



# THE NAZI KID: A STUDY ON FICTIONAL CHARACTERS OSKAR MATZERATH AND JOJO BETZLER

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## Abstract

This research paper entitled “The Nazi Kid: A Study on Fictional Characters Oskar Matzerath and Jojo Betzler” draws parallels and nonparallels between two fictional characters Oskar Matzerath and Jojo Betzler. Oskar Matzerath is the child-adult protagonist of the German novelist Günter Wilhelm Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959) and Jojo Betzler is the child protagonist of the movie *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), directed by Taika Waititi. Both of these fictional characters are representatives of German kids during the Nazi regime. By drawing out similarities between them this research paper tries to make explicit how the indoctrination of Nazi ideologies affected the minds of Nazi kids and how the fall of Nazism was accepted by the guilt-ridden German society. This is largely done by exploring the idea of German guilt as expressed through the evolution of the characters Oskar Matzerath and Jojo Rabbit.

Keywords: *Child protagonist, Fascism, German guilt, Personal and political, Postmodernism*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nazi Germany, officially known as the German Reich (1933-1943) still fills the minds of the world with fear and hatred. This is exactly why a lot of writers wrote against the anti-humanistic principles adopted by Nazi Germany and such works are still in demand. The movies which portray the Fascist regime in satirical light are largely welcomed even many decades after the collapse of Nazi regime. The German writer Günter Wilhelm Grass’s novel *The Tin Drum*, published in 1957 and the movie *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), written and directed by New Zealander Taika Waititi are perfect examples of art which strongly speak against Fascist Germany.

## II. HOW ALIKE AND DIFFERENT ARE OSKAR AND JOJO

One of the key reasons why this research paper studies the fictional characters Oskar Matzerath and Jojo Betzler is that both these characters evidently show how the Nazi indoctrination corrupted the minds of even the kids of Germany. Both these characters manifest how life in German Reich was largely a conflict between the personal and the political. The novel *The Tin Drum* and the movie *Jojo Rabbit* employ certain postmodern techniques to make implicit comments upon the futility of the tasks undertaken by the Nazi Germany.

“A key feature peculiar to the 20<sup>th</sup> century dictatorships was their concern with reaching juvenile minds” (Goutam and Gautam 1). Nazi schooling contributed highly to disseminate and inculcate anti-Semitic feelings among the youngsters of Germany. Educational institutions are the most efficient platforms where the brainwashing of minds could happen. The schools in Nazi Germany taught the German kids about the inferiority of the Jews, Blacks and so on. The entire curriculum attributed itself to this objective.

Grass is best known for his first novel, *The Tin Drum* (1959), a key text in European magic realism. This picaresque novel was the first book of his Danzig Trilogy. The Swedish Academy awarded Grass Nobel Prize in Literature and praised as the writer whose black fables portray the forgotten face of history. *The Tin Drum* is no happy tale as well. *The Tin Drum* encompasses the period from 1899-1953. Divided into three books, the novel gives the life of Oskar Matzerath, a drummer who stops growing at the age of three in the context of Nazi regime. The Book One (16 chapters) covering the period between 1899-1938 deals with the time before the advent of Fascism, Book Two (18 chapters) covers the WW II and demise of fascism. Book Three (12 chapters) depicts the post Fascist era, and the post-war West German, and Federal Republic (1945-1954).

The major complexity of the character Oskar Matzerath is that he could not be understood as a proper kid. Oskar is that kid who purposefully stops his physical growth so as to escape the responsibilities of being an adult. Oskar does not want to be born when he hears that his father wants to make him a grocer and decides to be born only when he hears that his mother would give him a drum as birthday gift when becomes three. Oskar uses drum as his major means of expression. Another complexity of the character is that the novelist is ambiguous about the sanity of the protagonist. Grass makes use of nonlinear plot and make Oskar an unreliable narrator. Oskar's character oscillates between the paradigms of Goethe and Rasputin.

The movie *Jojo Rabbit* is the film adaptation of Christine Leunen's book *Caging Skies*, published in 2008. The movie revolves around Johannes Betzler (Jojo), a ten-year old Hitler Youth member. The movie portrays how Jojo's convictions on Nazi ideals are shattered by his encounter and acquaintance with a Jew girl. Jojo has imaginary talks with Adolf Hitler. Jojo's evolution from being a Nazi kid pathetically involved in the idea of the supremacy of Aryans to a normal kid is largely depicted by the change in tone of his imaginary talks with Adolf Hitler.

