



Narrative Subversion of Children's Literature in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

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ABSTRACT

A Series of Unfortunate Events (ASoUE) by Daniel Handler, which he wrote under the pen name Lemony Snicket, is a radical subversion of the core ideals in children literature, specifically the rich dependence of the genre on the happy ending and narrative certitude. This discussion analyzes the way the series structurally denies the utopian promise of closure by means of ubiquitous metafiction, repetitive plots and the final denial of denouement. The unrelenting agony of closure turns into the philosophy of the series, that ambiguity and structural injustice are more honest and, after all, more compelling parts of the truth than idealistic promises. In ensuring misfortune and revealing the endemic breakdown of adult institutions (adultism), the text does not close its major mysteries, including the destiny of the Sugar Bowl MacGuffin. This pessimistic structure fosters critical reflexivity and resilience in the child reader turning the denial of certainty into an advanced pedagogical mode of negotiating the complex and frequently unfair world.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Postmodern Narrative, Narrative Subversions, Adultism, Child Reader, Meta Fiction.

Introduction:

It is an unspoken understanding between the author and the young reader when it comes to child-centered literature as the landscape of traditional children-centered literature is founded upon the basis of guaranteed safety, justice eventually and the ultimate closure of the narrative which is often mediated by an ideal of didacticism: good behavior yields only good results. It is genre rigidity, created by the anxieties of adults about exposure of children to challenging knowledge and is historically made up of fictional worlds created through misinformation in order to protect children against the unhappiness of the real world. *A Series of Unfortunate Events (ASoUE)* represents an important inflection point of children fiction in that it does not seek to saturate the tropes of a genre of literature, such as Roald Dahl or Neil Gaiman had done, but enact a radical structural deconstruction of those tropes. The tragic incidents are not just present but are structurally ensured in the series. The anti-thesis of the whole story is already set with the first warnings made by Lemony Snicket who clearly suggests to readers who want to experience the traditional happiness to choose another book. This promise of nonexistent happy beginning or middle proactively breaks the classical didactic agreement and creates a new and difficult dynamic of constant misfortune and insured unhappiness with the audience.

Pedagogical narrative closure plays a critical didactic role in classic children's narratives. The happy ending remained the bread and butter of domestic and adventure fiction in the first half of the 20th century, serving the purpose of rewarding the good and inculcating moral lessons and reasserting a sense of universal order. Such a foreseeable framework strengthens the myth of childhood as a secured and privileged situation, secluded against social necessities and inequalities. The happy ending is directly connected with the vow of certainty that promises the readers that particular, goodly actions and behaviors would lead to predictable and definite consequences. It is the traditional ending which the viewers interpret as being happy, and in many cases is as well defined as being rich and socially successful. By ensuring that there is no happy ending and that its protagonists time and again are subjected to growing misfortune, *ASoUE* rescinds this propelling support at once. This darkness of premise in the series is required not only to provide dramatic impact, but to oppose to a critical degree the misinformation or false knowledge that conventional texts spread in the name of shielding children against the unhappiness of life in the real world.

Another major assumption that is typically conducted by the narratives promising happiness is the idea of the child being safeguarded, which is where the idea of the Athenian child can be traced. This is the trope, according to which, children are so smart, capable, and good-natured that the Baudelaire orphans are far from lacking in them and in an ideal meritocracy, all of that ought to be preserved by the law and eventually bear positive results. Rejection of this meritocratic promise is the central tragedy of *ASoUE*. The mechanical genius of Violet, the research ability of Klaus, and the biting (and later cooking) talent of Sunny are far superior and more intelligent than almost all of the adults they come across. Nevertheless, even being so smart, they are never allowed to get the so-called happy closure that their merit deserves. This is a structural denial that stands as a stinging critic of adultism, which is the subjugation that children face under the hands of adults.

The unrelenting deprivation of justice attacks the nuanced connotation that children are naturally safeguarded under the law and virtue. The troubles that the Baudelaires endure reveal their structural vulnerability, as they demonstrate their political, economic and social reliance on adults who are usually incompetent, careless or irresponsible. The reason Count Olaf is able to constantly undercut the intelligence of the children, use their prosperity to his advantage, and abuse them, is evidence that the legal framework and institutional protection (such as Mr. Poe) is immensely corrupt and displays structural ineptitude by the society itself to safeguard the weak. The most disappointing twist to the happy ending, though, is not that something bad occurs, but that authoritative figures who are tasked with the prevention actually do nothing or disregard the truth of the children (a kind of systemic gaslighting), supporting the idea that only the children can help themselves.

The features of postmodern metafiction used in *ASoUE* blur the distinction between reader and narrator and promote self-reflexive comment on the construction of the text. The lugubrious and persistent narration of Lemony Snicket, and the recurring caution that the reader must not read the book, is a literary device of disempowered authority. Snicket assumes a passive and helpless role by seeming to see the orphans in pain but powerless to do anything about it. The act of doing this essentially discredits his dominion as both an adult and a narrator compared to the more standard dominating and instructive role of the children storyteller/narrator, the author. The refusal of the author to instruct the child reader and the protagonists undermines the conventional authorial role. Such consensual abandonment of agency does have, however, a powerful goal: it places the child reader in a more empowered and agency-seeking stance towards a challenging world. The child reader is compelled to face the absence of an overarching safety net, which makes them ready to negotiate the world on critical terms as opposed to the fictional promises given by authority.

