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Innocence lost at the contact of  
the threatening adult world in  
Lemony Snicket's *A Series of  
Unfortunate Events*

NEGATIVITY AND DISENCHANTMENT THROUGH THE NARRATOR'S EYES

présenté et soutenu par  
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# Introduction

“The best way to get kids to read a book is to say: 'This book is not appropriate for your age, and it has all sorts of horrible things in it like sex and death and some really big and complicated ideas, and you're better off not touching it until you're all grown up. I'm going to put it on this shelf and leave the room for a while. Don't open it.'”

- Philip Pullman in an interview about his *Dark Materials*<sup>1</sup> (1995)

Can you remember, as a child, thinking how some children's books were too naive or simple for you to enjoy it? For generation X, this might not be the case. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been the golden age for children's literature, it has been the corner stone to the genre's renewal. Lemony Snicket's narration could be summarised by Pullman's quote. Before his series came into the world, several inspirations could constitute a direct line of descent to his work. A story about an orphaned child going on adventure, punctuated by an ironic voice from the narrator, could be a start to his legacy: *Kidnapped!* by Robert Louis Stevenson<sup>2</sup> (1886) is a good mirror to Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999) (later called *ASOUE* in this work). The story involves an important fortune owned by the orphan, David, who is chased by villains for this money. This Victorian novel, not to mention Dickens' figure of the orphan, gives way to the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century series by Enid Blyton: *The Famous Five*<sup>3</sup> (1941). While the author's characters' number could compare to the three Baudelaire orphans in *ASOUE* (an uneven number might be a way to avoid a binary character development?), their main common point is that the children fight for what is true to them and go on adventures on their own. Later on, a particular theatre piece became a reference to children's stories about growing up: *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie<sup>4</sup> (1904), in the same way as *ASOUE*, challenges the idea of childhood and children's feelings while depicting an adventurous background (involving an evil Captain with a hook, recalling the favourite weapon of *ASOUE*'s villain). Near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a major children's books author changed the face of the genre: Roald

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1 “Philip Pullman in Conversation with Andrew Copson at the BHA Conference 2011 - YouTube.” N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2017. 05'08”

2 Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Kidnapped!*. Jazzybee Verlag, 1886. Print.

3 Blyton, Enid. *The Famous Five*. Hachette UK, 1941. Print.

4 Barrie, J. M. *Peter Pan (Diversion Classics)*. Diversion Books, 1904. Print.

Dahl created several positive stories starting about young heroes starting from nothing and succeeding thanks to their talents.

After this, emerging authors such as Philip Pullman, Susan Cooper, J.K. Rowling or Lemony Snicket enabled postmodernist literature to expand its definition. Rather than “being”, the books “do” something for their readers: they challenge them on the emotional level, they make them put their lives into perspective as children and most of all, they understand the world through non-standard narrations, symbolic representations and broken literary codes. After literary classics such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* redefined the child hero, post-modern books re-set the idea of a children's tale, its universe and atmosphere, the ideas it conveyed. Happy endings and positivity are deserted for more hardship, pessimism and bitter realism. No wonder why *Harry Potter's* end shows death on both sides of the story, and Roald Dahl imitates Dickens' figure of the orphan while kindly giving a chance to his heroes' hopes. Above all, they challenge the false idea that the adult world is as simple as the child's, and establish the rules of this new world the reader will have to face. They do not attempt to trick the child's beliefs, but rather to accompany young people in their search for identity.

In *ASOUE*, Lemony Snicket tells the story of three siblings, the Baudelaire children: Violet, Klaus and Sunny. They all have their own talents: Violet is an inventor, Klaus is keen on reading and Sunny loves to bite things. One day, they become orphans after their parents died in a mysterious fire that also destroyed their house, and Mr. Poe, their banker, takes them to their new guardian: Count Olaf. The latter reveals to be the villain of the story: he only accepted to be their guardian in order to put his hands on the Baudelaire fortune. From there, the thirteen *ASOUE* books narrate the orphans' attempts to escape the villain's traps. During this initiatory journey, the Baudelaire children find out about an enigmatic organisation that their parents and other people took part in: VFD. These three letters will be their goal in the story and reveal the ambiguous nature of Man as they grow up: both the villains and the heroes are part of VFD. The series appear to be divided into two halves: the first part is mechanical, the episodes repeat and resemble themselves, and the reader might get frustrated about them. The second part, however, introduces the VFD mystery and therefore blurs the line between good and evil. The children slowly distance themselves from their seemingly careless guardians in order to live on their own. They end their journey on an isolated island where they will get almost every answer to all of their questions, revealing a common past between the Baudelaires, Olaf and the Snicket family.

In children's literature, opposite forces confront in regard of morality. The good and

the evil are represented by symbolic figures who are supposed to guide the reader's perception of the world. They are supposed to help the young readership in the process of growing up. Works of literature such as *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, *Matilda* (1988), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) or *The Big Friendly Giant* (1982) by Roald Dahl, or Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* reconnected with magical worlds while depicting young struggling heroes. Their characters are lonely, lost in a world where the only solution must come from themselves. This way, the reader empathises for the hero while at the same time creating a bonding thanks to identification. These post-modern tales set their stories in darker and drearier atmospheres than traditional fairy tales, which tend to obliterate details about the duality of a same character. Bruno Bettelheim, in his *Uses of Enchantment* explains the difference of maturity between fairy tales' readership and young adult literature: "a child's choices are based, not so much on right versus wrong, as on who arouses their sympathy and who his antipathy<sup>5</sup>". Notions such as "innocence" therefore go along with "survival" in *ASOUE* by Lemony Snicket, which stand between children's literature and young adults'.

Innocence, as a matter of fact, is challenged in these series in its definition itself: "lack of guile or corruption; purity<sup>6</sup>" (Oxford Dictionary). An innocent individual can be a naive one: overall, being innocent equals being honest and keeping one's integrity. In the case of *ASOUE*, innocence and integrity are confronted to an urge for survival. It is an aspect of life that makes visible the moral principles of one's existence when faced with death. This is why *ASOUE* is more about a moral survival rather than a matter of life or death. These moral principles are mostly challenged by the context in which the situation takes place. The adult world, hence, is the landmark in the process of growing that involves giving up some pure thoughts. Being an adult often means acting as one (such as accepting one's responsibilities and fighting against childlike urges that drives one to hide from the rest of the world when something goes wrong). In *ASOUE*, being an adult is often more exemplified by children than by actual adults: being an adult is both acting and thinking as a mature person, on the contrary of some adults characters in *ASOUE*. Because of this existential need to act as adults, the children in the series are disenchanting. No wonder why the series defy traditional fairy tales that always give a happy end to their enchanted story: their goal is to offer solutions to the child's anxieties,

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5 Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1976. Print. 9

6 "Innocence - Definition of Innocence in English | Oxford Dictionaries." *Oxford Dictionaries | English*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

while *ASOUE*'s narrator only observes the hopelessness of the world. Above all, this disenchantment is lived by the children in the story like a hardship in the process of growing up, an additional obstacle in their initiatory journey. Thirteen episodes describe the children's formative months of struggling in the face of adversary: *The Bad Beginning* (1), *The Reptile Room* (2), *The Wide Window* (3), *The Miserable Mill* (4), *The Austere Academy* (5), *The Ersatz Elevator* (6), *The Vile Village* (7), *The Hostile Hospital* (8), *The Carnivorous Carnival* (9), *The Slippery Slope* (10), *The Grim Grotto* (11), *The Penultimate Peril* (12) and *The End* (13). These are presented as an investigation about the Baudelaire children and their journey, but thirteen episodes and their titles organised in alliterations do not sound aimless.

As a matter of fact, Lemony Snicket is more than the author of the story. It is in fact a pen-name used by Daniel Handler (the real author's name) in order to involve Snicket as a character in the story. His influence on the narration is pansophical. Through his eyes, the reader will discover the complexity of the adult world, its corruption and sadism (particularly since Snicket does not prevent himself from making ironical comments on dramatic situations). The specificities of the Baudelaire world are also explained thanks to Lemony Snicket: he punctuates his narrative with definitions such as "The word 'hackneyed' here means 'used by so, so many writers that by the time Lemony Snicket uses it, it is a tiresome cliché'" (2, 127). By doing so, he also reflects on the narrator's role and makes a satire of existing definitions by putting the words in context. His world is also structured like an abecedarium: almost every place has an alliterative name (such as "Hurricane Herman", "Lake Lacrymose" or "Fickle Fountain"). Thus, *ASOUE*'s universe derives from any other world: it is not magical or fantastic, it only has a Gothic architecture (according to Brett Helquist's illustrations in the books) and a lack of benevolence from adults towards children. From there, it is clear that the books are imbued with negativity.

Negativity and negativism punctuate the Baudelaires' initiatory journey and their survival. They are newly orphans at the beginning of the series, and on the contrary of some orphans' story, their destiny is not to end their childhood in an orphanage. The burden of their survival resides in their constant movement between homes. Their landmarks are regularly questioned since they are not given enough time to acclimate their new family. The surviving element determines their peace of mind. It is clear from the beginning that the orphans will not be able to hope for any bright future, or any happy ending. A contrast is often created by the narrator between the orphans' brilliant minds and their misfortunes, all of which described in a cynical tone. Their environment is imbued

with darkness, their town, the crowd, houses, clothes and cars, all of whose descriptions are completed by illustrations recalling Edmund Dulac's singularity, Lisbeth Zwerger's simplicity or NC Wyeth's gloom. Brett Helquist's illustrations are here to add a melancholic timbre to the young reader's perception of the Baudelaire story, as if the orphans needed to be depicted in the most tired, hopeless and depressed manner possible.

The Baudelaire children are neglected by adults, they are ignored. Their existence as young beings in progress is denied, which explains their loneliness. Adult figures such as Count Olaf (the villain), their other guardians that they consider each time their new family (all of them either careless or dead), Mr. Poe, Lemony, Kit and Jacques Snicket: all of them proved inefficient in keeping the children safe, because of one of their flaws (fear, exceeding politeness, reputation concern, anxiety, shyness). The children figures, however, are all depicted parentless: the Baudelaires, their friends the Quagmire triplets, Fiona Widdershins, Carmelita Spats and even their enemies at Prufrock Preparatory School. Snicket's role as a narrator, traditionally, would be to empathise with the children and try to counterbalance this carelessness by conveying an optimistic message to the reader. Yet, Lemony Snicket does the contrary: he adds negativity to the story itself. His personal story is as tragic as the Baudelaires'. He introduces every *ASOUE* book by an acknowledgement to his lost love, Beatrice. As the reader witnesses the Baudelaires' progressive loss of integrity, Snicket accumulates hyperbolic expressions of desperation to his narration. The addition of adults' ignorance and Snicket's negativity results in a melodramatic satire about children's fiction.

What about the real aims of the series then? Is this satire a conscious assessment of the recent children's books clichés? Is it consciously too naive? Is it purposely too dark? Why so? Furthermore, how is Lemony Snicket able to combine these two opposite ideas, like an oxymoron? How is the process of disenchantment working in *ASOUE*? And how will Snicket's roles as author and narrator affect the story? In what ways is Snicket paying a tribute to children's fiction while at the same time destroying its standards? To what extent are the series unbelievable yet true to life? Is this satire about adults or about children's fiction itself? In order to answer these numerous hypotheses, this study will be aimed at exploring the following concerns about a series that has not been much discussed: Snicket displays a certain idea of the orphan figure, in comparison with traditional figures and what they represent, and plays with his characters like a puppetmaster; in the series, the adult world is also an immoral place to live for a child, yet the orphans will have to survive it with the help of their exceptional talents, and choosing



between right and wrong decisions; but most importantly, Snicket is challenging the comforting, safe space that constitutes the fictional frame which contributes to the illusion the reader enjoys while reading a story: is the author real and speaking to the reader directly? Or is everything pretended and the reader is fooled? Is the purpose of an initiatory journey not to help the reader get through the process of growing up in the most encouraging way possible? Why is Lemony Snicket so depressed (and depressing)? Are the so-called villains this treacherous? Is the reader not able to turn into the same monstrous figure someday? The innocence demonstrated by the children seems ambiguous in the eyes of the narrator. Snicket's voice leads the narration through heavy clouds of pessimism and bitter disillusion while the readers have to decide whether to believe this friend who helps get them through this negative initiatory journey.

# I. THE ORPHAN(S) AND THEIR MISFORTUNE

## I. 1. Figures of the orphan in literature

### I. 1. 1. One orphan

Children's literature occasionally picture a story of a lost orphan travelling in a corrupt world where they will have to survive. In every culture's folklore, there is this pattern of the initiatory journey, may it be in Greek, Slav or Roman mythology, or in popular and fairy tales, and post-modern literature incorporated it in its attributes. *ASOUE* inscribes itself both into the picaresque genre, the end of the post-modern genre and children's literature. This ambitious mix is the reason for the singularity of its characters and narration. The orphans, especially in this saga, is a tribute to all the famous orphan figures of the history of literature. Charles Dickens' writing style, without being named, is present throughout the books. The difference with *ASOUE*'s narration is that Dickens has a more sentimental approach to a child's misadventures, whereas Lemony Snicket (also known as Daniel Handler) tells the story of the Baudelaire orphans with a theatrical pessimism, enhancing the inexorable aspect of their situation rather than allowing the reader to dream of better days for their heroes: "In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle"<sup>7</sup>. Snicket's satirical tragedy would rather warn the reader about fatality in the most distorted and inflated way. The books show an exaggerated view of a child's world: characters' particularities are enforced to the point that they represent archetypes of literature rather than realistic aspects of individuality, and situations worsen so that the young reader feels guilty about having such a quiet and pleasant life.

The Baudelaire orphans, in their newly miserable lives, learn that they will have to get used to live by themselves. Usually in fairy tales, these situations are created in order to answer children's fears, informing them of what is about to come and how to face it, according to Bruno Bettelheim, in his *Uses of Enchantment*<sup>8</sup>. Carl Gustav Jung also

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7 Snicket, Lemony. *A Series of Unfortunate Events #1: The Bad Beginning*. Harper Collins, 2009. Print. 1.

8 Bettelheim, Bruno. op. cit. 35.

developed a theory concerning a possible inner divine child within every adult, which could take the shape of an orphaned infant in literature, in order for the adult, this time, to explain the forces at stake in their psyche. This archetype, a subpersonality to the façade shown in society, is central to the story, in order for the adult to enjoy a renewed contact with their inner child's ego. In *ASOUE*, the children's identities, before being designated under the names "Violet Baudelaire", "Klaus Baudelaire" and "Sunny Baudelaire", are that of "orphans". Count Olaf notably takes pleasure into caging their identities into this family situation, as a punishment, forcing them to remember the tragedy that removed them from a comfortable and safe situation that every child should know. This is why the young readers, in contrast with the heroes' position, enjoy their peaceful life. The orphan is a way for them to project all their fears and to approach troubles in a more appeased way, as fairy tales enable them to.

Marthe Robert also used this process of projection in her theory<sup>9</sup> about the two figures of the child in novels. According to her, there are only two types of characters in fiction: the Foundling and the Bastard. These figures come from deep urges in Man that he will use in his childhood to persuade himself that his life is like a novel. His parents may have adopted him (the Foundling) or he was born from an impure union (the Bastard), which is why in both cases he feels rejected by his parents. The Foundling will eventually avoid conflict and be a deserter, while the Bastard is a social climber and will first know some failures before succeeding. The orphan is a "disillusioned child who cannot feel that he can rely on adults"<sup>10</sup>, which is the case in *ASOUE*. The children have known the perfect life before their parents died, which is why they resent them so much for "abandoning" them. At times, they want to project their frustration on an object and the only object they have is the memory of their parents, even though they perfectly know their parents did not ask for death. By creating orphaned characters, Handler presumably wanted to destroy fairy tales' tradition to offer solution to a young audience: fiction has its limits, and Klaus soon learns it in a metaphysical realisation of his weakness: "All his life, Klaus had believed that if you read enough books, you could solve any problem, but now he wasn't so sure"<sup>11</sup>. In short, the orphan figures is mistreated by the narrator in *ASOUE*, because of the limits it displays in identification for the young reader.