The family lives during Nazi regime were often fragmented. Family life and home are broken ideas in *The Tin Drum*. Oskar's mother, Agnes Matzerath's incestuous relationship with her cousin Jan Bronski who Oskar considers as his presumptive father shatters the picture of normal life. Grass satirizes the so-called purity of Aryan race as advocated by the Hitler and his followers by making Oskar's racial identity a mixture of many different ones. Jojo's family also faces some hardships due to the harsh times created by Nazi Germany. Jojo's father is away from home which leaves Jojo's mother Rosie with the responsibility of Jojo. Jojo initially believes that his father is a strong supporter of Nazi ideals. This conception of the ten-year-old boy is removed during the course of the film. Jojo's parents are not the Germans who nurtured the anti-Semitic sentiments shared by the German nation during Hitler's dictatorship. Jojo's mother even secretly gives shelter to a teenage Jewish girl, Elsa Korr in her house. Both Oskar and Jojo lose their family as well.

The death of Oskar's mother pops up in Oskar's mind a lot of doubts. At times he doubts that his mother's death as a suicide and at other times he holds himself responsible for his mother's death. He thinks his consistent drumming and glass shattering scream made his mother weak. Oskar also assumes that he has something to do with the death of both his presumptive father. These kinds of confessions made by Oskar is Gunter Grass's way of making the Germans realize that the huge number of deaths they witnessed during the times of Hitler's rule were the result of their wild belief Nazi ideals or their indifference. Although Oskar considers his mother as a sensual woman, he is convinced of her love for him. Jojo's mother Rosie is a bold woman and is an antifascist as well. Jojo's relationship with his mother is beautiful and warming. Rosie knows that her son is Nazi zealot. This is the reason why she wouldn't reveal to him that she has been keeping Elsa safe in their house for a long time. Rosie wants his son to see for himself the vanity of the fanaticism he clutches himself to.

The Nazi indoctrination deeply influenced the minds of the German kids. The novel introduces Oskar as an eccentric thirty-year-old humpback dwarf who desperately wants to tell his own life story. The novel belongs to the genre of Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman manqué. This research paper largely takes into consideration Oskar's convictions and activities till the age of fourteen. In this picaresque novel Oskar adopts drumming, the desperate means of self-expression to reveal his protest against the State and the Church. But one of the many paradoxes the novel presents is that for most of the part drumming becomes the outlet of Oskar's Narcissism. At one occasion in the novel Oskar breaks up the Nazi rally and at another occasion he uses his glass shattering scream to satisfy himself. As mentioned earlier Oskar's self is divided and oscillates between the paradigms of German Romantic writer, statesman and cultural icon Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) and the Russian controversial figure Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin (1869-1916). This duality in Oskar's personality is also reflected in the pictures of Hitler and Beethoven hung on the walls of Alfred Matzerath's (one of the presumptive fathers of Oskar) living room. As Oskar recalls, "Hitler and the genius hung opposite to each other, stared at each other, saw through each other, yet found no joy in what they saw" (Grass 103). This divided self of Oskar is a short version of how divided, complicated and instable the German nation was during the dictatorship of Hitler.

Jojo Betzler is introduced in the film as a kid who is eager to join the German Youngsters in the Hitler Youth (1928-1945), a separate section for boys aged ten to fourteen of the Hitler Youth in Nazi Germany. Jojo is no narcissistic figure but a victim of blind beliefs propagated in Nazi Germany. The movie shows how the programmes of the German Youngsters in the Hitler Youth tried to indoctrinate tenets of Nazi ideology in its young members. Jojo is filled with insatiable thirst to prove himself as a worthy member of Hitler Youth. Jojo, along with his friends are made to engage in activities which would make one devoid of any refined qualities. The kids are encouraged to fight with each other and even kill each other so as to make them ready to die and ready to kill. "The focus of training is readiness for defence, suitably adjusted to every age" (Wunderlich 357). The German burning of the Un-German books in 1933 to remove Jewish influence from the country is mocked in the movie. Although Jojo wants to be overzealous Nazi he could not prove himself as one. When asked to kill a rabbit in front of a group of kids Jojo fails to do so. This makes him a fool before the other kids who begin to call him "Jojo Rabbit". One of Jojo's eager attempts to show how influenced he is by the Nazi ideologies results in him getting serious injuries on his face and legs. Jojo assumes that those wounds made him ugly and initially is not aware how ugly his mind has become with his blind belief in Nazi ideologies.

