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The Shape Shifting Storyteller in Lemony Snicket's
A Series of Unfortunate Events

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Introduction

“If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book” (1). These are the opening words of Lemony Snicket’s *The Bad Beginning*, the first novel of thirteen in his book series for children, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. This opening line sets the tone of the series as dark and ominous and gives the reader an idea of what to expect of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as it follows the misadventures of the three Baudelaire orphans while travelling between different guardians after the death of their parents. The author of the series, Lemony Snicket, is a pseudonym used by Daniel Handler. Handler uses Snicket in order to participate in the same world that the Baudelaires inhabit.

The opening sentence cited above, despite from being rather gloomy, also introduces the ironic tone employed by the narrator throughout the series. The first novel in the series, *The Bad Beginning*¹, also introduces the narrator, Lemony Snicket, as a classic didactic narrator who takes every opportunity to explain difficult words and inform the reader of proper moral behaviour. However, in combination with the ironic playfulness and the fact that the explanations given are sometimes more humorous than they are correct, Snicket is immediately set apart from the traditional didactic narrator role of much children’s literature.

The conflicting image of the narrator (as both sincere and humorous at the same time) is further complicated as Snicket himself steps down from the role of narrator and becomes a character in the story. As he relates and reacts to the events occurring around the Baudelaires, the reader’s perception of Snicket as a reliable author is questioned and the line between character and narrator becomes blurred.

The aim of this essay is to explore the shifting identity of the narrator of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as the narrator changes back and forth from narrator to character. Using the appropriate narratological tools and concepts, such as ‘author’, ‘narrator’, ‘narration’ and ‘story-time’, this essay will show how the double identity of the narrator is characterized and how this affects the reader’s image of the narrator.

A brief description of the series along with a discussion of the narratorial concepts will form the first part of the essay. A study of Snicket as narrator, his narrative style, how he narrates on two levels and his narratological features will follow and part three

¹ Hereafter cited as *TBB*

will focus on Snicket as a character in the novels/series and how that affects his role as a narrator.

Plot background

After their house is burnt down and their parents killed in the fire, the Baudelaire siblings, Violet (fourteen years old), Klaus (a little older than twelve) and Sunny (an infant), become orphans. Due to legal reasons they are sent away to a distant relative, Count Olaf. The Count mistreats the children and tries to steal their fortune (which they will inherit when Violet becomes of age) by marrying Violet. When his attempts are foiled he flees, but in his escape he threatens that he will try and steal their fortune again.

In the following six novels, *The Reptile Room* (1999), *The Wide Window* (2000), *The Miserable Mill* (2000), *The Austere Academy* (2000), *The Ersatz Elevator* (2001) and *The Vile Village* (2001), a pattern is repeated: The Baudelaires are sent to stay at different relatives who act as their guardians. They soon realise that Count Olaf has followed them and, while in disguise, tries to kidnap them from their current guardian. When the Baudelaires recognize Count Olaf they try to warn the adults around them, but no one believes that the person in disguise is Count Olaf. This, almost always, results in murder and/or other heinous crimes.

The next five novels *The Hostile Hospital* (2003), *The Carnivorous Carnival* (2003), *The Slippery Slope* (2004), *The Grim Grotto* (2004) and *The Penultimate Peril* (2005), book eight to book twelve, all follow another pattern. *The Hostile Hospital* marks the start of this new pattern, in which the Baudelaires are no longer sent to stay with a guardian, but on the run accused of arson and murder. They still encounter more or less friendly persons who act as their guardians, even though they are not legally appointed guardians, as opposed to the guardians of the first seven novels who are legally appointed. Still on their trail, Count Olaf manages to foil every stable situation the Baudelaires find themselves in. It all culminates in the second-to-last instalment, *The Penultimate Peril* (2005), where nearly all of the surviving characters, both supporting and main characters from the previous novels, gather at a hotel. As the novel closes the hotel is burned to the ground and the Baudelaires leave together with Count Olaf.

The final novel, simply called *The End* (2006), is set on a remote island far away from where the rest of the story has been taking place. Most questions raised by the novels are answered and the story of the Baudelaire orphans comes to its end.

Narratological concepts

This section will deal with the narratological concepts that will be used to investigate and discuss Lemony Snicket's role as a narrator.

