

Erika Scheu

Dr. Curton

ENG 407

21 October 2015

### Simplistic Sophistication in Adolescent Literature: A Brief, Critical Reading of Lemony Snicket

“Kiddie lit,” “juvenile lit,” childish, simplistic: All of these terms have, at one point, been used to describe the genre of adolescent literature (Hill 1). This genre, while often categorized as intended for audiences approximately 12 to 18 years of age, offers an important literary experience to readers of any age or skill level. Adolescent literature is anomalous to other genres in its flexibility. While adolescent literature may appear simplistic, one must remember that “sophistication is not the same as difficulty” (Soter and Connors 65). To truly understand and appreciate the degree of sophistication which exists in adolescent literature, one must study the genre through the same critical lens as any other piece of literature. Daniel Handler, writing under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket, offers a paramount example of the relationship between difficulty and sophistication. One simple passage from *The Slippery Slope*, the tenth book in A Series of Unfortunate Events, proves that, while adolescent literature may not fall into a range of high reading difficulty, the genre can offer a degree of literary sophistication on par with any piece of classical literature.

Throughout A Series of Unfortunate Events, Handler (or Snicket), utilizes a vast network of literary elements to enhance his seemingly simplistic prose with rich meaning. As a developing reader, one can begin to pick up on common rhetorical strategies such as simile,

metaphor, and various types of repetition; however, a more sophisticated, practiced reader can see that the same passage of text is packed with even greater complexity by noting a vast network of literary allusions and symbolism. Furthermore, those who have studied critical literary theory can further unpack Handler's text to discover underlying themes that echo these veins of literary theory. To study these layers of complexity, one may consider the following passage, taken from *The Slippery Slope*:

“When I was looking into the pit,” Klaus said quietly, “I was remembering something I read in a book by a famous philosopher. He said, ‘whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.’” Klaus looked at his sister, and then at the sight of Esmé approaching, and then at the weakened wood that the children had placed on the ground. “ ‘ Abyss’ is a fancy word for ‘pit,’ he said.” “We built an abyss for Esmé to fall into. That’s something a monster might do.” (273)

This passage clearly lacks in the traditional sense of difficulty; almost any reader could understand the denotative meaning of this text: the vocabulary is simplistic and Klaus even defines a term young readers may be unfamiliar with; nevertheless, it is clearly stuffed with complex, layered literary meaning.

The topmost layer of sophistication can be seen in the use of repetition. There are, within this passage, two forms of repetition: parallelism in sentence structure and alliteration. Parallel sentence structure is seen as Klaus' words are echoed by the accompanying explanatory prose: “ ‘when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.’ Klaus looked at his sister.” Alliteration quickly follows: “and then at the weakened wood.” By utilizing various forms of repetition back-to-back, Snicket communicates a sense of urgency. It is as if the reader is part of the scene, being forced to look back and forth between the elements of danger being described,

including the “weakened wood.” Snicket specifically draws the reader to this element of the setting; in doing so, he instills a deep-seated meaning through this specific imagery.

Highlighting this image of “weakened wood” through alliteration, one can consider a deeper layer of meaning. This “weakened wood” takes on the symbolic meaning of the Baudelaire’s internal ethical struggle: The “weakened wood” is the result of a fire, which left this lumber in a state of singed disrepair. The Baudelaires themselves, our primary characters in this series, are in their predicament as a result of a fire which left them homeless and orphaned. Covering the “abyss,” this “weakened wood” is associated with the thin layer which separates the Baudelaire’s from falling into a pit of monstrosity. In this way, the “weakened wood” acts as a symbol for the internal struggle the Baudelaires face in carrying out their plan, looking rapidly towards and away from the potential of choosing incorrectly, of becoming monsters themselves.

