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**CHILDHOOD AND A CULTURE OF FEAR
IN LEMONY SNICKET'S *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS***

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Abstract

This article is an excerpt from an undergraduate thesis of the same title which focuses on *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, a children's book series by Lemony Snicket. This thesis explores how a culture of fear shapes childhood, which is represented in the series. By using qualitative textual analysis the research discusses how the series represent the way childhood is shaped by a culture of fear through the depiction of various characters and social institutions in the novels. This research also explores the author's attempts in challenging the notion that children are vulnerable by analyzing the Baudelaires' identity and vulnerability. Results suggest that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* demonstrates ambivalence in the perception of childhood. Social institutions that should create a safe space for children tend to further perpetuate the culture of fear for them. Furthermore, children's vulnerability is often taken advantage of by adults for their own interests. Results also suggest that for children, their childhood is shaped by a culture of fear that is created and maintained by adults.

Keywords: *culture of fear; childhood; children's literature; children's identity and vulnerability*

1. Introduction

The twentieth century functions with an underlying sense of fear pervading the society. This sense of uneasiness can be attributed to what sociologist Frank Furedi calls a 'culture of fear', which is "a culture that is anxious about change and uncertainty, and which continually anticipates the worst possible outcome" [Furedi 2007, 6]. Fear in contemporary society is a social and cultural phenomenon, not merely an emotion experienced by the individual. This culture of fear is ingrained into all levels of society, including childhood. One such effect is that many decisions made with children's best interests in mind are also informed by a culture of fear. Childhood itself is defined as "a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation" [UNICEF n.d.]. One of the things that differentiate modern childhood with previous eras is the involvement of the state in ensuring that children have a safe and fulfilling childhood. The high involvement of the state is due to the increasing focus that childhood is about children's welfare. Social conditions of the twentieth century contributed to the fact that the current American society is a very fear-averse, child-centered society [Stearns 2008].

This research analyzes Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), a children's book series that explores fear and the maltreatment of children as its main theme. The series follow a common pattern in children's literature of having children thrown into dreadful situations, but it stands apart from the genre because the series does not provide the traditional happy ending for the child protagonists. In thirteen books, Lemony Snicket (pen name of Daniel Handler) narrates the story of the Baudelaire orphans in finding a new home. Violet Baudelaire was 14, Klaus was 12, and Sunny was just a baby when their parents died in a mysterious house fire. They are passed from one relative to another, and encounter mischief and villainy as they are pursued by Count Olaf, a distant relative who covets their fortune. By the end of the series, the Baudelaires find themselves alone on a deserted island, ultimately abandoned by the adults who should have taken care of them. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* may defy the conventional happy ending in children's literature, but it also provides an interesting subject to examine the children characters' responses in high-risk situations, especially regarding child and adult relationships in a culture of fear. Thus, this research explores the representation of a childhood fraught with fear that is presented in the series. The way that Violet, Klaus and Sunny interact with their misfortunes is a cause for consideration, as theirs is a world that is plagued by fear, a world in which calamity after calamity befalls them. In this research, further mention of the narrator will refer to Lemony Snicket, while mentions of the author of the books will refer to Daniel Handler.

Few researchers have addressed the issue of how the culture of fear has shaped childhood. Research by Franklin and Cromby (2009) explores how the culture of fear affects parenting and childhood. Based on focus group discussions, they concluded that the concept of a culture of fear can be used to understand why there is a discrepancy between the prevalent sense of fear in society and the reality of risks that children face [Franklin and Cromby 2009, 174]. Meanwhile, in terms of research on *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and how it relates to the theme of fear, several notable studies include researches by Bullen (2008) and Blettner (2005) who discuss adversity and mourning in the series, respectively. Bullen's research on the representations of adversity within *A Series of Unfortunate Events* through its narrative style resulted in the conclusion that the self-awareness of the series is a model for how children could empower themselves in a risk society. Meanwhile, Blettner uses a psychological framework to analyze the series from a Kleinian perspective to discover how child readers could use the book to cope with psychological issues, including fear. Both Bullen and Blettner claim that despite the darkness, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can help young readers deal with real-life tragedy, as the Baudelaires' optimism and resilience become an outlet and serve as a model to deal with real-life hardship.