Story-time now VS narration now

In her dissertation, *Narratorial Commentary in the Novels of George Eliot*, Sara Håkansson describes different views on narrative in relation to time. A distinction is made between the 'now' of the story and the 'now' of the narrator. Håkansson refers to A. A. Mendilow who calls this 'story-time now' (that is the 'now' of the story) and 'narration now' (which is the 'now' of the discourse) (Håkansson, 19-20). The narrator and the reader occupy the same space in time, and are both observing the story, which can be paused by the narrator in order to comment on events. Håkansson writes: "Accordingly, narratorial commentary [...] occurs when the narrator halts story-time now, taking the reader into a narration-now sphere where he or she is invited into communication with the narrator" (20). This space, which Håkansson calls a narration-now sphere, is an ideal place for a didactic (teaching) narrator to explain and communicate his teachings, since it gives the reader a stronger feeling of participation. Switching from story-time now to narration now also switches the focus of the narrator so that the reader is now in focus as opposed to the main characters.

Many of the narrative elements that Lemony Snicket uses in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* occur outside of the ordinary story time. It will be shown that when Snicket comments on behaviour or explains hard words, he pauses story time and takes the reader (and himself) into a narration-now sphere in order to communicate his teachings more effectively.

Narrator and the various types of narrator roles

The two most common types of narrators are the **first person narrator** and the **third person narrator**. In a first person narration, the narrator is a character in the story that

experiences the events. Suzanne Keen writes in *Narrative Form* that “[...] the experiencing self is also the protagonist, or the central character” (36). However, a first person narrator does not have to be either the protagonist nor the central character, but can in fact also be a “[...] minor character who observes the action from the side” (Griffith, 38). Griffith further states that “[...]the [first person] narration is restricted to what one character *says* he or she observes” (Griffith, 38). This means that the reader cannot completely trust the first person narrator, since he or she is subjective and may choose what to tell and what to leave out. To complicate this a bit, Keen states that “[t]he use of pronoun alone does not make a first-person narration. Instead, first-person narration [...] indicates those narratives in which the narrator is also a character, where the narrator and characters coexist in the story world, *and* the narrator refers to himself or herself as ‘I’” (Keen, 36).

Unlike the first person narrator, the third person narrator is most often not a character in the story or part of the action, but rather someone who watches the events from the outside. It is possible to divide third person narration into two types, the **objective** third person narrator and the **omniscient** third person narrator. The objective third person narrator only describes what can be seen by the naked eye and can also be referred to as third person dramatic narrator, since the narrator can only narrate things that are audible or visible, much like if the narrator was watching a drama on stage. (Griffith, 38) The third person omniscient narrator, on the other hand, is able to see much more than the objective narrator. The omniscient narrator is able to enter the minds of the characters and can thus relate thoughts and feelings to the reader. What makes *A Series of Unfortunate Events* special is that it combines a third person narrator with a first person narrator in the same person. As will be seen below, Lemony Snicket is a third person omniscient narrator who, at times, is part of the action and thus a character as well as a first person narrator.

Lemony Snicket as a narrator

The narrator of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is Lemony Snicket. There is no doubt whatever about that. From the backside blurbs signed Lemony Snicket to the self-aware comments, it is an evident fact that no other person could be the narrator. Snicket's style and tone might seem gloomy at first, but it is filled with a somewhat strange sense of humour. Snicket often warns the reader of the gruesome and horrible tale that he is forced to narrate, and at numerous occasions he advises the reader to stop reading the novel and pick up something else. Snicket also includes references to completely nonsensical things and sometimes to other types of media. His irony and humour together with the gloomy atmosphere give the novels a unique tone.

When narrating, Snicket returns to three different narrative elements over and over again. Certain elements are recurring throughout all of the series and Snicket always uses the same expressions to deal with them when they appear. The narrative elements are Snicket's commentary on the things that Sunny says, on difficult words or phrases that are used and on behaviour and moral aspects of the story.