Clearly, the passage not only utilizes simplistic forms of rhetorical strategies, but these same elements build towards an even deeper, symbolic meaning; additionally, it must be noted that these images are rooted in literary allusion. The entire passage revolves around the quote Klaus attributes to a “famous philosopher” who he cannot remember. While one may easily understand the text without recognizing the source of this allusion, those who can identify its source are pulled further into the complexity of the text. The “famous philosopher” described here is, in fact, Nietzsche. It is with this allusion that the already sophisticated text can be further unpacked to reveal elements of literary theory. Nietzsche is associated with the shift into postmodern literary criticism: “Perhaps the greatest nineteenth century influence on literary theory came from the deep epistemological tradition of...Nietzsche: that facts are not facts until they have been interpreted” (“Literary Theory”). While not outwardly apparent in this passage

alone, Handler's work often echoes the ideas of post-modern literary critics who call the truth of language and its structure into question. One such thinker is Jacques Derrida.

Derrida is credited as the father of deconstructionism, which works to strip language of the arbitrary meaning history and culture have assigned to it, to critically evaluate meaning, all the while acknowledging, paradoxically, the impossibility of this task. Derrida asserts that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" in that "the paradox [of language] is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing. The opposition is part of the system, along with the reduction" (3-4). In the deconstructionist perspective, we must use this inherently flawed system of language, even though we understand that the "structure" can never truly be utilized due to its fluid, abstract nature. To deal with language, therefore, Derrida suggests that we, as literary critics, have a "critical responsibility" to go forward in our work to deconstruct this structure, even with the knowledge of the impossibility of this task (4). This complex ideology mirrors a literary strategy that is frequently utilized by Handler in A Series of Unfortunate Events, negative capability: the capacity to accept the inevitability of never truly knowing, which is clearly seen in the passage above from the *Slippery Slope*.

As discussed above, the passage describes the Baudelaires' inherent struggle to understand morality and ethics. Klaus states, "We built an abyss for Esmé to fall into. That's something a monster might do" (273). The siblings created the "abyss" to capture Esmé, a figure who the children view as monstrous, in the hopes of saving their own lives. They are clearly caught in an ethical dilemma, a dilemma which has no real answer. There will never be an answer, not for these characters, nor for the readers who are brought along on this journey. Just as the repetition of the passage pulls the reader into the action of the scene, the inherent ethical

ambiguity of the passage wills the reader to consider their own moral choices. In this way, the passage uses negative capability to appeal to readers on a universal level. Handler's frequent use of negative capability throughout the series creates a context of sophistication. The audience is forced into participation, into questioning the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil. The author breaks the structures of prescriptive morals and requires his readers to seriously consider what it means to be a "monster." Unlike children's literature, adolescent literature does not impose the trite, condescending structure of morality unto its readers; rather, the text works to echo the stages of adolescence itself: in this stage, and throughout adulthood, we must learn to make our own definitions of the world around us; we must answer for ourselves what it means to be good and what it means to be a "monster."

From one small passage of *The Slippery Slope*, one can discover a rich sophistication within the genre of adolescent literature. From simple literary devices, like repetition, to allusions to works of deeply complex literary theorists, like Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida, Daniel Handler/Lemony Snicket's writing works to prove the true literary merit that exists within adolescent literature. It is true that the language itself is simplistic: almost any reader can read this text and understand its meaning, yet it is also packed with meaning that can be observed, analyzed, and evaluated by highly developed readers. In this way, adolescent literature offers something to almost any reader. Due to this high degree of flexibility, it is time that we must assert its worth as real, legitimate literature; and as such, we must seek to use this genre in the most effective way possible. Owing to its anomalous flexibility, perhaps it is time we use adolescent literature to enhance the lives of the very audience which requires this flexibility: adolescents in the classroom. While being simplistic and sophisticated, adolescent literature may be the key to reaching all levels of learners, all levels of readers.

## Works Cited

- Brewton, Vince. "Literary Theory." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*. Iep.edm.edu. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. n.d. Web. 21 October 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Csudh.edu*. California State University, Dominguez Hills, n.d. Web. 21 October 2015.
- Hill, Craig. "Introduction: Young Adult Literature and Scholarship Come of Age." *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature*. Ed. Craig Hill. New York: Routledge, 2014. 1-24. Print.
- Soter, Anna O. and Sean P. Connors. "Beyond Relevance to Literary Merit: Young Adult Literature as 'Literature.'" *The ALAN Review* Fall 2009 (2009): 62-67. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 October 2015.