With this in mind, this research aims to inspire further discussion on the modern childhood experience. Using qualitative textual analysis, I explore how a culture of fear shapes childhood as represented in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by examining the depiction of adult characters and social institutions in the novels. Furthermore, this research examines the role of a culture of fear in shaping children's identity and vulnerability, and how the Baudelaires' identity challenges the notion of children as a vulnerable group.

2. The Culture of Fear

The term 'culture of fear' has been used by Furedi (2007) to refer to "a culture that is anxious about change and uncertainty, and which continually anticipates the worst possible

outcome" [Furedi 2007, 6]. He describes fear as having a "free-floating dynamic", as relating one fear with another can amplify the fear of both, and a standalone threat can attach itself to any area of life to make fear of that thing even greater [6]. The jump from an ordinary event leading to a possible worst-case scenario happens because cause and effect are seen through a lens of fear. In other words, this "crisis of causality" is largely in part due to fear being normalized, and people emoting fear to work through their experiences [6]. It is also impossible to discuss fear without mentioning risk, as these two terms are closely related and are often used interchangeably [6]. Furedi states that "through risk management, fear is institutionalized and the fear response is further encouraged and culturally affirmed" [5].

Altheide (2002) proposed that "fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit" [as cited in Furedi 2007, 2]. Furedi then uses this statement to explain how fear is not just "something natural or purely psychological", but that there is human interest behind it [2]. One reason for this fearmongering is that it is profitable. When "purely theoretical risks are over-analyzed and presented as genuine threats to life", it is not difficult to imagine a string of products marketed trying to stamp out those fears [Franklin & Cromby 2009, 162].

Furthermore, in a culture of fear children are automatically considered as a group that is 'at risk', or vulnerable. Frankenberg, Robinson and Delahooke (2000) state that this is due to their "perceived immaturities" and is "recognizable through their beliefs and actions, or [through] their appearance" [as cited in Furedi 2007, 7]. To be 'at risk' is not just a status that is assigned to an individual, but it includes whole groups of people, as it "clearly assigns to the individual a passive and dependent role. ... Someone defined as being at risk is seen to exist in a permanent condition of vulnerability" [7]. Vulnerability had become a way to describe the "inherent condition of [the] individual" [7]. The effect of being deemed as a vulnerable group is that the individual will start to normalize fear. Furedi (2007) calls this "deflation of the status of human subjectivity [as opposed to] the inflation of the threat that external forces pose to the individual self" [8]. In other words, the individual belonging to a certain vulnerable group may amplify the risk that they face due to their assumed "impotence". This implies that the identity of being vulnerable is considered a negative effect of the culture of fear.

3. Shaping Childhood in a Culture of Fear

As the culture of fear envelopes all levels of society, childhood is in no way free from the effects that this heightened anxiety has, whether immediately on themselves or through adults. This section discusses how *A Series of Unfortunate Events* represents the way childhood is shaped by a culture of fear through the depiction of adult characters and the social institutions in the novels. The analysis will be done by examining the various institutions, including the law, school, village, the media, as well as adult guardians, as they are the aspects that maintain a culture of fear for the Baudelaire family.

3.1 Adults and Social Institutions: Perpetuating a Culture of Fear

Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire are stripped of their comfort and privileges when they become orphans. The executor of their parents' will, Mr. Poe, repeatedly fail to put the children into good homes as their subsequent guardians are mostly neglectful. Circumstances

often led to what Furedi (2002) calls a crisis of trust, “where adults and children are unsure [of] who they can rely on” [as cited in Franklin and Cromby 2009, 164]. The Baudelaires, who are characterized as good, well-meaning children often find themselves in peril with no adult that they can count on for help. Most importantly, the children’s dependence on adults is what puts them in harm’s way. The following section explores the social establishments in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* that, instead of creating a safe space for children, manage to perpetuate the culture of fear even further.

3.1.1 Partiality of the Law

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the law is inconsistent in the way it views childhood. Depending on the context, the meaning of the word “child” often seems to change, depending on whose need is being served. For instance, on the one hand the Baudelaires are deemed too young to manage their inheritance, but on the other hand they are considered mature enough to be put on trial alongside an adult. Children are defined, managed and silenced by the law, and they are powerless against it. The law, it seems, cater to the needs of adults instead of children. These laws were made with children’s best interest and are meant to ensure their welfare in case they become orphaned; however, there is a discrepancy between the adults who created the system with the children that they are trying to protect. Despite these laws being informed by the prevalent culture of fear and intending to minimize risk factors, upon closer reading it is apparent that these laws actually sustain a culture of fear for the children. Using several examples in which the Baudelaires encounter the law, I will explore how the novels represent the way the law perpetuates a culture of fear.

