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More Than Just Nonsense Verse?: The Language of Dr. Seuss and Children's Literacy

Nicole Hewes

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**MORE THAN JUST NONSENSE VERSE?: THE LANGUAGE OF DR. SEUSS AND
CHILDREN'S LITERACY**

by

NICOLE HEWES



Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program

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so I'd like to make my gratitude well-known.

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for making this project happen

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ABSTRACT:

In Judith and Neil Morgan's biography of Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), there is a claim that Geisel's "books had been computer-tested with other print media and proved uniquely effective in conveying information."¹ While the veracity of this claim may be questionable, I do not believe it is faulty to speculate that there are qualities inherent in Geisel's wordplay that make his books resonate so strongly with children in ways that other books do not. However, I believe his skillful manipulation of language has been underappreciated, with his books being classified as merely "for fun" and "for entertainment" rather than as instructive and valuable tools for teaching skills such as reading comprehension as children engage with the accessible material in his works.

In this Senior Scholars project I wanted to demonstrate that Dr. Seuss books are much more than just nonsense verse and that it is his use of language, not just his whimsical subjects, which make his books resonate so strongly with children. For the first part of my project, I familiarized myself with all of his texts and scrutinized his use of language in a textual analysis. In this analysis, I attempted to show that Dr. Seuss is a bonafide poet, not merely a children's book author. This involved looking both at certain lines of Geisel's poetry but also at how his stories function as wholes through the use of repetition and other literary devices. By scrutinizing Geisel's use of language and wordplay, I hoped to isolate some characteristics that make a Seuss book different from other types of stories and texts for children and to perhaps speculate why these particular qualities are effective for entertaining and intriguing young readers.

The second part of my project was an empirical study that tested what influence reading a real Seuss text versus a fake Seuss text has on students' performance on a reading comprehension task. I tested the impacts of Geisel's language use by de-Seussifying two Dr. Seuss stories – that is, by breaking apart his rhymes (and other poetic devices like alliteration, consonance, etc), and turning the lines into un-rhyming prose while retaining as much of the original diction as possible. After totaling the scores in literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension, I then compared the scores of those students who read the original Seuss texts to the students who read the pseudo-Seuss story in order to see which version of the text led to better performance on the reading comprehension task. My expectation was that the language in the original Dr. Seuss texts influences the students' abilities to answer higher-order comprehension questions (inferential and evaluative).

My project produced two products that are closely linked. First, the textual analysis reveals and catalogues how Geisel plays with language. This analysis offers hypotheses about why the language use in Seuss books proves so engaging and delightful for children. Second, the research aspect of my project investigates whether or not it is the language in Seuss books that leads to children's enjoyment in reading these stories. Additionally, it interrogates whether Geisel's careful construction of language leads to increased levels of reading comprehension in children in comparison to a de-Seussified text. If Seussian language does indeed lead to greater levels of reading comprehension and enjoyment with reading, these findings could have great implications for theorizing how to make young children more engaged and critical readers.

¹ Morgan, Judith, and Neil Morgan. *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel*. United States: Da Capo, 1996, p. 271.

Viewed as a whole, the work of Dr. Seuss looms among contemporary children's books like one of his own whale-like species, unlike anything else in shape, size, or function.

- Helen Renthal



In the children's room of a suburban branch of a large, metropolitan public library system, the librarian jokingly responds to my questions about Geisel's books. "Dr. Seuss? Oh, we hide Dr. Seuss...well, not really. We keep him over there on a special shelf. We'd really rather they read something better—something more like A.A. Milne." Upon examining the "special shelf," I find that nearly all Dr. Seuss books have been checked out.

- Rita Roth

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Chapter One: Introduction

“I Like Nonsense, It Wakes Up the Brain Cells”

“They snap. They crackle. And also pop. If the books of other more staid authors are the oatmeal of children’s literature – solid, nourishing, and warm, but not much fun—those of Theodor Geisel are its Rice Krispies, blending nutrition with a happy explosive morning racket.”
- Warren T. Greenleaf, *Principal Magazine*, May 1982.

In my personal experiences, I’ve yet to encounter a child who didn’t have some familiarity with Dr. Seuss. For most children (and their parents) *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Lorax*, and *Horton Hears a Who!* (to name just a few) are not merely picture books, but represent the much larger “genre, category, [and] institution” of “Dr. Seuss” (Jonathan Cott, cited in Fensch, 1997). Though few would refute Dr. Seuss’s status as among the most popular children’s authors of all time, a strange schism occurs with regards to his books: while children almost universally love his works, the books have traditionally been – and in many cases continue to be – shunned by educators because they offer a “kind of frivolity that [is] not appropriate for school” (Roth, 1989, p. 142). In other words, though the whimsical linguistic play and zany plotlines in the Dr. Seuss books delight readers of all ages, it is precisely these elements of “fun” which have relegated Dr. Seuss texts to the sidelines in classrooms. In fact, outside of the annual celebration of Dr. Seuss’s/Theodor Geisel’s birthday, I’ve rarely seen a Dr. Seuss book read in a whole-class setting – even though students frequently fight over the opportunity to read these books during their silent or free-choice reading time.

One apparent reason for this shunning of Dr. Seuss stems from the common perception that his books are too silly, humorous, fantastical, and popular. While the stories do seem very simple – as though they were “knocked off on a rainy Friday afternoon,” as Geisel once said – the seemingly effortless verse in these texts is deceptive, as it masks the meticulous care with which Geisel wrote his texts (Harper, 1986, p. 133). Because his verse is both whimsical and

sparse, Geisel has traditionally, as Philip Nel points out, gone “[un]recognized as a poet” despite the fact that “when we think of Seuss, we think of poetry” (2003, p. 15). Having been dismissed as “a mere versifier,” Geisel and his works have often been considered unworthy of study in educational settings and described as lacking in literary merit (Flynn, 2005, p. 265). As Gary Schmidt comments, Geisel “is not always credited” for his “conscious manipul[at]ions of language and illustrations to create very specific effects” precisely because his books seem so easy and often, unsophisticated (1991, p. 42). However, a closer examination of the Dr. Seuss texts and a look at his philosophy of writing for children reveals that Geisel and his works possess far more literary merit than critics typically acknowledge.

However, not everyone has dismissed the Dr. Seuss books as unworthy of attention – they continue to be incredibly popular and have been increasingly recognized as “important contributions to children’s literature,” even by individuals “who do not equate best sellers with worthwhile reading” (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 92). Indeed, as Geisel’s biographer Ruth K. MacDonald argues, Geisel and his works support the claim that “being popular does not [have to] mean being second-rate” (1988, p. 170). Yet, despite being cited for a special Pulitzer Prize in 1984, Geisel and his works continue to be noticeably absent from classrooms and schools. His Beginner Books, with their simple verse and pictures are viewed as too silly or simple, while his powerful “message” books continue to receive sharp criticism for dealing with issues many consider too complicated or frightening for children. At the same time, all of his books have maintained their popularity in the years since their publication, meaning that children continue to read and enjoy the stories of Dr. Seuss – just not in school.

In order to address the peculiar absence of Dr. Seuss books from schools, I devised this Senior Scholars project in an attempt to defend the Dr. Seuss stories, explore whether or not they

possess literary merit, and investigate whether they might positively influence children's narrative comprehension. Put simply, I wanted to scrutinize the Dr. Seuss texts in order to assess the veracity of my hunch that these books offer children far more than just entertaining and amusing stories. Specifically, I was interested in exploring both how Geisel manipulates language in his texts and what influence the linguistic features of these books have on children's comprehension of the stories. My interest in the language use in the Dr. Seuss books and my empirical study to test its effects was inspired and driven by a likely-facetious comment in Judith and Neil Morgan's biography *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel*:

Dr. William O. Baker, a retired chairman of Bell Laboratories, sought out Ted to say that his books had been computer-tested with other print media and proved uniquely effective in conveying information (1996, p. 271).

While the veracity of this claim may be questionable, I do not believe it is faulty to speculate that there are qualities inherent in Geisel's wordplay and writing style that make his books resonate with children in ways that other books do not. However, the persistent categorization of the Dr. Seuss books as merely "for fun" and "for entertainment" has contributed to Geisel's skillful manipulation of language being largely underappreciated, particularly by educators. Despite the seeming simplicity of the Dr. Seuss texts, I have always believed that his books are much more than just nonsense verse, and in this project, I wanted to explore whether his use of language – not just his whimsical subjects and fun, humorous storylines – can help to explain why his books prove successful at enthralling and gratifying young readers. In other words, there were two overarching goals for this project: first, to explore and articulate Geisel's writing philosophy and manipulation of language and second, to investigate how or whether this language use influences children's abilities to comprehend the often-complicated messages in these stories.

Thus, this project falls into two parts – a literary analysis and an empirical study. In chapter one, I provide an introduction to Geisel and the Seuss canon by exploring the criticisms frequently lobbed against the Dr. Seuss and contend that the popularity and seeming simplicity of these books prevents many critics and educators from seeing the merit of these works. Chapter two offers an overview of Geisel’s philosophy of writing for children and argues that his commitment to this ideology helps to distinguish his books from other children’s texts and also gives them a great deal of literary merit. Chapter three attempts to break down Geisel’s use of language by tracing both his use of and the function of literacy devices throughout the body of his work. By exploring specifically how Geisel manipulates language, I believe that his status as a bonafide poet, not merely a children’s writer, emerges as the underlying sophistication of his texts is revealed. Chapter four presents the findings of a study conducted in order to see whether the language use in authentic Seuss texts enhances narrative comprehension when compared to the language use in a “de-Seussified” text. Finally, chapter five brings the entire project together and articulates the often-overlooked aspects of the Dr. Seuss texts that make them quality literature worthy of study in any classroom.

In *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!* (1978), Geisel writes: “The more things that you read, / the more things you will know. / The more that you learn, / the more places you’ll go.” Since the publication of his first book in 1937, Geisel and Dr. Seuss have undoubtedly been taking children places – both imaginary and real. Very few critics would argue that the Dr. Seuss books have failed in their goal of steering children toward the path of becoming lifelong readers; his books continue to delight and entertain readers of all ages. In this project, however, I hoped to explore not whether the Dr. Seuss stories are amusing when we read them with our eyes shut, but rather, what we can discover when we read the Dr. Seuss books with our critical eyes open wide.

Chapter Two: An Introduction to Dr. Seuss and a Defense of Theodor Geisel

“But we can have lots of good fun that is funny.”

Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) is undoubtedly one of the most beloved authors of children’s books; his whimsical and often zany stories delight adults and children alike. During the peak of his career, he received an average of 500 letters per week from children and nearly five tons of mail each year (Jennings, 1965). Nearly two decades after his death, Dr. Seuss ranks 6th among the highest-earning deceased celebrities, making over twelve million dollars annually from the continued sales of his books.² It does not seem unreasonable, then, to claim that Theodor Geisel, with an astonishing sixteen books on the list of the 100 best-selling children’s books of all-time, just may be the most popular American who ever wrote for children (Nel, 2003, p. 6). By the end of the twentieth century, over a million copies had been sold of eighteen of Seuss’s forty-four children’s books – including over eight million of his best-selling work, *Green Eggs and Ham* (Cohen, 2004, p. 342). Worldwide, over eighty million copies of his stories have been purchased, leading scholar Jonathan Cott to assert that Dr. Seuss “has become a genre, a category, an institution” (Cott, 1983, p.102). The whimsical nature of Geisel’s books has undoubtedly led to Dr. Seuss’s popularity, but the language play in his works has also led to Dr. Seuss becoming synonymous with hilarity, peculiarity, and nonsense. Therefore, though the continuing popularity of the Dr. Seuss books suggests that a significant proportion of children today continue to be exposed to these works, I believe that the notoriety and the style of the books cause many audiences to continue to regard the works as nonsensical, second-rate amusements rather than high-quality and carefully-crafted children’s literature.