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9 Robert, Marthe. *Roman des origines et origines du roman*. Grasset, 1988. Print.

10 Robert, Marthe. *Roman des origines et origines du roman*. op. cit. 65.

11 Snicket, Lemony. *The Bad Beginning*. op.cit. 87.

## I. 1. 2. Siblings

More than one orphan, the figure of the two siblings travelling parent-less is a complex figure of identification for the young reader. Bruno Bettelheim<sup>12</sup> explains this propensity to often tell the story of two siblings together by referring to the psychoanalytical aspect of fairy tales: in these tales, frequently one of the siblings goes on an adventure while the other stays at home, even if they had spent most of their lives together. This separation shows the inner fight between two urges: to stay forever close to one's parents, or to let go completely one's attachment to their childhood home and go away. In *ASOUE*, the two older siblings, Violet and Klaus, do not go different ways, they act as one entity. As Bettelheim points out, the outcome of these tales is often that the sibling who chose to leave the house turns out to be in danger, and it is the duty of the sibling who chose to stay home to save them, with the help of an enchanted artefact. The narrator in *ASOUE* clearly chooses to tell the orphans' tale as one at times, as if with all efforts put to differentiate them, they eventually come together as one again. From the beginning, the orphans are regularly referred to as "the Baudelaires", "the orphans", "they", "the Baudelaire money" (1. 54) or "the children", and less as "Violet", "Klaus", and "Sunny". Yet this tendency disappears as the books evolve, around the second half of the series. In each *The Austere Academy* (the turning point of the second half of the books), then *The Vile Village*, and *The Penultimate Peril*, different chapters are dedicated to the three children. Snicket intended to enable the reader to follow each of the orphans' separate tasks. It is more evident in the twelfth book, *The Penultimate Peril*, since the narrator chooses to tell these three different stories happening at the same time in three independent chapters (4, 5 and 6), and tells the reader that "In the case of the next three chapters, [...] the story is organised simultaneously, which means that [they] do not have to read the chapters in the order in which they appear" (12. 75). Since Snicket changes his type of narration and offers the reader a multiplicity of views of different fates happening at the same time, the siblings emerge as individuals, at intervals, according to the narrator's wish.

In this parent-less tale, the role of the adult in this trio seems to be played by Violet. Even if Klaus is mature for his age, it is Violet who has always been given the responsibility to take care of her brother and sister: "You are the eldest Baudelaire child', [her parents] had said, kindly but firmly. 'And as the eldest, it will always be your responsibility to look after your younger siblings. Promise us that you will always watch out

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<sup>12</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*. op. cit. 123

for them and make sure they don't get into trouble.” (1. 117). Throughout the series, this duty often helps Violet remember that she cannot behave like a child and refuse the negative outcome of events. Maturity is the main characteristic used to describe her, which could explain why she has so little difficulty finding what object to build in a desperate situation, with so few items to do so. Klaus and her are equal on another aspect of their experience as orphans, however: they are connected at the emotional level. Oftentimes, the narrator interprets his “investigations” and describes a pessimistic situation in which, according to him, Klaus and Violet go through the same hardship: “As Klaus walked down the tower stairs, he felt a heavy sinking in his heart as all hope left him. [...] Violet was feeling the same way” (1. 132). Certainly, this coordination of feelings goes along with their situation in itself, and the fact that they live alone (in its pure signification, their guardian are inefficient at keeping them safe) explains the reason why they huddle up on themselves like a little tribe. They survive on their own and can only count on each other's identicalness.

### I. 1. 3. The case of the picaresque

Starting from the villain, Count Olaf, then the secondary characters who appear to be the source of all adventures, their parents, the orphans slowly realise that morality is not as easy to maintain as it seems. They discover their parents were not as noble as they thought they were, and they also discover that Olaf has suffered mischief himself. This blurred definition of what is good and what is bad can be illustrated by the meaning of “VFD” (a small acronym that first appears on the orphans' friends' notebooks, starting from *The Austere Academy*) itself: the Baudelaire children are looking for what this mysterious assembling of letters could mean and why it seems so crucial to solve them: “and that in their notebooks they had written down a terrible secret they had discovered about Count Olaf, but that all the Baudelaire orphans knew of this secret were the initials V.F.D.” (7.7). Throughout the books, it can mean anything to anyone, good likewise bad intended people. At first, VFD resembles a name for Olaf's organisation, but then the orphans discover that their parents were also part of it. It gets more evident, as the end draws closer, that the “V” could mean “volunteer”, which remains an ambiguous name for a group of people whose intentions are unclear. In *The Slippery Slope*, the orphans' friends mention a schism that destroyed the organisation and separated the group into two distinct

factions: those who want to use fire to kill and ruin, and those who want to prevent the latter from doing so. This event recalls an episode from the Bible: the Babel tower. Before the men teased God's wrath, they were all speaking the same language and were therefore living in harmony. But when they tried to approach God, He decided to split this peaceful society into various languages and placed them around the globe, so they could not understand each other any longer. In *ASOUE*, the same event seems to have occurred within the organisation: at the beginning, their aim, though ambiguous, included solving mysteries together using each other's skills. But when the aim of their association was discussed by the people who wanted to use fire to punish criminals, moral dilemmas started to emerge and the group eventually split, remaining deaf to the others' arguments.

This notion of morality in *ASOUE* is the reason why the series could be compared to the picaresque genre. According to Thrall and Hibbard's definition<sup>13</sup>, a picaresque novel is a "genre of prose that depicts the adventures of a marginal hero/heroine of low social class who lives in a corrupt society". There is also a mention of a realistic tone, with satirical and comic characters. "There is no plot. The story is told in a series of loosely connected adventures or episodes." The difference that could be made from this definition in the case of *ASOUE* is that the orphans do not come from a low social class, they used to live in a wealthy mansion. However, their situation worsens at the point that it could be described as "from-riches-to-rags", in the contrary as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*<sup>14</sup>, for instance. The Baudelaire orphans evolve in a post-modern world where corruption has indeed affected a good number of adults around them, and Count Olaf is surely a satire of "parvenus". Gravitating around the children are secondary characters who appear to be comic, but not on purpose (like Mr. Poe or some of their guardians like Aunt Josephine).

The children themselves eventually become criminals, as they are accused of murder, but most of all because they were morally forced to do what the villains they hated had done so many times: they set fire to a hotel and accidentally killed one of their friends<sup>15</sup>. That makes them picaros at the same time as orphans in quest of security and love. Above all, Thrall and Hibbard suggest that the picaresque novel is autobiographical. In this case, it concerns the narrator, who cannot prevent himself from telling his own misadventures as the children suffer, to some extent, as a comparison with his own past (which seems to be strangely related to the children's fate). Lemony Snicket and Daniel Handler are drawing a thin line between what is fictional and what is not, which is why the

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13 Thrall, William Flint, and Addison Hibbard. *A Handbook to Literature*. Odyssey Press, 1961. Print.

14 Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. L. Hachette et cie, 1867. Print.

15 In *The Penultimate Peril*.

orphans live in such an unprecedentedly corrupt society that it is hardly believable. But contrary to the orphans' miseries, the narrator's tragedy seems real, surely because it is put in contrast with the orphans' almost present-tense narration. The fact that Snicket's story happened in the past and that he expresses his feelings at times, enables the reader to feel empathy towards him, because his mourning tone may sound more realistic than the misadventures of three gifted children who cannot find a suitable home to live peacefully.

## **I. 2. Snicket's orphans & the absence of pathos**

### **I. 2. 1. Vulnerability**

Handler's writing is metafictional: for instance, the narrator keeps explaining the meaning of words (as "murder" (7. 50)), and reflects on his own role as "author" and therefore narrator. The intonation he uses also influences the perception of the reader upon the story, and this is why the omnipresence of pathos in his narration is striking. It is not necessarily the pathos, but the irony in the fictitious compassion he shows for the children implicitly influencing the general tone of the story. His sympathy is hypocritical since he shows no mercy in forbidding any form of hope and compassion towards the children, and encourages his readers to look another way, putting an emphasis on his pathetic (in the sense of "imbued with pathos") role: Lemony Snicket clearly makes the reader understand that his duty is inevitable and that he has to face all these unfortunate adventures in order to investigate the truth, but the reader has no obligation in doing so. Snicket's role therefore reveals the inexorable aspect of this children's story from the beginning, so that the reader is ready to endure the worst situations for their heroes and accept it.

In their status as orphans, the Baudelaire children are vulnerable to insecurity, mischief and hatred. In the story, they got endangered the moment their parents disappeared. This shows how the narrator considers that only parents can fully care for their children and not substitutes to parents. For instance, the only reliable parent figures the orphans encountered immediately left this world (Dr. Montgomery Montgomery in *The Reptile Room*) or repeated the process of turning them once again into orphans and abandoned them (as Aunt Josephine, or Jerome Squalor, or the whole *Vile Village* and

Hector, or the Queequeg's Captain Widdershins, or Mr. Poe, in the end, did). All of these adult figures found their own excuses for giving up on their responsibilities. Aunt Josephine feared for her life, Jerome was too polite and consensual to refuse what his wife ordered, the Village of Fowl Devotees were too strict about their laws to accept "criminals" within their walls, Hector was too intimidated in public to speak out for the children, Widdershins abandoned the ship in order to move on without the children, and Mr. Poe was too unsuspecting towards adult figures (especially if the latter are wealthy) to be at variance with them. The Baudelaire orphans can hardly count on these guardians and will find in their own talents a way to get out of any situation. Yet, at times the narrator pauses the action to let the reader appreciate a quiet moment before the storm. In these moments, the Baudelaire orphans tend to feel helpless and this is when pathos finds its way in the narration: this Greek word meaning "suffering, passion, affect", the author uses it to postpone the element of resolution in the story and to allow his characters to show a vulnerable face. But most of all, pathos calls on the audience's feelings to send a message (may it be by the tone, the subject or the situation). Here the subtle message is that Handler has the control over the reader's feelings. He uses his faculty to know the story to play with the reader's chronological relationship to the events. For instance, Snicket stops the narration at the moment when Sunny gets attacked by "the Incredibly Deadly Viper", ironically apologises for this interruption, then tells the audience that Uncle Monty is about to die a chapter before it occurs (2, 28): "I promise you Sunny survives this particular episode. It is Uncle Monty, unfortunately, who will be dead, but not yet". Snicket, even though he hides it behind his own appearing sadness, loves to play with the audience and his characters: this is the real vulnerability in the story.

### 1. 2. 2. The "author" and his link with his characters

Lemony Snicket is not only the narrator, but one of the main characters of *ASOUE*. His part in the story is only suggested in the first half of the books, but his many allusions to details related to the Baudelaires' story later take more importance in the plot and reveal his implication in the VFD schism. As a matter of fact, the whole story revolves around three families and their auxiliaries: the Baudelaires, the Olafs, and the Snickets. Other families come to add to the plot, like the Quagmires, but their tragedies only reflect the



Baudelaires' to stress the danger of their world. These three families structure the story like allegories: the Baudelaires are the protagonists, the Olafs the antagonists and the Snicket the almost omniscient auxiliaries. By choosing to give importance to these three families, Handler suggests that although the structure of the plot is simple (almost binary), his series is really about family links and how they fall apart. Lemony Snicket presents himself as the investigator, only looking for clues long after the Baudelaires' story, but he really controls the narration and the story.

He controls the narration because he has this double identity: both the author and the narrator, as if the series was that of a biographical story. He also forces the reader to accept the tragic character of the story, even when he feigns to stop the dark events by small moments of pleasure (ch.5, p.82): “but I will end this chapter with this moment of companionable comfort rather than skip ahead to the unpleasant events of the next morning, or the terrible trials of the days that followed, or the horrific crime that marked the end of the Baudelaires' time at Prufrock Prep. These things happened, of course, and there is no use pretending they didn't.” He also creates many *mises en abyme*. He creates them, it is clear, because such coincidences are not hazardous, like in *The End* when the orphans discover that the enormous journal that has been bearing the writings of volunteers for many years is entitled “A Series of Unfortunate Events” (ch. 10, p. 233): “the Baudelaire orphans wondered about their unfortunate history, and that of their parents and all the other castaways who had washed up on the shores of the island, adding chapter upon chapter to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.”

He controls the story because he already knows the end of the VFD mystery, even if he suggests that he does not know why the Baudelaire parents were murdered (the schism is the obvious reason). He plays the naive, oblivious and escaping writer, in search for precise answers in spite of the little leads he claims to have. However, it is very suspicious that with such little leads, he came to have all the detailed dialogues the reader has access to. How could he know about the Baudelaires' thoughts, like when he recounts the Baudelaires existential dilemma (13, 53): “although the siblings were relieved to be out of Count Olaf's company, there seemed something cruel about abandoning Olaf on the coastal shelf”? Above all, Lemony Snicket has had many adventures before the Baudelaires', and deviates the story from its course to tell the reader about them (5, 168): “‘Beatrice,’ I cried, just as the scorpions spotted me, ‘Count Olaf is...’ I cannot go on. It makes me weep to think of that evening, and of the dark and desperate times that followed, and in the meantime I'm sure you are curious what happened to the Baudelaire

orphans and the Quagmire triplets.” He suggests, with these details and the small epitaphs at the beginning of each book (in *The Miserable Mill*: “For Beatrice – My love flew like a butterfly / Until death swooped down like a bat / As the poet Emma Montana McElroy said: ‘That’s the end of that.’”), that he had a lover that he lost, who took a great part in his life and that he seems to want to avenge, or at least deeply weeps. Beatrice is a recurrent mention throughout the books, as if she was a parallel to the Baudelaires’ tragedies, being the narrator’s tragedy. But in the end, the two stories connect, just like the two families unite: Kit Snicket’s daughter becomes the Baudelaires’ new sister when Kit dies. This baby’s name is also Beatrice – because Kit wanted her daughter to bear the name of the Baudelaires’ mother.

### **I. 3. Theatricality and Schadenfreude**

#### **I. 3. 1. Names and disguises (Shakespeare’s influence)**

In *ASOUE*, the world is codified. Roles are restrained by rules: for instance, the Baudelaire encounter a village where they have to obey, rather than adults, its rules themselves<sup>16</sup>. However, these rules are a pretext for adults to model their own hierarchy of power (especially towards children) according to their pleasure: “Rule #920 clearly states that no one may talk while on the platform unless you are a police officer. You are orphans, not police officers, so shut up” (7, 39). Childhood and adulthood’s representations are biased by Lemony Snicket’s narrative: some of the village’s rules existed before the children arrived, yet they apply only to them: “Rule #4,561 clearly states that citizens are not allowed to use their mouths for recreation<sup>17</sup>” (7, 62). In this sense, Snicket created a world in which rules are bendable in order to dissimulate the adults’ secrets, and keep the children away. Disguise is a trick initiated by adults, especially villains. The dissimulation pattern could be found in Shakespearian literature: in *As You Like It*<sup>18</sup>, Rosalind disguises as a man in order to avoid sexual aggressions. She dissimulates her identity in order to survive. The Baudelaire orphans also have to do so in *The Carnivorous Carnival*, when they intend to infiltrate Olaf’s theatre troupe: Violet and Klaus pretend to be siamese siblings and change their voices and names, while Sunny passes herself off as a dog. The

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16 Snicket, Lemony. *The Vile Village*. op. cit.

17 A reference to Sunny’s teeth.

18 Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It: A Comedy*. S. Gosnell, 1810. Print.

most surprising aspect of this situation is that the villains (who are used to disguises since they themselves spend their lives performing on stage) do not recognise the children at all, even though they spent several months chasing them. This could mean that dissimulation is the determining element of survival in Snicket's world.