First of all, the Baudelaires are primarily affected by inheritance laws, as their parents’ will state that the Baudelaires are to live with a relative, and they are also prevented from accessing their family fortune until Violet comes of age. These are due to the idea about childhood based on assumptions about what children are supposedly lacking: the ability to care for themselves. In the care of their new guardians, the children often find themselves in distressing situations. The one person that should have been able to help them, Mr. Poe, fails to do so. For example, when the children had Count Olaf as their guardian, Mr. Poe dismissed their pleas for help because Count Olaf was acting *in loco parentis*, meaning that “[Olaf] may raise [the Baudelaires] using any methods he sees fit” [Snicket 1999a, 66]. This represents what happens when children’s rights are in conflict with parental rights.

However, problems do not only stem from the individual guardians, but also from the rigidity of the system that is initially intended to protect children. Mr. Poe is too rigid in implementing the instructions of the will, leaving no room for negotiation, which further puts the children in a culture of fear. For example, Mr. Poe declines Justice Strauss’s offer to become the Baudelaires’ guardian because their parents’ will states that they ““must be adopted by a relative”” [Snicket 1999a, 160]. The novel’s criticism of the law’s inflexibility is shown when, after being denied to live with Justice Strauss, the Baudelaire children only meet misery with their subsequent guardians.

Even though Mr. Poe acknowledged that the law is flawed [Snicket 2000a, 88-89], he still dismissed the Baudelaires’ uneasiness and doesn’t consider their needs, further emphasizing the rigidity of the law. The law and Mr. Poe’s rigidity is in accordance with what Monk (2009) calls the “‘neutral’ best interests of children” [178], referring to the fact

that often in law when children are being referred to, the emphasis is on the action that is being done for them, instead of considering their individual needs.

Furthermore, the law shows partiality towards adults when there is a conflict of interest between children's rights and parental rights. For example, when Violet is tricked into marrying Olaf in *The Bad Beginning* (1999), at 14-years-old she is still underage. However, as her legal guardian at the time, Olaf gave permission for Violet to marry himself. Not only is this a blatant abuse of power, but this manipulation of a loophole also presents incestuous undertones since Count Olaf is her father figure. Even though the prerequisite for a guardian's permission was made to ensure the protection of the child, when a parent's interests clashes with a child's wellbeing, it is the adult that will win. The adults present during the ceremony, including Mr. Poe, were helpless to stop the wedding because everything was done according to the law.

The realm of youth justice also shows partiality towards adults as it focuses on delivering justice instead of ensuring welfare for children. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaires are put on trial alongside Olaf, a full-grown man. The High Court interprets the term "justice is blind" literally to emphasize that the High Court doesn't differentiate between bringing justice to adults and children. In the field of law, the complexity of youth justice is based on the concern for either justice or welfare [Monk 2009]. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, since the court doesn't take into account the reasons or the situations that caused the Baudelaires to do those things, it can be seen that the court is committed to serve justice instead of ensuring children's welfare. The Baudelaires relied on the High Court's verdict to decide if they were guilty or not.

The Baudelaires depended on the law to bring justice and keep them safe, but it repeatedly failed them. First of all, the rigidity in following their parents' will kept putting them in dangerous situations when they are placed in the care of strangers. Second, a child's wellbeing is considered less than an adult's interest, as can be seen when Olaf was able to give permission for Violet to marry himself. On one hand, they are protected by the law. On the other hand, when they were put on trial, they were treated like adults, instead of being guided and corrected as children should. In the eyes of the law, children are represented by an adult, such as Mr. Poe. Being represented by an adult further emphasizes that children are silenced and does not have a voice in the eyes of law. Through *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, it can be seen that the law and legal system creates a culture of fear for children because it doesn't take what they want into account, instead going by what the adults think is best for the children. When adults don't understand children's needs due to a communication gap, then their needs are not met. In other words, the law cannot operate as naturally for children because they don't have a voice.