² Hoy, Peter. "In Pictures: Top-Earning Dead Celebrities." *Forbes.com*. Forbes Magazine, 27 Oct. 2008. Web. <http://www.forbes.com/2008/10/27/top-dead-celebrity-biz-media-deadcelebs08-cz_ph_1027celeb_slide_7.html>.

The Downside of Popularity

While Geisel undoubtedly stands as one of the greatest children's writers in terms of popularity, the simplistic and fanciful nature of his books often prevent his works from gaining the literary recognition they deserve (Schmidt, 1991, p. 41). In the preface to her biography of Theodor Geisel, Ruth MacDonald (1988) defends the literary merit of the Dr. Seuss books by arguing that the popularity of a text is not inversely proportional to its quality:

Popularity can be misleading. Simply because an author is well known and his books widely marketed and purchased does not mean that there is no literary value to his work. Dr. Seuss's works seem verbally simple, but the appearance is deceiving. His books do not come without hard work, craftsmanship, and a thorough grounding in the history of English and American literature (preface).

As MacDonald argues, though Dr. Seuss books often appear simplistic, Geisel was actually a meticulous writer, carefully scrutinizing every word he chose to include in his stories. "I realize they look as if they've been put together in 23 seconds," he once said in a magazine interview, "but 99 percent of what I do ends up in the scrap basket" (Jennings, 1965). Geisel was particularly mindful of his trademark rhymes, showing the devotion of a true poet when working on his stories: "I stay with a line until the meter is right, and the rhyme is right, even if it takes five hours" (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. XIX). Yet, despite Geisel's scrupulous writing process, many critics have overlooked his adept craftsmanship and dismissed him as "a mere versifier" (Flynn, 2005, p. 265). Seuss Scholar Philip Nel, however, asserts that Geisel deserves "critical recognition" because his poetry has been influential enough to "actually [change] the language itself" – it was in a Dr. Seuss book, after all, that the word "nerd," now a ubiquitous utterance in the English language, first appeared (Nel, 2003, p. 25). Unfortunately, the persistent

classification of Geisel's works as whimsical often leads to audiences not taking the Dr. Seuss stories – and Geisel himself – seriously.

Therefore, despite Geisel's influential and carefully-crafted verse, only the two *The Cat and the Hat* books have been heralded for their literary achievements, leaving the majority of his other books for young readers “overlooked, patronized, and undervalued” (Fensch, 1997, p. 1). The popularity and critical reception of *The Cat in the Hat* books stems from the drastic departure these stories offered from the “general dreariness of children's school primers” such as the *Dick and Jane* series, which failed to provide engaging or exciting stories for children (Morgan & Morgan, p. 148). Literacy scholars had long criticized basal readers like the *Dick and Jane* books because they “insulted [children's] intelligence” with their uninteresting phonological repetitions; critics even argued that these lackluster reading materials had contributed to the low literacy rates amongst American children (MacDonald, 1988, p. 141). In contrast to the “pale, pastel, middle-class illustration[s]” in the *Dick and Jane* books, *The Cat in the Hat* provided readers with vibrant depictions and a zany plotline that emphasized wordplay over monotony (MacDonald, p. 106). In other words, Dr. Seuss “brought pleasure to American children” by making reading fun and entertaining, qualities that were often overlooked in primers that focused on teaching children how to decode and read basic words (MacDonald, preface).

Yet, although scholars celebrated *The Cat in the Hat* for “killing the *Dick and Jane* readers,” *The Cat in the Hat* alarmed many parents and educators who “felt safer with Dick and Jane” than the devious and unpredictable Cat in Geisel's story (Nel, 2003, p. 167). The discomfort many adults experienced with the Dr. Seuss stories was not atypical – until recently, although universally adored by his readers, Geisel and his books were “held at arm's length by the children's literature establishment” (Roth, 1989, p. 142). From the outset, Geisel struggled

with gaining acceptance for his work; a whopping twenty-seven publishers refused to publish Geisel's first book, *A Story That No One Can Beat* (later renamed *And to Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*) on the grounds that it was "too different" from other stories for children (Morgan & Morgan, p. 81). The lack of didacticism in the story also concerned publishers, who criticized *A Story No One Can Beat* because it "ignored or flouted the defining conventions of children's book" due to its notable absence of an explicit moral (Pease, 2010, p. 24). Eventually, a friend of Geisel's published the story as a favor, and the nation enthusiastically received the very first Dr. Seuss book. This warm reception came as a surprise, as Geisel's work differed so dramatically from anything and everything else on the market:

The unqualified enthusiasm of these first recognitions of the world of Dr. Seuss was remarkable because in the constrained circle of children's literature Ted was a rowdy and, at first glance, an undisciplined revolutionary. He was among the first to link drawings as equal partners with text, risking comparisons to comic pages (Morgan & Morgan, p. 84).

Throughout the entirety of his career, Geisel continued "consistently [challenging] the limits of the conventions of children's literature" and eventually began to garner (sometimes hesitant) acclaim from critics and his audiences alike (MacDonald, 1988, p. 164). These positive reactions to the Dr. Seuss books were largely based on the fun and excitement of his stories, however, and rarely lauded the stories for their literary value.

Despite the commercial success of Geisel as a writer, his books often failed to receive the recognition they rightly deserve. Though his works consistently ranked amongst the most popular books at the time of their publication, not one of them won the greatest prize in children's literature, the Caldecott Medal; in fact, Geisel was only nominated for the award three

times.³ That such a popular author never won the most prestigious prize in his field provides a vivid illustration of the anxiety surrounding the Dr. Seuss books:

The fact that the books were all Caldecott Honor Books, all runners-up to the grand prize of Caldecott Medal-winner, may indicate a certain reservation about Dr. Seuss's books. The fact that they are insistently funny, with no grand moral or educational lesson behind them, may have made the books seem less worthy to the judging committee than other books that have not maintained the kind of popularity over the years that the Dr. Seuss books have. The fact that the verse does not aspire to poetry, but is content to be amusing, without any grand pretensions, may also have had some bearing on the committee's selections (MacDonald, p. 9).

The uncertainty and reservations surrounding the work of Geisel continued throughout his career, as critics accused Geisel of a "number of heinous crimes against childhood" including introducing children to adult concerns and problems such as the nuclear arms race, "oversimplifying issues," and generally "frightening children" (MacDonald, p. 14). Taken together, the lack of recognition from awards committees and the concerns of critics reveal the strange contradiction surrounding Geisel's work: though beloved by the children for which he was writing, Dr. Seuss books made many adults very uneasy, especially teachers and librarians.

Though students tend to respond to Dr. Seuss books with greater enthusiasm than most other children's literature, teachers rarely take his work seriously in their classrooms. Geisel's works are typically reserved for reading at home, as educator Rita Roth explains: "Dr. Seuss, like comic books, provided a kind of frivolity that was not appropriate for school" (Roth, 1989, p.

³ Seuss was awarded a Caldecott Honor (a secondary prize) for *McElligot's Pool* in 1948, *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* in 1950, and *If I Ran the Zoo* in 1951.

142). Though she now believes Dr. Seuss books are more than worthy of study in the classroom, Roth believes that many teachers cannot “see beyond rhyme” and therefore wrongly conclude that Geisel’s work cannot offer anything meaningful or useful for their students (p. 142). Librarians, too, are tentative with Dr. Seuss, as they find his books “too jokey” to serve as useful and worthwhile children’s literature (Morgan & Morgan, p. 175). As she investigated the perceptions of the Dr. Seuss books, Roth described the treatment of Geisel’s books in libraries:

In the children’s room of a suburban branch of a large, metropolitan public library system, the librarian jokingly responds to my question about Geisel’s books. ‘Dr. Seuss? Oh, we hide Dr. Seuss...well, not really. We keep him over there on a *special* shelf...We’d really rather they read something better—something more like A.A. Milne.’ Upon examining the ‘special shelf,’ I find that nearly all Dr. Seuss books have been checked out (p. 142).

Thus, although Geisel’s work provides the “self-consistent, happy madness beloved by children” (Morgan & Morgan, p. 88), teachers, librarians, and critics have always questioned his status as a serious writer and tried to encourage students to read what they consider higher-brow literature.

Towards the end of his career, however, Geisel did begin to gain more recognition for his significant literary achievements. The *New York Times* celebrated his unique ideas and storylines, which were lauded as being unparalleled by those of any other author, and his books were translated, with varying degrees of success, into over twenty different languages (Morgan & Morgan, pp. 151, 225). Additionally, Bernard Cerf, one of Geisel’s editors at Random House, compared working with Ted to being in the presence of a master:

‘You don’t tell Joe DiMaggio how to hit the ball,’ [Cerf said.] He liked to astonish audiences by naming distinguished authors of Random House—Eugene

O'Neill, William Faulkner and John O'Hara—and to conclude that Ted, alone among them, was a genius (Morgan & Morgan, p. 170).

Few critics would have echoed Cerf's praise at the time, but Geisel did finally receive credit for his significant contributions to children's literature when he received a special citation from the Pulitzer Committee in 1984. Geisel's biographers, Judith and Neil Morgan, report that he was "flabbergasted" by the award and felt that it came "right out of left field, particularly after all these years" (p. 255). One of the members of the committee, however, recounted that the decision to give Geisel the award was reached with "'as close to immediate unanimity'" as any proposal in which he'd been a part, perhaps indicating a softening in the critical reception of the Dr. Seuss books (Morgan & Morgan, p. 255). In her obituary about Geisel, writer Anna Quindlen also eulogized his talents as a wordsmith:

[He was a man who] took words and juggled them, twirled them, bounced them off the page. No matter what the story in his books, the message was clear and unwavering: words are fun. [...] He is remembered for the murder of Dick and Jane, which was a mercy killing of the highest order (Morgan & Morgan, p. 290).

Quindlen's recognition of the influence of the Dr. Seuss books suggests Geisel is slowly beginning to gain a reputation as an important American writer for more sophisticated reasons than his sheer popularity with his readers.

Conclusion: Giving Geisel the Credit He Deserves

The contributions of Theodor Geisel to the field of children's literature cannot be overstated; with the publication of his unique and convention-defying works, he created "a whole new way of viewing children's books" (Fensch, p. 185). His books continue to delight readers decades after their publication and seem to possess a timeless quality that many critics find struggle to fully articulate, including Rudolf Flesch, author of *Why Johnny Can't Read*:

'What exactly is it that makes this stuff immortal?' asked Rudolf Flesch about Dr. Seuss's work. 'There is something about it,' Flesch tried to explain. 'A swing to the language, a deep understanding of the playful mind of a child, an undefinable something that makes Dr. Seuss a genius pure and simple' (Cott, p. 102).

This "undefinable something" makes classifying the Dr. Seuss books a challenge, as they defy categorization in children's literature. Scholar Helen Renthall argues that the Seuss canon stands apart from all other contemporary children's books as its "own whale-like species, unlike anything else in shape, size, or function" (p. 38). While the Dr. Seuss books undoubtedly stand out in the field of children's literature, I believe that these works – particularly the meticulous craftsmanship of Theodor Geisel – remain both overlooked and underappreciated. As Ruth McDonald elegantly articulates in her biography of Geisel, his rousing popularity should not undermine the critical attention that ought to be devoted to the Dr. Seuss books:

By bringing interesting reading materials to children, Seuss gave a new dignity and interest to the field of children's literature. Simply because his books are not high literature, and appear deceptively simple in both language and illustration, does not mean that there is no literary or artistic value to them or that they are effortless productions dashed off in a weekend. By putting such effort into his

books, Seuss dignifies child readers and reading, giving them extraordinary efforts and excellent products. His massive popularity does not imply a crass diminution of his art. Being popular does not mean being second-rate (p. 170).