The first narrative element is the things that Sunny says. Sunny does not speak in regular words since she is only a toddler. The utterances Sunny makes are most often short in length, but translated by Snicket into long and sometimes complex sentences. While everyone else does not seem to understand what Sunny is saying, Sunny's siblings and Snicket seem to have no problem in understanding exactly what Sunny says. When Sunny says something it is almost constantly followed by the same sentence structure. Sunny's utterance is repeated and placed within quotation marks, followed by the phrase "which in this case probably means" or a variation of the same phrase with the same meaning, and lastly an explanation of what Sunny meant. For example, in *The Slippery Slope*², Sunny says "Goo goo," which Lemony then translates into "I'm going to pretend I'm a helpless baby, instead of answering your question" (*The Slippery Slope*, 185).

Not only do the short utterances that Sunny makes contain a lot of information; in some cases they also contain references to other books and authors. In these cases, the words Sunny uses are real words, and not made up gibberish. While the younger reader might understand that something Sunny has said is a real word, it often takes a more

² Hereafter cited as *TSS*

mature and more well-read reader to understand how to connect the uttered word or phrase with a reference and then connect it the context.

One example of how this referencing is done can be found in *TSS*. The Baudelaire siblings are discussing what to do next when Sunny says: “Godot”. Snicket translates the word into: “We don’t know where to go, and we don’t know how to get there” (*TSS*, 331). The word “Godot” is a reference to the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, in which the two main characters are waiting for a man named Godot who never arrives. The meaning of the play is open for interpretation, but the key components are the waiting and not knowing what to wait for. Snicket never mentions the play in his explanation of the word, but still manages to sum up an important part of it. Simply by stating that “Godot” means not knowing where to go and which road to take to get there, Snicket refers both to the title and the essence of the play. Snicket also captures that Sunny sees the future as filled with uncertainty, a feeling that is enhanced if the reader is familiar with *Waiting for Godot*.

TSS also contains another example of a reference found inside something Sunny is saying. When the Baudelaires and Quigley have to escape by travelling down the mountain, Sunny suggests that they travel by means of a sled. The word she uses for this is “Rosebud”, which Snicket provides the following translation for: “[...]which meant “In some situations, the location of a certain object can be much more important than being outnumbered,”[...]” (*TSS*, 321). The translation provided by Snicket does not mention the word sled, but suggests that they should flee rather than staying and being outnumbered, however, Sunny’s siblings and Quigley all sees this as a signal to leave the mountaintop they are currently on in the sled. The connection between the sled and Sunny’s utterance is instead found in the word “rosebud”. This word is a reference to Orson Welles’ film *Citizen Kane*, in which “Rosebud” is the name of the sled the main character had when he was a boy. A reader familiar with the film will be able to make the connection between the sled the Baudelaires and Quigley flee in and “rosebud”, while any other reader will just regard “rosebud” as another random word uttered by Sunny.

One example from the early novels can be found in *The Reptile Room*³, when Sunny utters the phrase “Divo soom?” (*TRR*, 90) after the death of Uncle Monty. An

³ Hereafter cited as *TRR*

explanation of the word is not provided by Snicket, or any other character, but “Divo soom” could be morphed into “Divo sum”, which is Latin for “being like a deity”. It is possible to link this statement to death, and that the dead Uncle Monty is now like a deity in that he occupies another realm of existence.

The End contains yet another example of references in what Sunny says. After a rather long discussion about a ring, described by the island’s facilitator, Ishmael⁴, who tells the Baudelaires of the number of people who have been owners of it, Sunny says: “Neiklot?”, which Snicket then translates into meaning “Why are you telling us about this ring?” (*The End*, 229). When reading “Neiklot” backwards, it spells out Tolkien; the writer who wrote *Lord of the Rings*.

As mentioned earlier, the references as such do not mean anything. It is not crucial to the plot whether or not the reader notices the references. The references will in some rare cases add a deeper meaning to something that Sunny has said, as in the example where *Waiting for Godot* is mentioned. A reader familiar with the play might interpret the situation as even more meaningless than a reader not familiar with the play, thus adding a little to the reading. In most cases, however, the references are only used as hints towards other works and will have a humorous effect on the reader who is able to detect them. Even though a younger reader might miss out on the references contained in Sunny’s sayings, they will probably not even notice the references in the first place. Since the references are mixed in together with a majority of words that are totally meaningless (and sometimes not even actual words), the less well-read reader will only see the words which are references as more occurrences of real words with no actual meaning.

