2012. "And, after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency."

--Pauline Hopkins, Contending Forces

Choose a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole

A person's surroundings form the essence of their interpretation of the world, wide or narrow. In John Boyne's novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, the latter is demonstrated through cultural norms experienced by a privileged German boy during the Auschwitz concentration camps. Despite the horrific genocidal acts that surround the boy, his naive, clueless, and otherwise childlike character prevent him from truly understanding his place in the world until he sees first-hand how the world is not such a friendly place after all.

When Bruno becomes aware of their moving away from Berlin to serve his fathers' responsibilities, he elicits sentiments of despair for having to leave his friends, the food, and the crooks and crannies of his house he can no longer explore. The place to which he moves in, nicknamed "Out-With" in lieu of "Auschwitz," overlooks a fence that borders several people of all ages, wearing striped pyjamas, whom his father insists "are not people at all." Instead of inquiring about their conditions and what exactly his father's responsibilities are, he vows that he would never hang out with such people and focuses on his own losses of losing his old friends in Berlin. Such a self-centred attitude highlights how Bruno's naive character prevents him from being able to attest to the people beyond the fence, instead sticking to his family's ideals of self-importance that ultimately stem from a disdain towards the people in the striped pyjamas. Bruno clearly does not recognize this, for he "wasn't entirely sure what job Father did," and this cluelessness is further perpetrated by a comment from Maria, their housemaid, that they "don't have the luxury of thinking / some people make all the decisions for us." Despite eliciting symptoms of naiveness and cluelessness, it is ultimately his family's influence that prevents Bruno from overcoming the two.

It is only when Bruno confronts a boy sitting across the fence that he starts to inquire about the people. In a devious escape from his family home to explore, he meets Schmuel, who Bruno is surprised to learn has the "same" birthday as him. Being bored at home, Bruno is enlightened to share (or claims to share) similarities between himself and the boy, namely that they were taken away from home and have to bear poor living conditions. What Bruno fails to recognize is the dichotomy between the two, which further illustrates his initial reluctance to understand people

that are not him, as the Germans were "superior." Becoming increasingly uneasy about his father's companions and his obnoxious sister, Bruno escapes the house to visit Schmuel every day, and even volunteers to step foot beyond the fence to help find Schmuel's missing father. In disguise, he puts on a pair of "striped pyjamas" and remembers how his grandma said you "feel like the person you're pretending to be" with the right outfit. This symbolic recollection finally makes Bruno inquire about these people, as he was one of them now. It is when Bruno follows the soldiers' order to march into a dark building that he tells Schmuel that he is his best friend and realizes, first-hand, that he was never pretending.

Bruno is a powerful figure in this novel, illustrating how one's naive and clueless character prevents one from understanding the circumstances of others. Father's influence has taught him that their prosperity was of utmost importance, assuring Bruno that what he was doing was integral to their nation. Only when he escapes his family's wrath, whether intentional or not, does he begin to risk what he knows and relinquish to the power of realization.