While popularity tends to be conflated with low-brow literature, critics have overlooked for too long the fact that Geisel's works defy this stereotype both with their whimsical, but methodical use of language and their timeless plots. Furthermore, as we will see next, a fairly sophisticated philosophy about writing for children undergirds the entirety of the Seuss canon – a fact which makes the Dr. Seuss books even more worthy of critical attention and recognition.

Chapter Three: The Writing Philosophy of Theodor Geisel

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

“You can enjoy Dr. Seuss’s books, for example, even if you don’t understand some of the words, even if you don’t know English, and even if you don’t follow the plots—some of them are fairly complicated. But there’s enough regularity and sequence built into them so that even if you don’t get all the words or all the points, it doesn’t matter. You don’t have to get the moral of The Sneetches in order to enjoy it.” – Howard Gardner

Building on the argument developed in the previous chapter – that though the Dr. Seuss books rank amongst the most popular children’s books of all-time, the popularity and ubiquity of the books does not mean that the works are subpar – this section explores the key components of Geisel’s philosophy of writing for children. By critically examining the features of this ideology and exploring how this philosophy informs Geisel’s writing, I hope to illuminate the often-unrecognized literary merit contained in the Dr. Seuss books and argue that these works do, in fact, constitute quality literature for children.

Though the Dr. Seuss books tend not to be recognized for anything other than their entertainment value and memorable characters, some literary scholars, have defended the work of Geisel and argued that his works possess literary merit:

[T]he works of Dr. Seuss are not simply popular. They are written in dead earnest, with a serious though sketchy theory of reading behind them, and they have been recognized as important contributions to children’s literature by people who do not equate best sellers with worthwhile reading (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 92).

Throughout his writing career, Geisel held strong beliefs about what constitutes quality writing for children and always ensured that his own writing lived up to these expectations. The central

tenets of Geisel's philosophy include giving children the intellectual credit they deserve; using fantastical elements in a logical manner; refusing to impose didactic morals; creating stories that use humor, nonsense, and imagination to encourage children to think critically; and playing with language in entertaining stories that prove reading can be fun. I believe that Geisel's view of children's literature provides one explanation for why his stories seem so drastically different than other works and why they radically revolutionized how we conceptualize writing for children and children's books. It was Geisel's philosophy of writing for children that led him to "consistently [challenge] the conventions of children's literature" throughout his career (MacDonald, 1988, p. 164). In pushing the boundaries of what subjects should be discussed in children's books, Geisel offers a chance for children to be empowered, rather than domesticated and indoctrinated by overly didactic texts:

Dr. Seuss is not simply trying to make children aware of these important issues; he is also positing models for children to follow. He wants to empower children, rather than drive them to despair. He also implies that children are smart enough to understand these issues; they need not be helpless victims (MacDonald, p. 165).

By analyzing Geisel's philosophy of writing for children, we can better understand not only why he wrote his books the way he did, but also begin to comprehend why these stories captivate children and became such significant contributions to the field of children's literature.

What Makes for a Good Children's Story?

While Geisel did not subscribe to any well-known theory of or formulaic approach to writing children's books, he did hold very strong views about what made for successful and high-quality stories for children. When asked to give a lecture about children's literature, Geisel analyzed the great works typically read by children to identify their shortcomings; he concluded that classic texts such as myths and Aesop's fables were often "too cold and abstract, too mathematical and intellectual" to stimulate true engagement in children (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 123). He did, however, enjoy the excitement one could find in epics such as *The Odyssey*, the "great roguish tricks" contained in *Robin Hood*, and the "vivid imagery" in myths (Morgan & Morgan, p. 123). According to his biographers, Morgan and Morgan, Geisel felt that *Robinson Crusoe* was the best work for children because it met what Geisel called "the seven needs of children" (p. 123). In Geisel's mind, a story for children would only engage the reader if it met seven distinct criteria to which he believed children enthusiastically responded:

Geisel described the best children's stories as those that addressed what he thought were children's seven basic needs: love, security, belonging, achievement, knowledge, change, aesthetics. They want *fun*. They want *play*. They want *nonsense*. He added, 'If you write with these needs in mind, you'll have a chance of having children accept you' (Pease, 2010, p. 77).

The wording of the above statement reveals Geisel's commitment to putting the reader at the center of his stories – he believed writers could not merely impose stories and morals on children, but that they needed to actively consider exactly how to reach a young audience.

Though Geisel favored writing that met the seven needs of children, he also thought that too much focus on the child could actually make a story worse. In an interview he once remarked

that “[n]inety percent of failures in children’s books [...] come from writing to preconceptions of what kids like” (Bunzel, in Fensch, 1997, p. 12). Throughout his writing career, Geisel attempted to undermine the persistent stereotypes and presumptions about what children like, ultimately demonstrating that kids like stories far more complex and sophisticated than those typically written for them. With his zany, chaotic plots that tackled real-life issues and encouraged children to use their imaginations, the Dr. Seuss books posed an active and subversive challenge to the simplicity and didacticism present in most children’s books on the market at the time:

Part playful jester, part hard-edged satirist, and part provocateur, the sharp-tongued Geisel rebelled against the delicate, protective approach taken by many writers, and the emotional squeamishness and sentimentality that characterized much of what had passed for kids’ books (Marcus, in Fensch, p. 189).

At the time of their publication, the Dr. Seuss books revolutionized the conceptualization of just what a children’s book could and should do. Though Geisel received harsh criticism for writing stories about the nuclear arms race in *The Butter Battle Book*, the prejudice that led to the Holocaust in *The Sneetches* and *Yertle the Turtle*, and the discomforts of aging in *You’re Only Old Once!*, he remained convinced that children’s books should present children with honest representations of the world in which they live. Thus, the Dr. Seuss stories advocate for children’s rights by crediting their intellectual capabilities and exposing them to issues that other children’s texts, such as *The Dick and Jane* series, tended to skirt over in favor of more simplistic, uncontroversial, and ultimately, boring, stories. For Geisel, the simplest way to assess the quality of a children’s book was to ask whether it could “be read with pleasure by adults” (Morgan & Morgan, p. XIX). Geisel’s concern about whether adults could also enjoy his stories reveals his belief that books written for children don’t need an entirely different set of qualities

than works intended for adults. In other words, Geisel felt that children could not only handle stories that would also engage adults, but that to provide them with anything else was to do them a severe disservice.

Giving Kids the Credit They Deserve

Geisel felt that the majority of literature written for kids patronized young readers by underestimating their capabilities to understand complex material and challenging topics. Seuss aficionado Charles Cohen argues that Geisel's work engaged children so effectively because he "believed that children's abilities and their imaginations exceed[ed] adults' expectations" and thus wrote books that appeal to and intrigue those with vivid imaginations (Cohen, 2004, p. 300). By writing stories that engaged the imaginative capabilities of children, Geisel found that he could write tales that not only entertained children, but that also showed them that reading could, in fact, be fun and adventurous. Geisel believed that fantastic stories with sophisticated plots, like those in the Dr. Seuss books, more effectively teach children how to read than the bland primers typically used for instructional purposes. "There's been too much 'Come here, Fido,' in kids' readers," Seuss once said in an interview—"I sometimes wonder how any of us learned to read" (Bunzel, in Fensch, p. 11). Geisel felt that children could grasp far more sophisticated and interesting language than the bland, repetitive writing offered to them in other children's books; he expressed this opinion in an interview about his writing process:

'We just try to say what we have to say simply and concisely,' [Geisel] explains.

'Adults minimize the speed and the desire children have for learning. Children can do at three or four what is expected from them at six or seven.' Television, he

believes, has vastly expanded children's vocabularies, making it possible for authors to use words that rarely appear in primers (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 94).

Geisel's belief in children's ability to comprehend more complex vocabulary than many believed led him to weave interesting and bizarre words throughout his stories and even to make up his own words when he felt words in English simply wouldn't articulate his ideas effectively.

The wacky and unique vocabulary that appears throughout the Seuss books serves as one of the defining features of these works. At the time of their publication, the use of these neologisms and esoteric words set Geisel's work apart from nearly everything else in the field of children's literature. Geisel actively campaigned against the word lists provided by publishers for children's authors; in one comment about these lists, his anger and frustration about the assumptions such lists make about the capabilities of children is obvious and palpable:

'In writing for kids of the middle first grade, the writer gets his first ghastly shock when he learns about a diabolical little thing known as "The List." School book publishing houses all have...lists...of words that kids can be expected to read, at various stages in their progress through the elementary grades. How they compile these lists is still a mystery to me. But somehow or other...with divining rods or something... they've figured out the number of words that a teacher can ram into the average child's noodle. (Also, the approximate dates on which these rammings should take place)' (Cohen, p. 322).

Strong diction such as "ramming" implies that Geisel felt that such structured vocabulary instruction was both unnecessarily forceful and undesirable to children. Indeed, he felt that word lists paralyzed the potential of children by "placing lower expectations on them" (Cohen, p. 300). The zany words that appear throughout the Seuss books, therefore, were not only intended to

delight children with their sounds and distinctiveness, but also to send a very political message about Geisel's views of children's abilities and skills.

Rather than seeing children as inferior to adults, Geisel viewed kids as capable of understanding anything that adults can, if only the ideas were presented in simple enough language and somehow connected to their own lives. Throughout his career, Geisel maintained the view that children are capable of far more than many adults believe; when asked if there were "hidden adult meanings" in his works, he blatantly responded: "Well, I don't think there's any difference between adult meanings and children's meanings" (Nel, 2003, p. 129). Philip Nel astutely argues that Geisel's view of children and grown-up meanings as one and the same reveals Geisel's belief that kids are every bit as intelligent as adults. Indeed, in one interview, Geisel stressed the importance of treating children as equals when writing for them, rather than exploiting the role of author to address them as a more knowledgeable adult: "Children welcome good writers who talk, not down to them as juveniles, but clearly and honestly as equals," he said (Nel, p. 60). Ludwig Bemelmans, the author of the *Madeline* series, argued that Geisel's capability to talk *to* the child rather than *at* the child stands as one of the greatest strengths of the Dr. Seuss books:

'Dr. Seuss treats the child as an adult, and I think a children's book, to be good, must not be made for an inferior creature, for the diaper brigade. Because children are very, very, very alert, you know?' (cited in Nel, p.129).

Geisel not only viewed children as equals, but also believed that they weren't all that different from adults; in fact, towards the end of his career, finding that his stories had been enjoyed and treasured by adults and children, Geisel proclaimed: "I no longer write for children. I write for *people!*" (Morgan & Morgan, p. 283). This idea of writing for people rather than one specific

demographic explains Geisel's belief in the importance of children's literature for ameliorating social problems:

'Children's reading and children's thinking are the rock bottom base upon which the future of this country will rise. Or not rise. [...] In these days of tension and confusion, writers are beginning to realize that books for children have a greater potential for good or evil than any other form of literature on earth' (cited in Nel, p. 61).

In Geisel's opinion, children's literature held the powerful potential to affect not only the futures of the young readers themselves, but also of the country and the world in which they live. This belief led Geisel to take his job as a children's writer very seriously and undoubtedly contributed to his meticulous approach to writing his stories.

Carefully-Constructed Simplicity: The Writing Process of Theodor Geisel

For Geisel, writing for children was a full-time job; when he wasn't actively working on writing or illustrating one of his books, he was dreaming up ideas for the next one—even his extensive traveling served his writing by giving him the inspiration for many of the strange beasts which fill the pages of his stories. In 1974, Geisel described his writing process, a diligent routine which reflects his dedication to his craft:

I've made it a rule to sit at my desk for eight hours even if nothing comes, I've seen so many writers and artists become bums especially in a resort town like this

[La Jolla, California]. They go to the beach in the morning and when they come back they don't feel like working. So I work eight hours straight. When the working is going well, I'll go at it with hammer and tongs for a month, then take six or seven months off. Even then I'll be working, though, filling up notebooks with ideas (Pease 149).

