessity to escape from a current painful situation surrounding him. Just as Guido tries to protect his son’s innocence, Bruno would stubbornly deny the reality in front of him in order to prolong his stay in the land of childhood naiveté. When Bruno first spots the camp and its interns from his bedroom window, the view suddenly makes him feel “very cold and unsafe” (Boyne 2007:20), and yet, after some time and a discussion with his sister, what they first termed as a “nasty-looking place” (Boyne 2007:32) ends up being some kind of farm; a much more comforting mental image. This becomes for Bruno the *only* truth he wants to believe, and, although his sister grows out of this idea, he is completely convinced that what lies beyond the fence is some kind of resort full of happy families and children to play with, as he once tells Shmuel, his Jewish friend:

‘It’s so unfair,’ said Bruno. ‘I don’t see why I have to be stuck over here on this side of the fence where there’s no one to talk to and no one to play with and you get to have dozens of friends and are probably playing for hours every day. I’ll have to speak to Father about it.’ (Boyne 2007:111)

This delusion goes on for the rest of his stay at the camp, and we can find several examples of it. Names, for instance, are a clear indicator of this consistent denial of reality; the softening that goes on in Bruno’s mind. He persistently calls his new bearings “Out-With” instead of Auschwitz, despite seeing the correct name written down on a bench and the fact that his sister had repeatedly told him to pronounce it properly. This is exactly the same approach that Bruno takes towards Hitler’s name, changed for “The Fury” throughout the whole book. Bruno is fully convinced that Shmuel’s situation is exactly the same as his (or even better, since he has friends to play with) and that any drawbacks are just attributable to misunderstandings from his part:

‘The train was horrible,’ said Shmuel. ‘There were too many of us in the carriages for one thing. And there was no air to breathe. And it smelled awful.’

‘That’s because you all crowded onto one train,’ said Bruno, remembering the two trains he had seen at the station when he left Berlin. ‘When we came here, there was another one on the other side of the platform but no one seemed to see it. That was the one we got. You should have got on it too.’

'I don't think we would have been allowed,' said Shmuel, shaking his head. 'We weren't able to get out of our carriage.'

'The doors are at the end,' explained Bruno.

'There weren't any doors,' said Shmuel.

'Of course there were doors,' said Bruno with a sigh. 'They're at the end,' he repeated. 'Just past the buffet section.'

'There weren't any doors,' insisted Shmuel. 'If there had been, we would all have got off.'

Bruno mumbled something under his breath along the lines of 'Of course there were', but he didn't say it very loud so Shmuel didn't hear. (Boyne 2007:129-130)

In spite of Shmuel's firmness in several cases such as this, his repeating over and over again that it is not the same on his side of the fence, and Bruno's sister's perseverance in teaching him the proper names for both his house and the Führer, it is only when he crawls under the barbed wire that his fantasy finally collapses:

Bruno opened his eyes in wonder at the things he saw. In his imagination he had thought that all the huts were full of happy families, some of whom sat outside in rocking chairs in the evening and told stories about how things were so much better when they were children and they'd had respect for their elders, not like the children nowadays. He thought that all the boys and girls who lived here would be in different groups, playing tennis or football, skipping and drawing out squares for hopscotch on the ground.

He had thought that there would be a shop in the centre, and maybe a small café like the ones he had known in Berlin; he had wondered whether there would be a fruit and vegetable stall.

As it turned out, all the things that he thought might be there –weren't. (Boyne 2007:205-206)

And yet, the truth is so self-evident, that there are times when the reader cannot help but wonder if the innocence that Bruno so hard-headedly wants to maintain is real or feigned. The question is, therefore, if in Bruno's case repression is fully voluntary or not. To the present day reader, some of the clues in front of Bruno's eyes seem so evident that at times it is difficult to believe that Bruno truthfully does not know how to interpret them. Children's ingenuousness could very well be a factor here, but in truth, towards the end of the story, Bruno is nearly ten years old, an age at which innocence –especially under harsh circumstances– already starts fading. However, as the author himself claims, there is a feasible explanation to all this; Bruno had never known or even imagined that anything like the Holocaust could ever happen. It

was not a notion he had ever been forced to confront, and so the truth about the situation simply never crosses his mind:

the idea that Bruno, an innocent nine year old, would understand the events taking place around him implies the hindsight knowledge gained only by the passing of time and the study of history. [...] I stand by my believe that Bruno is an innocent child in a time and place that he does not understand; he has grown up with a father who has been in the Nazi party since he can remember --- why on earth would he question this when he has never known anything different? (www.teenreads.com)

