

## **You Got to Go and Dig Those Holes**

A psycho-social analysis of prejudice and conformity in Louis Sachar's *Holes*

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## Introduction

When I was a toddler, my parents played children's movies on our old VHS player. Therefore, I grew up on borrowed VHS copies of *Aladdin*, *Shrek 2* and *The Little Mermaid*. When the player finally broke after years of usage, I cried, because I was still a child and didn't understand the concept that these tapes weren't the sole copies of my favourite movies. Still, for my sixth birthday, my parents bought me DVD copies of these three movies, along with a copy of the 2003 movie *Holes*, as there had been a 2-for-1 sale that day. It then became a sort of tradition to watch *Holes* on my birthday every year, but unfortunately that tradition only lasted a few years. In the midst of the spring 2020 Covid lockdown, I rediscovered my limited collection of DVD copies, which I decided to go through. When the time came for me to rewatch *Holes*, what I found wasn't a simple children's movie, but rather a profound allegory on societal issues and a complex weave of plotlines beautifully told through humour and *feel-good* scenes. This may seem like an overdramatization, but *Holes* truly is a masterpiece, not only in the aspects listed above, but also through its detailing of psychological and sociological features of human beings in our historical and modern Western world.

Before looking at some of these specific features, it is important to somewhat understand the basic lining of the complex and intertwined plot. The movie basically follows three distinct events and sets of characters, which culminate into a final series of events in the climax, the first of which is Stanley's. We first meet Stanley Yelnats the IV being wrongfully convicted of stealing a famous athlete's shoes. He is then sent into a correctional facility called Camp Green Lake, located in the middle of the Texan desert, in which all of the boys detained must dig a hole in the ground every day. Stanley is introduced to Mr. Sir, the assistant warden, and Dr. Pendanski, the camp counsellor. As the camp is divided into teams, Stanley is joined with other kids, including Zero, Zig-Zag, Armpit, Squid, X-Ray, Magnet and, later, Twitch. To explain Stanley's bad luck regarding his wrongful conviction and his parent's low socio-economic standing, Stanley's grandfather tells the tale of his own grandfather from Latvia, Elya, who double-crossed his town's fortune teller, Madame Zeroni,

who then cursed Elya's family line. Thus, when Elya's son wins a large sum of money, he is robbed by Kissin' Kate Barlow, a renowned outlaw in the Southwest of the United States.

Back to the present, Stanley finds a lipstick in his hole and gives it to his friend *X-Ray*, at which point, the third plotline is introduced to the movie. In brief, decades before, the camp used to be a town surrounding a lake. In the middle of this town layed a schoolyard owned by Miss Katherine. To help rebuild the school, Miss Katherine enlisted the help of the merchant of the town, a young black man named Sam. As they fell in love, jealousy struck the wealthy businessman of the town, Trout, who ganged up with the rest of the town to kill Sam and burn down the school. In revenge, Miss Katherine became Kissin' Kate Barlow, cursing the town and killing any wealthy men who crosses her path. Years later, she meets Trout once more in the now dried-up lake of the town, where she buried her treasure. She kills herself and promises Trout that he will never be able to find her riches.

After some time in the facility, Stanley befriends Zero, who reveals that his real name is Hector Zeroni. When Zero runs away, Stanley eventually runs after him and helps him survive, fulfilling the prophecy of Elya and Madame Zeroni as their descendants and effectively getting rid of the curse on his family. They return to camp to find Stanley's great-grandfather's stolen treasure. They eventually dig up the treasure, right before Stanley's family reaches the camp and helps stop the warden, who turns out to be Trout's granddaughter, and her workers from abusing the boys any longer. With both the curse on the Yelnats family and on the town lifted, Stanley and Zero split the money from the treasure chest and go back home, eventually along with all of their other friends.

That being said, this recap does little to actually illustrate the depth in which this movie explains certain psycho-social attributes of human society. From Kate and Sam's story, prejudice is explained through the townspeople's discrimination, jealousy and low self-esteem, which then links back to the Camp Green Lake detention facility's way of weaponizing similar prejudice to enforce conformity, effectually deindividualizing the boys from their former, non-incarcerated selves.

## Prejudice and Self-Esteem

According to Stangor and Leary (2006), the term Prejudice can be defined as generalised negative attitudes of outgroups and their members, mainly in evaluating the standing of outgroups compared to ingroups. In the context of *Holes*, this type of attitude is clearly present in the flashback illustrating Kate and Sam's story. From the moment Sam appears on the screen, Trout Walker and his friends seem to make fun of his business for no reason other than the fact that he is black. Then, when Trout sees Kate and Sam kiss, his rage is not only fueled by jealousy, but the fact that Kate chose a black man, at that time highly segregated from their white peers, as a lover over him. He funnels this rage through the legal system by having the town lynch him, under the pretence that his actions were unlawful, yet simultaneously pushes the town to burn down Kate's school, which is also illegal.