Classic literature references are scattered during the series, dissimulated in the names of the characters. In *The Grim Grotto*, T.S. Eliot and Lewis Carroll are evoked when the Baudelaire children find Isadora's poem, but other characters are a hidden hint for bookworms: Mr Poe (American writer Edgar Allan Poe), Caligari ("The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", a 1920 film by Robert Wiene involving a carnival and a gloomy atmosphere), the Baudelaires (poet Charles Baudelaire), Dr Georgina Orwell (referring to George Orwell, the author of *1984*<sup>19</sup>) and in the last book, the characters are named after *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare<sup>20</sup> and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville<sup>21</sup> (also present with the Queequeg in *The Grim Grotto*). Furthermore, the violet ray was a popular medical device in the early 20th century, based on the coil technology developed by Nikola Tesla, Violet Baudelaire's favourite inventor, hence the choice of her name. The two younger Baudelaire siblings were likely named after an unfortunate couple in Rhode Island: a wealthy businessman called Claus von Bulow was found guilty of injecting his wife, Sunny, with a deadly insulin cocktail. Beatrice Baudelaire is named after Baudelaire's poem "La Béatrice"<sup>22</sup> (or she could also be Dante's guide to heaven, a woman named Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*<sup>23</sup>). Esmé Squalor is named after J.D. Salinger's short story *For Esmé – With Love and Squalor*<sup>24</sup>. Two of the Quagmire Triplets, Isadora and Duncan, are named after Isadora Duncan, the famous American dancer (who eclipsed the pioneer Loie Fuller). The names in *ASOUE* are a way for Handler to use fiction as a vast encyclopedia, which explains the reason why Dewey Denouement, the owner of Hotel Denouement in *The Penultimate Peril*, which functions as libraries do, is named after the Dewey classification: a system with which anyone can find any book in any library thanks to its name and subject. Names are no longer a way for the characters to be unique, but a way to be linked to a certain idea according to their identification (Montgomery Montgomery, in *The Reptile Room*, is therefore destined to be an innocent and funny character).

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19 Orwell, George. *1984*. Arcturus Publishing, 1948. Print.

20 Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1611. Print.

21 Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. Macmillan, 1892. Print.

22 Brunel, Pierre. *Baudelaire antique et moderne*. Presses Paris Sorbonne, 2007. Print. 82

23 Alighieri, Dante. *Dante's Divine Comedy: The Vision of Hell*. Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851. Print. Translated by C. B. Cayley

24 Salinger, J. D. *For Esme With Love & Squalor*. Penguin Group, 1950. Print.

The notion of otherness goes along with this idea of a loss of control on identity. In Shakespeare's plays, the hero often has a nemesis or a double that questions his own existence (like in *Richard III*<sup>25</sup>, regarding Richard and Richmond, or Richard's own split self). In *ASOUE*, the other and the double reside in the character's disguise. Olaf, in particular, is defined by dissimulation: his several names and disguises (see appendix 1, figure 3) reveal a multiplicity of identities, therefore different aspects of a villain that also serve as cultural references. He consecutively bears the names of Stephano (*The Reptile Room*), who is an alcoholic butler in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare; Shirley (*The Miserable Mill*), a character created by Charlotte Brontë<sup>26</sup>, who inherits an immense fortune; Genghis (*The Austere Academy*), which is a tribute to Genghis Khan, a genocidal founder of the Mongol Empire; and Detective Dupin (*The Vile Village*), which is a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe's character in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "Marie Rôget" and "The Purloined Letter"<sup>27</sup>. By the end of the seventh book, it is no longer necessary for Olaf to use any disguise as he murders a man, Jacques Snicket, who was believed to be Count Olaf (or rather, "Count Omar", a misnaming induced by the *Daily Punctillio*, a diffamating newspaper in *ASOUE*). Olaf's name itself could have different origins. For instance, Oluf was the Danish Count of Rosenborg who renounced his throne and divorced twice. Olaf also uses anagrams of his own name (Al Funcoot in *The Bad Beginning*, and Dr. Lucafont in *The Reptile Room*). "Olaf" also comes from the old Norse name "Aleifr", which means "the ancestor's descendant": Olaf is a descendant to several traditional literary villains: he embodies all of them. His status of Count could notably be inspired by the eponymous character of *Dracula*, created by Bram Stoker<sup>28</sup>: Olaf's favourite weapon is the impaling harpoon gun, which could remind of a vampire's fangs. Handler created a combination of all the tricks used by a villain in literature that Olaf symbolise.

### 1. 3. 2. **Condescension & perverse pleasure as narrator**

Lemony Snicket is the central element of narration, both because his name is a pen-name for *ASOUE* and because Snicket is a character in the series. However, his use

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25 Shakespeare, William et al. *King Richard III*. J. Nichols, 1811. Print.

26 Bronte, Charlotte. *Shirley*. Dodo Press, 2008. Print.

27 Bloom, Harold, and Sterling Professor of the Humanities Harold Bloom. *Edgar Allan Poe's the Tell-Tale Heart and Other Stories*. Infobase Publishing, 2014. Print.

28 Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Hachette Black Moon, 1897. Print.

of narration derives from the norm on many levels, such as his benevolence shown towards the children. Laurie Langbauer defined this uneven sensation the audience gets from reading Snicket speaking with these words: "Part of the series' comedy derives from how relentlessly Snicket laments the orphans' desolation, how outrageously he insists on it<sup>29</sup>". Eventually the reader might grow discontented by this accumulation of sorrow, which could explain why Lemony Snicket seems to take pleasure in recounting the miserable adventures of the Baudelaire orphans. A word to describe this pleasure comes from the German "schadenfreude", which could translate to "bad-intentioned joy". That could be illustrated by his comparison of Sunny with a loaf of bread (7, 184), like a reification of the heroes. Snicket sounds too naive to be innocent in his narration. He pretends that his only purpose is to investigate the Baudelaire case, whereas at the same time he claims that some of the case's parts are missing. For instance, after knowing so many details about the children's lives, he declares that the reason for the Baudelaire fire has never been found. Yet, it seems very clear that the sole purpose of this fire (which could have only been led by Count Olaf, the pyromaniac) was to destroy the Baudelaire mansion, kill their parents and retrieve their fortune. The Baudelaire case itself would be sufficient to come to the conclusion that money was the motive, but other elements even come to corroborate this version: the Quagmire triplets lost their parents in a fire and themselves possess an enormous sapphire fortune. Count Olaf does not deny that it is him who set their house on fire, and other characters of the story also lost a sibling or a parent in a fire. Fire is also used to destroy evidences, as in *The Slippery Slope*, where VFD quarters were destroyed. The narrator always plays naive when it comes to why such things happened yet the answer seems easy even for a child.

The perverse pleasure Snicket takes in narrating such "unpleasant" tales is subtle and resides in the choice of words used in showing his compassion. For instance, in the first book, he tells the reader a way to feel better while showing how impossible it is for the Baudelaire orphans to do so: "As I'm sure you know, to be in one's own room, in one's own bed, can often make a bleak situation a little better, but the beds of the Baudelaire orphans had been reduced to charred rubble" (1, 12). Again, Langbauer summarises this "moral uncertainty" as follows: "the series presents moral uncertainty as one of the necessary evils of our times. Snicket's voice performs the slippery doubleness through which Handler calls attention to his books' artifice and the contradictions of ethical conduct"<sup>30</sup>. Lemony

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29 Langbauer, Laurie. "The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X." *PMLA* 122.2 (2007): 502–521. Print. 502

30 Langbauer, Laurie. "The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X." op. cit.

Snicket is the messenger of our inner moral conflict. Implicitly, he allows the reader to feel that this compassion is exaggerated at the point that it is not honest, so that the real purpose of reading such tales is to find a nuanced way to consider heroes and villains. Duality is played both by Handler and Snicket, and by the obvious opposition between the Baudelaires and Olaf, that tend to disappear in the second half of the books. The narrator is the omniscient maker of the story that controls the level of guiltiness the reader feels as the Baudelaire story slips into darker moral conceptions. Schadenfreude is a complex feeling of relief and immorality that Snicket subtly illustrates when he points out the misery of the Baudelaires (“one might say they are magnets for misfortune”<sup>31</sup>), while at the same time encouraging the reader to enjoy it (“there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you enjoy that sort of things”<sup>32</sup>). It is as if the reader who is brave enough to read the books despite the warning, will be rewarded by a moral validation from the narrator, as a complicity between two spiritually-elevated beings.

### I. 3. 3. The relationship between reader and narrator

This complicity does not stop there. An implicit rule between the reader and the narrator dominates the reading experience: the narrative voice has a foreshadowing power over the audience. For instance, Snicket slips direct references to his former or incoming books in the narration. He refers to the last book, *The End*, in the very first book: “to the bowl of apple cores which sat on a small wooden table” (1, 23). This bowl of apples is not a simple detail in Snicket's fictional style. In the next book, *The Reptile Room*, he refers both to the first and the last books: he mentions horseraddish apples (2, 1) and qualifies the new Baudelaire adventure: “in the case of these three children it was only the bad beginning” (2,2). The horseraddish apples are the central element of the final chapter in the Baudelaire survival: the appletrees were planted by their parents long before their children arrived on the island, and enable the orphans to survive the Medusoid Mycelium. Therefore, Snicket plays with the reader's ability to remember small evidences in his investigation (especially on a second reading). The influence of time is essential in the

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31 Snicket, Lemony. *A Series of Unfortunate Events #1: The Bad Beginning*. Harper Collins, 2009. Print.  
Back cover

32 op. cit.

relationship between reader and narrator: the latter can manipulate the perception of the story, going backwards (telling his personal tragedy, mysteriously connected to the Baudelaire case) or forward in time (as his anticipation of Uncle Monty's death in *The Reptile Room*), playing with reading pleasure like an omniscient entity: "I'm sorry to tell you that the orphans were wrong about boarding school being better, but at the moment they knew nothing of the troubles behind them, only the troubles behind them, and the troubles that had escaped out the window" (4, 190).

The reading experience is based on the narrator's position towards the audience. In this case, the narrator adopted a negative opinion on his own narration. The author confuses the reader by using a name and a character who play a part in the story, but most of all by bringing back the narrator's role to its former glory: Jacques Derrida summarises the tendency to fictionalise one's signature by "the author's figuration"<sup>33</sup>. The reader is easily tricked into thinking that Lemony Snicket is the actual author of the series, because of his implication in the story and his "investigation" purpose. This is why the narrator addresses the reader in both a condescending and pitiful tone on the backcover: "I can think of no single reason why anyone would want to open a book containing such unpleasant matters" (7, backcover), and he also likes to patronise his readership: "Clearly you do not want to read about such things" (8, backcover), in order to reinforce the feeling of exclusivity the reader may feel while opening the books.

However, this proximity with the narrator is often entangled with a guilty pleasure (close to *Schadenfreude*). When Lemony Snicket anticipates the story or stops the narration, the reader, though frustrated by this absence of control over the fiction, may also feel a form of closeness. The characters are only puppets in the hands of Snicket, and the reader witnesses this. In *The Reptile Room*, in the chapter before this quote, Sunny was being attacked by the Incredibly Deadly Viper, and the next chapter begins on this: "I am very, very sorry to leave you hanging like that, but as I was writing the tale of the Baudelaire orphans, I happened to look at the clock and realized I was running late for a formal dinner party" (2,27). Snicket is not "sorry" at all, but the reader paradoxically enjoys this cliffhanger. In its essence, this process allows the reader to take the time to appreciate the "dramatic and exciting ending to an episode of a serial, leaving the audience in suspense and anxious not to miss the next episode" (Oxford Dictionary). Snicket uses this technique several times in order for the reader to feel both empathy towards the

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33 "Signéponge (Jacques Derrida, 1988, Première Publication En 1984) [Signeponge]." N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2017. 43

characters and intimacy with the narrator's irony.

What is morally acceptable depends on the readership, on the amount of suffering in the books and the point of view of the narrator who is also the author and represents an institution that the reader normally trusts). Snicket questions our moral boundaries, the limits of what is tolerable. He also questions the responsibility of adults.



## II. AN ADULT WORLD: TRICKS & TREATS

### II. 1. Morality: the tolerable & intolerable

#### II. 1. 1. Children's work

The morality of a story depends on the way the reader and the narrator agree on what is tolerable or not. In *ASOUE*, the children find themselves trapped several times in situations where they will not be able to sleep, eat or spend some time together during a long period of time. An entire village envisages them as tools and not children: "I'm all for the orphans doing our chores, but I don't want them cluttering up my house" (7,40). Oftentimes, the orphans consider living by themselves to avoid the constraints of their role as children: "'We could get jobs,' Klaus replied. 'I could work in a library, maybe, and you could work in some sort of mechanical factory. Sunny probably couldn't get a job at her age, but in a few years she could'" (2, 52). Their roles are also challenged, almost denied, when they are given unsuitable jobs for children: "'Why, Sunny's only a baby. She should be in preschool, not an office environment.' 'Well, it doesn't matter now,' Nero said" (5, 204). It is especially the case in *The Miserable Mill*. Instead of being taken care of, they are enrolled in a wood factory in a small village isolated by a large forest. This experience surely remains the most painful one, since their home consisted of a dormitory with no window, and only a chewing-gum as a meal. Since the beginning of their adventures, the Baudelaires have suffered worsening living conditions, but the lumbermill is the reflection of their disenchantment. The repetitive, tiring gestures they have to make all day long transform them into exhausted workers. Their environment is no longer safe, and their guardian (Sir) hides his face behind a large cloud of smoke, which could be a metaphor to the opacity of the children's future.

Their security takes the form of a contract. Sir tells them that "The deal was that I would try to keep Count Olaf away, and you wouldn't cause any more accidents. You didn't keep your end of the deal" (4, 181). He shows no benevolence towards them. Before this

encounter, “the orphans had never had jobs, and they were nervous” (4, 35). The narrator himself, again, takes pleasure into describing, through an antiphrasis, the brutality of some events happening in the factory: “And I simply cannot describe the grotesque and unnerving sight – the words 'grotesque' and 'unnerving' here mean 'twisted, tangled, stained, and gory' - of poor Phil's leg” (4, 97). *The Miserable Mill* might be the book where the orphans' childhood turns into an adults' constraint, and is no longer a question of family links. After this, the children will go from living in a neglecting school to a hospital, by the way of a circus, a village, a mountain and a submarine. Their situation at the lumbermill makes them forget what living in a comfortable home means, to the point that Snicket emphasises the pathos in the narration of their story: “Violet and Sunny looked out the window to watch for him, and they were so anxious that it took them several minutes to realize that the window was not a real one, but one drawn on the blank wall with a ballpoint pen.” (4, 78). Hope is even annihilated by the narrator, when the only character (Phil, whose name recalls the Greek form of the words “friend, dear, beloved”) who brings optimism to the children's situation is the one who gets his leg sawed off. The more Phil tries to put things into perspective, the worse his circumstances get. Eventually, the children realise that this work experience ruined their health more than Olaf could have ever done. This could explain why the children start to feel that people can never have a true noble heart if they have been treated in a bad way: “I know he sometimes is a little bit mean, but you'll have to excuse him. He had a very terrible childhood. Do you understand?’ [...] Violet sighed. 'I understand. I think I'm having a very terrible childhood myself.’” (4, 57). This could also mark the first sign of decline regarding the Baudelaires' sense of morality. Yet, the children conclude this chapter on a positive note about their survival: “We know how to work in a lumbermill now, so we could get jobs in some other town” (4, 103)

## II. 1. 2. Health and love

Among all their misadventures, the children barely find the time to spend time together or with their guardian. In *The Ersatz Elevator*, Jerome, although a caring guardian, is scarcely there for them. This is the frontier between good and evil that makes all the helpless guardians look both pitiful and likeable. In an interesting ternary mirror

effect, the narrator describes this ambivalence: “But although all the workers looked tired, and sad, and hungry, none of them looked evil, or greedy, or had such awful manners” (4, 65), which could also apply to the guardians. The circumstances through which the children spend time in the factory (in *The Miserable Mill*) are the reflection of their new way of life as orphans: they never sleep, barely eat and spend their time mourning their parents. At several occasions, their physical conditions are alarming: “when they awoke, just two hours later, to begin another groggy day” (5, 137). After the lumbermill experience, the children seem to never find a good night's sleep in the series, so that “exhausted” is one of the new adjectives to describe them: “the children were too tired to say even 'Good afternoon' – and later, 'Good evening' – to these other residents of 667 Dark Avenue” (6, 24). As a consequence, the narrator emphasises this aspect of their miseries in order to reinforce the feeling that narrator and readers have the control over the orphans' destiny: “Violet found herself staring at the suitcases, remembering how effortless her life had been before all this trouble had set upon them, and how surprising it was to find herself in such miserable circumstances now. [...] we know how disastrous the lives of the Baudelaire orphans are, but Violet's misfortune was constantly surprising to her” (2, 157).