3.1.2 Child-Centered Social Institutions

Despite being constructed as places that should be safe for children, child-centered social institutions affirm that in a culture of fear, even established institutions cannot be counted on to provide a safe environment, despite being created for the best interests of children. To begin with, social hierarchies and an environment that breeds prejudice in schools means that children cannot escape from being bullied, whether from their peers or from adults (teachers) who abuse their power. At Prufrock Preparatory, the Baudelaires are discriminated against for being orphans. Not only are the Baudelaires taunted by other

students, but they are also relegated to live at the abysmal Orphan Shack because they are orphans. Prufrock is also susceptible to loopholes, because the security system that is supposed to keep villains out of the school is unable to stop if the villains are the teachers themselves. Count Olaf is able to enter the school under the disguise of a teacher, and Vice Principal Nero also takes advantage of the students.

The Village of Fowl Devotees further emphasizes that even communities that are centered on the child can perpetuate a culture of fear for children. The Village of Fowl Devotees adopts the Baudelaires and “the entire town of V.F.D. [Village of Fowl Devotees] will act as guardian over [the] children because it takes a village to raise a child” [Snicket 2001b, Chapter 2, para. 56]. The idea of communal childrearing adapted by the Village of Fowl Devotees presents an alternative to traditional childrearing in an individualized society, as it challenges the assumption that parents cannot trust other adults to take care of their children due to a crisis of trust as suggested by Furedi (2002) and Franklin and Cromby (2009). However, this communal childrearing ultimately fails because the villagers take advantage of the Baudelaires by making them do the villagers’ chores. Furthermore, the mob mentality that works within the villagers only further put the Baudelaires in harm’s way.

3.1.3 Adult Guardians

Besides social institutions, individual adults can also create a culture of fear for children. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaires’ adult guardians continually put them in harmful situations because they either take advantage of children or lack the capacity to raise them. There are several instances when the Baudelaires are taken advantage of by adults because they are considered to lack power or that they have something of value. Throughout the series, several times the Baudelaires become a commodity because adults think they have economic value. This can be seen when the Baudelaires are employed at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill because the owner assumes that children don’t have to be paid properly for their work, or when the Village of Fowl Devotees assume that the Baudelaires would do the villagers’ chores in exchange for being adopted. Olaf adopting the Baudelaires is also another example of adults taking advantage of children for their economic value, because Olaf expects that by being their father, he is entitled to the Baudelaires’ inheritance. Esme Squalor also takes advantage of the Baudelaires to increase her social status, as orphans were “in” at the time Esme adopted the Baudelaires.

The above examples are of adults taking advantage of children for negative reasons. However, the imbalance of power between adults and children mean that even though the intentions are good, adults can still take advantage of children, such as when the Volunteer Fire Department enlist the Baudelaires as spies because children are apparently less noticeable. V.F.D. acknowledges that children are often dismissed by adults, and so they use that to their advantage. The way that adults consistently take advantage of the Baudelaires emphasize the power relation between them.

Besides taking advantage of children, adults can also create a culture of fear because they are portrayed as having no capabilities in child-rearing. For example, Aunt Josephine’s phobias are debilitating, as she “[is] more concerned with grammatical mistakes than with saving the lives of [the Baudelaires]” [Snicket 2000a, 58]. The Baudelaires should be the ones who are afraid, but through the character of Aunt Josephine, Handler explores how fear is paralyzing. The novels criticize how society is paralyzed by fear through the depiction of

Aunt Josephine, even though most of her fears fall under the category of “irrational fears” [Snicket 2000a, 34].

Furthermore, when adults conspire for their own interests, children's welfare is often sacrificed. This is shown through how the different systems interact with each other, such as the cooperation between Esme Squalor and *The Daily Punctilio's* reporter to gain information from each other by sacrificing the Baudelaires' wellbeing.

In short, despite not being malicious on purpose, some of the guardians failed the Baudelaires because they neglect the children in various ways. Through *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, it can be seen that adulthood and childhood are often on opposing ends. Adults can cause a culture of fear when they abuse and take advantage of children. In each book, the children are placed in different homes, and despite encountering difficulties from Olaf who tries to enter their homes, their new guardians often have a direct effect on their misfortune.

3.2 Fearmongering by the Media

Besides the mistrust of strangers, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* uses the media to show how fearmongering operates in a culture of fear. The “murder” of Count Olaf that was framed on the Baudelaires is reported by *The Daily Punctilio*, where the newspaper falsely presented them as criminals. The Baudelaires then spend the remainder of the series being on the run from authorities and being identified as criminals. Although fearmongering by the media affects all levels of society, the media's partiality towards adults is the reason why it creates and maintains a culture of fear that is specifically for children, which will be further explained below.