By doing so, Trout makes it clear that he does not actually care much for the law, but rather simply wishes to take his revenge on Sam. The townspeople, on the other hand, aren't quick to riot because of this jealousy, but rather because they wish to reinforce their place on top of the social hierarchy. Even the sheriff, as jealous of Sam as he may be, doesn't wish to punish Kate for kissing Sam, but rather to kill Sam for his actions, as he even mentions himself : "It ain't against the law for you to kiss him, just against the law for him to kiss you". This is an example of the tendency to see the more negative traits from members of certain outgroups and positive traits within themselves. Before the events of that fateful night, the townspeople seemed to rather like Sam and his sales. Sam had been questioning their stereotypes of how a black was supposed to act, as he had been nothing but kind to the people of Green Lake, but the moment he crossed the line of what they deemed acceptable, it overpowered those positive traits.

However, Kate, as part of the caucasian ingroup, was seen as the victim and wasn't killed. Indeed, the victimisation of white women is nothing new in Western societies. As Smiley and Fakunle (2016) recount, the main accusation towards black people that lead to lynchings in the 19th and 20th centuries were rape accusations by white women towards black men, and most of these accusations weren't conducted by the women themselves but

rather male figures in their entourage. Therefore, to reinforce their prejudices and stereotypes towards black men, white people would paint them as these “dangerous rapists and thugs”, throughout history as well as in the movie. Similarly, through a study conducted by the Pretrial Justice Institute in 2015, black men generally have a bail amount 35% higher than white men, representing an ever-present injustice within the justice system that portray these same prejudices (Riviera, 2017). So, when the townspeople found out that Sam had kissed Kate, which in their eyes had been a violent and forceful act, it confirmed their stereotypes and prejudices towards black people in general through confirmation bias, or the tendency to search for and favour information that confirms one’s own beliefs, and punished him in accordance to not only his act, but his race as well.

This tendency is also what pushed Trout to act as such, since he wanted to protect his self-esteem, now broken by the fact that Kate had chosen Sam over him. Indeed, Trout had a rather low self-concept : A rich, white bachelor that no-one dared to refuse : “Nobody says no to Charles [Trout] Walker”. With this low self-concept now questioned by Kate, his self-esteem is lowered as well. Thus, he attacks Sam in order to overpower him in this new way, therefore protecting his self-esteem.

However, this one plotline is not the only one where prejudice can be seen. In the present-day Camp Green Lake, prejudice, especially towards the lower-educated individuals such as Zero, is very present. For example, when Zero is introduced, Dr Pendanski, who is usually the *Good Cop* to Mr. Sir’s *Bad Cop*, immediately attacks him on this level : “You wanna know why they call him Zero? Because there's nothin' inside his stupid little head”. Except, this prejudice is part of a larger psycho-social feature within the movie : the deindividuation and conformity of the incarcerated boys within the detention facility.

### **Deindividuation and Conformity**

When Stanley first steps out of the bus onto Camp Green Lake, he is immediately stripped of his clothes and given the same uniform as the others : a simple orange jumpsuit and a white t-shirt. He then meets the people he will be spending the next eighteen months

with : Zero, Zig-Zag, Armpit, Squid, X-Ray and Magnet. Peculiarly, it is not the camp counsellor that gives the boys their nicknames, but rather themselves, as Dr. Pendanski insists on using the names “society will recognize them by”. This can be analysed by Armpit’s reaction to Stanley using his birth name, where he immediately attacks him. Stanley then learns about the multiple group rules that have been established at camp, such as respecting the boys that have been there longer than him (for example, giving his bread to X-Ray and not keeping the smallest shovel for himself), asserting his dominance onto other groups (as he does right before he gets his nickname) and not taking Dr. Pendanski’s counselling sessions seriously. When he does conform to these norms, he is positively reinforced by cheers from the other boys, but when he does not, he is physically attacked, for example when he is pushed by Squid for not immediately giving up the smallest shovel on his first day.

Through this operant conditioning, Stanley seems to lose his old passive and lawful self. It is only when he accidentally attacks another boy at the compound that he is *bestowed* with a nickname, yet this nickname seems to represent a violent and nonchalant teenager rather than Stanley himself. With the simple fact that the boys refuse to be called by their birth names, it seems clear that they do not want their *outside-camp* selves and their *inside-camp* selves to be seen as one. This could be due to the fact that nicknames, especially those underived from one’s birth name, is a powerful tool in deindividualization, which then helps cope with the toughness of their current lifestyle at the camp (Reicher & Levine, 1994). Similarly, according to Zimbardo’s Prison Experiment in 1970, three variables are necessary in quantifying one’s deindividualization : group presence, anonymity and arousal (Diener, 1976). The former and later are both present through the fact that it is a juvenile detention facility for young criminal teenagers, but anonymity seems harder to quantify in the context of Camp Green Lake. Nevertheless, the nicknames, as well as the never-changing uniform worn by all of the boys, seems to help this anonymity to an extent. Their daily routines are also the same, not aiding in permitting them to develop as particular individuals.