Geisel's dedication, persistence, and patience with his craft contributed to his staunch refusal to adopt a formulaic approach to writing that would have sped up the process considerably. In contrast to many other writers for children who publish several titles a year, Geisel produced only one or two Dr. Seuss titles in an average year. Moreover, each of his stories differs significantly from one another; even though Geisel does recycle characters and wrote several sequels in his writing career, each of the tales features an entirely unique plot. Avoiding the use of a plot formula was very important to Geisel, who felt that writing with a prescriptive formula prevented any chance to give children credit for their intellectual capabilities:

'A formula is usually tantamount to writing down to children, which is something a child spots instantly,' [Geisel said in a 1965 interview.] 'I try to treat the child as an equal and go on the assumption that a child can understand anything that is read to him if the writer takes care to state it *clearly* and *simply* enough' (Jennings, 1965).

Thus, Geisel gave credit to children's capabilities by rejecting the temptation to use a formulaic approach to writing his work, as creating quality picture books mattered more to him than earning as much money as possible from his work.

In order to write successful stories that would cause kids to think and use their imaginations, Geisel felt that he needed to consistently challenge his own creative abilities during the writing process:

He liked to approach a book ‘with a situation or a conflict and then write myself into an impossible position so there is no [apparent] way of ending [the book]...People who think about the endings first come up with inferior products’ (Morgan & Morgan, p. 129).

Geisel’s fear of producing “inferior products” caused him to be a consummate perfectionist with his work – another reason why each book took so long for him to write. He commented that he frequently “forg[ot] that he [was] writing and drawing for kids, not critics” and often spent too much time working out slight nuances instead of simply “knocking it out, and laughing while I’m doing it” (Morgan & Morgan , p. 215). From such statements, one can gather that Geisel believed that children’s authors shouldn’t take their work so seriously that they forget that the stories they are creating are intended to entertain and therefore, ought to be fun to write. Geisel often claimed that he wrote primarily to “please himself” or his wife, further underscoring his belief that children’s books should also be enjoyable for adults (MacDonald, p. 5). As his career as a writer progressed, Geisel stopped concerning himself with considering for what age certain books might be appropriate and just wrote what he thought needed to be said and what children (or adults) would enjoy (Cott). Placing an age on the books wasn’t productive, he felt, because “[s]ometimes the more complex books can be the simplest ones to read because the clues given in the pictures are stronger” (Cott, p. 120).

Coupled with his illustrations, his jaunty and exciting verse also helped make his stories accessible to children of all ages. At the time, writing in verse provided another set of challenges

for Geisel during his writing process. While he often joked that he “couldn’t speak in prose at all,” composing stories that convey sophisticated ideas in very simple rhyming language enhanced the difficulty of Geisel’s mission to write great stories for children (Nel, p.16). Seuss scholar Philip Nel believes Geisel deserves significant credit for his talents as a writer – though children’s books are far shorter than other works, writing in verse poses significant challenges meaning that Geisel needed to be “constantly aware of meter, rhyme, and the rhythms of language” (Nel, p. 29). However, Geisel isn’t often credited for his talents as a poet because his work seems so simple; this effortless effect, however, was actually carefully constructed during the writing process:

‘The problem with writing a book in verse is, to be successful it has to sound like you knocked it off on a rainy Friday afternoon,’ Geisel once said. ‘It has to sound easy. When you can do it, it helps tremendously because it’s a thing that forces kids to read on. You have this unconsummated feeling if you stop. You have to go right through to the end—to the final beat’ (Harper, 1986, p. 133).

Perhaps more than any other writer for children, Geisel mastered creating poetry that seems effortless and easy – yet writing these verses never actually came easily to Geisel.

The Dr. Seuss books were the result Geisel’s intensive and meticulous process of revision and rewriting. Due to Geisel’s constant editing and perfectionism, the standard timeframe for writing one of the Seuss books was approximately 18 months (Bunzel, in Fensch, p. 12). “I realize they look as if they’ve been put together in 23 seconds,” he once said, “but 99 percent of what I do ends up in the scrap basket” (Jennings). Geisel’s editing practices often verged on the extreme – “[t]o produce a 60-page book, I may easily write more than 1,000 pages before I’m satisfied” – but also reveal his commitment to only publishing his work when it fully

pleased him (Nel, p. 32). His dedication to his craft was truly second-to-none as he concerned himself with each and every word in his stories:

‘They don’t realize that every sentence is as important as a chapter in a novel, every word is really a page. You can’t just knock them out over the weekend; you have to sweat them out.’ (Jennings).

Furthermore, Geisel’s commitment to viewing children as equals also influenced how he constructed and edited his verse; he felt that many children’s authors tended to use “convenience rhymes” as opposed to the more desirable “positive thought rhymes,” thereby patronizing the child and losing their interest entirely (Cott, p. 112). To write truly engaging rhymes required giving the child intellectual credit and having a deep commitment to revision:

I’ve also said that too many writers have only contempt and condescension for children, which is why they give them degrading corn about bunnies. The difficult thing about writing in verse for kids is that you can write yourself into a box: If you can’t get a proper rhyme for a quatrain, you not only have to throw that quatrain out but you also have to unravel the sock way back, probably ten pages or so... You find that you’re not driving the car, your *characters* are driving it (Cott, p. 112).

Though Geisel deliberated every word in his books and dedicated himself wholly to his craft, he refused to accept accolades about the seeming-perfection of his work:

‘If I am a genius, why do I have to work so hard?’ he once said. ‘I know my stuff looks like it was all rattled off in 28 seconds, but every word is a struggle and every sentence is like the pangs of birth’ (Nel, p. 35).

Geisel firmly believed that he didn't have any inherent ability to write for children, but rather that the greatness of his books stemmed from his painstaking and thorough work. "The most important thing about me," he said, "is that I work like hell—write, reject, re-reject, and polish incessantly" (Nel, p. 32). Geisel's commitment to his scrupulous revision process helped him to achieve his goal of producing quality stories for children written in his deceptively-simple verse.

Though Geisel had an intense writing process, above all else, he wanted to make sure that his stories would delight and entertain his readers so much that they wouldn't be able to put the books down. In order to do this, he carefully cultivated his writing so that he achieved the parameters he considered necessary for "writing simply." When children's books were successfully "written simply," Geisel believed that children would revel in the stories from beginning to end:

For Seuss, writing simply means 'no dependent clauses, no dangling things, no flashbacks, and keeping the subject near the predicate. We throw in as many fresh words as we can get away with. Simple, short sentences don't always work. You have to do tricks with pacing, alternate long sentences with short, to keep it vital and alive. Virtually every page is a cliff-hanger—you've got to force them to turn it.' (Jennings).

Geisel clearly wrote with his audience in his mind in order to create stories that would truly delight his readers, rather than just convey a particular viewpoint or message. Geisel's concept of "writing simply" also confirms his belief that children can understand anything that adults can if only it's presented in clear and precise enough language. The idea of writing simply essentially encapsulates Geisel's whole philosophy of writing for children – providing entertaining stories that treat children as equals by assuming they possess the intellectual capabilities to grapple with

and think critically about real life issues.

While Geisel put serious dedication into and devoted himself completely to analyzing every syllable in his texts, he still did thoroughly enjoy writing his books. When asked what he liked most about writing, Geisel replied:

‘I tend basically to exaggerate in life, and in writing, it’s fine to exaggerate. I really enjoy overstating for the purpose of getting a laugh. It’s very flattering, that laugh, and at the same time it gives pleasure to the audience and accomplishes more than writing very serious things. For another thing, writing is easier than digging ditches. Well, actually *that’s* an exaggeration. Isn’t it.’ (Morgan & Morgan, p. 239-240).

Geisel’s affinity for exaggeration and humor led him to write books that thrive on logical nonsense – stories that not only amused and engaged the children who read them, but also the man who wrote them.

Logical Insanity: Nonsense, Humor, and Imagination in the Dr. Seuss Books

Perhaps even more than their verse, the Dr. Seuss books are known for their fantastic characters and zany plots. Contrary to popular belief, however, Geisel didn’t just devise the craziest scenarios possible, but rather carefully designed his stories to reflect everyday situations to which children could relate. Though clearly fictional, the plots of Dr. Seuss books are often born out of fairly mundane and typical experiences that he then transforms into the fantastic. Many critics believe this basis in reality contributed to making the Dr. Seuss books such monumental successes:

It is in the contact zones between real and fantasy worlds where Seuss's books become exciting. Presenting a world both fantastical and real, Seuss gives us both sides of the looking glass at once. His worlds are recognizable, and utterly foreign—this combination gives his books their appeal (Nel, p. 69).

Not only do the Seuss books present issues thoroughly grounded in reality, but they also address issues particularly pertinent to children and with which they have some familiarity. Whether Seuss defends imagination in stories such as *If I Ran the Zoo* or *McElligot's Pool*, the rights of even the smallest person in *Horton Hears a Who!*, or the fear of getting in trouble in *The Cat in the Hat*, children feel the Geisel both addresses and legitimizes their concerns.

Yet, while Geisel grounds his work in real issues, he always exaggerates and transforms the incidents so that they remain just barely recognizable. Morgan and Morgan, in their biography of Dr. Seuss, argue that Geisel's books allow the reader to view the world through a distinctively Seussian lens:

The incidents and characters that found their ways into his books exploded from some odd grain of truth, some trenchant observation, some giddy insight. Yet they had all been passed through the Seussian filter, removing any semblance of ordinariness or predictability and intensifying the ridiculous (Morgan and Morgan, p. 87).

Thus, while the Seuss books often “let fancy run free without equivocation or apology,” Seuss always made sure that his stories never strayed too far from the logical (Lurie, 2003, p. 94). Sometimes this means that the Dr. Seuss stories begin from a setting in which children might find themselves – home alone on a rainy afternoon, looking at animals in a zoo, or fishing in a pond – and then let imagination run wild. In other cases, the scenario itself is fantastic – an

elephant being asked to sit on an egg or a militant turtle asking his fellow creatures to stack up – but the reactions and behaviors of the characters mirror those felt by children or adults in similar situations. By keeping the fantastic elements of the Dr. Seuss stories thoroughly grounded in some semblance of reality, Geisel can successfully make the strange seem familiar or the familiar seem strange.

Maintaining a sense of reality was critical, as Geisel argued that children, while they enjoy fantastic stories, won't go along with a story if the fantasy doesn't make any sense or have any grounding in the logic of the world. He felt that it does children's intellectual capabilities a disservice to assume that they will go along with whatever the author puts in front of them without a thought about its sensibleness. As Philip Nel contends, if an author plans to tell a fantastic story, the lie only works when the "inventiveness [is] grounded in reality" (p. 122). Similarly, a magazine article written about Geisel argued that "his fresh melding of the logical with the ludicrous" contributed significantly to the allure of the Dr. Seuss stories (Jennings). Geisel's commitment to creating entertaining and fantastical stories that still made sense is another way that the Seuss books resist patronizing children. The Dr. Seuss books cultivate what Geisel called "logical insanity," meaning that his zany plots retained a sense of logic despite their complete improbability (Jennings). By maintaining a degree of sense, Geisel felt that his readers would recognize the fictionalization of the events in the story, yet still "go along with it" because of the logical feasibility of the plot (Jennings). Geisel clarified what he meant by "logical insanity" during [a lecture he gave on children's writing:

'This is the crux. [...] A man with two heads is not a story. It is a situation to be built upon logically. He must have two hats and two toothbrushes. Don't go wild with hair made of purple seaweed, or live fireflies for eyeballs....Children

analyze fantasy. They know you're kidding them. There's got to be logic in the way you kid them. Their fun is pretending...making believe they believe it"

(Morgan & Morgan, p. 124).