When dealing with mental issues, and especially in the case of trauma, in which so many elements play an important role in the protection of the psyche, it is never easy to draw boundaries and to provide complete assertions. Just as Freud states, “[i]t is true that all repressed material is unconscious, but not true that everything belonging to the Ego is conscious.” (Freud 1939: 122) A person may willingly refuse to see what lies in front of him/her, but this voluntary action may be intermingled as well with unconscious mechanisms of defence. In the case of Bruno, it could be argued that all these are in fact combined and that the blocking of the truth is carried out by a mixture of ignorance, ingenuity and wilful negation. The last part is especially noticeable when we take into account his relationship with Shmuel, his Jewish alter-ego. Even though they are of the exact same age –being born on the same day– Shmuel is far less innocent than Bruno is and seems to realize the horror of his situation much better than Bruno does, who, in fairness, does not seem too keen to realize:

‘You don’t know what it’s like in here,’ said Shmuel eventually in a low voice, his words barely carrying across to Bruno.

‘You don’t have any sisters, do you?’ asked Bruno quickly, pretending he hadn’t heard that because then he wouldn’t have to answer. (Boyne 2007:140)

This is only one of the moments when Bruno clearly refuses to deal with something that could potentially shatter his barrier of innocence; an example in which we could talk about wilful repression, but not the only one. When, after being terrorized by Lieutenant Kotler he denies having met Shmuel and consequently brings the young officer’s terrible wrath upon his friend’s shoulders, he admits blocking that memory due to shame:

Bruno [...] wanted to pretend that the incident a few months earlier when he had denied his friendship with Shmuel had never taken place. It still preyed on his mind and made him feel bad about himself, although Shmuel, to his credit, seemed to have forgotten all about it. (Boyne 2007:178)

Insomuch as Bruno does consciously block certain memories that make him feel sad –such as the aforementioned, or the remembrance of his previous

life in Berlin— it could be concluded that not only his psyche, but also his conscious mind are going to great lengths to maintain his innocent purity and preserve Bruno from the trauma surrounding him. This process, despite the difference in age, is also evident in his mother, as Vera Farmiga —the actress portraying the part of the mother in the filmic version— suggests:

She is a bit oblivious to what unfolds around her. She chooses to be oblivious. Elsa's world structure is very small. She only concerns herself with what affects her family, the safety of her family, her and her position in society. [...] I think, on some levels, she must intuit it. She knows that people are being horribly mistreated, but I think she doesn't look. She doesn't want to see because seeing it would implicate her husband. (M. Herman 2008: min 8:46-9:55)

Therefore, both Bruno and his mother show signs that their blockages could be partially voluntary and conscious, although it could be argued that other factors contribute equally to their barring of trauma. However, the main difference between their cases and that of Gemma, Jane Yolen's protagonist, is that for her, we are not talking of a case of repression to impede the intrusion of a trauma that is occurring at the time of the blockage, but of the suppression of painful memories of the past. As has already been mentioned, this process can be accomplished by means of replacing those traumatic reminiscences with fictional memories or fantasies. Gemma, therefore, will repress the psychological trauma inflicted upon her as a result of her experience as a death camp survivor during World War II by identifying with the fictional character Briar Rose, the princess in an earlier version of *Sleeping Beauty*. Not only does she believe she *was* Briar Rose, an actual princess living in a castle, put to sleep by an evil witch and awakened by a prince, but also she keeps repeating the same fairy tale over and over until the time of her death to the point that her elder granddaughters believe she is demented. They are not far off mark, though, although they do not know it. Gemma, in fact, is *not* insane but clearly traumatized. Her case is that of an extensive repression under which she is—or she claims to be —completely unable to remember her past. When she is rescued by a group of partisans after being gassed and abandoned in an unmarked grave and they ask her about her story, her name, her origins, etc. she cannot answer any of those questions:

‘I do not know. I have no memories in my head but one.’

