Candidate 2 evidence

To what extent do the main characters grow and mature over the course of the novel Un Sac de Billes and the film Au Revoir les Enfants?

<<Un Sac de Billes>> (USdB) is a novel by Joseph Joffo set in the early 1940's, which follows the story of the protagonists Joseph and Maurice who are brothers fleeing occupied France. The plot is modelled around his own experiences as a child, bringing to life the hardships Jewish people faced during that time. Louis Malle's film <<Au Revoir les Enfants >> (ARIE) follows a similar idea of using two main protagonists to illustrate the events he endured as a semi-autobiographical production. The film is set in a Catholic boarding school that hides Jewish children to protect them from the Nazis. Julien Quentin, the main character and a Catholic, gradually grows closer in friendship to new student Jean 'Bonnet', a Jew in disguise. The name of the film reflects how they say goodbye to their childhood at the end of the film. Throughout both plots, the themes of prejudice and antisemitism are depicted through the eyes of the children, leading to their loss of childhood innocence and causing their characters to adapt and change in response to these pressures and strains.

The first person the reader meets in USdB is the main protagonist, Joseph Joffo. He is only ten years old at the beginning of the novel and it is through his character that the passage into early adulthood is the most clearly illustrated. He is at first presented as a sensitive boy when he loses a game of marbles against his older brother, where Maurice says to him <<Arrête de chialer>>[1]. The fact that Joseph cries over a simple and inconsequential game immediately portrays his character as being rather delicate, childish and feeble, since he gets upset over little things. The difference in maturity between the two brothers is made obvious quite early on, with the developments in Joseph's character into becoming a more strong-minded and confident person being much more stark than those in Maurice's, largely due to the two year age gap and Maurice's brotherly duty to look after Joseph in the past.

One day Joseph and Maurice's mum sews a yellow star onto their vests with the word <<Juif>> inscribed on it. Their experience at school following the introduction of the stars is drastically different from before, with classmates turning on them and hurling hurtful insults at Joseph, telling him that Jews were responsible for the war.

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[1] page 12, Un Sac de Billes, 1982

He states to himself, <<C'est quoi, un Juif?>>[2]. This rhetorical question conveys how he doesn't know who he truly is or what his religion stands for. His classmates have instantly turned against him, all because of a small yellow star on his clothes. At ten years old, Joseph is still unaware of the highly prejudiced society he lives in. The innocent and pure qualities of Joseph's character at the start of the novel successfully set him up for the drastic change that takes place in his life and make the shift in his character even more heart-wrenching.

The idea of one character showing noticeable developments and the other staying relatively stable is also common to ARIE, where Julien Quentin is portrayed as a naïve young boy whilst Jean Bonnet is already familiar with the cruelties of the world. Julien even asks his older brother François <<C'est quoi un youpin?>>, displaying his shallow understanding of other religions and highlighting his sheltered upbringing. His curious tone as he asks the question suggests that he's unaware of the fact that the term <<youpin>> is a highly offensive slur, indicating its common use in the deeply antisemitic society they were living in. His brother's response does not show much more maturity when he says <<un Juif, c'est quelqu'un qui ne mange pas de cochon>>. Although Julien's naivety can be forgiven, François is older and the ignorance in his response is evident. To him, the only defining feature of the religion is that they don't eat pork.

The questions from Joseph and Julien are very similar but have incredibly different contexts, with Julien's harmless curiosity a bold contrast to Joseph's confusion about who he really his. Despite the difference in situations, the presence of childhood innocence and confusion are strong in both characters.

In USdB, Joseph and Maurice travel all over France, constantly under threat and even being held hostage by the Gestapo. After fleeing once more, this time from his sister's house, Joseph states <<peut-être j'ai cru jusqu'à présente me sortir indemne de cette guerre>>[3]. Looking back on his youth, he realises how childish his belief was that he would come out from the war unscathed, mentally and physically. His ability to reflect critically on his past self effectively demonstrates how he has matured to develop more realistic ideas around the lack of justice in the world. This point is further proven when Joseph admits <<quand ils ont arrêté papa, je n'ai même pas pleuré>>[4]. Over the course of the last few years of his life, he has evolved from being a sensitive, tender boy who cried over losing a simple game and

[2] page 27, Un Sac de Billes, 1982
[3] page 224, Un Sac de Billes, 1982
[4] page 224, Un sac de Billes, 1982

who was oblivious to the cruelty of the war to a toughened adolescent who can handle these difficult situations.

The changes seen in Joseph's character were forced and were what kept him alive throughout the war. On the contrary, in ARIE Julien's loss of innocence was far more inconsequential, albeit no less upsetting. He watched the horrors of antisemitism play out in front of him from a safe seat. After warming up to Jean and discovering his true identity as a Jew, Joseph endeavours to keep his secret hidden as the boys grow close in friendship. He even invites Jean to dinner with his family, showing how he has become a more compassionate person and can't bear to see his friend alone. However, when the Nazis come looking for Jews at the school Joseph unintentionally gives Jean away. After he's been caught, Jean comforts Julien in the dormitory as he's packing away by saying <<ils m'auraient eu de toute façon>>. This suggests that Jean had left any hopeful delusions behind long before the story began and had a much more realistic view of his fate. His hopeless acceptance saddens the audience and is exaggerated by Julien's shock and upset. Upon seeing Julien's sadness, Jean tells him <<quand on me cherche on me trouve>>, reassuring him that he won't be gone forever. This emphasises Jean's immense bravery as he continues to comfort his friend whilst faced with certain death himself.

Despite the many differences, from the characters and plots to the media forms, <<Un Sac de Billes>> and <<Au Revoir les Enfants>> are two heart-wrenching wartime stories that clearly show the adaptation of their characters throughout their childhoods in response to the pressures of war, fear and prejudice. From Joseph and Maurice's close encounter with death at Hotel Excelsior to Julien watching his best friend be taken away by Nazis, the children all share the experience of being forced to prematurely open their eyes to the cruelty and antisemitism that ravaged Europe in the 1940's. The final line of USdB from Joseph as he regards himself in the reflection of his window on his return home powerfully sums up the effect of the journey all the children have undertaken. He states, <<c'est vrai, j'ai grandi.>>[5] .

[5] page 258, Un Sac de Billes, 1982

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