Throughout his career, Geisel maintained his conviction that children enjoy "making believe they believe" even the zaniest things you write, but only "if you obey certain Rules of Logic" (Nel, p. 122). In creating stories that follow the laws of logic and sense, Geisel credits the child's propensity for analyzing what they read, something very few other authors writing for children at the time tended to do.

Using Imagination and Nonsense to Inspire Critical Thinking

The implementation of logical insanity in the Dr. Seuss books not only credits the child's intellectual abilities but also reveals Geisel's feelings about the importance of imagination. Seuss biographer Ruth MacDonald contends that in "recording stories like those children tell themselves," the Dr. Seuss books consistently "[give] dignity to [children's] fantasies" and reflect the strength of the young imagination (MacDonald, p. 165). The idea that the fantasies of children are not only feasible, but also far more appealing than reality recurs throughout the Dr. Seuss books (MacDonald, p. 66). With his ability to tell stories like the ones in children's heads, Geisel won praise from critics for his ability to reach children both in their own language and through their thought processes:

[W]hile Geisel will be remembered for the respect he brought to the field of children's literature, his most lasting impact was his ability to address kids—tenderly and candidly—on their own fiercely imaginative terms (Marcus 189).

Geisel firmly believed that rather than trying to limit the imaginative inclinations of children, books for kids ought to encourage them to maintain, and even to enhance, those capabilities. He often lamented the fact that imagination tends to “get knocked out of you by the time you grow up,” and felt that if a person didn't gain a secure imagination in youth, he or she would never develop one at all (Nel, p. 123). Thus, the Dr. Seuss books, rather than imposing restrictions on the imagination or teaching children rules, impel children to “stretch their [imaginative] skills by Dr. Seuss's example” (MacDonald, p. 166). Unsurprisingly, then, the Dr. Seuss books often center around letting “a child's imagination run wild” even if it places them “at odds with grown-ups [unable] to appreciate a child's sense of wonder and creativity” (Cohen, 2004, p.184-185). Perhaps Geisel's most important contribution to children's literature is providing kids with a space to utilize their imaginations away from the disdain and discomfort of adults:

Seuss celebrates the power of the imagination and provides a safe forum for children to exercise it: in the pages of books. He also eases the child reader back into reality, with the endings of the stories clearly including adults and what happens when older people collide with children's flights of fantasy (MacDonald, p. 28).

The Seuss books then, not only encourage children to use their imaginations, but also show them how to cultivate their creative abilities even when adults try to encourage them to behave and think realistically. Philip Nel believes that the centrality of imagination in the Seuss books encourages children to take “an active role” in reading and to see “their imaginations as a source

of strength (Nel, p. 163). The Dr. Seuss books, in other words, give legitimacy to the imaginations of children and often tell the kinds of stories children would tell if their creative abilities weren't restricted by conventions or rules.

In many ways, the Dr. Seuss books empower children to think about the world on their own terms, rather than as it is defined by adults. Critics have argued the emphasis on imagination not only in the plots of the Dr. Seuss stories, but also Geisel's creative use of language, helps readers to learn about the world around them. With his zany creativity, Geisel uses nonsense for its traditional purpose in his stories—raising awareness that reality is constructed and therefore, alterable. Literary scholars specializing in nonsense contend that the genre possesses powerful potential for influencing children to interrogate their world:

Apseloff and Anderson argue that nonsense literature has 'the heretical mission of...teaching[ing] the young that the world constructed by their elders is an artificial thing. Nonsense literature uses the spirit of playfulness to rearrange the familiar world. It thereby reveals that the rules we live by are not inevitable' (cited in Nel, p. 164).

Philip Nel argues that Geisel achieves the goal of nonsense literature by positioning "the imagination as a realm in which one can at least *imagine* another world, if not actually realize that world" (Nel, p.178). Other scholars of nonsense argue that by revealing imaginative possibilities, "nonsense inoculates the children against narrow-mindedness" (Shortsleeve, 2002, p. 36). Geisel clearly subscribed to this philosophy of the creative possibilities of nonsense, as one of the most famous quotations attributed to him acknowledges his affinity for nonsense and fantasy: "I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living." Furthermore, Geisel also believed that by presenting "things out of whack," nonsense possessed

the power to reveal “how things can be in whack” (Nel, p. 38). However, rather than just using nonsense for its traditional aims, Philip Nel contends that the Dr. Seuss books take nonsense one step further, by actively encouraging children to resist the societal status quo:

By providing the imaginative impetus to change the world, Dr. Seuss encourages children to subvert dominant modes of socialization. In this sense, Seuss’s books go beyond the conventional definition of nonsense literature, which uses absurdity to reveal reality as a construct but less frequently indicts society at large (p. 173).

Perhaps Geisel’s most potent use of nonsense to encourage resistance to the dominant culture occurs in his books that explicitly provide social commentary, such as the strong environmentalism message in *The Lorax*, the allegorical rendering of the Japanese following WWII in *Horton Hears a Who!*, or the danger and futility of the quest for nuclear weapons in *The Butter Battle Book*. Even in the stories without an explicit “message,” however, the books tend to have a mistrust of authority, usually conveyed through a patronizing or villainous adult figure. Quite famously, Geisel “often thought of himself as a child” and once commented that he’d “always had a mistrust of adults,” two views which play out in his stories that empower children to think about the world around them.

Moreover, Geisel openly admitted his own aversion to the status quo of adult-dominated society—“I’m subversive as hell!” he once remarked (Cott, p. 117). Seuss scholar Philip Nel argues that “Seuss enjoyed upsetting people’s expectations about how a children’s author should behave” (Nel, p. 102). His rebellious personality may explain why many of his stories, particularly the ones with strong social commentary, contain “liberal, even antiestablishment morals” (Lurie, p. 95). The encouragement the Dr. Seuss books offer to children to interrogate the world around them undoubtedly contributed to the discomfort and unease his books often

caused for many adults. Children's literature scholar Alison Lurie argues that the greatest concern for many adults about the Dr. Seuss books is not necessarily their fantastic plots and characters, but that they urge "wild invention" and imply that it might "be politic to conceal one's fantasy life from parents" (Lurie, p. 92). Furthermore, in many of the Seuss books, "the rewards of daring to go beyond the limits of common sense [and conventional society] are clear" (MacDonald, p. 86). The books also threaten adults because their motives differ so dramatically from most other children's literature—rather than instructing children in how to behave and fit into the preexisting world, the Seuss stories encourage kids to interrogate the ways that the world "def[ies] common sense" (Nel, p. 169). As Geisel himself said, nonsense endows children with an opportunity to consider other options for "things that the adult does not find unusual" (Nel, p. 164). "[C]hildren's literature as I write it and as I see it," Geisel once said, is "satirizing the mores and habits of the world" (Nel, p. 164). The Dr. Seuss books go even further than simply satirizing adult society, however, as they actively insist that kids should not accept adult society without question. In his writing, Geisel positions himself as an ally for children and shows them that not all adults believe they should be indoctrinated into the existing status quo:

[T]hey are books for children written by an adult, but they were created by someone who had not lost his memory of the fantasies and injustices of childhood. Their magic lies in Ted's ability to honestly address the injustices while ameliorating them with the sense of wonder established by the fantasies (Cohen, p. 194).

The power of the Dr. Seuss stories lies in their ability to employ nonsense to create stories that not only entertain children but also raise their awareness of the power they hold to transform the world around them.

Not only do the plots and themes of the Dr. Seuss stories reveal to children that the world is alterable, the use of language in the stories also reinforces this sense of possibility. By using language in unconventional ways, Philip Nel argues that Geisel reveals to children another way of challenging power and adult-dominated practices:

“If children learn the structures of power as they acquire language, then deconstructing language can have a liberating effect—a potential challenge to the structures of power that language bears” (Nel 173).

In the Dr. Seuss stories, the use of neologisms stands out as one way that Geisel demonstrates that language need not always stick to conventional English and that sometimes, imagined words can convey ideas better than the ones readily available to us. As a whole, the Dr. Seuss books send a strong message about the possibility of avoiding dangerous situations through not only “cleverness,” but also “verbal ingenuity” (Shortsleeve, p. 36). The wordplay Geisel employs in his stories also suggests that the “linguistic world constructed by adults is not the only possible one” (Lurie, p. 94). In *On Beyond Zebra!*, Geisel explicitly sends this message as the child protagonist devises his own alphabet that begins after “Z,” much to the surprise of his traditionally-minded friend: “Because most people stop with the ‘Z,’ but not me!” Literary scholars also contend that nonsense in general encourages linguistic familiarity and the deconstruction of the rules and limits of language:

Apseloff [contends] that nonsense helps children to understand that words can have multiple meanings, thus providing them an opportunity to begin to make sense out of language. In presenting readers with confusing scenarios, nonsense, in fact, trains one in how to reach reasonable decisions when faced with confusing circumstances. It teaches lessons in logic and helps to develop a sense

of humor (cited in Shortsleeve, p. 36).

Thus, Geisel's employment of both nonsense and whimsical use of language encourages children to think critically about the world around them while also endowing them with the skill set to do exactly that.

What's His Point?: The Morals and Messages of the Dr. Seuss Books

While the Dr. Seuss books seem to encourage young readers to interrogate the world around them, the morals and messages of the stories have remained hotly debated. Over the years, Geisel and his work have been contradictorily accused of being "simplistic," "too didactic," "too moralistic," "not moralistic enough," and "merely silly" (Schmidt, 1991, p. 41). Geisel admitted that, ultimately, having morals in a story was inevitable, but he resented when critics accused him of didacticism or tried to read certain morals into his books:

'The morals,' he said, 'are never put in as morals, and children don't read them as such. Kids gag at having morals crammed down their throats. But there is a moral inherent in any damn thing you write that has a dramatic point. People change places, and with any resolutions of conflict or narrative motion a moral is implied' (Jennings).

Though Geisel often didn't intend for his stories to take on certain slants or viewpoints, he admitted that sometimes you "find yourself preaching in spite of yourself" (cited in Fensch, p. 125). Yet, he still felt annoyed when people attempted to read things into his stories that simply weren't there, such as "Biblical connotations" into *Green Eggs and Ham* (Fensch, p. 125). Geisel

also claimed that sometimes morals were absolutely inescapable due to the topics he was discussing in his works (MacDonald, p. 14). His belief that “children [can] not be insulated from things that may frighten or disturb them,” explains why many of stories deal with “adult concerns” and also the occasional presence of morals in the Dr. Seuss books (Nel, p. 125).

These books that most explicitly target adult concerns have been grouped collectively in the Seuss literature as the “message books,” a title that implies their moralistic content. The message books include texts such as *The Lorax*, *The Butter Battle Book*, *The Sneetches*, and *Yertle the Turtle* that more often than not, function as allegories for contemporary social problems. During WWII, after realizing the harm inherent in creating propaganda films, Geisel realized how critical childhood was for fostering citizenship skills and thus committed himself to using his books to get children to begin using these skills without explicitly indoctrinating them into any particular mindset or ideology:

Children’s ability to re-imagine the rules by which people live convinced Geisel that writing children’s books might transform the cognitive structures behind political parties and social formations. He began to think of childhood as a quasi-utopian space in which belief in peace, social equality, and democratic participation could be reanimated. He also believed that children possess a sense of fairness and justice as well as a hunger to belong and to participate. When empowered to make their own choices in their own space, children can open up new possibilities. Furthermore, he insisted, children are immune to propaganda: ‘You can’t pour didacticism down little throats.’ The challenge was to protect children from the corruption of the adults’ overbearing power rather than indoctrinate them into any orthodoxy. Geisel later spelled out this philosophy in

his essay “Writing for Children: A Mission”: ‘In these days of tension and confusion, writers are beginning to realize that Books for Children have a greater potential for good, or evil, than any other form of literature on earth. They realize that the new generation *must* grow up to be more intelligent than *ours*’ (Pease, p. 78-79).