‘What one?’ Holz-Wadel asked.

‘A fairy tale.’

[...]

‘What fairy tale?’ Joseph asked.

She shrugged. 'I do not know its name. But in it I am a princess in a castle and a great mist comes over us. Only I am kissed awake. I know now that there is a castle and it is called 'the *schloss*.' But I do not know for sure if that is *my* castle. I only remember the fairy tale and it seems, somehow, that it is my story as well.' (Yolen 2002:211)

And yet, as in the case of Bruno, there are certain instances in which Gemma seems to remember what she has supposedly forgotten, which makes the reader suspect that what was once repressed is struggling to arise, though Gemma tries hard to keep it buried. According to Freud, it may be possible that "certain parts of the repressed material have escaped this [repression] process, have remained accessible to memory and occasionally reappear in consciousness, but even then they are isolated, a foreign body without any connection with the rest of the mind" (1939:121). Even though Gemma tells the story of Briar Rose to her granddaughters as a fairy tale –although, as she says once with absent expression, for her it is "[n]ot a silly story at all." (Yolen 2002:151, italics in the original)– she intermingles certain images that do not originally pertain to the tale, and that are indicative of how Gemma's traumatic images and memories– the real events– are still very much present and not at all forgotten. She, for instance, explains the meaning of "mist" by using, of all the possible synonyms, the word "exhaust" (Yolen 2002:43), which acquires greater significance when we discover later that she was nearly gassed to death inside a van at Dachau. Besides, after the evil witch casts the spell, instead of thorns, as in the original tale, Briar Rose's castle is surrounded by barbed wire, whose meaning she refuses to explain arguing that it is better that the girls shouldn't know (Yolen 2002:59) . And yet, the most indicative sign that the tale is nothing but a fictive construction around a traumatic real event is the way in which Gemma describes the evil witch as "*the one in black with big black boots and silver eagles on her hat. [...] that angel of death*" (Yolen 2002:19, italics in the original).

Nowadays, those bits and pieces of information that arise despite the speaker's contrary preferences are called "Freudian slips" and, in fact, it was Freud who realized how certain events –traumatic and non-traumatic alike– repressed in the unconscious are bound to eventually arise one way or another:

either the instinct has kept its strength, or it will regain it, or it is reawakened by a new situation. It renews its claim and [...] it gains at some weak point new access to a so-called substitutive satisfaction which now appears as a symptom without the acquiescence and also without the comprehension of the Ego. (Freud 1939:163-164)

Insomuch as repression is the direct cause of those traumatic revenants that re-surface as symptoms, recuperating the hidden memories and acknowledging them is vital for the individual to finally work through the



trauma. Those memories, though painful as they may be, are an undeniable part of the person that experienced them and therefore, in order for him/her to recover the sense of wholeness lost as a consequence of the inflicted trauma, should form part of their accepted selves. This way, even if the victim does not fully recover, he/she can at least begin to overcome the situation. As Caroline Garland defends:

for traumatized individuals to get better, the knowledge and the memory of the events they have suffered may need to become part of, and integrated into, the individual's conscious existence, through being worked through instead of being walled-up in some avoided area of mental activity. (Garland 2007:5)

However, this is not by any means what Gemma does and, consequently, she suffers from her unresolved trauma until the moment of her death. It manifests itself not only through the aforementioned Freudian slips but also through perhaps the most indicative symptom of a traumatic neurosis: compulsive repetition. She not only identifies herself with the fairy tale character of Sleeping Beauty, but she unrelentingly retells her story in almost an unconscious way, specially when she is about to die. Actually, this story –her story– is the last “rational” thought that she has before her demise: “The old woman struggled against the restraints, trying to sit up. [...] ‘*I was the princess!*’ she cried again. ‘In the castle. The prince kissed me.’ [...] ‘I am Briar Rose,’ Gemma was repeating. ‘I am Briar Rose.’” (Yolen 2002:16-17)