Frustration is one of the keys to the children's woe. Most of the time, the children have access to food (except in *The Miserable Mill*, where the only real meal they have is half a peach), but they can hardly devote time to eating. In *The Vile Village*, Hector is a good cook whose speciality is Mexican food. The orphans enjoy his company and his spicy dishes, but each time they start eating them, the village calls for an emergency or their friends are in danger. In *The Miserable Mill*, the orphans pause to make an assessment about their health and mental state, and this pause in the narration enables the reader to realise the impact of such conditions on a child's existential wondering: “The dismayed orphans looked at their reflections, and their dismayed reflections looked back at them. For several moments, the Baudelaires stood and pondered the mysterious way their lives were going” (4, 47). In the final book, their situation becomes neutral: they do not enjoy their (blank) food, or (uniform) clothes, or (isolated) home, but at least they are no longer hungry, miserable and endangered. This might be a mark of the narrator questioning the meaning of survival: is it worth surviving if life is no longer enjoyable? On the other hand, this neutral situation contrasts with the exaggeratedly tragic events the orphans went through. Their conclusion shows them the bitterness of a normal life, which in the end they reject, since they decide to travel back to civilisation: “'You'd think we would have had enough treachery for a lifetime,' Klaus said, 'but there's more to life than safety'”

(Chapter Fourteen, 3).

### II. 1. 3. Monstrous figures

In order to allow a story to develop, it needs to have a disruptive element. In order to have one, most of the time it involves one or several villains. In *ASOUE*, the main villain is Count Olaf, a terrifying middle-aged man recognisable by his single eyebrow and eye-tattooed ankle, but most specifically by his shiny eyes. Count Olaf, who was the orphans' first guardian after their parents' death, became at the very first second of their encounter, the Baudelaire children's nemesis, as acknowledged like one in the second book, *The Reptile Room* (2, 45): "the children were alone with their nemesis, a word which here means 'the worst enemy you could imagine'". At first the orphans consider him like a threat that will disappear once they change home, but the threat grows even more terrifying when they realise that not only is he following them everywhere, but he is deceiving every adult around them by disguising his main features. These disguises allow him to hide his identity and put the Baudelaires in the position in which they are the only ones to know his real identity, meaning its true nature. They realise this when Olaf silently threatens them with a knife when they are about to reveal his real name to Montgomery in *The Reptile Room* (2, 60): "Without saying a word, the nemesis of the Baudelaire orphans had sent a very clear warning." Silence, in this case, is Olaf's real weapon, he represents the dangerous Unknown, as the narrator explains in *The Miserable Mill* (4, 80): "But one of the worst things about Count Olaf is that his evil ways are so despicable that it is impossible to imagine what would be up his sleeve next." However, Count Olaf hardly ever does something despicable, only once in a while (killing Uncle Monty in *The Reptile Room*, kidnapping orphans in *The Austere Academy*, trying to marry a young girl in *The Bad Beginning...*), he most of all plays on what he could do rather than what he actually does. His only presence is the threat the orphans fear the most: "But to wait for one's adopted uncle to come home while a greedy and violent man is upstairs was one of the worst waits the Baudelaires had ever experienced." (ch. 4, p.56)

Silence, disguise, hiding, all of these negations of existence reveal a double personality, the one Olaf shows in society and his real nature. Like a true Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Olaf plays with the rules of civilisation. In *The Wide Window*, ch.7, p.97, Olaf is characterised by the word "chameleonic", which means that he perfectly understands the social mechanics of this world, that he adapts to them while doing his terrible deeds at the

same time. When speaking of character archetypes, Jung wrote about his theory of the “Persona” archetype<sup>34</sup>: a compromise between the social façade and the individual. This theory implies that the superficial personality abides to social norms and develops an imitative attitude. Olaf’s character seems to merge into every new guardian’s socially acceptable alter-ego. In the second book, Olaf presents himself as a talented and experienced herpetologist, like Montgomery. In the third book, he introduces himself as a lonely, unloved man who has an obsession with grammar, just like Aunt Josephine. In the fifth book, he befriends Vice-Principal Nero because he considers himself to be the best gym teacher in the world, the same way Nero considers himself the greatest violinist in the world. By reproducing these characters’ idea of a good individual, he blends in and makes them accomplices of his monstrous plans. Above all, Mr. Poe should be used to Olaf’s ways to proceed, and even if he “[means] well, a jar of mustard probably also means well and would do a better job of keeping the Baudelaires out of danger” (5, 5). All of these side characters are caught in Count Olaf’s treachery and therefore are no help for the orphans. Like in *The Miserable Mill*, when Klaus is hypnotised by Georgina Orwell (what an eloquent name), almost all the guardians are under the influence of Olaf’s power. Like a monster controlling its creators. Throughout the books we learn that Olaf has not always been a bad person: in school, he was isolated because of his one eyebrow<sup>35</sup> and since the end of the Baudelaires’ story blurs the line between good and evil, it is hard to say if Olaf was bad on his own, mirroring the children’s thoughts as Olaf dies in *The End* (13, 317): “it seemed that [Olaf’s] eyes, were watching them, though whether the eyes were noble or treacherous, good or evil, seemed even now to be a mystery.”

The symbol of the eye is recurrent and representative of this moral ambiguity. This symbol could be a Biblical reference to an omniscient control over all mortals. The Baudelaires consider Olaf to be a threat because he inexplicably knows and controls everything. For instance, in *The Vile Village* (7, 220): “Olaf learned that [the Baudelaires] would be living with Hector at the outskirts of this town”, but there is no justification as to how he learned it<sup>36</sup>. This is why the eye is the metaphor that allows the transition between the unjustifiably effective tricks and the tragic consequences on the orphans. Michel Foucault’s *Surveiller et Punir* develops this very notion of control and surveillance in regard

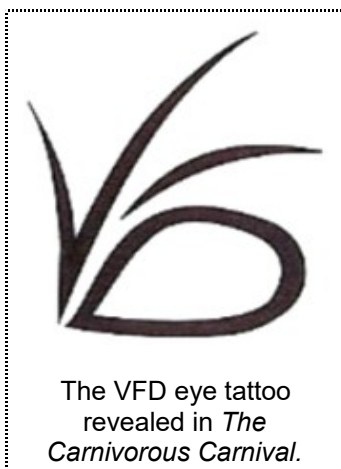
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34 Jung, Carl Gustav. *Les racines de la conscience: études sur l’archétype*. Librairie générale française, 1954. Print. Translation by Yves Le Lay

35 Snicket, Lemony. *The End*. op.cit. p.230

36 The reader learns about it in *The Penultimate Peril*, when Olaf reveals he has a Justice associate who enabled him to know everything about the Baudelaires thanks to Justice Strauss’ naivety.

with *The Panopticon writings* by Jeremy Bentham<sup>37</sup>, revolving around the theme of the eye. Foucault considers this “visibility entirely organised around a watching and dominative eye”<sup>38</sup> is a model of modern discipline, the same way Olaf tames the orphans by forcing them to do cruel chores for children in *The Bad Beginning*, chopping wood, clean up an entire insalubrious mansion, because he considers them to be spoiled and lazy, which is paradoxical since later in the series<sup>39</sup> he adopts Carmelita Spats, a hateful, spoiled, despicable little girl whose any desire is satisfied by Olaf and his fiancée, Esmé. The two female characters then represent Olaf’s best allies, especially because having the same bad intentions, they can keep the Baudelaires under surveillance, as if they were an extension of Olaf’s evil mind. In *The Grim Grotto*, for instance, the Baudelaires and their friend Fiona are captured on Olaf’s submarine, and they are being held captive under the eye of Carmelita. “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately”, like explained by Peter Kivisto<sup>40</sup>. It is a tower held by an omniscient supervisor, the same way Olaf needs to know everything about what the orphans do all the time in order to anticipate the next home they will be put into.



The eye pattern is present in the villain's description<sup>41</sup>, it is present in his house, his paintings (appendix 1, figure 1), shaping the doors of Dr. Georgina Orwell's cabinet in *The Miserable Mill* (appendix 1, figure 2), on the many tattooed ankles they come across (including Olaf's), and more importantly, the eyes are the most efficient way for the children to recognise Olaf, as if they themselves had a third eye, an intuition that helped them get through his traps. The eye, in the Christian culture, is also a way for God to recognise those who

serve him, in whom he can put his faith into. This could explain why the Volunteers in *ASOUE* all wear an eye tattooed on their ankles. They served a purpose before, praising the education to cultural interests (like cartography, cooking, journalism, poetry, inventing, research...), but then conflicted and a Schism arose within the Volunteer organisation.

37 Bentham, Jeremy, and Miran Božovič. *The Panopticon Writings*. Verso, 1995. Print.

38 Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir*. Gallimard, 1975, p. 207 (personal translation)

39 Starting from the tenth book, *The Slippery Slope*. op.cit.

40 Kivisto, Peter. *Social theory : Roots and Branches*. Los Angeles : Roxbury, 2000. p.389

41 In *The Ersatz Elevator* (64): “From behind his monocle, Count Olaf’s eyes grew even shinier, as they often did when he was looking down on the helpless Baudelaires. The children felt as if his eyes were a pair of lit matches, about to burn them to a crisp.”

These “servants”, like in the biblical episode involving the Babel tower, are no longer united and “noble-hearted people” can no longer be told apart from “the villains”. Olaf being the “villain” of the story, and representing immorality (knowing what is moral and still choosing the wrong path), he is characterised by these omnipresent eyes, as if he was some multiple-eyed creature who is no longer a member of civilisation. The eye on his ankle is shaped in a strange way and the orphans only discover its meaning in *The Carnivorous Carnival*: the illustration by Brett Helquist in the books reveal that the tattoo is the VFD acronym itself (see illustration above).

But most of all, the eye is such a mysterious symbol throughout the books, that in the final episode in *The End*, which involves the death of both a protagonist (Kit Snicket) and the villain (Olaf), the two dying characters evoke this symbol and its symbolical power over humans: Kit recites the poem “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes” by Francis William Bourdillon: “The night has a thousand eyes, / And the day but one / Yet the light of the bright world dies / With the dying sun. / The mind has a thousand eyes, / And the heart but one: / Yet the light of a whole life dies / When love is done.”<sup>42</sup> Olaf responds by quoting the final stanza of Philip Larkin's "This Be The Verse"<sup>43</sup>. These cited eyes are the mirrors of the duality that reigned on the first half of the books, and the ambiguous nature of man the children discover in the second half.

## **II. 2. Intelligence and talent at the service of survival**

### **II. 2. 1. The children's talents**

Varieties of talents in the books are the core of the VFD organisation. Most volunteers are mentioned, not by their names, but by what field they specified in. These are very specific, as Justice Strauss, Aunt Josephine who loves grammar, or Montgomery Montgomery, who is a herpetologist. Yet the villains seem to have what could be seen in society as “useless” talents: Esmé is fond of fashion and Olaf's troupe is trying to be good at drama. This could be analysed as a way to marginalise arts of all types, and to label them as the ones that could get a child into trouble. Of course, this could seem biased by

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42 Bourdillon, Francis William. “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes”, A Victorian Anthology, 1837-1895. Stedman, Edmund Clarence. 1895.

43 Foundation, Poetry. “This Be The Verse by Philip Larkin.” text/html. *Poetry Foundation*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2017. Web. 12 Feb. 2017.

the over-exaggeration put upon the villainy of Olaf, but Handler plays with hyperboles in order to break traditions, therefore this marginalisation is only a mirror of society, not the image the author wants to cast upon the minds of young adults. In the case of adults, their specialisation was originally part of their belonging to the VFD community. Each member brought their talent to use during investigations, but most of all, their common passion involved libraries. In every VFD member's house there would be one (at the Baudelaires', Justice Strauss', Montgomery's, Aunt Josephine's, and even in the most surprising places like Lucky Smells Lumbermill or under a mountain). Libraries are promises of happiness for the Baudelaire orphans, who have always lived in a mansion where the library was the common room that united all members of the family. In this respect, libraries in *ASOUE* are the element of frustration in the Baudelaires' adventures, and the evidence that their situation worsens book after book: they begin by living in their parents' house where they enjoy the largest and most universal library, then discover Uncle Monty's library which is still generous but more specific about herpetology, then a smaller library at Josephine's, more specific about grammar this time, then grow frustrated at Lucky Smells Lumbermill since Sir's library only holds three books. Later, in Prufrock Prep, the access to a large library is denied to them because of their status as orphans, and after this episode, the libraries they encounter were either destroyed or what they were looking for was stolen.

Libraries are the reason for part of the children's talents and curiosity: this is a metaphor for Handler's will to make children read. Their curiosity is what keeps them alive (their curiosity for the VFD mystery for instance) and characterises them: "Curiosity was one of the Baudelaires' most important customs" (13, 160). Their gloomy motivation to continue their journey (their friends' disappearance, their parents' death, the tragic elimination of their guardians) could be summarised by Klaus' quoting Proust in *The Bad Beginning*: "Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind" (1, 38). Their talent and urge for survival come from their will to escape places that does not enable them to satisfy their intellectual thirst. They are not only interested in reading encyclopedias, which could answer most of their questions, but their references come from a larger interest in literature. Yet the most important source of literary references remains Daniel Handler himself: he plays with the reader's cultural knowledge when, for instance, he makes Uncle Monty say: "Never, under any circumstances, let the Virginian Wolfsnake near a typewriter" (2, 38), referring to one of the most important modernist author of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Virginia Woolf. The Baudelaire's talents only come from the various sources of astonishment present in society and embodied by children:



Violet aspires to be an inventor, Klaus is a researcher, Sunny later becomes a cook, Quigley Quagmire is a cartologist, Duncan wants to be a reporter and Fiona is a mycologist. All of these talents are easily praised in society, but above all they are the proof of an advanced intelligence from such young people. Their common point is that they are all orphans. That detail could seem like Handler created them in order not only to encourage young readers to persevere in their passion, showing them it is possible even in the darkest circumstances. But it is also probable that he, most of all, wanted to use these characters as figures of juvenile exception, opposed to a form of adult regression, since so many of the gifted adults in the Baudelaire universe disappeared.

## II. 2. 2. Using talents as weapons (to preserve innocence?)

The orphans are the creation of Daniel Handler and represent the fight against corruption and ignorance that Count Olaf embodies. The particularity of children in general, as opposed to adults, is that they feel the effects of a situation in a more intuitive way than adults do. Their understanding of the world is emotional before being intellectual. Yet, the Baudelaire children, even though they remain fictive characters, represent a different aspect of childhood: a scientific research showed that an intellectual understanding of the world from a child is “negatively associated with behaviour problems and attenuate the effects of behaviour problems on emotional understanding<sup>44</sup>”. This means that the Baudelaires' cleverness could explain their moral dilemma, but also that this allows them to take distance from their tragic personal story and find solutions quicker than a child who listens to their feelings in a stressful situation. It is not confirmed that Handler created them in this respect, but the orphans surely show signs that their personal talents are the reason for their survival. Several times, the children resigned themselves to be brave and provide for themselves, even though the oldest, Violet, was only fourteen: “We were afraid to give ourselves allergic reactions, and we were afraid to steal a sailboat and we were afraid to make our way across this lake in the middle of a hurricane. But that didn't stop us” (3, 160). Their instinct is not what helps them get away from a desperate situation, it is their talent for inventing, researching or cooking: when Stephano (Olaf) is

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44 Cook, E. T., M. T. Greenberg, and C. A. Kusche. “The Relations between Emotional Understanding, Intellectual Functioning, and Disruptive Behavior Problems in Elementary-School-Aged Children.” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 22.2 (1994): 205–219. Print.

about to convince Mr. Poe that he could be a good guardian for the children, the Baudelaires do not cry, scream or desperately try to make Mr. Poe change his mind. Violet invents a lockpick device to open Olaf's suitcase and prove that he used make-up to dissimulate his ankle tattoo of an eye (his distinctive sign). The children have understood that they cannot rely on adults.