Yet, despite Geisel’s commitment to instructing children in how to eradicate many of the problems plaguing contemporary society, he still refused to impose patronizing didacticism onto his readers. Despite intense criticism for being too moralistic, Geisel claimed that only six of his books were “blatant[ly]” moralistic, meaning that he only intended for a small majority of his works to advocate a specific viewpoint (MacDonald, p. 14). In fact, Geisel contended that “the only message his books had in common was hope” (Morgan & Morgan, p. 279).

Yet, even when Geisel did promote a particular view, his stories never read like homilies – rather than indoctrinating his readers, Geisel merely “encourg[ed] subversive thoughts and behaviors” (Nel, p. 169). In his analysis of *The Butter Battle Book*, Philip Nel argues that the “education technique” used in the story to teach children about the perilous world of the nuclear arms race is “exactly the opposite of brainwashing” (Nel, p. 163). Instead, the story uses nonsense—the increasing terror of the weapons race escalates from a disagreement between the Yooks, who eat toast butter-side up, and the Zooks, who eat toast butter-side down—to get children to interrogate the sense of such a dangerous plight. Furthermore, Nel contends that rather than proposing a “clear-cut” solution, the story “throws us back on our own imaginative resources to resolve the problem” (Nel, p. 163). As *The Butter Battle Book* illustrates, the main theme of the “message books” is not getting children to think one particular way, but rather for them to realize the errors in the conceptualization of contemporary problems and to challenge

them to take action to “resolve dire threats to life as we know it” (MacDonald, p. 164). Above all else, however, the message books, and all of the Dr. Seuss books, foster the development of “mastery and independence” in order to “empower” children to be active agents involved in shaping their own world (MacDonald, p. 165).

While many of the Dr. Seuss books do not impose a blatant message on the readers, the characters and the qualities these figures embody provide a potential source of instruction in the works. Geisel himself admitted the personification of the cast of critters that often serve as protagonists in his works: “[N]one of my animals are really animals. They’re all people sort of” (Jennings). Many literary critics argue that the Dr. Seuss books that center around animals should be interpreted based on the character traits possessed by each of the animals:

Dr. Seuss’s animal stories should be interpreted according to the quality the eponymous animal personifies. Each animal personifies a trait—whose cultural consequences the story explores. In giving these deeply felt affects an animated form, Dr. Seuss turns interiorized human emotions into objects for conscious deliberation. Each animal’s story encapsulates a mood that produces an emotional effect on the audience (Pease, p. 94).

Indeed, the characters in the Dr. Seuss books do command our attention, a deliberate action taken by Geisel who showed his hatred for “bunny-bunny” or “fuzzy-wuzzy” books by creating a cast of animals anything but tame and mundane (Jennings). From the troublesome Cat in the Hat, to the loyal Horton, to the persnickety Lorax, the creatures in the Dr. Seuss books are both multi-dimensional and vibrant. Jonathan Cott praises the motley of animals created by Geisel, claiming that his “extraordinary variety of ingeniously named, fantastical looking animals” surpasses that of nearly every writer for children (Cott, p. 103).

Not only do the Seuss characters, animal and human, represent different characteristics, they also often pose challenges to the well-behaved protagonists in typical books for children. When writing, Geisel “avoided mechanically well-mannered characters,” not only to rebel against well-behaved children like Dick and Jane, but also because he felt children could relate better to characters who were a little bit mischievous:

[Geisel once commented,] ‘I think a youngster likes to read about someone who is bad for change—then he realizes that he’s not the only one who gets into trouble [and] messes up the house when mother is away’ (Cohen, p. 324).

Logically, the rebellious streaks in his characters can only emerge under certain conditions, and thus, as Selma Lanes contends, the plot of stories that feature a child as the main character must take place “either in the absence of grown-ups,” like *The Cat in the Hat*, or “in the imagination” as in *If I Ran the Zoo* or *McElligot’s Pool* (Lanes, in Fensch, p. 45). Many of his characters, particularly the animals, often become heroes by the end of the story; though there is often nothing extraordinary about these protagonists, they triumph because “fate simply forces greatness upon them, and they muddle through to greatness as best they can” (MacDonald, p. 48). Furthermore, some protagonists, such as Mack, the little turtle that dares to speak to King Yertle in *Yertle the Turtle*, demonstrate that one can be “iconoclastic” simply by “dar[ing] to speak truths that others would prefer not to face” (Nel, p.193). Coupled with the plots of the stories, the characters in the Dr. Seuss stories help fulfill Geisel’s goal of ensuring that kids grow up smarter than the generation which preceded them by revealing to children that “the world is what they make it” and encouraging them to use their imaginations to think about how to transform and improve that world (Nel, p. 195).

While Geisel wanted his stories to make children realize the tremendous potentials of their imaginations, he also had a far simpler goal in crafting his stories: entertaining his readers. Morgan and Morgan argue that many people, in “treating [Geisel] like a philosopher [and] trying to interpret what he wrote” overlook the uncomplicated fact that he simply hoped that his stories could help learn to find reading enjoyable (Morgan and Morgan, p. 219). Thus, while some of the Seuss books do have morals, the majority of them are “content to observe the world and invite the child reader to have fun living life” (MacDonald, p. 164). His commitment to producing quality and engaging stories led to an “unshakable and comforting constancy about Dr. Seuss” (Morgan and Morgan, p. 213). His only consistent goal for his work was to provide stories that children wouldn’t want to put down: “I’m just trying to capture an audience,” Geisel said, “most every child learning to read has problems, and I am just saying to them that reading is fun” (Moje and Shyu, in Fensch, p. 196). As Morgan and Morgan explain in their biography, Geisel loved receiving letters from children and adults who’d developed a love of reading from the Dr. Seuss books (Morgan & Morgan, p. 241). Indeed, his ability to “bring pleasure to both children and adults” and show them that “life is good and to be enjoyed” is likely his greatest accomplishment (McDonald, p. 170).

Helen Renthal argues that Geisel succeeded in his mission to make reading enjoyable by bringing together “a genuine comic spirit” and “a sense of the power and joy of language,” two qualities she believes children “need, cherish, and too rarely find” (Renthal, p. 37). Geisel’s whimsical wordplay and sense of humor dominate his stories in part because they make for entertaining tales, but also because Geisel believed in the value and importance of laughter:

‘Childhood is the one time in an average person’s life when he can laugh just for the straight fun of laughing—that’s the main reason I write for kids. As one

grows older his humor gets all tied up and stifled by social, economic and political rules that we learn from our elders, and before long our laughter gets all mixed up with sneers and leers. Kids react spontaneously to something ludicrous, so I have more freedom writing for them. They laugh at silly things their parents would feel embarrassed to be caught smiling at. I have a secret following among adults, but they have to read me when no one is watching.’ (Jennings).

The idea that adults might have to read Dr. Seuss books on the sly speaks to the fact that the stories, despite being enjoyed by all, do seem to target children directly and often leave adults completely out of the picture:

‘[Geisel] was a subversive,’ said Ellen Goodman, ‘in the way that people who really speak to children often are. They cut through the treacle, the must and the fear. They side with the young and dismiss the rest of us for what we are, ‘obsolete children’...In Dr. Seuss’ reading rooms, it is still possible to laugh and think at the same time (Morgan & Morgan, p. 290).

Though many critics have accused Geisel of being “too moralistic” and suggest that his stories lack literary merit, upon closer analysis, the vast majority of his works might unsettle adults only because they reach children in their own worlds, make reading fun and engaging, and also encourage them to resist indoctrination into the ways of the adult world.

Conclusion:

In all of the Dr. Seuss stories, Geisel maintained his commitment to his philosophy of what makes quality children's literature: amusing children in ways that credit their intellectual capabilities and showing them the potential their imaginations offer them to change the world. Richard H.F. Lindemann, in the introduction to *The Dr. Seuss Catalog*, offers the following apt summation of the Dr. Seuss works as a whole:

Despite these various accomplishments, Geisel remains above all a fabulist. His stories, frequently using outrageous creatures and scenes to act out some simple truth, engage the reader and teach him or her both about reading and about life. Geisel addresses fears and anxieties, respects childish amusement and nonsense, and validates the idiosyncrasies of our individual imaginations, all without being preachy, condescending, or visually histrionic. Some stories are adventures, others are allegories. But regardless of the style, all these works are playful, both visually and verbally: funny-sounding words and absurd creatures are the norm. Even when the characters are mean or scary (like The Grinch), there is foolishness to break the tension (Lindemann, 2005, p. 1).

As the above passage implies, Geisel was a meticulous craftsman when writing his books, deeply committed to revision and making his stories appear deceptively effortless and carefree, rather than calculated and imposing. That Geisel committed himself to a loose philosophy of writing also suggests that he deserves to be recognized not only for his ability to amuse his readers, but also for the literary merit his works possess. The stories he told resonate so strongly with children because they offer a safe place for them to cultivate and preserve their imaginations: within tales that address their genuine needs and show them alternative conceptions of their

world through the whimsical use of language. Geisel continues to stand apart from other writers of children's literature because he dared to take risks and reach out to children where they were; as Maurice Sendak once said: "[Geisel] wrote big noisy books with noisy pictures and noisy language. [...] He was a bull in a china closet" (Nel, p. 195). It is Geisel's willingness to make noise in his stories that has undoubtedly led to the timeless appeal of his books, as the need to be heard and empowered is a desire shared by all children in every generation.

Chapter Four: The Language Use in Dr. Seuss

“So the writer who breeds more words than he needs is making a chore for the reader who reads.”

In the previous chapter, we learned about the writing philosophy and process of Theodor Geisel and how this ideology informs the Dr. Seuss books. The unyielding commitment Geisel showed to writing quality stories for children that encompassed the tenets of his writing philosophy provides one piece of evidence that the Dr. Seuss books possess more literary merit than critics and audiences typically acknowledge. Exploring the language use in the Dr. Seuss stories provides an additional avenue for demonstrating the literary value of these texts. Traditionally, Geisel’s status as a poet has always been contended; Seuss scholar Philip Nel points out that despite the fact that “when we think of Seuss, we think of poetry,” we typically do not acknowledge or reward Geisel’s efforts as a bona fide poet (2003, p. 15). In this chapter, I will explore the language use in the Dr. Seuss books in order to demonstrate not only that Geisel *is*, in fact, a poet, but also that his skillful manipulations of language endow the Dr. Seuss books with a great deal of literary merit.

While the Dr. Seuss books reflect and encompass Geisel’s philosophy of writing for children, the most distinctive and recognizable aspect of these texts remains his unorthodox use of language. As discussed earlier, Geisel worked with careful precision to cultivate the seemingly-effortless simplicity of his texts. In other words, though not always recognized or praised as a serious author, Geisel “consciously manipulate[d] language and illustrations to create very specific effects” (Schmidt, 1991, p. 42). Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel employs specific literary devices both at a local, syntactical level and at a broader, whole-text level. At the local level, Geisel frequently uses devices of word and sound repetition, meter, and diction, while at the broader level he employs repetition of phrases, audience involvement, and

textual circularity. An examination of the literary devices used in the Dr. Seuss books can help lead to an understanding of how Geisel's manipulation of language operates and why these stories delight readers both young and old. Ultimately, however, while it is possible to break down the use of language in the Dr. Seuss books in terms of common literary devices, it is how the devices work together which truly give the Dr. Seuss books their distinctive flavor. As Ruth K. MacDonald, Geisel's biographer claims, Geisel demonstrates "permissiveness with language" because "almost any use of it is sanctioned as long as it amuses" (1988, p. 169). The language use in the Seuss books, then, also reflects the primary objective Geisel had for his writing: to make reading fun and engaging.