And yet, Gemma does not have any rational reason for her instant identification with the character in Briar Rose; it is all, as has already been explained, part of her fictionalised self created in order to escape from the shattering force of the trauma. She believes she was born a princess, while there is no proof whatsoever to back up that affirmation; she claims she lived in a castle, while the only castle she ever inhabited was the *schloss* where the concentration camp of Dachau was situated; she thinks she was awoken by a prince's kiss after being put to sleep by an evil witch, while what saved her after being gassed and left in a common grave was Josef performing mouth to mouth resuscitation on her (or what is also called “kiss of life”).

On the other hand, Bruno *does* have plenty of reasons to identify himself with Shmuel, and yet he does not. He either actively refuses to do so in an attempt to hinder the penetration of the trauma surrounding him, or his infantile innocence and behaviour prevent him from making that connection. As has already been said, the two boys share a number of characteristics; from the date of their birth (same date and year for both) to their physical appearance, or even, to a certain extent, their current personal situation. In fact, it could be said that they are almost doppelgangers, or, as Bruno declares once, “like twins” (Boyne 2007:110). John Boyne himself refers to these coincidences in the

following terms: “They are reflections of each other and as they sit, cross-legged in the dust, the fence that separates them acts as a kind of mirror image of the boy the other might have been.” (www.teenreads.com) The fence, therefore, can work as both a mirror and as a transparent glass. As a mirror, it would reflect the image and the world of the viewer back to him, without a glimpse of what lies beyond. This is what Bruno sees: a world behind the fence that must forcefully be a reflection of *his* world, while Shmuel is able to see the differences between the two sides and to tell them apart. And yet, at the same time, Shmuel realizes that the two boys *could* have been the same boy, as Boyne suggests. He is able to see the similarities between them much better than Bruno does:

If it wasn't for the fact that Bruno was nowhere near as skinny as the boys on his side of the fence, and not quite so pale either, it would have been difficult to tell them apart. It was almost (Shmuel thought) as if they were all exactly the same really. (Boyne 2007:203)

Indeed, both boys could be seen as the two faces of the same coin, and the identification that Shmuel makes is feasible enough. It is as if “they were all exactly the same really” and in fact, they suffer from the exact same fate. Once Bruno crosses the fence, the mirror no longer applies, and his world is left behind him. The differences that separated them remain at the other side of the fence, beyond the looking glass, in another world. Consequently, the connection is complete and the two boys merge in one. They were born the same day and—almost as if fate had touched them and predestined that they would meet—bond and die together. The identification serves another purpose here: just as Bruno and Shmuel finally come to see themselves in one another, the reader gets to see in them not only the fate of these two boys, but of thousand others that died similarly. In the words of John Boyne himself:

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS [sic] is *not* a novel about Auschwitz, it is about two boys on either side of a fence at a concentration camp during World War II. While it is clear that I am implying a specific camp, it was important to me to recognise that there were many more camps in operation at that time, and many millions of innocents who died in Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, etc. and each of these should be remembered too. (www.teenreads.com, italics in the original)

We should indeed remember every victim, every camp, every story, all the trauma and the pain that this genocide caused and causes still, and it is books like these that keep the memory alive. As has already been mentioned, recovering and maintaining an active memory of one's traumatic past is essential for the individual's recovery. According to LaCapra:

When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when the language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical

distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma in a fashion that may never bring full transcendence of acting out (or being haunted by revenants and relieving the past in its shattering intensity) but which may enable processes of judgement and at least limited liability and ethically responsible agency. These processes are crucial for laying ghosts to rest, distancing oneself from haunting revenants, renewing an interest in life, and being able to engage memory in more critically tested senses. (2001:90)

And yet, as LaCapra highlights here, this remembering should be done with a degree of “conscious control,” that is, with coherence and rationality in a way that differs itself from the mere flashbacks and fragmentary revenants proper of an un-worked through trauma. Pierre Janet, as Van der Kolk and Van der Hart point out, already distinguished from these two types of memory as “narrative memory” and “traumatic memory.” The latter, they say, “has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity” (1995:163), whereas narrative memory “consists of mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995:160) In other words, while traumatic memory can recur without any significance other than a compulsive recollection that haunts the victim of the unresolved trauma as one more of its psychological consequences, putting those memories in a coherent narrative may serve the purpose to making sense of the trauma.