Most of the time, it is adults who behave like children, which is why Violet, Klaus and Sunny's talents are crucial in the face of adversity. Their guardians often are the ones to be protected or preserved from the danger and the children face survival alone because of this non-assistance: "Aunt Josephine's fear had made her a bad guardian. A guardian is supposed to stay with children and keep them safe, but Aunt Josephine had run away at the first sign of danger" (3,188). The children are defined by their talents and use them at every time of the narration, even if survival is not at stake, but comfort is: Violet, for instance, invents noisy shoes in order to scare away the tiny crabs in the "Orphans' Shack" and have a better night's sleep. Violet's talent could appear to be the most important one, the practical one, but Klaus' researching thirst is as significant in survival as Violet's: finding substantial solutions to a problem is as essential as understanding it. For instance, Klaus is the one who will enable the orphans to free their friends Isadora and Duncan Quagmire, thanks to his knowledge of poetry and anagrams in *The Vile Village*. In a sense, their talent is a weapon against ignorance and corruption: their innocence is the reason for their survival. Besides, their innocence is a strength in the same way as their intelligence. This explains why, in the last book, they are able to raise a newborn baby and defeat death while remaining faithful to their principles. Yet, this does not stop the narrator from using the traditional moral of the story to be ironic: "The moral of the story is that if you tell yourself that you can do something, then you can actually do it, a moral easily disproved if you tell yourself that you can eat nine pints of ice cream in a single sitting..." (13, 236). The talents are a pretext in this series for the narrator to parody fairy tales' moral tone towards children: Snicket remains realistic as to what a child is able to do.

### II. 2. 3. Reference to Greek *mètis*

The Baudelaires' talents are in line with the oldest outcomes present in fairy tales and mythologies. In most traditional tales where magic is near, the hero often finds a way

to trick his fate out of the villain's plan. In the Greek mythology, this ability is called the "mètis". It is said to be an intelligence "able to see by bringing the future and the past together"<sup>45</sup>. Not only is it an ability to see beyond the current miseries, but to use the past mistakes to undo one's fate. In *ASOUE*, after trusting so many guardians who appeared to be associates with Count Olaf (Esmé Squalor<sup>46</sup> and the circus troupe<sup>47</sup>, for instance), the children decide that they cannot count on adults any longer and remain neutral when obscurely unfathomable guardians approach them: Franck, Ernest and Dewey Denouement<sup>48</sup>. These triplets bear with each of them a characteristic: Franck seems to be the good one, Ernest the bad one and Dewey the neutral one. But as one disappears and the other emerges, the orphans are confused as to which one of them they are talking to, since they strictly look like one another. Therefore, this ambiguity of trust enforces the children's suspicion and prevents them from making another mistake. The last triplet, Dewey, is a new figure to the Baudelaires' universe. He is one of the only neutral characters present in the narration, neutral in the sense of "indistinguishable from evil or good". This emergence of a possible nuance in the moral rules of this adult world is unusual, and explains why the children are confused about their own responsibility in criminal events happening around them. Dewey Denouement happens to be in love with Kit Snicket, Lemony's sister, who herself remains mysterious from beginning<sup>49</sup> to end, and together they could be interpreted as the perfect beings, since they balance good and evil so well. Mètis appears for the first time in Hesiod's writings: he describes her as "she who know more than any god or mortal"<sup>50</sup>.

According to this description, Mètis is the perfect being, combining spiritual elevation and manual ability. Therefore the children themselves could be that perfect being. Violet has a practical intelligence, she is able to build anything out of anything to defeat any situation<sup>51</sup>. Klaus has an extraordinary memory and an unprecedented thirst for learning and reading, which explains why he is able to understand any situation and find a

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45 Bonenfant, Maude. Perraton, Charles. *La ruse: entre la règle et la triche*. PUQ, 2011. Print. Personal translation. 25

46 In *The Ersatz Elevator*.

47 In *The Carnivorous Carnival*.

48 In *The Penultimate Peril*.

49 At the end of *The Grim Grotto*, when she offers to take the orphans in her cab while they do not know who she is at all. They eventually accept her offer instead of going back to Mr. Poe (who does not care about them anymore): this marks the end of the negative cycle engendered by adults, and the children finally take their own decisions from then.

50 Hésiode. *Hésiode, Theogonie*. Les Belles Lettres, c. 700 BC. Print. Translation by Paul Mazon. 886-887

51 For instance, she managed to destroy the wall of a prison-cell with a loaf of bread, some water and a bench, in *The Vile Village*.

solution to seemingly unsolvable riddles<sup>52</sup>. And Sunny, at first glance, seems to be a simple baby who has four sharp teeth and therefore only has the physical strength to help her siblings (which is already a lot for a baby). But as the narration goes on, she keeps this strength while becoming aware of her own talent, cooking. She represents creativity and how Man is able to transform his primal nature (her previous passion for biting things) into something beautiful or enjoyable (delicious dishes out of nothing). The children, together, are stronger and can defeat a negative situation, which is why only together they represent the potential perfect being described by Hesiod. They always trick their way out of a tragic end planned by Olaf. This also has a common point with mythology: when there is a rule (may it be social, legislative), there is a trick. Perseus tricks the Medusa with a shiny shield thanks to the help of Athena and Hermes (who represent ruse and wiseness) in Greek mythology for instance. The Baudelaire orphans, on the contrary, are hardly helped by adults and have to find their own solution within themselves. Therefore their “mètis” is an introspection and their talents emerge from an urge for survival.

## **II. 3. Growing up and its limits**

### **II. 3. 1. The small pleasures of childhood**

The Baudelaire survival resides, as a matter of fact, in their ability to remain innocent despite the absurdly critical situations they witness. The issue they constantly face is that they cannot rely on adults. For instance, while the villain could still be chased, Mr. Poe chose not to and wait for the police, because: “A grown man does not get involved in a car chase. This is a job for the police” (2, 181). It is as though Mr. Poe put boundaries over the bravery a being is capable of in consequence of their age or status: being noble is being “wise” according to Poe. Yet, the children remain the only characters to dare act while the others (mostly adults) watch them or prevent them to. This is why the children feel so alone in the world. Their loneliness ensues directly from their parents' death: “it is a sad truth in life that when someone has lost a loved one, friends sometimes avoid the person, just when the presence of friends is most needed” (1, 34). Their children's perspective is often challenged in the eyes of a threatening adult world: “It was bad enough having Count Olaf acting in loco parentis and announcing himself as their father,

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52 Like when he found out where their friends were locked in by solving an anagram sent by them.

but to consider this man her husband, even for the purposes of a play, was even more dreadful" (1, 77). This wedding episode is told in a satirical tone but the gloomy atmosphere released in this scene reveals a true insecurity towards the children, especially Violet.

Hence the importance of the small moments of pleasure they experience from time to time, between hardships. Their maturity allows them to appreciate them for what they are: "The Baudelaire orphans were alive, and it seemed that maybe they had an inordinate amount of luck after all" (4, 194). Frequently, some supporting characters help them feel supported: "And most comforting of all, Hector didn't pester them with a lot of questions about why they were so surprised and silent" (7, 75), which is why such "considerate people" (op. cit.) are also important in their search for emotional stability. Some of their guardians consider them with kindness, but the orphans eventually become disenchanted by adults: "The Baudelaires looked at one another in sadness and anger. They understood. They understood that Aunt Josephine was more concerned with grammatical mistakes than with saving the lives of the three children. They understood that she was so wrapped up in her own fears that she had not given a thought to what might have happened to them. They understood that Aunt Josephine had been a terrible guardian, in leaving the children all by themselves in great danger" (3, 158). Their small pleasures are shadowed by the realisation that adults are not reliable.

The Baudelaires also make the most of their maturity through their love for mechanical devices, books and things to bite (or cook). When they focus on their talents for a purpose (often putting the latter into practice altogether in the same room) the children forget corruption. Their innocence is preserved by their ability to wear blinkers. This metaphor is made clearer in the last book: they start a new life on an island isolated from civilisation, and it is there that "the Baudelaires [feel] more at home than they [have] in quite some time" (13, 97). The island is their final haven, and it could be analysed as the way for the Baudelaires to avoid threats and responsibilities. However, eventually, the children's most considerable strength, as shown in every moral of every episode, is their unity: "It dawned on them that unlike Aunt Josephine, who had lived up in that house, sad and alone, the three children had one another for comfort and support over the course of their miserable lives" (3, 213).

## II. 3. 2. Family

Growing up is a life hardship in itself since family is often an obstacle to the teenager's conflicting feelings. When family is reduced to two siblings and a distant banker, growing up in a healthy and reassuring context seems impossible. Retrospections often come to help the Baudelaire orphans in this respect, but these always refer to happy moments spent with their deceased parents. Becoming an orphan after having known peace and comfort seems harder than being “born” an orphan. Above all, the Baudelaire children's adventures worsen as they meet the most despicable guardians Snicket's world has ever borne, even though this world is different from ours. Family, therefore, has a different meaning for the Baudelaires than the traditional one: “A group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit” (according to the Oxford Dictionary). Right from the beginning, the narration starts on the picture of the three children together, and not their parents, as though this unity of siblings was the core of their identity as characters, in the eyes of Lemony Snicket (who thus foreshadows the following events when Mr. Poe announces the children they just became orphans). Mr. Poe incidentally happens to be the first adult to take care of the children. He provides “ugly shirts” and “boiled vegetables” to the children, which seems to be the minimum a guardian should do for his new family, but Mr. Poe insists that the children must go the next morning “quickly, so as to get the Baudelaire children to leave the house” (1, 18). This reveals the bitter turn the children's life will soon take.

The few adults who agree to become their guardian have never met the children before, which is quite surprising given that the adult will soon become the children's new family. Klaus summarises this thought in *The Wide Window*: “Doesn't it strike you odd that none of our relatives are related to us?” (3, 6). They later lack moral support and benevolence from adults when they lose loving guardians (like Uncle Monty) and are not taken into account when an important decision is to be made<sup>53</sup>. The adults quickly get dissatisfied of the children in such a way that they look for excuses to get rid of them, giving up on their responsibilities. In *The Vile Village*, a social observation is implicitly made by Snicket when the orphans are accused of murder: one of the Elders first says

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<sup>53</sup> In *The Reptile Room* for instance, Stephano (Olaf) suggests that he took the orphans with him and adopt them, and it is not the orphans' opinion that allows his plan to fail, but the fact that the Baudelaires reveal his real identity with evidences, after failing to convince Mr. Poe that he was a dangerous person. The same alarming observation will be made in *The Wide Window*, or in *The Miserable Mill*, when the director of the mill will want to get rid of the orphans and a mysterious secretary (Olaf) will gladly accept the orphans as her own children.

“But surely the orphans aren't suspects [...]. They're only children, after all” (7, 158). Yet, when Detective Dupin (Olaf) “proves” his accusations and imposes his authority saying “it's not cool to disagree with Detective Dupin” (7, 158), the Elders start to say “I never trusted those kids” (7, 160). Children here represent the evil in a desperate situation, the perfect suspects for those who want to satisfy their anger and project it on an object. The hatred that follows the Baudelaires is immeasurable compared to the real world and the amount of couples who desire to have children.

Olaf's mischiefs impact this fictive world to the point that the only children figures present in the narration are orphans (Fiona, the Quagmires and even Carmelita Spats, the child nemesis of the Baudelaires). The status of parents is only represented through the role of guardian, but rarely are actual parents mentioned if not as deceased ones. For instance, in *The Austere Academy*, children in Prufrock Preparatory School need their parents' authorisation to live in comfortable rooms. In this case, family is the condition for comfort and security (the Baudelaires having none, they have to live in what is called “The Orphan Shack”, a small shed where their bed is a bale of hay and tiny crabs pinch their feet. This shack is like a stigma for the orphans, who live in a place reflecting their own family status. Family, therefore, means “A group of people related by blood” (Oxford Dictionary) for the Baudelaires, but not only. Violet seems to have the mother's role, given her maturity and her promise to her parents to keep her siblings safe and Sunny is the most vulnerable one, she represents the need for a family the orphans express throughout the books. Birthdays even seem miserable in *ASOUE*, and when it is Klaus', the best birthday present he asks for is life: “If your invention saves our life, Violet, it will be the best birthday present you've ever given to me, including that book of Finnish poetry you bought me when I turned eight” (7, 185). In the last book, they change their family status with Kit Snicket dying while giving birth to her daughter: (13, 321) “Although they were still children, the Baudelaires were parents now, and there was quite a lot to do.” The children discover their power to protect, after having suffered in surviving a multitude of adventures, and Sunny herself is no longer a baby, she is a mature child taking care of a newborn.

### II. 3. 3. Baby Sunny

One of the most complex characters in the series, among others like Olaf, who stands as the figure of the villain, is baby Sunny. Many metaphors about growing up mark

the series, but the most eloquent one is that of Sunny: the books start as she can only express herself through baby-like syllables (she is considered a baby)... But around the end of the series, her brother and sister notice that she is able to form full words and even sentences (in *The End*), and she chooses key-words that reflect a deeper ability to think and memorise. She represents the difference in the trio of children. Bruno Bettelheim explains it as an obsession with the number three, often present in children's tales. In order to fully understand the importance of this number, Bettelheim makes the assumption that this obsession comes from the need to differentiate the last child of the family: the number three here means two against one<sup>54</sup>. Going further, Bettelheim suggests that this position in the family makes the youngest child the most vulnerable (which is quite clear in the case of Sunny), but also the most rejected. This would enable the young readership to identify with the last child. Growing up often implies a feeling of rejection, and the youngest child is supposed to be the embodiment of this idea. Bettelheim adds that this opposition of two against one reinforces the identification of the reader with the "one", which represents the individual.

However, Sunny is not the kind of character one can identify with, on a long-term basis. Certainly, she suffers and is underestimated, but this is also the case for her two siblings. The difference she makes is in the way the author, Daniel Handler, built his characters. She might be the only character to evolve on a real-life scale. Out of all the roles played in the series, she and Count Olaf are the only round characters, contrary to all the other flat characters (alike Mr. Poe, who never proved to be efficient whatsoever, and appears to be a simple pattern of failure in the books). Sunny grows up at the same time-scale as the young readers. Yet, she remains such a different character that it is a too complex task to identify with her. She is the figure of exception in the books: she can use her four sharp teeth as a weapon or a tool in the first half of the books, but then discovers her cooking skill and is even able to save her siblings with it (by finding the antidote to the Medusoid Mycellium<sup>55</sup> using wasabi). Still, identifying with such a talented baby seems as easy as identifying with an out-of-this-world being, a supernatural entity. Given that by expressing herself only with one-word sentences, she is fully understood by her siblings, and not adults gives her an exclusive relationship with the reader, who has access to the translation of her sayings. The reader can even, as the books show a more mature Sunny, understand what she means without using a translation: in *The Vile Village* (one of the

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54 Bettelheim, Bruno. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*. op. cit. 141

55 In books 10 (*The Grim Grotto*) and 13 (*The End*).



books representing the turning point between the first and second halves of the series) she shrieks, pointing at the sky, “Machina!” (230). The expression “Deus ex machina” has been explained earlier by the narrator and even if, at this moment, her siblings do not understand what she means, the reader perfectly gets that she is talking about a miracle coming from the sky (Hector's hot air mobile home). The orphans are often surprised at the speed at which Sunny evolves, in the same way the reader would be: “‘Brilliant!’ Sunny shrieked, in mid-crawl, and her siblings smiled down at her, surprised she had uttered a word that everyone could understand” (2, 186).