Writing in Verse: Children and Poetry

The rhyming verse in which all but a few of the Dr. Seuss books are written stands as the most easily-discernable use of language in these stories.⁴ By writing in verse, Geisel was not merely writing stories for kids, but also writing poetry for them. Writing effective poetry for all ages requires the dedicated precision that Geisel possessed, as "[e]ach word must be chosen with care, for both its sounds and meaning, since poetry is language in its most connotative and concentrated form" (Huck et. al. (2002), quoted in Gill, 2007). Unlike most poetry, however, which relies on sophisticated figurative language, poetry for children depends on different qualities for its salience:

Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (2002) offer a useful definition of children's poetry: 'a concise and memorable case of language, with intense

⁴ The Dr. Seuss stories written in prose include *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, and *The King's Stilts*

feeling, imagery, and qualities of sound that bounce pleasingly off the tongue, tickle the ear, and leave the mind something to ponder' (cited in Gill, 2007, p. 623).

For children, then, an enjoyable experience with poetry revolves around the experience of language. Studies have shown that children respond so strongly to poetry because it satisfies their "spontaneous desire to play with language" (Cumming, 2007, p. 93). The musicality of the language use in poetry has been shown not only to delight young readers, but also to influence their development, as it excites the musical part of the brain (Heald, 2008, p. 228). Yet, despite children's natural affinity for poetry and language play, these activities occupy a very small amount of time in classrooms, accounting for another reason why the Dr. Seuss books tend to be avoided by educators. However, the Dr. Seuss books, and many other works of children's poetry, not only delight children, but also encourage them to look at and investigate the world around them. In fact, one study found that poems that discuss "topics that reflect their experience and concerns" tend to be most popular with children, along with funny poems and story poems (Sloan, 2001, p. 54). The Dr. Seuss stories, then, provide a potent combination of the things children love most about poetry: humor, narrative, and relevancy to their own experiences.

While children prefer funny, relevant, and story-telling poems in terms of content, in form, their preference is also clear: children love verse that rhymes. While their preference likely stems in part from the musical predictability of rhyming poetry and language play involved in rhymes, researchers have found that children also carry preconceptions about the poems based on whether or not they rhyme. In interviews with British children, Alison Kelley found that, time after time, the children reported that poems "that don't rhyme seem sort of dreary" while the "ones that do rhyme seem more sort of upbeat" (2005, p. 130). Studies in the United States have

also shown that children consistently associate rhyming poetry with humor, even after being exposed to poetry that nullifies or complicates or that notion (Cumming, 2007, p. 97). Geisel undoubtedly benefits from this preconception, as children turn to his work with the idea that his poetry will be humorous and entertaining – and he certainly doesn't disappoint. Furthermore, rhyme not only proves salient for children who can read, but as Goswami and Bryant found, the majority of children in the pre-reading phase can also recognize rhyme, which suggests that children can benefit from and enjoy poetry well before they can read it themselves (cited in Cumming, 2007, p. 93). In fact, Geisel himself was occasionally flabbergasted by the young child's propensity for rhyme; when his friend's three-year old son recited his story *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose* from memory, Geisel remarked, "I don't write for kids that young. How does he do it?" (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 125).

Not only do children show a strong preference for rhyming poetry, but this type of poetry can actually enhance their reading skills by aiding their pronunciation and introducing them to the playfulness of language. Even before children can read the Dr. Seuss books for themselves, the stories can help them develop the skills they need to become readers; as Robin Heald (2008) argues, the musicality of the language both attracts and holds the reader's attention, even through multiple readings:

For decades, children have become readers hearing and then looking at Dr. Seuss books. Children who have stored memories for the sound and rhythm of language are better able to make predictions about words and phrases, as they emerge as readers. Margaret Whitsett, coordinator of *Mini Imani*, a Reading Recovery based program, says, 'Children who are stimulated by the rhymes or cadence of a book they have heard will be more likely to ask for that book. Yes, they've heard the

story and know the next sentence by heart, without looking at it, but the point is, they *are* looking at the words while they're parroting. They're using their memories and their beginning reading skills. It's a way of easing children into reading words' (p. 230).

The Seuss books not only allow children to develop the skills needed to learn to read, but the rhymes also provide scaffolding for beginning readers, allowing them to continue to read the story without having to stop frequently to discern unfamiliar words. Geisel himself commented that "[r]hyming...makes kids pronounce words correctly...[when] sounding [them] out" (Cohen, 2004, p. 303). Rhymes offer children a "clue" about how to read an unknown word, because the predictable pattern of the verse allows them to detect with which word the unfamiliar word must rhyme, therefore guiding them toward the sound of the unfamiliar word (MacDonald, 1988, p. 120). Geisel expertly uses this scaffolding in his stories by beginning his stanzas with common words with which the majority of young readers are familiar and then adding to that base vocabulary "rhyme words that are similar, but not the same" (MacDonald, 1988, p.116). In this way, readers can tackle new words in a far less frustrating manner than if they encountered them out of context. Furthermore, Geisel often uses short line lengths in his texts, which helps to emphasize the rhymes, and therefore, make deciphering words even simpler (MacDonald, 1988, p. 120). In his analysis of *Cat in the Hat*, Donald Pease (2010) details how the rhymes in the story function as scaffolds for children trying to decipher the unknown words in the text:

Each unknown word sounds like the rhyme word that precedes it and conforms to the accentual pattern of the line. Children learn the sound of a new word by way of a rhyming word. The end rhymes of *cat* and *hat*, *cake* and *rake*, *man* and

fan, fish and dish, ball and all, and the internal rhymes cup and up and looks and books assist the reader in pronouncing the unknown words” (p. 111).

In the Beginner Books, the series Geisel created for young readers, he often takes the predictability of his rhyming to an extreme – he frequently creates lists of short words which all share a common vowel and which differ only in terms of the consonant at the beginning of the word (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). These lists of largely similar words aid children in determining the pronunciation of the words; for example, in *Hop on Pop*, Geisel writes: “RED NED TED and ED in BED.” Not only does this strategy assist children with pronunciation, but it also exposes children to the infinite possibilities of language by demonstrating that “with a simple change of a consonant, the entire meaning of a word changes” (MacDonald, 1988, p. 120). The use of rhymes in the Dr. Seuss books, then, not only carries benefits for burgeoning readers, but also attracts them to the text and makes them desire to learn how to read.

Though the Dr. Seuss books draw children in with their rhyming verse, the steady and rhythmic meter holds their interest and propels them through the story. Research shows that children prefer rhymes that follow a perpetual rhythm, rather than lines that change between different meters (Sloan, 2001, p. 54). Geisel understood the importance of meter in his stories, saying that it “tends to make kids want to go on,” and that if broken, leaves “a child feel[ing] unfulfilled” (Fensch, 1997, p. 126). Throughout his stories, Geisel uses a consistent meter – which he claimed came to him during a cruise, as it matched the steady beat of the boat’s engine:

That rhythm, or meter, is known as anapestic tetrameter. A simple anapest is a three-syllable word or phrase with the emphasis placed on the last syllable, like the word ‘*anymore*.’ Anapestic tetrameter has four sections of three syllables in which the last syllable is stressed in each section (Cohen, 2004, p. 182).

Other than Geisel's works, the most famous poem composed in anapestic tetrameter is " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," written by Clement Moore. A look at the scansion of the following passage from *Yertle the Turtle* demonstrates the syllabic stresses of anapestic tetrameter:

'You **stay** in your **place** while I **sit** here and **rule**. /

I'm **king** of a **cow**! And I'm **king** of a **mule**! /

I'm **king** of a **house**! And a **bush**! And a **cat**! /

As the above passage demonstrates, the anapestic tetrameter meter carries an "internal sense of rhythm" that helps propel readers through the verse (Heald, 2008, p. 230). Seuss biographer Thomas Fensch attributes the effectiveness of this meter to the fact that the "stress [falls] toward the end of the line," which causes the verse to "gallop" (Fensch, 1997, p. 4). Literary scholar Brian Boyd describes the use language and meter in the Dr. Seuss books as "a verbal equivalent of the play-face, the gamboling gait, the rhythmic romp" (Boyd, 2001, p. 204). Thus, Geisel's consistent use of the anapestic meter gives all of his stories a sense of continuity and poetic predictability – the reader knows what rhythm to expect when she opens the pages of a Dr. Seuss story, as the distinctive meter is part of what characterizes a Dr. Seuss book.

A preoccupation with sound is an essential component to successfully using a given meter; critics have long hailed Geisel's manipulation of and focus on sound. As his rhyming, metric verse demonstrates, Geisel intensely focused on how his words sounded both individually and in the context of the lines of his verse. Chuck Jones, an animator who worked with Geisel on making animated specials based on the Dr. Seuss books, noted the intricacy and centrality of sound in Geisel's texts:

'Ted's stuff,' [he] said, 'has that quality of puzzlement. He uses Sam-I-am, not

just Sam, and Sam-I-am not only rhymes with green-eggs-and-ham, but has the same metric emphasis' (Morgan and Morgan, 1996, p. 171).

By focusing on sound, Geisel made rhyme, line, and meter all work together to establish a distinctive style in his verse. The true artistry of the Dr. Seuss books, however, cannot be fully appreciated until one reads the stories aloud. One fan of Geisel's work, describes sound as the ingredient that truly distinguishes the Dr. Seuss books and draws readers into the stories during read-alouds:

'Sound! It's a tantalizing trickster when Seuss manipulates it. It's as if the words so neatly pinned down to the pages by clean, clear type were just on tip-toe with excitement to be turned loose by being read aloud...Read aloud a Seuss book once to a young audience and there is a ... big-eyed quiet, but read the book through twice and... everybody gets into the act and recites the yarn' (Cohen, 2004, p. 311).

Seuss scholar Philip Nel heralds the Seuss books for getting children excited about poetry and teaching them that a genre frequently perceived as "rarefied, difficult, [and] elitist]" can also be zany and fun. "Bringing in a book by Dr. Seuss [to a group of older students]," he says, "reminds them that they have been enjoying poetry since their earliest years" (Nel, 2003, p. 30). By providing children with humorous, rhyming poetry with a steady rhythm and a playful sound, Geisel caters to the child's natural inclinations for language to draw them into his stories that make reading fun.

“He plays upon words, backwards and forwards”- Evelyn Schroth

An examination of the literary devices that Geisel employs in his stories reveals that Seuss uses many of the conventional techniques of poetry in order to make his verses resonate so strongly with children. While looking at these devices in isolation helps illustrate how Geisel put his verses together and highlights some common elements of his poetry, maintaining a sense of how the works operate as cohesive units remains essential to understanding the language use in Dr. Seuss. In this section, I will briefly describe the specific literary devices that Geisel repeatedly uses in his stories and describe what influence each of these devices has on the reader. Appendix one contains an extensive catalog that traces the uses of the devices outlined in this section throughout the texts in the Seuss canon.⁵ First, I will describe the literacy devices used at the local level, that is, in individual words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. Next, I will detail the techniques used at the broader, whole-book level which help to provide cohesion to his stories. Finally, I will discuss at some length how Geisel uses neologisms, arguably the language feature for which he is best known, in the Dr. Seuss books. My purpose in providing this literary analysis is twofold: first, I hope to demonstrate the often-unnoticed technical merit of Geisel’s work, and second, I want to reveal how Geisel’s whimsical and playful use of language both conforms to, but also subverts or goes beyond, the conventions of poetry in ways that intrigue and delight his readers. The Dr. Seuss books remain, above all else, about the wonders of language without limitations, a theme that Geisel “sanctions...by his expert use of [playful

⁵ The devices contained in this catalog are organized in the same order in which they appear in this chapter. Consult this list for specific examples of how Geisel employs these devices in his stories.

language]” (MacDonald, 1988, p. 122). The Dr. Seuss stories derive their vivacity from this playfulness, so pinning down some of the ways Geisel manipulates language can help us to understand the vast appeal of his works.