Furthermore, if recovering the memory of the past is crucial in the case of individual traumas, it is tantamount when dealing with collective historical traumas such as the Holocaust. When a whole community suffers from the same painful experience, a series of ties and affective links are developed within its inhabitants that may result in a bonding of the collective affected by it. According to Erikson, this kind of shared experience touches each and every one of the members of the community setting them apart from the rest of groups and becoming “almost like a common culture, a source of kinship.” (1995:190) In those cases, the trauma becomes a marker of identity, or what has been called “foundational trauma.” Such is the instance of the Jewish community; where the shared trauma of the Holocaust is still very much alive in their collective consciousness and is a current object of study and debate highly useful in the pursuit of social agency. The memory of the genocide is nowadays present through an increasing number of memorials, museums, monuments, books and films or even the very camps where such tragedy took place. Such memorial spaces keep the memory of such atrocity alive as a means of giving testimony for all those who perished during it. Besides, it is necessary to make people aware of the historical event not only to prevent a repetition, but also as homage to the victims.

However, Holocaust survivors have not always been so keen on recuperating memory. In fact, as Edkins points out, the victim's first reaction was, in many cases, to leave it all behind; to forget the horror in order to continue with their lives. As Aharon Appelfeld claims, "anyone who underwent the Holocaust will be as wary of memory as of fire. It was impossible to live after the Holocaust except by silencing memory" (qtd. Edkins 2003:117). Such behaviour, though considered unethical by several scholars (Collado 2008:61), is understandable enough, since the instinct of self-preservation, the urge of protecting ourselves from any kind of pain is present, to a higher or lesser degree, in every human being. This is, basically, what Gemma does, and, according to Joseph –who has been tormented by years of constant remembering and reliving his trauma through dreams– it was "[j]ust as well" (Yolen 2002:231).

On the other hand, attempts at silencing the memory of these historical events were not only carried out by the victims themselves, but by the perpetrators as well. It is broadly known that, after World War II, certain spheres insisted on convincing the public opinion that stories about the Holocaust and what went on in concentration and death camps had been nothing but maliciously spread rumours in order to move people to support the war against the Nazis. Such ideas, incredible as they may seem, still circulate nowadays which make the unearthing of the truth about the Holocaust though memorials and books still a necessity.

And yet, in some cases, the recovery of traumatic history is not done by the direct survivors themselves, but by their descendants, as is, for example, the instance of the African-American Community, whose history of slavery and oppression is being vindicated now in contemporary novels such as those of Tony Morrison or David Bradley, among others. Even if those descendants were not touched by their predecessors' trauma, or if those experiences happened several centuries ago –as with the African-American history of slavery– they can sometimes be compelled to unearth the true story behind their forefathers' hidden suffering in an attempt to overcome in their names their unworked through traumas. Such task falls, as María Jesús Martínez Alfaro argues (2009:348), on the hands of Becca, Gemma's younger granddaughter, who travels to Poland after her grandmother's demise in order to put together the clues along Gemma's fairytale and discover the true story behind it. She is moved by the profound love she feels towards her grandmother, and it is through that love, as Gemma López Sánchez suggests, that the "purification of abject material" can be achieved. (2010:55) Becca knows this; she is conscious that her quest is not so much about recovering her grandmother's forgotten past, but to work through it and attest for the rest of victims who could not pass on their stories. "*Why am I doing this?*" she wonders, to which she answers, "[f]or

Gemma” but she immediately corrects herself by saying “For all of us” (Yolen 2002:104-105, italics in the original).