The media's partiality towards adults can be seen as it takes advantage of the children as a source of financial gain. The newspaper uses sensationalist headlines and misinformation to perpetuate stereotypes of delinquents as a form of fearmongering. As a result, when children are painted as delinquents, it causes fear in adults. From this, we can see that the media not only affects children, but also affects adults, and this is one form of “stranger danger”. Furthermore, there is a duality of painting children as innocent or devilish. That media is partial to adults can be seen in the way that it paints children as The Other. *The Daily Punctilio* uses sensational headlines that blows events out of proportions and has a tendency to report false information, such as when they reported the Baudelaires as being “notorious murderers” and “bloodthirsty children” [Snicket 2005, Chapter 3, para. 31]. The Baudelaires are misrepresented as delinquents, which does not go hand-in-hand with the children's abilities to cause mayhem. *The Daily Punctilio's* article framing the Baudelaires and Count Olaf as villains and victims is in accordance with Altheide's (2002) statement that “fear... is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit” [as cited in Furedi 2007, 2]. In other words, *The Daily Punctilio* plays an active role in fearmongering because it is profitable.

The media's partiality towards adults can also be seen through the reception of *The Daily Punctilio's* intended audience – it is adults who believe the contents of the newspaper. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, most of the adults believe in everything the newspaper says and are easily filled with fear, compared to the Baudelaires who are more critical of the content.

However, the author Daniel Handler challenges the media's power in the form of the name of the newspaper: *The Daily Punctilio*. The meaning of the word "punctilio" implies attention to detail and correctness in conveying something ["Punctilio" n.d.], which is not displayed by *The Daily Punctilio*. This contradiction between the name of the publication and its content is one way that Handler attempts to challenge the power of the media, and to suggest to readers that they should be more critical when engaging with the media. Furthermore, he shows the idiocy of the adults who believe the news immediately, and who must be given explicit instruction on how to behave.

Thus, it can be seen that the media plays a role in perpetuating a culture of fear through fearmongering by using sensationalist headlines, misinformation and perpetuating stereotypes about delinquents. It can be seen that the media, made by adults, is actually created for adults as the sensationalism it uses to depict the Baudelaires is in accordance with Other-ing children, placing them as wild and separate from the order of adulthood. The media's treatment of children is one aspect of how childhood is shaped by a culture of fear.

4. Challenging the Notion of Children as a Vulnerable Group

One aspect of a culture of fear is that it has shaped the identity of being vulnerable. Children are a category that are deemed inherently vulnerable because of their assumed dependence on adults. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaires find themselves in dangerous situations because they are "at risk", both as children and as orphans. The adults' construction of childhood is based on children's assumed dependence for adult guardians, which emphasizes that children are inherently vulnerable. This section explores the Baudelaire's identity and vulnerability, both as it is perceived by adults and by the Baudelaires themselves. To do that, the discussion will begin by exploring the adult characters' perception of the Baudelaires' vulnerability. Later, I will examine how the Baudelaires identify themselves, by referring to their moments of vulnerability. I will also analyze Snicket's attempts of challenging the notion of children as a vulnerable group.

4.1 Adult Construction of Children as a Vulnerable Group

The adult characters in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*' insistence on perceiving the Baudelaires as children and orphans enforce the idea that they are vulnerable, which is in accordance with the notion that children's "perceived immaturities" are the reason that they are constructed as a vulnerable group [Frankenberg, Robinson and Delahooke 2000, as cited in Furedi 2007, 7]. This can be seen through the insistence that the Baudelaires must always have an adult guardian. This is so that they can always be under watch, under instruction and under protection. This unequal power relation is evident when the Baudelaires volunteer at the Heimlich Hospital, as their boss, Babs, believed that since "children should be seen and not heard" the opposite also applies: "[adults] should be heard and not seen" [Snicket 2001c, 58]. It is assumed that children's dependence and immaturity mean that they need to be constantly watched, while at the same time they do not have a voice because they are "not [to be] heard". This clearly aligns with what Furedi says about people 'at risk' being assigned "a passive and dependent role" [Furedi 2007, 7]. On the other hand, adults have a voice and their power allows them to not be under watch. Children's lack of voice imply that they are less trustworthy than adults, and that they may be a nuisance. This is one of the reasons why

they are seen to be vulnerable, as their lack of morality makes them need proper guidance to become better adults.