Sunny therefore not only represents the last child of the family and the most defenceless one, but she has this special understanding of the world that prevents her from being completely identified with by the readership. Yet, in situations in which survival is at stake, she seems to be the triggering factor of decision, be it in favour of the children's survival, or for the interest of the villains. In *The Slippery Slope*, for instance, she is threatened to be thrown off the mountain, but many members of the theatre troupe find this decision too rough to be followed and decide to leave, thankfully for the children. In *The Bad Beginning*, she is caged in the air in order to oblige Violet to marry Olaf. Sunny, by her status as a baby, both represents the exposure and innocence of youth but also the urge for survival anyone has within oneself, and most of all, she is the unity of the family. Violet and Klaus are relatively in their adolescent years<sup>56</sup> whereas Sunny is by far the youngest, since she has a ten-year age gap with her siblings. However, that does not stop them from considering her as a person and not a baby. They are the only ones to take her mysterious elocutions seriously and to understand the mechanisms of her mind to get her ideas. This latter curiosity is what makes the narration so uneven: understanding that the word “José!” (2.104) refers to the American wrestler José No Way and therefore means “No way!” is already an impressive performance, but being able to understand that by “Tenti” (6. 207), she means “If we had some dynamite, we could blast our way out of the hallway, but we can't use the tongs as dynamite” is inexplicable. This is why Sunny's intelligence is limited by the perception the reader has through Violet and Klaus' translations. The narrator might as well trick our vision of this special character in order to believe that small and apparently vulnerable beings can hide unexpected abilities.

Changing homes is a metaphor for growing up and accepting the flaws and variations of negativity in the adult world. Snicket creates the paradox of evolving story and

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56 Violet is fifteen at the end of the books, Klaus is fourteen and Sunny is approximately three.

characters and old-fashioned, predictable mechanisms of narration. Travel is portrayed as a movement towards maturity. However this fictional frame implies limits, because this example of growing up takes place in a world treacherous enough to struggle to imagine a happy ending to it.

# III. A SATIRE OF INITIATORY JOURNEYS: FICTION AND ITS LIMITS

## III. 1. Bildungsroman in ASOUE

### III. 1. 1. A travel turned to the past

From the beginning of the books, Lemony Snicket tells the reader that “[their] initial opinion on just about anything may change over time” (1, 28). The Baudelaires' state of mind about growing up and being an adult evolves throughout their adventures, but their initial opinion about their childhood never changes. What characterises their mood, especially given their statuses as orphans, is nostalgia. Their travel, after their encounter with their parents' murderer (Olaf), begins with one of their closest relatives, Uncle Monty. Once he gets killed, the more guardians they meet, the more their family circle gets ambiguous. This contributes to bring the series closer to several genres of literature, especially modern and post-modern fiction, among other similarities: the search for identity and problems of the self; the rejection of an omniscient narrator (*ASOUE* is characterised by Snicket's first-person narrative and personal story that influences the reader's perception of the story); the importance of subjectivity over the narration (and the multiplicity of points of view<sup>57</sup>); the disruption of chronology (often brought about by the narrator); the ambiguity of good and evil; the concept of the Stream of consciousness (although Snicket does not use this technique explicitly, his narration imitates a fluid transcription of his own thoughts); the acceptance that a text is not original (which could be both illustrated by Snicket's investigations and stylistic imitations of situations, in the same way as Charles Dickens or the picaresque genre); the complexity of reality (and the corrupt world in which the Baudelaires live); the notion of anxiety possessing the heroes; and the abolition of the concept of a happy ending.

Above all, the Baudelaires endure a hard apprenticeship experience, summarised by the ideal word: “‘Bildungsroman,’ said Sunny. She meant something along the lines of,

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<sup>57</sup> In *The Penultimate Peril*, the three children's perspectives are shown in three different chapters, each one focusing on Violet, Klaus, then Sunny.

'Since that moment, our story has been a long, dreadful education in the wicked ways of the world and the mysterious secrets hidden in all of its corners" (12, 289). Their nostalgia turned towards their parents prevents them from accepting their present home(s): "and most of all, of course, they missed living with their parents, which was, after all, where they truly belonged" (4, 70). Their paradox is their will to solve a mystery involving their deceased parents, that becomes both a resentment of the past and a purpose in life. This is why their nostalgia is a limit to their children's lives. If their only solution to their miseries is the re-establishment of truth, it still does not guarantee them a stable home and a bright future. On the contrary, they seem to follow the same hopeless path as Lemony Snicket himself. Their limits are, above all, set by the fictional boundaries of the series. The limits of their evolution as characters are the reason to the limits of their evolution as children. Their travel is the mirror of their spiritual realisation: it is a circle. Firstly, their lives start as they live happy in the safest home. Their situation then degrades to the point that their roles and the villains' are reversed, then they gain back their moral values and take decisions on their own. Yet, in the end, they decide to go back to their former world after living on an isolated island. Their apprenticeship saga is then over. Handler plays with what traditional children's literature aim at: the figure of the circle only reveals a closed storyline that could never be satisfactory for a mature reader.

### III. 1. 2. Children as heroes

In children's literature, the heroes are mostly embodied by children, in an attempt for the reader to identify more easily to the struggles of the hero. In Bildungsroman, this identification is even more likely to be present since the reader will follow every step of the spiritual (and sometimes physical) elevation of the hero. In the case of *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, for example, since the books were published every year, following the recurring narrative structure of school years at Hogwarts, the reader was even able to grow up with their heroes. But what is at stake here is character development. And in *ASOUE*, the character development is quite non-existing, except for Sunny, as said before, which is the proof of Handler's satirical approach to a children's story. He does not create his characters to be skilful in the sense that they are not passionate about many things on their own, they need to be together if they want to succeed. The three orphans are just one inventor, one researcher and one cook. The first two have these skills because they are

useful, they are not fond of dancing, singing, playing sports, painting. Of course, through these talents they show that they are creating, or studying, but not that they are able to do several things at once, like any human being who is not defined by one characteristic.

In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone*<sup>58</sup>, on the contrary (and to cite a recent influential work of children's literature who happens to have several layers of reading as well), Harry, Ron and Hermione, facing the three final obstacles to find the Philosopher's stone, use their own skills to defeat them. Hermione uses spells to free Ron from the Devil's Snare plant, Harry snatches the key in the air with his innate Quidditch talent, and Ron leads the greatest game of wizard chess ever seen, all of this to reach the ultimate goal. At first glance, it seems like this trio is not so different from the Baudelaire orphans: Harry is "the brave one", Ron is "the loyal one" and Hermione is "the smart one", to put it simply. However they happen to have other passions, unlike the Baudelaires. Ron later joins the Quidditch team of Gryffindor, Harry is the best student in Potion class and Hermione, who had always been very cautious and obedient, breaks the rules to help her friends when they need to find a secret room to train. All of these show that this saga was meant to allow the reader to believe in the development of these characters, unlike in Handler's saga, which annihilates almost any form of realism in terms of personality and evolution. Handler seems to want to counterbalance all the times a children's book was saying that the value of a hero is determined the number of qualities he has and how he reacts in adversity.

The Baudelaire orphans, unlike many children's heroic figures, do not always choose the right path, and they are caged in a one-word talent, "inventing", "reading" or "cooking". They also lose their faith in nobility in the end of the series, even though they still seem to be able to differentiate what is right from what is wrong. They had to set a whole hotel on fire to inform their friends that the place was no longer safe, even though that meant reproducing the same tragic and despicable act that caused them so many miseries before, and becoming criminals themselves. Handler's goal in this choice of characterisation is not to say that the children are the best example the reader can follow. Instead, by suggesting they are only "human" and also make mistakes, and presenting his work like a real investigation in time, he actually induces a questioning of how to tell stories to children. Should we always read what we want to read, the way we want to see it written? Or should we accept that there are many terrible things we could do, and that

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58 Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015. Print.

despite considering ourselves “good people”, that does not prevent us from doing them?

### III. 1. 3. Irony at the service of fatalism

Most of Snicket's tellings are a satire of our world. It allows Handler to introduce several levels of reading. However, this satire is very exaggerated. The situations are barely believable, and the children are lost in a very dangerous world where they cannot rely on adults, and where they are never believed. On top of that, the press is corrupt, the villains disguise themselves badly yet other adults still believe them, as if they were more naive and credulous than children. A morbid atmosphere induced by death also follows them through the Baudelaires adventures, and this adds to the fact that they cannot live a normal, happy children's life. Above all, Snicket seems to take pleasure in narrating their misfortunes, adding dramatic irony to them: “Their situation seemed like a game, although this game had desperately high stakes” (2, 115). The general plot is rather ironical given that the reader might be a child. Does this mean that Handler intended no possible identification from the reader? Or is this identification reinforced by the tragic events and suffering?

Above all, this satire implies that Handler considers the reader clever enough to keep a critical mind on the exaggeratively tragic events in the books. It also allows the author to differentiate himself with naive fairy tales inducing happy endings, which are common in children's literature. Hope is not the leitmotiv of Snicket's literature. Roald Dahl, another post-modern children's literature writer from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes using the same ironical tone, but his stories still happen to have happy endings. Once again, Handler's series is a constant opposition between the children and the adult world, between which the readers find themselves and decide of the pros and cons according to Snicket's perspective. In *ASOUE*, the adults often ridicule themselves by accusing the orphans of the flaws or crimes they committed themselves: in *The Penultimate Peril*, when the Baudelaires find themselves accused of one crime (the murder of Jacques Snicket), other characters take advantage of it and shame them on other subjects, like being “bank robbers” (12, 298), an accusation hold by their former teacher Mrs. Bass who is herself a bank robber, or being “freaks” (according to Hugo, a hunchback employed in Madame Lulu's Circus), or “twisted”, a paradoxical accusation coming from Colette, the contortionnist. The trial happening at the end of the penultimate book is the assesment of the manichean satire Handler attempted to represent in his series. The frontier between

good and evil is blurred. Klaus implores the last volunteers to react as Olaf tries to kidnap Justice Strauss: “If there are any volunteers in the crowd, take off your blindfolds and help us!” (12, 297). The issue is that both the characters who were considered good and the evil ones debate over whether to take off their blindfolds and help the Baudelaires. The people Klaus called the last “volunteers” are the ones he considers noble, but they (heroes and villains) are in fact all part of the same VFD organisation. Handler even seems to mock their sense of morality and amour propre: Kevin, a man who considers himself to be a freak simply because he is ambidextrous, cannot accept any other destiny than being a villain because of this (12, 219).

The irony Snicket displays in his narration only serves the purpose of putting fatalism into perspective. Since the beginning of the series, the narrator keeps reminding the reader of the tragedy of the Baudelaire story, sometimes using unnecessary explanations to enhance the negativity of the events: “The word 'dreadful', even when used three times in a row, did not seem like a dreadful enough word to describe everything that had happened” (4, 178). Snicket insists on the irreversible aspect of the orphans' situation: rather than a dramatic story (when hope is permitted), it resembles a tragedy: the reader knows that the end is fatal but cannot do anything to prevent it. Snicket seems to adopt the same position as the reader, that of a helpless character, but he truly knows that his role is almost omniscient over the reader. The outcome of tragedies is often death, but in the case of the Baudelaires, death is almost omnipresent (the death of their parents, Uncle Monty, Aunt Josephine, Dr. Georgina Orwell, Jacques Snicket, Dewey Denouement, Kit Snicket and eventually, Olaf), which makes it a recurring pattern rather than the goal of the story. Snicket seems to live a personal tragedy, alongside the children's story, since he lost his entire family and the woman he loved. Yet, the irony of some situations in Lemony Snicket's narrative enables the reader to take distance from his feelings: it is as though the pathos of the events is counter-balanced by the absurdity of them.

### **III. 2. Repetitions and predictability**

#### **III. 2. 1. Mechanisms of survival and the influence of luck**

“They needed to be lucky if they wanted to stay alive” (4,131). This single sentence could summarise the whole *ASOUE* series. The children manage to survive several

misadventures while creating disorder at the same time. In the first half of the books, they are relatively passive to Olaf's mischievous plans. However, when their friends get kidnapped by Olaf, when it is no longer their own lives which are at stake, but the people they consider to be their new family, the series mark a turning point. The children no longer hesitate: good and evil do not matter, it is the survival of their unity that does. In this survival, some factors, like luck or talent, mean more than others. Sometimes the children get away from a trap because they combine all their talents together, as it is the case in *The Ersatz Elevator*, when they get out of the elevator shaft with welding torches and the help of Sunny's teeth, in order to find the Quagmire triplets thanks to Klaus' researching and memorising skills. In this case, their survival is not at stake, but it is with their talent that they manage to succeed. They do not have the choice but to rely on their skills, since the adults never listen to them. When the orphans, whose intelligence becomes famous, try to convince one of their oldest acquaintances (Mr. Poe) that they tell the truth (as always), surprisingly enough (after all, they were never wrong when denouncing Olaf in disguise) he never believes them and considers that they will always remain confused orphans. Thus the children cannot rely on adults or their persuasion skills.

Yet their talent is not sufficient in the explanation of their survival. It is frequent that children, in order to grow up and feel mature, desire to copy the way adults behave or talk. In the case of *ASOUE*, the children do not have the choice: their survival is based on imitation (or, rather, the intellectual surpassing of the adults of this world) and on luck. In *The Carnivorous Carnival*, in order to approach Olaf without being discovered, the children disguise themselves as circus members: they dissimulate their identity, in the same way Olaf did before. Not only do they not choose to survive but have to, they also follow Olaf's example in order to survive the same hostile environment he does. On the contrary of classics of children's post-modern literature (like *Harry Potter*, when the hero takes example on Dumbledore, the good figure), the Baudelaires' adventures follow a different moral path. Handler seems to guide them on the same direction as the villains in order for the heroes to understand what "evil" really means, rather than stigmatise it. Handler goes further in the opposite view, since he does not send the traditional message fairytales' morals do: luck is a factor of survival more important than talent, therefore if you succeed in life it is not by virtue but by chance. Snicket deliberately mocks the moral tradition while preventing himself to give a truer moral to balance his irony: (13, 236) "The moral of the story is that if you tell yourself that you can do something, then you can actually do it, a moral easily disproved if you tell yourself that you can eat nine pints of ice cream in a



single sitting...". The narrator's irony always discourages the reader to think that this story is an optimistic one.

### III. 2. 2. Pleasure of reading

Lemony Snicket's series is based on a repetitive structure that in a first phase allows the reader to understand the logic of the narrative, although this cycle appears to be tedious for a reader who only seeks a good story to read as a child or to a child; but on the second half of the books, the reader (if they made it so far) accesses a more complex form of story-telling. For instance, the discovery of the VFD society of volunteers and the Baudelaire parents' implication in it changes the aim of the narrative: it is no longer question of survival, but of revealing the truth about the past and the villain's intentions. Therefore the reader slowly enters another form of morality. Bruno Bettelheim indicates in his *Uses of Enchantment*, that having the villain punished at the end is not what makes children take the side of the hero, and that "the conviction that crime does not pay is much more efficient, which is why in fairy tales the villain always fails."<sup>59</sup> In *ASOUE*, the contrary situation is what questions the way fairy tales are told: Count Olaf always gets away with his crimes, and the Baudelaire children themselves begin to lose their moral sense when they burn the Hotel Denouement to the ground<sup>60</sup>, or disguise themselves<sup>61</sup>, or break the rules of a village<sup>62</sup>, all of which because of their inexhaustible urge for survival. So little moral shown in these books aimed at children could be explained by Bettlheim's theory that "in our modern society, the adult wants to hide from the child the fact that everything wrong in life comes from our own nature: what makes all human beings behave in an aggressive, asocial, selfish, angry or anxious way. We want our children to believe that Man is inherently good."<sup>63</sup> In reality Daniel Handler's logic is simple: every *ASOUE* tome begins with a warning that this book might not be the one the reader wanted to read and that they should out it back at their place. The back cover is even more discouraging, and by doing so, Handler uses a strategy of preterition, to tantalise the reader to go further in the story.