“Time may heal wounds, but it does not erase the scars” (Yolen 2002:81), says Stan, one of the survivors with which Becca eventually speaks, and they are precisely those scars that future generations should be reminded of in order for them to avoid repeating the past’s horrible mistakes. Gemma herself, although apparently unaware of the truth of her traumatic past, seems to warn her granddaughters about the importance of this preserving of the past, and even do it herself though disguised as a fairy tale: “*The future is when people talk about the past. So if the prince knows all their past lives and tells all the people who are still to come, then the princes live again and into the future*” (Yolen 2002:111, italics in the original). This use of the fairy tale in order to denounce the atrocities of history is something that, Jack Zipes argues, has been recurrent in literature after the Second World War:

Following World War II, the fairy tale set once again to combat terror, but this time the terror concerned not only the inhibitions of the civilizing process, rationalization and alienation, but the demented and perverse forms of civilization that had in part caused atrocities and threatened to bring the world to the brink of catastrophe. (1991:xxvii)

Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that both Jane Yolen and John Boyne resorted to this type of fiction-writing to narrate such harsh stories as these two books are. “For countless centuries,” Terry Windling states in the introduction to the 2002 edition of *Briar Rose*, “storytellers have used the richly symbolic language of fairy tales to explore all the dark, and bright, and shades of grey of the human experience” (2002:xiv), and consequently, Yolen, as a fairy tale author and scholar, knows it “better than most” (2002:xiv) Boyne, on the other hand, has stated several times that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is not only a work of fiction, but a *fable* which he defines as “a piece of fiction that contains a moral.” (www.teenreads.com) What the moral is seems clear enough, and it goes back to the issue of giving voice to the victims of atrocities, honouring their memory and preventing a repetition, as Boyne seems to ironically imply with the closing lines of the book: “And that’s the end of the story about Bruno and his family. Of course all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again. *Not in this day and age.*” (2007:215, our emphasis)

To finish, and according to the above said, although a certain degree of blockage and repression of traumatic experiences is understandable and almost unavoidable, the realization of and coming to terms with reality and painful recollections is tantamount in order to avoid further mental damage. For Bruno, however, this realization comes too late, and he becomes aware of the terrible situation around him only when the current of events and the force of

his own delusion are about to take him to an early death. Gemma, on the other hand, although she dies still immersed in her world of fantasy, has somehow planted the seed in her younger granddaughter which moves her to eventually find out the truth and work through her grandmother's trauma in her name. Although the memory transmitted to Becca is but a figment of reality, an illusion, that reality is still alive under its fairy tale disguise, and a number of clues have been dropped here and there alongside the story that serve as indicators and landmarks towards the recovery of the truth. Once this truth is unearthed and passed on by Becca to her boss and, presumably, the rest of her family, Gemma's death and suffering have not been in vain. Consequently, Becca's act of telling is a symbolic act of homage not only to her grandmother – who is no longer alive – but to the rest of the victims, both the survivors and the deceased.

Such a homage and possibility of working through can likewise be achieved by means of writing, as numerous scholars have pointed out. Inasmuch as “literature makes silence audible, and it verbalizes pain, bringing up its hidden causes” (Martínez Falquina 2009:514), the late proliferation of trauma narratives such as *Briar Rose* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can be viewed as an attempt to “express repressed suffering” (Martínez Falquina 2009:514) and move towards a common understanding and collective homage to all the victims that were overwhelmed by those dramatic episodes. Giving voice to such atrocities not only prevents forgetting, but also attempts to right past wrongs and provide the attention that victims –both collective and individual– merit. Just as Judith Herman points out, “telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (2001:1). Therefore, books such as the here analysed pay homage to all those victims by giving voice to their suffering and bringing to the public eye the knowledge of the atrocities committed so that, hopefully, they will never be repeated. Just as is stated on an inscription at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, “the Europe of the future cannot exist without commemorating all those, regardless of their nationality, who were killed at that time with complete contempt and hate, who were tortured to death, starved, gassed, incinerated and hanged [...]” (Andrzej Szczypiorski, *Prisoner of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp*, 1995).

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