As the series progresses Sunny begins to abandon her baby-gibberish more and more and starts using real, actual words. She still speaks in one-word sentences that usually are interpreted as quite long sentences, but this transition is none the less important. The amount of references in Sunny’s saying thus increases in the latter novels, while they are more hidden and much harder to decode in the earlier novels.

⁴ Throughout *The End*, Ishmael often repeats the phrase “Call me Ish” (*The End*, 55). This is a reference to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* that starts with the famous sentence “Call me Ishmael”. While Ishmael’s name is a reference, it is not contained either inside a statement made by Sunny, nor in a translation by Snicket, and thus not relevant to my discussion. It is, however, one of many intertextual references found in names and places in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

Throughout the series, Sunny is the youngest character, but at the same time the character who most often gives reference to things that only more mature readers might understand. This combination of advanced knowledge and only speaking in what could be called gibberish creates a paradox. The combination also gives Sunny, as a character, a humorous aspect, no matter what grim situation she might be faced with since she, in her nature as a character, is so double-sided.

A second recurring narrative element is when a less common or difficult word or phrase is used. Much like in the case with Sunny's utterances, the word or phrase is always repeated within quotation marks and followed by the phrase "[...] is a word/phrase which here means [...]", or a variation of this, and then an explanation of the word or phrase. The explanation provided by Snicket usually relates back to the context where the word was used, so that a hard word is explained by imagery relevant to the ongoing scene. Sometimes, when the word that needs to be explained has multiple meanings, Snicket provides the synonyms as counterexamples in his definition of the word⁵. The explanations of the words are always correct in the context, but the definitions do not always correlate with a dictionary. Snicket does not aim to teach the exact meaning of every hard word he chooses to use, but rather to give the reader an understanding of the word that might lead to the incorporation of that word or phrase into the reader's vocabulary. Snicket also employs the same method and pattern when explaining idiomatic expressions; fixed expressions with a figurative meaning.

For instance, when the word 'phantasmagorical' is used in *The Wide Window*⁶, Snicket writes "[...] and the orphans could not imagine who would want to buy such a phantasmagorical—the word “phantasmagorical” here means “all the creepy, scary words you can think of put together”—place” (*TWW*, 152). This definition of the word would not be found in any dictionary, as it is too informal and too vague. *Longmans Dictionary of Contemporary English* provides the following definition to 'phantasmagoria': “[...] a scene that is confused, changing, and strange, like something from a dream.” Whilst Snicket's explanation is not as precise as the explanation given in the dictionary, it is an explanation that he can be sure that everyone will understand.

⁵ “[...] the word “dumbly” here means “without speaking,” rather than “in a stupid way”[...]” (*TRR*, 86) and “The storm finally broke—the word “broke” here means “ended,” rather than “shattered” or “lost all its money”[...]” (*The Wide Window*, 150) are two examples of how Snicket includes synonyms in his explanations.

⁶ Hereafter cited as *TWW*

Sometimes the words explained are less complex. In these cases the explanations contain the more complex words, so that there is always a new phrase or word for the reader to learn, even if the explained word is a common word. In *TBB*, while the Baudelaires are shopping for groceries, Snicket writes:

[...] they purchased garlic, which is a sharp-tasting bulbous plant; anchovies, which are small salty fish; capers, which are flower buds of a small shrub and taste marvellous; and tomatoes, which are actually fruits and not vegetables as most people believe.
(*TBB*, 42)

Whilst the explanation of words such as garlic or tomatoes might be unnecessary, it fits with the humoristic tone that Snicket sometimes employs. In *The Hostile Hospital*⁷, while the Baudelaires are searching through a library of records in order to find “The Snicket File”, Snicket finds another opportunity to explain complex words. While searching for the file in various places (since it is not placed under S as it should be), many unusual terms and words are mentioned; each term marking the start or end of one section of dossiers. Not all terms mentioned on the names of dossiers are explained, but some of them are. For example; “Fin de siècle” which Snicket explains as “[...] a term for a time in history when a century is drawing to a close” and “fissle” which is described as “a fancy word for a rustling noise, like the one that continued to come from behind the locked door as the children looked frantically for Fire” (*THH*, 103-104) are two of the terms mentioned and explained⁸.