The titles of the books themselves evoke a terrible threat that the children will face,

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59 Bettelheim, Bruno. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*. op.cit. 20 (personal translation)

60 Snicket, Lemony. *The Penultimate Peril*. op.cit.

61 Snicket, Lemony. *The Carnivorous Carnival*. op.cit.

62 Snicket, Lemony. *The Vile Village*. op.cit.

63 Bettelheim, Bruno. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*. op.cit. 18 (personal translation)

like three little Hercules performing thirteen labours. This approach to a children's story puts the reader and their heroes in a pessimistic situation, which in the end, do not give them any reward (they do not find an answer to the VFD mystery and they leave the safe place they had found to go on more dangerous journeys). By breaking the tradition to end a children's story well, Handler challenges his readers. He asks them to choose, at the end of each book, if they are optimistic enough to continue reading this unrealistically tragic series of books. The ultimate chapter of the last book of the series (which is the only fourteenth chapter of the entire series, proving that the final episode does break the cycle), *The End*, ends on an ambiguous note: the children, who had finally found a suitable place to live, if not the best (the desert island full of horseradish-flavoured apple-trees), eventually decide to come back to the "civilised" world, not only to raise their new sister, Kit Snicket's daughter, and to continue investigate the VFD case. The latter has never really been solved, just like the sugar bowl's aim remains a mystery, like the reason for the assassination of many VFD members. Handler therefore suggests his readers that a story never really has an end, even though the episode does: (ch. 13, p. 321) "The girl, named after the Baudelaires' mother, howled and howled, and as her series of unfortunate events began, this history of the Baudelaire orphans ended."

### III. 2. 3. A broken cycle

The initial structure of the first half of the books is like a cycle: Mr Poe takes the orphans to their new guardian, leaves in haste, then Olaf appears in their new environment, disguised, the orphans reveal his mischiefs, he escapes, and they are taken to their new guardian. This could be considered both a satirical representation of security regarding children in our society, or a repetitive setting up for what will happen next. The second theory is more likely, since some details in Lemony Snicket's (or rather Daniel Handler's) work that soon become the plot will break the cycle book after book. For instance, Lemony Snicket's small interventions in the story reveal to be considerably important to the VFD plot: he uses his own adventures as examples or counter-examples, like in the eighth book, *The Hostile Hospital* (90-92):

"This is not a tale of Lemony Snicket. [...] But if this were a book about me, instead of a book about the three children who would soon run into someone they had hoped never to

see again, I might pause for a moment and tell you about something I did many years ago that still troubles me. [...] I suddenly remember this thing I did, and think to myself, *Was it really necessary? Was it absolutely necessary to steal that sugar bowl from Esmé Qualor?* This sugar bowl later<sup>64</sup> proves to be the corner stone of the schism that destroyed the VFD peace, that caused the death of many volunteers and most of all, the death of the Baudelaire parents.”

In the second half of the books, the orphans suddenly decide that they can no longer count on adults to protect their lives (and their money). Therefore, the help of Mr. Poe is no longer needed. This decision is taken in the same period of time in which the orphans begin to discover about the secret organization of volunteers, VFD. In *The Austere Academy*, the Baudelaires are sent to a boarding school instead of with a relative, and make friends with the Quagmire Triplets, who turn out to be better supporting characters who actively help the Baudelaires, than the neglecting patronising adults. At the end of *The Ersatz Elevator*, when they discover the secret passage from their guardians to their childhood house, even knowing about VFD, they still follow Mr Poe to the Village of Fowl Devotees (VFD) (where he abandons them on the account that there is a new program allowing orphans to be raised by a village, since “it takes a village to raise a child”). This is the last time they are officially led to a new guardian by Mr Poe, since this book marks the end of the cycle: the orphans begin to be accused of murder and will end up doing things almost as mischievous as Olaf himself (lying, burning a hotel to the ground...). The cycle seems to be broken around the sixth book, since one of their guardian is a mischievous character herself (Esmé Squalor) and will end up joining Olaf and his troupe. This event begins to reveal the non-binary way the world works, in which any apparently good authority or power can hide a bad intention, in which adults can be blinded by greed and abandon their “noble heart”.

### **III. 3. Fiction and its evolving frame**

#### **III. 3. 1. Reversed roles**

The fictional frame both implies boundaries and a larger freedom to imagination in comparison with our world. In the case of the Baudelaire world, what is enhanced is the

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64 Three books later, in *The Grim Grotto*. op.cit.

dichotomy between adults and children. Regarding both the emotional and rational aspects, it seems that the children surpass their elders: “Klaus sighed. He felt, sometimes, as if he had spent half his life explaining things to Mr. Poe” (2, 150). Their responsibilities are reversed and so are their roles. The orphans are not always considered as such, and more like burdens to get rid of. Above all, adults behave like children and the orphans show more wisdom than they do. In *The Austere Academy*, Principal Nero likes to humiliate the children by repeating what they say in a high-pitched voice, like a child: “‘Nonsense,’ Nero said. Klaus wanted to say ‘Nonsense!’ right back at Nero, in Nero’s own repulsive way, but he bit his exhausted tongue” (5, 150). The Baudelaire wisdom, indeed, comes from the threat induced if they dared to be as vicious as some adults are towards them. They suffered in the past and do not wish to live the same experiences again, but Snicket’s love for dramatic irony, as a matter of fact, confirms that their efforts put in satisfying their guardians are useless. The orphans’ loneliness could also be explained by the fact that few adults understand them on the emotional level: “The Baudelaire orphans sat together on the floor of Sir’s office and looked up at the adults discussing the situation, wondering how in the world they could talk about it so calmly” (4, 178). The children are often the only characters feeling the urge in situations when Olaf escapes, once again.

Olaf is notably a major element in the reversing of the characters’ roles. Children’s fiction often establishes a clear difference between heroes and villains: the hero is noble, always stays true to their original values and always makes good decisions despite a critical situation. In *Harry Potter*<sup>65</sup>, for instance, the villain, Voldemort, presents all the characteristics of evilness: his physical appearance is terrifying, his intentions are turned towards dark purposes, and his army is composed only of wizards with extremist opinions. Therefore the villain does not let ambiguity blur the definitions of good and evil. In *ASOUE*, however, Olaf appears to have lived the same childhood as the orphans, which the latter only discover in the last episode, *The End*. This could explain why the villain’s last words are: “Man hands on misery to man” (13, 318). This plot twist reveals Handler’s real intention to refuse a simplification of life principles in the sole purpose of pleasing a child. On the contrary, the Baudelaire orphans eventually face the moral dilemmas they thought they would never hesitate over. At the beginning of the series, the reader would never imagine that the Baudelaires themselves would set fire to a hotel in which several people are still in. In *The Penultimate Peril*, this episode destroys the last hope for the children to

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65 op. cit.

ever feel noble. This hope comes back when they reach an isolated space, when they are allowed in a new community that does not know them and accepts them as they are. Their roles, for the first time since the beginning of their thirteen adventures, have no real definition on this island. The land itself does not bear a name, and the children have to bear white clothes: their identity is neutral. The recurring expression in this episode, above all, is “it depends how you look at it”, as a way for Snicket to conclude on the ambiguity of life and the limits of the fictional frame: “One could say, in fact, that no story really has a beginning, and that no story really has an end, as all of the world's stories are as jumbled as the items in the arboretum, with their details and secrets all heaped together so that the whole story, from beginning to end, depends on how you look at it” (13, 288). Above all, the reader is never tricked into thinking the Baudelaires are villains, because their “villainy” is only born in the eyes of the adults who do not want to see beyond their actions.

### III. 3. 2. Happy endings

Bruno Bettelheim in his *Uses of Enchantment*<sup>66</sup> (p. 22), suggests that fairy tales enable the reader to understand that, even more than a “happy ending”, the end of a tale means that life continues. It is not eternal, but it can be rewarding if bondings in society are made, if the child leaves their comfort zone and home. Daniel Handler goes even further by asking his readers to be brave enough to envisage that the Baudelaire orphans might never be happy, or rarely, and that it might be the case for them in life. This way, Handler allows his audience to put things into perspective, and to appreciate small pleasures of their safe life in reality. *ASOUE* is one of the rare children's stories to consider their own fiction as a more pessimistic place to grow up than in reality.

Most of the time, the aim of fairy tales is to beautify a child's vision of the world in order for him to evolve in a more optimistic approach to life, and happy endings is a good way to consider ends in life, like death or separations. In *ASOUE*, the aim is exactly the opposite (or so it appears to be): although Handler is asking a high maturity of his readers to understand that beyond the exaggeratively tragic events of the books, there is a truth about hardship in life, it seems that this exaggeration is also a way to suggest that adults should stop exposing their children to stories that always end well. Bettelheim interprets this choice by stating that it allows children to dominate their anxiety towards the unknown,

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66 Bettelheim, Bruno. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*. op.cit.

but Handler, on the contrary, plays on the metafiction that raises from this combination of exaggerative and gloomy atmosphere and the unsubtle conception of some characters, like Mr. Poe, who has not evolved in thirteen books, reduced to a coughing banker “well intentioned but of no real help” (2, 124). In doing so, the author creates an implausible universe in which the reader is not fooled. The only truth about the story resides in the tension felt by the orphans, and the feeling of despair and frustration that grows throughout the books. The story never ends well, and Handler may argue that this is not only a mock children's story to make a satire of traditional ones, but that this narrative choice could witness a new reaction from young readers. They put things into perspective in a more direct, instinctive way, because they will never be as desperate as the orphans, to the extent that they can project their desires of happiness more easily, because contrasting things is a more accessible defence mechanism for a child. After doing this, they will identify to the orphans' ability to find happiness in small things. *My heroes are enduring the most terrible things in life, they are orphans, they are chased down by the most despicable people on earth and they are, most of the time, hungry and tired. Therefore my problems are negligible next to theirs. Above all, my house is safe, I can have fun with my friends and I can trust my parents. I am not to blame*, is the comforting observation they will unconsciously formulate in their mind.

### III. 3. 3. A satire of how to tell tales

In the story, Snicket mocks modern children's tales by gradually discouraging his young characters' hopes. The Baudelaires go from home to home in order to survive to Count Olaf's mischievous plans. It begins at their original mansion, which is no longer habitable because of the fire, then Count Olaf's lamentable house, which is found to be unsanitary and insecure, then the following guardians' homes, until the end of the first half of the books. The second half starts at the end of the seventh book, when the Baudelaires decide to live their lives on their own, escaping the raging, death-thirsty VFD village and beginning a journey all by themselves. They do not count on Mr. Poe anymore<sup>67</sup>. Since they have to escape, they travel different places, each book uncovering a new landscape. Each place becomes, for a brief episode, the pretext for the satire of civilisation(s). To use

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67 At the end of the eleventh book, *The Grim Grotto*, they see Mr. Poe approaching them on the beach, but decide instead, as a way to break the cycle, to head towards a perfect stranger who appears to be more than helpful, since this is Kit Snicket, Lemony Snicket's sister and volunteer in the VFD organisation.

Michel Foucault's term<sup>68</sup>, these places appear to be heterotopias: they are topographies that reconstruct a society with the intent to make a satire of it. They are places where power is expressed in a different way, where a counter-power is expressed in a different way than in the context of a contemporary society (like in a city, or in a broader sense, in a form of a democracy). This can be illustrated with the metaphor of modern cemeteries, which are built far from cities in an attempt to keep distance from death.

In *ASOUE*, each place exploits a specific aspect of society: the isolated village<sup>69</sup> exploits the psychological power of a mob, the hospital<sup>70</sup> exploits the power over death a surgeon possesses, the mountain<sup>71</sup> exploits the power of nature over Man, the submarine<sup>72</sup> exploits the dictatorial power of a captain over his sailors, on the direction to take or whether to abandon the ship or not. But most importantly, the final place the Baudelaires find themselves in is the most eloquent of all: an isolated island<sup>73</sup>. The isolation allows the civilisation in it to develop its own functioning, in regard of law, politics and economy. In *The End*, the Baudelaires discover that the island's community welcomes any castaway who accepts to give up their former customs. They all dress in white robes and eat the same "blank" food, at the same times of the day, and refuse to keep mechanical objects, in order to avoid violence and to keep death away from their island. The story even mentions the most famous island story, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe<sup>74</sup> (13, 39): "Do you live on the island, Friday?", which also raises the question of the other.

Gilles Deleuze develops this idea of the Other through the notion of a "possible world": "without the possible future world facilitated by the Other, linear chronology collapses, so that consciousness merely survives in an 'eternal present'"<sup>75</sup>. In *ASOUE*, the contrary situation proves this theory: even though the island constitutes a new world for the orphans, it is stuck in an "eternal present" because of its absence of progress, and because Ishmael, the facilitator, refuses any form of other culture. This way, the island's absence of identity is preserved and security is guaranteed. Although the orphans meet a new civilisation, they do not allow them to develop a notion of the Other through a variety of new customs, since their customs are simple and insipid.

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68 Foucault, Michel, and Daniel Defert. *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988. 1980-1988*. Gallimard, 1994. Print.

69 Snicket, Lemony. *The Vile Village*. op.cit.

70 Snicket, Lemony. *The Hostile Hospital*. op.cit.

71 Snicket, Lemony. *The Slippery Slope*. op.cit.

72 Snicket, Lemony. *The Grim Grotto*. op.cit.

73 Snicket, Lemony. *The End*. op.cit.

74 Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Macmillan and Company, 1866. Print.

75 Hamilton, Grant. *On Representation: Deleuze and Coetzee on the Colonized Subject*. Rodopi, 2011, p.114.

Space and time are also not determined in the books, which contributes to the fictional frame's ambiguity. They could be set in the USA, according to the architecture of the buildings and the general landscapes throughout the books, but the only evidence of time in History the reader gets is technology: this world has newspapers, radio sets, cars (taxi), televisions and elevators. Computers are also mentioned in *The Austere Academy*, yet the spatio-temporal frame does not seem to be the main interest of the author or narrator, since choosing a specific time and place would suggest to take into account the social, political and economical background of it, which would mean to insert a highly realistic setting into the narrative (which plays on hyperbolic and unbelievable situations right from the beginning). In order to create an unrealistic and increasingly tragic catastrophe, the world in which it will be set must be separated from any form of verisimilitude. Yet, the author still chose to keep elements of reality, like the Caspian Sea (13, 10), so that the reader is not confused and keeps learning from their reading. This is why the setting is confusing: the Baudelaires' world seems to be set in the real world, with contemporary technology, literary and scientific references, and renowned place names, but the places where their particular adventures take place do not appear on any map. However, the author created a world in which everything is named alphabetically as an alliteration or like in a library (which is why every volume of the saga is an anaphoric alliteration, except for *The End*): Prufrock Preparatory<sup>76</sup>, Decision Day<sup>77</sup>, Calligary Carnival<sup>78</sup>, Briny Beach<sup>79</sup>, Medusoid Mycelium<sup>80</sup>, Hurricane Herman<sup>81</sup>, Lake Lachrymose<sup>82</sup>...

Fairy tales often have a reputation of simplicity of plot, of candour in the content of their story towards children. In an attempt to contradict this prejudice, Bruno Bettelheim makes a comparison between the way traditional fairy tales and modern children's stories treat the child's anxieties: "Modern securing stories do not evoke death or ageing, or the hope of an eternal life. Fairy tales, however, put the child in presence of all the fundamental hardships of Man<sup>83</sup>". In *ASOUE*, which is a modern children's story, Snicket chooses not to prevent his young readers from discovering his characters' miseries, often

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76 Snicket, Lemony. *The Austere Academy*. op.cit.

77 Snicket, Lemony. *The End*. op.cit.

78 Snicket, Lemony. *The Carnivorous Carnival*. op.cit.

79 Snicket, Lemony. *The Bad Beginning*. op.cit.

80 Snicket, Lemony. *The Grim Grotto*. op.cit.

81 Snicket, Lemony. *The Wide Window*. op.cit.

82 op.cit.

83 Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1976. Print. 19



creating a *mise en abyme* between his series and the orphans' discovery of a book summarising the VFD history called *A Series of Unfortunate Events* in *The End*: “the Baudelaire orphans wondered about their unfortunate history, and that of their parents and all the other castaways who had washed up on the shores of the island, adding chapter upon chapter to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*” (13, 233).