Another feature that Oskar and Jojo share is their physical illness or slight physical deformities. As for Oskar his physical illness is something that parallels his moral illness. Oskar's short physical stature is something he chose for himself. As a kid he pretends that he cannot speak and read; he wears "the guise of infantility" (Reddick 65). Oskar even views himself as Jesus Christ. This is a parody of how Hitler wanted the German nation to see him as the saviour of Germany and the one to lead Germany to ever-growing and eternal greatness. When it comes to the case of Jojo, he never wanted to have any physical deformity. What happens to Jojo is an accident or a product of his impulsive behaviour. This idea of physical deformity is introduced in both the novel *The Tin Drum* and the movie *Jojo Rabbit* to satirize the idea of "Honorary Aryan" cultivated in the minds of young people in Nazi Germany. Oskar's physical illness is a protest towards the Nazi ideology of Aryans being the superior race. On the other hand, the physical injuries make Jojo feel that he is no more an Aryan.

Oskar's romantic involvement with a woman named Maria becomes incestuous when Alfred Matzerath marries her. This makes Oskar both the father and half-brother of Kurt, the boy Maria gives birth to. Oskar's romantic relationships with other women too end up in tragic notes. After Jojo loses his mother Jojo feels that Elsa is his only hope. He begins to have feelings for Elsa. Jojo becomes almost fully convinced of his wrong convictions of Jews after he saw his mother hanged. From the Jojo who believed that Jews were not even humans he evolves to become the one who accepts Elsa, the Jew girl as his own family. He doesn't want to make her sad and therefore he often wrote fake letters and read them for Elsa as if they were sent by her lover. The movie's depiction of the fall of Nazi Germany (1945) by the combined efforts of Russia and USA is funny and at the same time thoughtful. The movie exhibits how the Nazi Germany behaved as if even the young lives do not matter. The small Nazi kids were made to fight with guns in their hands only to face pathetic deaths. Another kid character named Yorki (Jojo's best friend) reminds Jojo that since the war is over Elsa is free. This makes Jojo feel abandoned.



Oskar is a fantastic drummer. Oskar's drumming becomes a key protest against Nazi Germany which tried to bring restrictions in art as well. Jojo and his mother Rosie's differences in opinion about dance explicitly communicates how much the indoctrination of Nazi ideologies affected the fine spirits of the youngsters. Jojo is a ten-year-child who is supposed to live his childhood as fully as possible which means making pleasant memories. Jojo always wanted to be a soldier who fights for his nation, when Jojo's mother, a lady of fine spirits asks him to dance he replies that dancing is for people who do not have any job. Rosie corrects him and says that dancing is for people who are free. Although Jojo is not able to digest his mother's words then, by the end of the movie Jojo understands the real meaning of what his mother implied. In the end of the movie, we find Jojo who dances with Elsa. Jojo now realizes that he had never been free before and therefore was never able to dance. Now that the war is over and Jojo realizes the fake policies of Nazi Germany he becomes free. He finds himself no longer a slave to the purposeful inculcation of wrong ideologies. Elsa's freedom is political whereas Jojo's freedom has a spiritual, psychological or mental aspect to it as well.

Gunter Grass had been a member of an influential literary group called Gruppe 47(1947-1967) and his work *The Tin Drum* has the major theme which is the need for Germans of the author's generation "to accept the crimes of National Socialism" (Bullivant 2). The book is his attempt to make the Germans of his times to repent for their dark past as he makes evident how gullible the petty bourgeoisie of Germany was. Oskar and his creator share many common features which means the text contains many autobiographical elements. Even the setting of the novel is autobiographical. Gunter Grass was also involved with Nazi regime during his youth as he confessed in his memoir *Peeling the Onion* (2006). This he considers as a shame. This could be the reason why he portrays Oskar as a hypocrite and by the end of the novel as someone who feels guilt for multiple reasons. By making Oskar a prisoner and eccentric the novelist suggests that the whole nation is supposed to be punished for their crimes of hypocrisy, eccentricity and indifference. The guilt feeling is something central to the movie *Jojo Rabbit* as well. It is his guilt feeling which forces Jojo to write fake letters to make Elsa happy. Elsa's admittance of Jojo as a brother stands for the possibility of a good future after the fall of Nazi Germany.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this research paper a comparison between the fictional characters Oskar Matzerath and Johannes Betzler have been done to study what were the impacts of inculcation of Fascist ideologies in the young minds during the Nazi regime in Germany. Both the characters engage in a conflict between the personal and the political. This has been an inductive study since it concentrated only on two fictional figures but has largely aimed to showcase the mentality and convictions of a large population of Nazi kids. Although both the novel and the movie contain some imaginary elements, they share the common objective of portraying the Fascist era in Germany as barbaric. While Günter Wilhelm Grass makes the tale of Oskar embellished with many magic realist elements, Taika Waititi makes the tale of Jojo interesting with a satirical tone all throughout the movie.

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