The third type of narrative element is when Snicket relates the ongoing events to his own life or his own opinions of moral behaviour. These are most often used as a way for Snicket to comment on morals and behaviour of the characters. Through the sharing of these anecdotes, the reader gets insight into the character Lemony Snicket, but more on this later. He often drops comments on the behaviour of the characters – and most often Snicket chooses to comment on the “bad” qualities of “evil” characters.

⁷ Hereafter cited as *THH*

⁸ Other terms explained are: “Snell’s Law”, which Snicket explains as “[a law] which states that a ray of light passing from one uniform medium to another produces an identical ratio between the sine of the angle of incidence and the sine of the angle of refraction [...]” (*THH*, 100) and “jacutinga” which Klaus knows to be “[...] a sort of gold-bearing iron ore found in Brazil” (*THH*, 102).

For instance; in *TWW*, while explaining that when someone replaces the first letters of a word with “S-C-H-M” they don’t care about that thing. Count Olaf, in the disguise of Captain Sham has said “Truth, schmuth” and to this Snicket comments: “But only a despicable person like Captain Sham wouldn’t care about the truth” (*TWW*, 186). Comments like “[l]eaving their dirty breakfast dishes behind, *which is not a good thing to do in general but perfectly acceptable in the face of an emergency [...]*” (*TRR*, 68, emphasis added) or “[...]began pounding on the table in strict rhythm, *which is an exceedingly rude thing to do*” (*TBB*, 50, emphasis added) also show that Snicket has opinions on how to behave.

By choosing to comment on moral behaviour, Snicket establishes himself as a didactic narrator. Children’s literature in general before the 19th century was entirely didactic in its nature, and most often intended to teach the readers something and not entertain them (children’s literature, *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*). *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* defines didactic literature as “[...] literature [...] intended to convey instruction and information” and as a word that is “[...] often used to refer to texts that are overburdened with instructive or factual matter to the exclusion of graceful and pleasing detail so that they are pompously dull and erudite”. It also states that some literature can be both didactic and entertaining at the same time (didactic, *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*). Lemony Snicket’s writing is both entertaining and didactic at the same time, and the primary didactic elements are his comments on manner and his teaching of vocabulary. These are often written with an ironic twist, which sets him apart from the classical didactic narrator, who most often “[...] impart[s] [...] “useful” information, frequently sugarcoated[sic] in narrative or dialogue” (children’s literature, *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*).

Sometimes, the narrative elements, Snicket’s translations of the things that Sunny says, his comments on difficult words or phrases and his comments on moral behaviour, occur together. A less common word might be used in the translation of what Sunny is saying, or to introduce an anecdote or comment or the explanation of yet another less common word. One of the prime example of this is the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch”, a phrase that is used in the latter half of *TRR* when the story reaches a point where the Baudelaires are acting separate from one another. After stating that Klaus begins to read, Snicket starts a new paragraph, clearly signalling the change in narrative

level, from the story-time now to the narration now. Further on, the tone Snicket uses is also different from his normal narrative tone, as he is in fact now addressing the reader directly instead of retelling the events of the story. Snicket writes:

It is now necessary for me to use the rather hackneyed phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch.” The word “hackneyed” here mean “used by so, so many writers that by the time Lemony Snicket uses it, it is a tiresome cliché.” “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” is a phrase used to link what is going on in one part of the story to what is going on in another part of the story, and it has nothing to do with cows or with horses or with any people who work in rural areas where ranches are, or even with ranch dressing, which is creamy and put on salads. Here, the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch” refers to what Violet was doing while Klaus and Sunny were in the Reptile Room. For as Klaus began his research in Uncle Monty’s library, and Sunny guarded the door with her sharp teeth, Violet was up to something I am sure will be of interest to you.” (*TRR* 127)

The very next paragraph begins with the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch” and then continues to narrate the story as usual. “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” is then used another two or three times more before the novel ends. The last time Snicket uses this expression he promises the reader “[...] that this is the last time that I will use the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch,” but I can think of no other way to return to the moment when [...]” (*TRR* 165)

The two examples above can also be seen as examples of Snicket’s unusual sense of humour. The humour involves references to things that are not relevant (for example the ranch dressing in the longer of the quotes) while still remaining very casual and reporting. Snicket could almost be considered a little bit unintelligent by including these totally unnecessary references, but they add to the contrasting image of him. On one hand he has a great deal of authority, he promotes the use of good language and speaks often of proper moral behaviour; while he, on the other hand, writes very silly things.