Furthermore, the Baudelaires' status as orphans made them more prone to abuse and neglect than other children because they lack the protection that their parents should have been able to provide. Their status as orphans is often justified by others for their mistreatment, such as when they are not allowed to join other children to live in the Prufrock Preparatory dormitories. Indeed, the word "orphan" is the word that is most used by others to identify the Baudelaires. Unfortunately, it is a label that is often manipulated by others to take advantage of the children. The Baudelaires were most objectified by their status as orphans when Esme Squalor adopted them to increase her social status.

Besides being a child and an orphan, Violet's identity also makes her vulnerable in situations that neither Klaus nor Sunny would necessarily find themselves in. Even though Snicket's characterization doesn't restrict the children to traditional gender roles, Violet is still objectified and taken advantage of by some of the male adults because of her gender. The most obvious example is when Olaf attempts to marry Violet to take control of the Baudelaire fortune. Even though Olaf has economic means, it is apparent that he and his henchmen find Violet desirable.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, adults identify the Baudelaires as orphans to take advantage of them. On the other hand, the Baudelaires identify themselves as orphans to empower themselves, which will be explained in the next section. The reason that adults perceive childhood vulnerability as a means of maintaining power over children. This is how the novels perceive children. In other words, adults identify children as being vulnerable to take advantage of them.

4.2 Challenging Childhood Vulnerability

4.2.1 Challenging Childhood Vulnerability through the Baudelaires' Identity

The Baudelaires' agency challenges the adult construction of childhood vulnerability. This can be seen when they are employed by V.F.D. to become spies at the Hotel Denouement in *The Penultimate Peril* (2005). The Baudelaires are employed by V.F.D. because children are believed to be more unnoticeable than adults. This is the way that they manipulate their vulnerability for power. Furthermore, by entering the system, the Baudelaires cease to be passive objects, but instead become active subjects. The Baudelaires use the methods that adults and society have so far used against them to empower themselves. Handler constructs the Baudelaires' vulnerability to emphasize their empowerment; that children who are robbed of their privileges can still rise above their terrible circumstances. The Baudelaires are contrasted with incapable adults around them to emphasize their willingness and their resilience to overcome their misfortunes.

Another way that the Baudelaires deal with their vulnerability is by working together to solve their problems. By using each of their unique skills, the Baudelaires are able to overcome any difficulty that they faced. For example, when they are suddenly abandoned by Captain Widdershins and Phil in the submarine *The Queequeg* in *The Grim Grotto* (2004). The Baudelaires know that they had no parent or adult guardian to take care of them, but this only strengthened their resolve to work together and take care of each other to overcome their misfortunes.

As previously mentioned, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* differ from other works in the children's literature genre because the Baudelaires do not get the conventional happy ending. Instead, the Baudelaires are abandoned by a whole community on a deserted island because they are accused of being the source of trouble. Since adults are the ones who create a culture of fear for children, the Baudelaires manage to survive in the island for one year without any tragedy. This implies that for there to be safety, adults and children cannot occupy the same space.

4.2.2 The Narrator's Role in Challenging Childhood Vulnerability

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the narrator plays an important role, since he not only serves to narrate the story, but he also attempts to challenge the notion that children are inherently vulnerable. Snicket's purpose of showing the Baudelaires' vulnerability is his strategy of challenging the notion of children as a vulnerable group. There are several ways in which he does this.

First of all, during the Baudelaires' brave or virtuous moments Snicket often compares the children to himself, a cowardly and sneaky adult. An example is when the Baudelaires are about to enter the Village of Fowl Devotees after "a few minutes to work up the courage to walk through all of the muttering, scuffling birds" [Snicket 2001b, Chapter 2, para. 37]. Snicket emphasizes on the Baudelaires' courage by contrasting it with his cowardice. By painting the children in a positive light, Snicket is showing his partiality towards them and showing that even though they may be in a dangerous situation, the children have a courage that he lacks. Snicket also praises the Baudelaires for sticking together and taking care of each other, and that them being together is one of the ways that they can escape their unfortunate predicament. Snicket is implying that even though children are often painted as being weak and lacking mature traits, they possess a certain kind of goodness that adults lack.