Even though Dr. Pendanski seems keen on not turning them into these deindividualized prisoners, he still perpetuates the idea that they should not be learning valuable skills inside the compound, for example when he refuses to let Stanley teach Zero how to read, even if the action doesn't actually harm anyone. This seems counterintuitive at first, as he insists on the importance of reintegrating society post-detention, during the counselling session for example. However, this facade is unveiled when, towards the end of the movie, when Zero and Stanley are in the pit surrounded by lizards, he says : "[at] least we got plenty of graves to choose from", showing that he does not care much for the boys outside of their ability to dig up the treasure. Yet, if Dr. Pendanski doesn't actually care about the boys, why does he put up this facade in the first place?

Well, even if, as mentioned earlier, the camp counsellor doesn't wish for the boys to turn into the *typical deindividualized prisoner*, he still wishes to keep them pliable and unquestioning of the true motive behind their digging. To do so, he tries to change the boys from the deviants they were before entering camp, into straight-lined, socially-acceptable teenagers, under the pretence that that is the only way they can reenter society. In some sense, Dr. Pendanski is still trying to deindividualize the boys, but under his and his coworkers' authority rather than under the social norms established by the boys themselves.

However, in this specific movie, there are characters who are able to see through both the general norms set by the boys at the camp, as well as Dr. Pendanski's authority game, namely Stanley and Zero. In Zero's case, it can be believed that he refuses the boys' norms as he sees himself as different from them : he is the sole illiterate one there, and is constantly differentiated from the others by Dr. Pendanski. Therefore, without this "Social Identification" to his team, he is less likely to follow the social norms established in the camp. He also refuses to truly conform to the person Dr. Pendanski pushes him to be, as he learns how to read and is finally empowered by the resistance it offers him (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Similarly, Stanley also doesn't socially identify with the group at the beginning, as he is not truly a criminal, which leads him to not totally give in to the norms established by the group. However, over time, he slowly starts to conform more and more, for

example by giving the lipstick he found to X-Ray and taking the blame for the stolen sunflower seeds. Therefore, Stanley's true resistance is towards the warden, Dr. Pendanski and Mr. Sir. Stanley, compared to the other individuals in his team, doesn't take the counsellor's insults towards Zero as *normal*. The more time goes by, the more Stanley gets to know Zero and learns that he isn't as ignorant as others make him seem, just illiterate. Therefore, Dr. Pendanski's insults towards his friend becomes more and more of a cognitive dissonance in his eyes, making him lose the sense of authority he held in the beginning. Once he meets the warden, he also sees through her games and starts to understand the true meaning behind their digging, making her and her employees less trustworthy, thus less of a referential authority, which is why he found the power of disobedience in himself to steal Mr. Sir's truck and run after Zero.

## **Conclusion**

Holes truly is filled with allegories for contemporary psycho-social models and issues. As Sam's story is shown, Louis Sachar, author of the movie's screenplay, details the links between racial prejudice, the townspeople's confirmation bias and Trout's displacement of anger in a sense that feels both historical and representative of today's Western society. In addition, in the story set in the present, Sachar demonstrates the power of conformity and authority, as well as how these misleading psycho-social aspects can be deflected and prevented with Zero's lack of social identification to the rest of the boys and Stanley's comprehension of others' cognitive dissonances. Through these aspects, it is clear that the movie portrays multiple facets of our reality, yet how far can this fictional world be stretched to fit onto this reality? According to Eric Schlosser and other social scientists and activists since the 1950s, it wouldn't take much stretching at all. As prisons, especially in the United States, have become today a place of guaranteed relatively-free labour, imprisonment is not only used as a punishment, but as a reward. Politicians, aristocrats and billionaires alike use these methods for their own gain, but also as a punishment towards others in order to keep their place on top of the social hierarchy (Schlosser, 1998). This institution is called the

Prison-Industrial complex, and it is what the warden, Mr. Sir and Dr. Pendanski all represent : money-hungry authority figures who trick others into free labour that will eventually benefit them, under the pretence that the institution is solely benefitting the incarcerated and their entourage. Under this lense, Sachar then seems to present an optimistic view for the future of this aspect of society, in which the corruption is stopped and the boys find their freedom and individualities in the end. However, to find justice for Camp Green Lake, Stanley and Zero needed the help of police forces and lawyers, who are generally on top of such individuals on the social hierarchies. Thus, the question remains : How does one stop corruption when no one can socially overpower the corrupted? Many civil rights activists and leftists have pointed towards revolution and overthrowing power, but this has yet to be seen in Canada and the United States. So, for now, the poor, the uneducated, the racially discriminated and many others are unfortunately left to have to go and dig those holes.

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