All these recurring narrative elements, from explaining what Sunny says and what the meaning of a difficult word is to comments on moral behaviour, occur outside the

regular story-time. The two quotations above are examples of how Snicket does this. The fact that he is almost apologetic towards the reader for using the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch”, shows that he has now left the ‘story-time now’, and entered ‘narration now’, in which he is free to provide longer explanations as the story is frozen. Apart from the risk of losing the interest of the reader, there are no limitations on how long Snicket’s side notes can be, since he no longer narrates on the same level as when he narrates the story. They are comments made by Snicket from where he is narrating. Snicket is able to “freeze” the story while explaining and adding his own anecdotes, all in order to make it easier for the reader to comprehend what is actually going on. Since he addresses the reader in what Håkansson calls a ‘narrative-now sphere’, he and the reader exist at the same time. The ‘narration-now sphere’ enables Snicket to exist in the now that the story is read. The narrative itself will always remain in the past, but Snicket’s commentary always occurs in the present of the reader.

Not only in the three typical narrative elements does Snicket include references and humour. Also outside, in character dialogue or in names, Snicket’s humour can be seen. One typical example of this can be found in *TBB*. While the Baudelaires are travelling to meet Count Olaf for the first time, Mr. Poe explains to them who they will be staying with. Immediately before the following quotation, Klaus asks Mr. Poe how Count Olaf is related to the Baudelaire family.

Mr. Poe sighed and looked down at Sunny, who was biting a fork and listening closely. “He is either a third cousin four times removed, or a fourth cousin three times removed. He is not your closest relative on the family tree, but he is the closest geographically. That’s why –“ (*TBB*, 15)

While a young reader might actually find this mix-up of kinship funny, it takes some knowledge of the different definitions of ‘close’, and also knowledge of the expression ‘closest relative’ along with a general sense of kinship to fully appreciate the humour.

Another example of Lemony Snicket’s humorous references can be found in *TRR*. At one point in the book, Snicket mentions “the Virginian Wolfsnake” and that it should not ever be let near a typewriter” (*TRR*, 36). For anyone not familiar with the writer Virginia Woolf, the “Virginian Wolfsnake” could be a real snake from the state of

Virginia. It is mentioned in the context of other made-up names of snakes (the other's lacking literary reference) and it is a hint to the erudite reader that will not bother the less erudite reader.

Snicket's humour is also reflected in other ways. Chapter five in *The Carnivorous Carnival*⁹ deals with the concept of "déjà vu". The first page of this chapter (*TCC*, 101 and 103) is printed twice, with minor alterations the second time. In *TRR*, Snicket repeats the word "ever" 209 times when telling the reader to "never, ever [...] fiddle around in any way with electric devices." (*TRR*, 155). These two examples show Snicket's odd sense of humour.

What makes Lemony Snicket so special as a narrator is not only the narrative elements that he repeatedly uses, but also the fact that he mixes third and first person narratives. When narrating the Baudelaire story he is a traditional third person omniscient narrator. He never actually retells any thoughts, but he often states how a person is feeling at the moment. This, along with the returning comments that he knows how the story will end, makes it clear that Snicket is omniscient in his narrator role. However, when the 'story-time now' is broken and the 'narrative now' entered, the reader is faced with much more than just a third person narrator. Snicket constantly refers to his own life. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is narrated by both a first person narrator and a third person narrator who are in fact one and the same person. Most of the narrating is done through the third person narrative, but when Lemony Snicket acts as a character and when he shares his very subjective views on the events he is narrating, he becomes a first person narrator.

When narrating the novels, Snicket seems to address two different types of readers; younger readers and older readers. Whilst the suspense and adventure will appeal to both younger and older readers, some of the humour that Snicket uses is clearly aimed at the more well read audience that can be found in the group of older readers. The more well read reader will pick up on details and references that the younger reader will not. The narrative itself, with young persons as main characters also indicates that the target audience are younger readers. Even though ironically, Lemony Snicket states in *TRR* that "If this were a book written to entertain small children, you know what would happen next" (*TRR*, 175), there might lie some truth in this statement. Even though *A*

⁹ Hereafter cited as *TCC*

Series of Unfortunate Events is published by Harper Collin Children's Books, they may appeal to readers of any age. The editors Margaret Meek et. Al quotes C.S. Lewis who once wrote that "the sorting out of books into age groups, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers" (*The Cool Web*, 145), and this also applies to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Even though some evidence point towards it being a series for children, it is also possible for readers of any age to find something in the series.