Snicket also mocks the didactics of children's literature. This can be seen through the tone and language that he employs in his narration. For example, when Snicket advises the reader not to imitate the Baudelaires' actions in *The Wide Window* (2000), he does this to "mollify the publishers", since they are apparently worried that child readers would mimic the Baudelaires' actions [Snicket 2000a, 145-146]. This shows Snicket's partiality, not only towards the Baudelaires, but towards children in general, because he knows that children are not gullible enough to attempt such things. This is in contrast with the adults, as it has been mentioned previously, who are gullible and stupid and thus must be given very detailed instructions.

However, Snicket's attempts to challenge childhood vulnerability is ambivalent in itself, since as the narrator he cannot escape the didactics of the genre that he is mocking. This can be seen when he alludes to authors and literary works that he believes readers should be aware of to be well-read. Snicket believes that being well-read is a virtuous characteristic. Furthermore, his allusions also serve to instruct readers to ponder beyond the book that they are reading. One example of this is when a passage in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is used as a secret code to open a locked door in *The Penultimate Peril* (2005). Snicket later reflects on the parallels between the passage and what the Baudelaires are going through. Furthermore, Snicket shows a preference towards highbrow literature compared to children's stories such as fairytales. He often mocks the meaning of fairytales, often serving an alternative moral

message of those tales. In short, Snicket's appreciation of knowledge and being well-read is his way of persuading (child) readers that children should be well-read. Thus, even though he mocks the didactics of children's literature, he still falls into the same traps, as he still attempts to teach children what books they should read. Snicket's role as the narrator shows ambivalence. On the one hand, Snicket's partiality towards the Baudelaire criticizes the adult perception of children as a vulnerable group. On the other hand, since he speaks to the implied (child) reader as an adult, it implies that children still need adult guidance. In other words, his own actions negate the children's empowerment that he is trying to support through his portrayal of the Baudelaire.

5. Conclusion

Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* provide a representation of childhood that is shaped by a culture of fear. This series show that oftentimes, social institutions and establishments that were created with the purpose of protecting children instead puts them into more fearful situations and cannot guarantee safe spaces for them. Through the depiction of the law, child-centered social institutions and adult guardians that do not function to protect children, children will be subject to a culture of fear that is created by the adults around them. Within these systems, children often do not have a voice, and the rigidity of these systems emphasize that these institutions are partial towards adults, as they serve to accommodate adult interests while sacrificing the children's wellbeing. As portrayed in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, in a culture of fear, childhood is constructed by adults to take advantage of children.

Although both adults and children are affected by the culture of fear, the causes of each are somewhat different. Adults are the ones who create and further perpetuate a culture of fear for children, not only by taking advantage of children, but also by lacking the capacity to raise them properly. There is a communication gap between adults and children that further emphasizes the unequal power relation between them. Since children are not listened to and considered untrustworthy, they are often put into fearful situations. Fearmongering by the media further perpetuates a culture of fear. On the other hand, children are a source of fear for adults, and adults have a tendency to believe other adults instead of children. However, even though adults perceive them as inherently vulnerable, children are able to empower themselves despite this vulnerability.

The relationship between the adults and children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a relationship that is fraught with an imbalance of power. Snicket exaggerates the inability of adults and social institutions to protect children, constantly making the children seem helpless in various situations. However, the Baudelaire are given a chance to explore their individual abilities as well as exploit their vulnerability to escape from their dire situations.

Ultimately, there is ambivalence in the construction of childhood that is presented in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. On the one hand, childhood is constructed as a period in which children are considered highly dependent on adults, and thus adults must create safe spaces for children in order for them to live and grow without harm. On the other hand, the creation of these safe spaces is often what further perpetuates a culture of fear for children, because these spaces and institutions confirm their vulnerability because they have no say in this situation. Furthermore, the narrator's attempts to deconstruct the notion of childhood

vulnerability is ambivalent itself, as the narrator cannot escape the didactics of the children's literature that he himself is mocking.

Despite this ambivalence, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* manages to show that children who are robbed of their privileges can, in fact, rise above their circumstances. The culture of fear has shaped childhood so that children must have inner strength to confront their situations. This is in accordance with children's literature in general, which empowers by putting children in horrible situations. It is children themselves that must be able to stand on their own, as even well-meaning adults tend to perpetuate the culture of fear for children even further. That even in a world plagued by terror children can overcome their fears is a central message that is present in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

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