Snicket plays with the reader's ability to dissociate the story's relative realism and the narrator's metafictional satires. Again, in Bettelheim's words: “the conscious and unconscious associations which fairy tales [and *ASOUE*] evoke in the mind of the listener depend on his general frame of reference and his personal preoccupations<sup>84</sup>”, therefore the reading experience depends on the child's will to feel empathy or frustration towards the Baudelaire story. Snicket sets the fictional frame in a dystopian world, to abide the theory according to which “Every utopia since *Utopia*<sup>85</sup> has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author's or in the readers' judgement, both a good place and a bad one. Every utopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a utopia<sup>86</sup>”. Handler, like other post-modern children's literature writers (Roald Dahl, Philip Pullman, J.K. Rowling), tells a story where the heroes are fighting for what they consider to be good values, in a pessimistic and corrupt world. Yet eventually, the orphans free themselves from this mechanical cycle, after being stuck acting as characters and not people: “but for a moment none of the Baudelaires could move, as if they were unwilling to travel any farther in their sad *history*, or see one more part of their *story* come to an end” (13, 286).

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84 *op. cit.* 13

85 More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Primedia E-launch LLC, 1516. Print.

86 Alderman, Naomi. “Dystopian Dreams: How Feminist Science Fiction Predicted the Future.” *The Guardian* 25 Mar. 2017. *The Guardian*. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

# Conclusion

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

- *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling (2007)

Handler's many literary references (Georgina Orwell, Stephano, Dupin, Baudelaire) are a way for him to pave the way for his young readers: when they will be mature, they will be able to recognise these names in their adult readings (1984, *The Tempest*, Edgar Allan Poe, and French poetry...). At certain occasions, he managed to break the fourth wall with his readers, implying that the characters might encounter the name Lemony Snicket in their story: “His full name,’ Duncan said, flipping through his notebook, ‘is Jacques Snicket.’ ‘That sounds familiar,’ Violet said. ‘I’m not surprised,’ Duncan said. ‘Jacques Snicket is the brother of a man who –” (7, 222). The three main families, Olaf's the Baudelaires and the Snickets meet for the last chapter, where the orphans learn their links with these: “They would have named [Klaus] Lemony? Where did they get that idea?’ ‘From someone who died, presumably” (Chapter Fourteen, 2), above all adding a morbid tone to the narrator's existence. This reveals a multiple-layered story, originally criticised for its unexplained simplistic structure: “Whereas J. K. Rowling might argue that she needed seven books to see Harry Potter through Hogwarts, there are no conceptual reasons for the Snicket series to extend over 13 books<sup>87</sup>”. Yet, while many readers might get frustrated at the first half of the books which repeats the same process: Snicket discouraging the reader to read further, then describing the initial situation of the Baudelaires in a new environment, the arrival of Olaf and how the Baudelaires will struggle to convince their guardian he has returned until they find a solution themselves and Olaf escapes again; the audience soon gets the narrator's intention of an ironical and whimsical fiction: after disliking the first book, “through his reading of the second in the series, [Geoff Fox] had been battered into acquiescence by ‘the relentless and obvious humour, the repetitious and self-conscious style, the predictability of the characters, and the transparencies of the plots.’<sup>88</sup>”

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87 Butt, Bruce. *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 34, No. 4, December 2003. 282

88 op. cit. 279

The predictability of the characters, as aforesaid, is paradoxical: some characters evolve while others remain the same. This is the dichotomy between adults and children the author makes in the series: Sunny is the most evidently round character while Mr. Poe is the most eloquently flat one. Handler might have had the ambition to enable the young reader to feel the power of wisdom over his parents while enjoying the series. Yet, they still lose their innocence in this respect. The author's pessimism is a mirror to the reader's slow realisation that dreams and hopes might never come true. This loss of innocence has several factors: a lack of trust from adults, additional tragic events, loneliness (associated with survival instinct), constant danger. Theoretically the orphans have no time for naivety while residing in gloomy and unsafe homes. All of these explain their disillusion. The dichotomy between adults and children also participates to their disenchantment: the majority of adults are portrayed in a grotesque and pathetic way while the children are full of decaying hopes and desperately in need for security and in search of their identity as individuals. Fortunately, this dichotomy is diminished by another vision of the adult world, portrayed by some VFD members and Lemony Snicket. The most notable creation out of all of Snicket's is the villain: Olaf represents the threat and possible reprisal combined to a merciless and eccentric sadism. Out of all adults, his ambition motivated by money is the most logical one. Mr. Poe is embarrassed by the orphans and makes illogical choices in the choice of their new homes, while a lot of the children's guardians seem to hesitate on whether to believe the orphans or other adults. Snicket investigates on the Baudelaire case for obscure reasons, until the reader understands that his motivation is his lost love, Beatrice, the Baudelaire's deceased mother. All these connecting relationship networks only lead the reader to think that this intricate world is the reflection of the complexity of human nature.

Handler also uses his series to make a satire of children's fiction and adult society. The aim of satire is to improve society by criticising its flaws, using irony and exaggeration. A writer uses his characters, who stand for real people, to expose their weaknesses and exaggerate their personalities in analogies of certain individuals or aspects of a decaying civilisation. This satire often implies that by creating these characters, he will enable them to evolve and change their flaws. But in Handler's case, his only aim seems to ridicule in every way possible every aspect of adult behaviours: Olaf is stupid, Esmé is obsessed with fashion and being "the best", Mr. Poe is afraid his reputation might be tarnished because of the orphans, and Captain Widdershins swears only by the absence of hesitation in a stressful situation. Every adult is dominated by a motivation or fear that

prevents them from acting in a noble way, even supporting characters like Hector or Justice Strauss. Most importantly, Snicket himself is the embodiment of ambiguity. His ambition to use his name both as an author and narrator is a process of autofiction. He goes further in refusing to step out of this role even on interviews: “Daniel Handler is a very talented and handsome man who has agreed to represent me when there are circumstances that prevent my appearing on camera, on television, at a library, at a bookstore, at a school, walking down the street, going into a restaurant, going on a roller coaster, going into an automobile, on a ship, on a plane, and other situations that prove unnatural for me<sup>89</sup>”. It seems like the frontier he draws between Handler and Snicket should never be revealed. With these series, he has attempted to create a beautiful illusion of a children's story while simultaneously destroying the idea of traditional fictional frames.

Above all, his satire resides in the Baudelaires' initiatory journey. Handler takes over the structure of famous Bildungsromans such as *Kidnapped!* by Stevenson<sup>90</sup>, *Don Quixote* by Cervantes<sup>91</sup> or *The Pickwick Papers* by Dickens<sup>92</sup>, which all use humour to lighten the story's gloom. In all of these tales, travel allows the depiction of different societies and therefore different rules, as a mirror for the varying human neuroses. With his moralist tone and redundantly sorrowful comments, Snicket transforms these satires into a negative experience his characters endure. Even though he uses irony in his narrative, the presence of humour is always on the side of the villains, which enhances the cynicism of his tales. His omniscient position also reflects Jonathan Swift's satirical role in the telling of *Gulliver's Travels*<sup>93</sup>. Swift managed to bend reality in order to make the reader look at it again: he depicted ordinary human customs as curious ones so that the audience stops taking them for granted and look at them as if for the first time. Handler created a similar world where an initiatory journey resembles a wider and odder picture of our world. The two authors use their apprenticeship novels (to all appearances) to make a metaphor about what it means to grow up and the context in which an individual will have to find their own identity. They accumulate different sceneries and allegories as a pretext for the complexity of human nature.

For this reason, Handler's story ends on a rush towards the “Great Unknown”, a

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89 Lemony Snicket, interviewed by TeachingBooks.net in San Francisco, California on March 26, 2012.

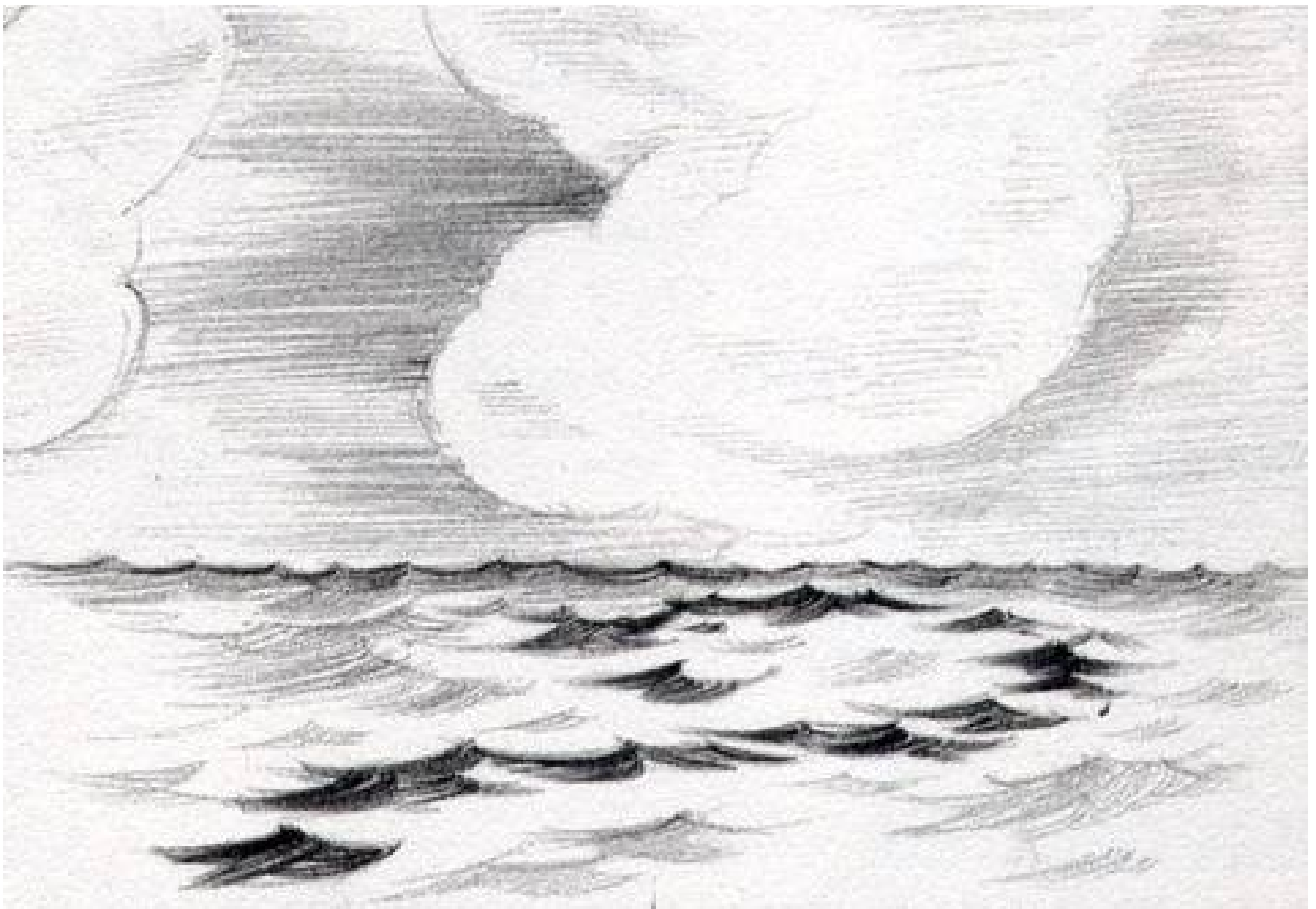
90 Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Kidnapped!*. op. cit.

91 Saavedra, Miguel de Cervantes, and Tobias George Smollett. *Don Quixote*. Wordsworth Editions, 1998. Print.

92 Dickens, Charles. *The Pickwick Papers*. Hueber, 1905. Print.

93 Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Jones & Company, 1826. Print.

mysterious question-mark shape following the Baudelaires everywhere on sea: “My brother [Lemony Snicket] used to call it 'The Great Unknown' [...] in an instant they were gone – either swallowed up or rescued by this mysterious thing” (13, 304). It is not clear whether this thing is threatening or protecting the Baudelaires, but they eventually go back at sea, like other characters before them leaving the island, who might have “gone forever into the great unknown” (13, 307). This end leaves the reader with the choice of existence they wish to live: go forward and risk their optimism into the great unknown, or remain forever stuck in their comfort zone, which, in the end, corresponds to traditional fairy tales' happy endings. This raises the same dilemma as in Barrie's *Peter Pan*<sup>94</sup>: whether to grow up, or not. In the end, Lemony Snicket's choice of narration is similar to children's primitive instincts that push them to imagine the worst situations possible in order to ward off bad luck.



The Great Unknown

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94 Barrie, J. M. *Peter Pan* (*Diversion Classics*). op. cit.

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Appendix 1: Brett Helquist's illustrations in *ASOUE*



Figure 1. Olaf's house in *The Bad Beginning*

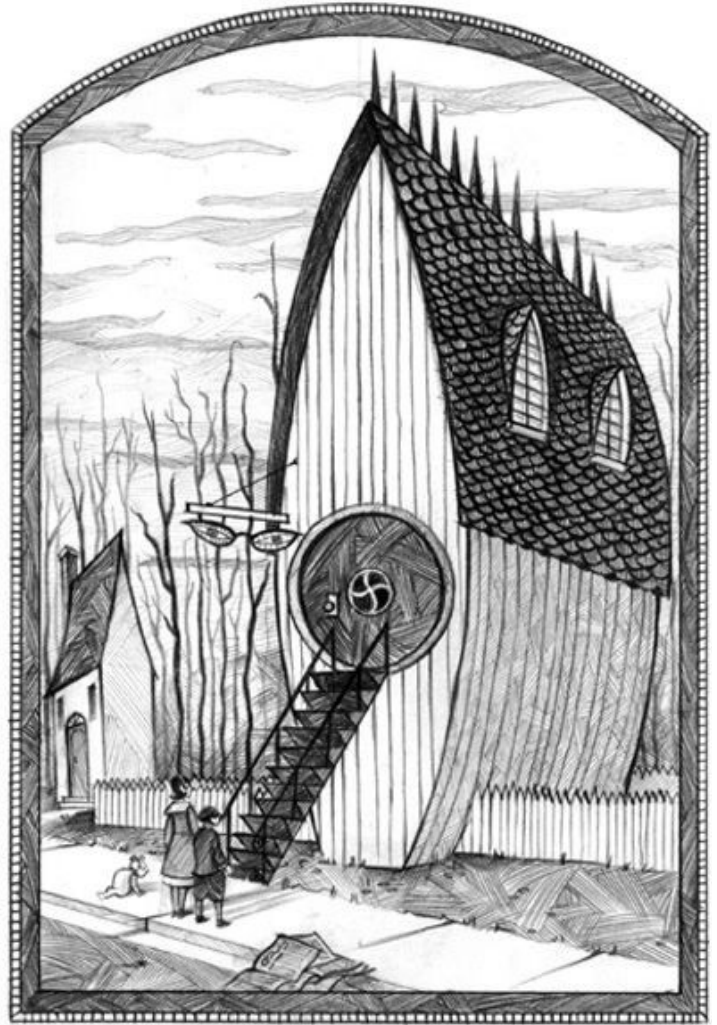


Figure 2. Dr. Georgina Orwell's eye-shaped house in *The Miserable Mill*



Figure 3. Olaf's many disguises



Dear reader,

You seem to have picked up the wrong research paper. This dissertation analyses the soul-tearing whereabouts of three orphaned children, satirically depicted in the voice of a tortured mind bearing the names of Lemony Snicket or Daniel Handler, as suits your taste. From the very first page of this work, you will encounter convoluted theories on what the wretched narrator decided to do with notions such as "innocence", "death", "morality", "survival", "adult", "child", or even "fiction".

I can think of no single reason why anyone would want to endure such a troublesome task as reading these perplexing sheets of paper. The Baudelaire orphans would never tolerate their story being investigated in order to determine its negative and disenchanting aspects. Lemony Snicket himself would violently sob if he were to find this dissertation on his desk.

It was my solemn duty to write down the digressions of my mind on these subject, but you may prefer some other enjoyable activity and put this work back where you found it.

With all due respect,

*Ilona Compoint*

ILONA COMPOINT