Snicket's use of irony, the way that he uses didactic elements in his narrating, how he addresses two different types of readers and his constant referring back to his own experiences makes him a very unreliable narrator. Even though he starts out seeming very reliable in his traditional third person omniscient narrator role, the more the reader finds out about him and how he narrates, the less confidence the reader will have in him. Since he is also a character, coexisting with the main characters in his narrative, we can be sure that he has own motives.

Lemony Snicket as a character

Many of the elements that make Lemony Snicket an untrustworthy narrator help in creating a vivid and interesting character. A man who is very interested in language and who is investigating the lives of three orphans is a very intriguing character. There are, however, some instances when Snicket steps out of his role as a narrator and becomes a character.

Since Lemony Snicket is a pseudonym for Daniel Handler, this means that Snicket is just a name made up by Handler. The distinction between the actual characters of the narrative and the narrator thus becomes smaller as Handler has invented his narrator just as much as he has invented his other characters. Snicket becomes the voice through which Handler tells the story. Handler, while being the real author of the series, is at the same time completely separated from the narrator and the pseudonym. In this way, Lemony Snicket is yet another character invented by Handler.

Every novel in the series is dedicated to a woman named Beatrice. Through the two lines of text following “For Beatrice”, for example “When we met, my life began. Soon afterward, yours ended” (*The Ersatz Elevator*, v), “Dead women tell no tales. Sad men write them down” (*The Grim Grotto*, vii) or “No one could extinguish my love, or your house” (*The Penultimate Peril*, v), we learn that Lemony has loved Beatrice and that Beatrice has perished in a fire. In *The End* it is revealed that Beatrice was the mother of the Baudelaires and that before she met the Baudelaire father, she and Lemony Snicket were in love and a couple. Lemony refers to Beatrice and how they loved each other in all of the thirteen books, and in *The Penultimate Peril*¹⁰, Count Olaf claims that Beatrice and Lemony were involved in the murder of his parents. Since Lemony loved the Baudelaire children’s mother, he can be said to coexist with the Baudelaires.

The seventh book in the series, *The Vile Village*¹¹, marks the first time Snicket really becomes a part of the same universe as the Baudelaires. Up until this book he has narrated the Baudelaires tale and from time to time provided information about himself through examples and anecdotes. *TVV* however introduces Lemony Snicket’s brother. Whilst stating several times that he is investigating the lives of the Baudelaire orphans and that he has visited many of the places they also visit, this time someone related to

¹⁰ Hereafter cited as *TPP*

¹¹ Hereafter cited as *TVV*

him makes an appearance. Jacques only introduces himself as Jacques, but when speaking to Duncan Quagmire after that Jacques has been killed, the Baudelaires learn that “His full name,[...] is Jacques Snicket.” (*TVV*, 222) and that “Jacques Snicket is the brother of a man who—“(*TVV*, 222). Snicket does not seem to react in any way to the death of his brother, but on the other hand Lemony does not react very strongly to anything. In *TSS*, Snicket mentions his sister for the first time, by “hiding” a letter to her inside the novel. The letter begins in the middle of a sentence and is hidden under the presumption that “[...]even the most melancholy and well-read people in the world have found my account of the lives of the three Baudelaire children even more wretched than I [Lemony Snicket] had promised, and so this book will stay on the shelves of libraries, utterly ignored, waiting for you to open it and find this message.”(*TSS*, 100-101). In the last two novels, *TPP* and *The End*, Kit Snicket becomes an important character, who features prominently in the narrative. The inclusion of his own two siblings shows that he is part of the same universe as the Baudelaires.

Other information that shows that Lemony Snicket is a character can be found in *THH*. In the novel a photography depicting four persons is described. One of them is Jacques Snicket, two of them are the Baudelaire parents, but the fourth one is someone the Baudelaires do not recognise. The person is described as “[...] a man who was turned away from the camera, so the children could not see his face, only one of his hands, which was clutching a notebook and pen, as if the obscured man were a writer of some sort” (*THH*, 108). This description matches the photo featured on the second to last page in every novel where the author and the illustrator are presented. The photo always depicts a man in hat and suit, turned away from the camera so that his face is not visible.