The first half of the series follows a rigid, formulaic pattern where the Baudelaires would introduce themselves to a new guardian, Count Olaf would introduce himself wearing an easily hackable disguise, the children would use their respective intellectual abilities to resolve the immediate issue, the adults would fail pathetically to notice that something is amiss or to actually listen to the children, and the cycle would repeat. Though this repetition of plot has been denounced as a redundancy, especially when consumed during binge-viewing, this repetitive element serves not as a rhetorical weakness but rather as a vital important device. This structural repetition is an allegorical expression of the perpetual predictability of systemic misfortune. It is a clear depiction of how malice and evil can triumph over honesty and justice more easily. This criticism requires the constant non-performance of institutional characters, none of whom embodies this more than Mr. Poe. Mr. Poe denying the disguises of Olaf despite the overwhelming evidence and the prior traumatic events, serves as a paradigm of institutional incompetence and dismissal of concerns of children systematically, a kind of gaslighting, to which the vulnerable are subjected. The formulaic plot further enforces the point that the knowledge (skills of the Baudelaires) is regularly invalidated with adult negligence and political reliance.

The application of rhetorical strategies like alliteration in the titles of books, the repetition of a word by the narrator and similar methods, it is not only plot but also a linguistic repetition. This makes the sentence strong in the existential sense of the Baudelaires leading a cycle of misery that they can never escape. This form of structural assurance of tragedy produces an inverse narrative certitude: the reader is aware that something is set to go wrong. Offering the formula to survive until around *The Hostile Hospital* (Book 8), the story compels the main characters as well as the readers to prolonged suffering. This strategy solidifies the disapproval of adultism, defining that redemption will have to come through internal ability and thought, rather than through institutional change.

The formula starts to genuinely break in the second half of the series as the Baudelaires are now active members, morally complex creatures, working within the secret organization V.F.D. and is occasionally pushed to ethical extremes (e.g., setting the Hotel Dénouement on fire). This violation of formula is an indication that the children are moving beyond the familiar, safe boundaries of traditional children's literature, although that safety was twisted. This change is officially signified in the last volume, *The End*, which reverses the alliterative titling tradition which was followed in the previous twelve books. This metamorphosis is highly symbolic; it indicates that the Baudelaires have finally escaped the cycle of misery, the repetitive, predictable nature of adult institutions. This new liberty is codified in the structure of the narrative, in which the cynical predictability is replaced by moral disorder and totality of uncertainty. The last book stands as the thematic climax, the children are unable to bring the problems of the world away but realize it as a necessity.

The series is a skillful combination of deadly and life-changing tragedy like kidnapping, attempted murder, non-consensual surgery and mob violence, with a dead-pan, even absurdist delivery style. This method does help to achieve a special effect of narration in which the narrative creates a kind of equivalence

between extremely different spheres of misery, like the loss of parents and the momentary pain of a lumpy beef casserole. There are two possible interpretative purposes of this equalization. One can interpret it as trivialized life events, although constructively, it is claimed to authorize the experience of children to their world. It recognizes that the subjective experience of difficulty may not always reflect a judgment of severity of those experiences by adults. The text legitimizes the complicated emotional reaction the child has to the surrounding by trivializing trauma and glorifying the trivial, making the trivial seem to be what is traumatic. The ethical contradiction they face, as they are confronted with making acts and sacrificing their morals, is not a special case to display, rather an obligatory dark side to surviving in a world which is never on their side.

The final book, *The End*, does not follow the pattern of the standard fantasy resolution in children's literature (evil being chased away) but instead has a thematic climax that focuses on philosophical and moral decision-making and symbolism. An overwhelming absence of closure defines the finality of the book, a structural decision that critics claim would have made a betrayal of the series had it been not made otherwise. To provide a clean, closed, happy ending, would have subjected the whole message of the previous twelve volumes to retroactive invalidation that safety, justice, and predictable rewards are not promised. The denouement transports the reader to the frustration of the desire to know what has happened. The way the Baudelaires leave the lonely island colony (a false utopia that required ignorance to keep the place peaceful), and come back to the indecisive world, where the cyclic principles were eliminated, is how the complex world is acknowledged over the simplicity imposed.

The entire absence of certainty concerning the ultimate destiny of the Baudelaires, the entire history of V.F.D. and the mysteries of the schism within the organization are the philosophical requisite of the pessimistic world view that the series depicts. The denial of closure is a denial of the traditional obligation of the author to repay the so-called narrative debt that the genre imposes. The series requires the reader to realize that there is no guarantee that one will always receive closure. This may be a world where there is no sense of justice or of lasting security.

This ambiguity is condoned in accordance with the ultimate moral standing of the Baudelaires. After selling their own souls (when they burn down the house and get away with Olaf), they are not ethically entitled to a chaste reward of a clean utopian ending that is the stuff of children literature. The cloak conclusion is, then, the only correct way to represent the moral grey zone of moral ambiguity where the Baudelaires live, raising the work to the status of highbrow metafictional literature that puts more emphasis on philosophical speculation rather than on the clarity of the plot.

The commercial and critical sensation of *ASoUE* is an indicator of the paradigm shift in the children literature of its kind, attesting to the ability of the child reader to cope with such thematic complexity and existential uncertainty. The series is actively opposed to the aspect of protection-based, anxiety-driven storytelling which attempts to keep children out of the reality. Rather, it trends towards legitimizing the subjective experience of the child as having found itself in a world which is recognized to be chaotic, unfair as well as incomplete in information resources. Subverting expectations, *ASoUE* increases the intellectual requirements of the genre, justifying critical questioning and self-reliance as the tools required by young readers nowadays.

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