A similar scene can be found in *TPP*. This time however, Snicket interacts with the Baudelaire orphans. A taxi driver, described as “[...]a tall, skinny figure[...]"(*TPP*, 244) approaches the Baudelaires and asks if the three of them are in need of a taxi. They converse for a while and Snicket, the narrator, describes this in the same manner that he would describe any conversation. The description of the taxi driver again matches the pictures of Lemony Snicket at the end of each novel, as well as the illustration of the taxi driver on page 237. A few pages after their conversation, Snicket goes into great detail describing the objects inside the taxi and states that “I do know

who the man was, and I do know where he went afterwards” (*TPP*, 251). While still described from Snicket, the narrator’s point of view, there is much evidence that points to that the taxi driver and Lemony Snicket are one and the same.

A distinct feature in the world of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is the secret organization V.F.D. in which almost every major character is involved. The codes and symbols used by V.F.D. can be found among all of the Baudelaire’s guardians and among the villains (most notably, Count Olaf’s tattoo of an eye) and even Lemony Snicket is a member. Due to events not known to the reader, a schism occurred that split the organization into two (now conflicting sides): one side whose members start fires and one side whose members are committed to putting out fires. What the abbreviation “V.F.D.” stands for is never explained fully as many different explanations are given. “Volunteer Fire Department” is however one of the many suggestions that the Baudelaire siblings come across in the novels. The fact that the narrator of the series is a member of one of the sides of a conflicting organization could not be considered reliable. When reading the novels, the reader will gradually receive more information about “V.F.D.” in the same rate as the Baudelaires uncover it. Snicket’s membership also gives his character an underlying objective in narrating the stories, giving him the perfect opportunity to depict the other side in a bad light.

His characteristics as a narrator affects the image of the character, but as the character is presented further and Snicket’s motives explained, his own background and values also affect the image of the narrator. By making Snicket into a person with his own agenda and feelings, and not only letting him narrate the story, Handler manages to nuance the scale between good and evil. Events described and accusations made by Snicket in the earlier novels have to be looked at in the light of Snicket’s unreliability. This makes the narrator less trustworthy, but at the same time creates a much more realistic character.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that Lemony Snicket, the narrator of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, is both a third person and first person narrator at the same time as he is a character. This creates a complex narrative situation in which the reader will never be certain whether the character or the narrator is speaking and expressing judgement on characters and actions.

Lemony Snicket has all the traits of a classic third person narrator. However, if we accept Keen's definition of a first person narrator as a narrator who coexists with the characters of the story world and refers to him or herself as "I", then Lemony Snicket is without a doubt a first person narrator. Even though he only interacts on rare occasions with the Baudelaires, he is as much of a character as anyone else in the series of novels. Due to the fact that the first novels do not feature Lemony Snicket as a character, the only good definition of his role as a narrator is dual: both first and third person narrator applies. Snicket also uses a didactic storytelling with humour and irony contained within pauses of the main narrative. The combination of grim and dark humour with didactic elements sets him apart from much traditional didactic storytelling.

By blurring the line between first person and third person narration as well as between narrator and character, Lemony Snicket's relationship to the reader becomes unique. While he seems trustworthy at first, his involvement in the story and the blurring of concepts makes him hard to define. The image first presented of an objective narrator becomes impossible to trust, as Snicket's background and motives are explained. Him being a character makes him unreliable and the reader is led to question what really is the truth, and might even find out that the distinction between good and evil is not as clear as the distinction between black and white.

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Every episode of Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events begins by imploring viewers not to watch it. "Look away, look away," warns the opening title song, performed by star Neil Patrick Harris and co-written by Daniel Handler, a.k.a. the "cereal" Lemony Snicket who wrote the book series that inspired the Netflix one, premiering Friday on the streaming network. "This show will wreck your evening, your whole life and your day. Every single episode is nothing but dismay. So look away." Harris is also a pretty perfect fit as Count Olaf. While Jim Carrey made the shape-shifting money grubber imposing and odd in the film, Harris turns him into more of a menacing creature of the theater. He's a gaslighting narcissist with an entourage of minions and an extensive costume department.