A. Syntactical Devices: Repetition of Words

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel liberally uses repetition of words and phrases; Morgan and Morgan rightfully claim that “repetition [serves as] a vital tool in the rhythm of the books” (Morgan & Morgan, 2006, p. 87). The following catalogue of literacy devices will demonstrate the various ways that the Dr. Seuss books use repetition and what function it serves within the story.⁶ Interestingly, Geisel varies his use of repetition so greatly throughout his stories that he uses the same literary devices in very different ways and for a myriad of purposes. The following list defines the devices of repetition that appear throughout the Dr. Seuss books and outlines how Geisel uses each one of the devices.



1. **Anadiplosis:** The repetition of the last word (or phrase) from the previous line, clause, or sentence at the beginning of the next.

Anadiplosis appears in the Dr. Seuss stories in order to reiterate specific points, to provide emphasis, and to speed up the pace of the verse by having the sentences overlap and run into each other.



⁶ All literary device definitions come from The Forest of Rhetoric, a web dictionary of literacy terms created and maintained by Dr. Gideon Burton of Brigham Young University. <<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>>

2. Anaphora: Repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines.

Geisel uses anaphora in the Dr. Seuss stories to highlight specific attributes, themes, or occurrences. Though used primarily for emphasis, the repetition can also help to propel the reader through the verse at a more rapid rate.



3. Antanaclassis: The repetition of a word or phrase whose meaning changes in the second instance.

Antanaclassis allows Geisel to use the sound continuity of repetition while providing ample opportunity for wordplay through the use of the multiple definitions of words.



4. Antimetabole: Repetition of (identical) words, in successive clauses, in reverse grammatical order (and) **Chiasmus:** Repetition of ideas in inverted order. Repetition of grammatical structures in inverted order⁷

Antimetabole and chiasmus are used in the Dr. Seuss books to emphasize key themes or claims made in a story, to mirror the contextual situation of the plot, and to provide the basis for linguistic tongue twisters.



5. Diacope: Repetition of a word with one or more between, usually to express deep feeling

The Dr. Seuss books use diacope in order to articulate strong feelings, to reveal convictions and ideas held by characters, and to provide dramatic emphasis during key events in a story.



6. Epanalepsis: Repetition of the same word or clause after intervening matter. More strictly, repetition at the end of a line, phrase, or clause of the word or words that occurred at the beginning of the same line, phrase, or clause.

The use of epanalepsis in the Dr. Seuss books provides circularity to stanzas or ideas and emphasizes key situations in which characters find themselves.



⁷ Antimetabole and chiasmus are not exactly the same, as antimetabole requires the inversion of identical words. However, the two devices are very similar and provide essentially the same effect.

7. Epizeuxis: Repetition of words with no other between, for vehemence or emphasis

Geisel's uses epizeuxis in the Dr. Seuss stories to express strong emotion, signal the passing of time, and to attract the interest of the reader.



8. Mesodiplosis: Repetition of the same word or words in the middle of successive sentences

Mesodiplosis is used in the Dr. Seuss books to connect lines through the use of repetition and to emphasize key terms or ideas.



9. Polyptoton: Repeating a word, but in a different form. Using a cognate of a given word in close proximity.

Polyptoton appears frequently in the Dr. Seuss books. It provides linguistic wordplay while demonstrating that changing just a few letters in a word can alter its meaning completely. It allows for repetition of words without a stanza veering into an indecipherable jumble of sound.



10. Symploce: The combination of anaphora and epistrophe: beginning a series of lines, clauses, or sentences with the same word or phrase while simultaneously repeating a different word or phrase at the end of the each element in this series

Symploce provides a sense of symmetry to successive lines and allows for repetition that alters just slightly from line to line. The device provides structure for tongue twisters by offering a structure for the repetition of similar sounds.



11. Synonymia: In general, the use of several synonyms together to amplify or explain a given subject or term. A kind of repetition that adds emotional force or intellectual clarity.

Synonymia provides a way for an idea to be repeated in a passage without having to repeat the words verbatim in order to add emphasis. The device can add emotional drama to a situation or highlight a specific idea, inclination, or feeling.



12. Traductio: Repeating the same word variously throughout a sentence or thought

The use of traductio in the Dr. Seuss books allows Geisel to repeat particular words or sounds for emphasis; it can be used in order to highlight strong emotions, underscore key ideas, or simply to provide a bit of linguistic fun.



B. Syntactical Devices: Repetition of Sounds

As a writer concerned with sound, Geisel frequently uses the literary devices of alliteration, assonance, and consonance to provide a sense of symmetry in sound, while also writing lines and stanzas that tickle the tongue. Perhaps more than any other set of literary devices, it is these strategies for repetition of sound that occur most often in the Dr. Seuss books. Whether repeating sounds in English or in his nonsense words, Geisel uses these devices to add excitement and verbal interest to his poetry. Interestingly, these devices tend to be the noticeable in the Dr. Seuss books, and often mask the presence of the many other poetic devices that appear in Geisel's poetry. The list that follows outlines the devices of sound repetition used in the Dr. Seuss books and explains how their use enhances Geisel's poetry.



1. Alliteration: Repetition of the same letter or sound within nearby words. Most often, repeated initial consonants.

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses alliteration as a way to play with the sounds of words. Though he sometimes uses the device to create tongue twisters, more often than not, the device is used to add a sense of repetition and rhythm to his poetry. Moreover, knowing that the words will begin with the same initial sound provides another scaffold for early readers.



2. Assonance: Repetition of similar vowel sounds, preceded and followed by different consonants, in the stressed syllables of adjacent words.

The use of assonance in the Dr. Seuss books allows for certain words, phrases, and stanzas to cohere in terms of sound. This proves especially effective when Geisel includes zany words, as the similar sounds can aid pronunciation and provide a sense of connection that helps to ground the wacky words and maintain logical sense. Additionally, when coupled with other literary devices, assonance can help to enhance the effects of these devices.



3. Consonance: The repetition of consonants in words stressed in the same place (but whose vowels differ). Also, a kind of inverted alliteration, in which final consonants, rather than initial or medial ones, repeat in nearby words.

Summary: Consonance appears frequently in the Dr. Seuss books and helps to provide a sense of cohesion in sound for lines and stanzas. When used with nonsense words or in odd lists, it can prevent the words from seeming unrelated to one another and also help to maintain logic and give meaning to words by providing a consistent sound context.



C. Syntactical Devices: Devices of Meter

While Geisel writes in a steady, anapestic tetrameter throughout his works, he employs a number of different strategies for making his lines read faster or slower. By adding or omitting conjunctions and breaking his lines in the middle of a thought, Geisel controls the pace at which his readers navigate his poetry. Thus, though the poetry in the Dr. Seuss books follows a consistent “bump-biddy-bump meter,” the rate at which the anapests are read can be accelerated or decelerated through simple linguistic manipulation (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 92). The following list defines the devices of meter that appear in the Dr. Seuss books and explains what influence these metrical adjustments have on Geisel’s poetry.



1. ***Aphaeresis:*** The omission of a syllable or letter at the beginning of a word.

The use of aphaeresis in Geisel's poetry speeds up the meter by dropping syllables and therefore, extra beats, from words, meaning that the reader gets to the end of the line sooner than they would otherwise.



2. ***Asyndeton:*** The omission of conjunctions between clauses, often resulting in a hurried rhythm or vehement effect

Summary: The use of asyndeton in the Dr. Seuss books provides a way for Geisel to accelerate the pace of his lines. Using this device can also verbally emphasize the strong emotions that characters feel at different points in time.



3. ***Enjambment:*** As opposed to an end-stopped line enjambment occurs when a thought or line continues onto the next.

The use of enjambment in the Dr. Seuss books tends to slow the pace of the lines by spreading out over several lines an idea that could be contained in a single line. Enjambment can mirror the actions of a character and often builds suspense.



4. ***Polysyndeton:*** Employing many conjunctions between clauses, often slowing the tempo or rhythm

When used in the Dr. Seuss books, polysyndeton slows the pace of a line by adding additional syllables. The slower pace of the line can mirror ways the characters feel, emphasize specific ideas, and enhance the reader's suspense.



D. Syntactical Devices: Diction, Lists, Figurative Language

The wordplay in the Dr. Seuss stories not only takes the form of repetition and metrical manipulation, but also occurs within the words and phrases contained in the verse. Geisel frequently explores switching parts of speech, using words and phrases as the objects in his sentences, and devising words that sound like what they represent. At the level of the phrase, Geisel dots his stories with frequent exclamations and exaggerations and often invites his readers into the plot by asking them questions and soliciting their opinions. Though the Dr. Seuss books contain examples of many different literary devices, it is particularly interesting that Geisel rarely uses metaphors or similes in his poetry. This omission may provide another reason why the stories entice young readers, as research has shown that the use of complicated figurative language in poetry often confuses children and makes reading poems far less enjoyable for them (Sloan, 2001, p. 54). Geisel, then, as a master craftsman, sprinkles his stories with words and literary devices that captivate readers, while omitting those that prove too complex and could turn his readers off from his poetry. The list that follows outlines the syntactical devices Geisel uses in his books and explains the effects they have on the poetry.



1. *Anthimeria*: Substitution of one part of speech for another (such as a noun used for a verb)

Through the use of anthimeria, Geisel subverts the notion that a word can only function as a single part of speech and therefore demonstrates the endless possibilities of language manipulation.



2. *Adynaton*: A declaration of impossibility, usually in terms of an exaggerated comparison.

The use of adynaton provides a tool for Geisel to convey the opposition adults often feel toward the convictions of children while also providing an opportunity for humor and wordplay.



3. *Ecphonesis*: An emotional exclamation

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses ecphonesis to express joy in the moments of empowerment for his young protagonists. Additionally, he uses the device to highlight significant attributes of characters or to add emotional emphasis to words or phrases.



4. *Hyperbole*: Rhetorical exaggeration. Hyperbole is often accomplished via comparisons, similes, and metaphors.

The use of hyperbole in the Dr. Seuss books provides a source of humor in the stories; the exaggerations in the stories tend to provide vibrant descriptions; generate reader interest; and underscore key feelings, thoughts, or ideas.



5. Interrogating the Reader

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel poses questions to his readers that invite them into the plot of the story. Often, these questions encourage young readers to use their imaginations and to think creatively, practices Geisel models for them in his books.



6. *Metallage*: When a word or phrase is treated as an object within another expression

Throughout the Dr. Seuss stories, metallage provides an opportunity to play with words in different contexts and to call attention to the importance of language by allowing specific words to form the central focus of lines and sentences.



7. *Onomatopoeia*: Using or inventing a word whose sound imitates that which it names

The use of onomatopoeia provides Geisel with ample opportunities for inventing and using neologisms in his stories while also allowing for fun wordplay as the words sound like what they represent. With its simplicity and amusing nature, onomatopoeia is one of the most frequently used devices in the Dr. Seuss stories.



8. *Simile*: An explicit comparison, often (but not necessarily) employing "like" or "as."

Similes appear very rarely in the Dr. Seuss books; when they do, they tend to either make easily-understood, concrete comparisons or encourage readers to use their imaginations by making connections to unfamiliar and invented words or concepts.



E. Whole Book Devices: Allegories, Pacing, Repetition, and Conclusions

While Geisel employs a myriad of literary devices at the syntactical level, he also uses several different strategies at the broader page and whole-book levels in order to provide cohesion and a sense of purpose to his stories. In her analysis of the Dr. Seuss stories, Evelyn Schroth heralds the effective use of “story line tactics” in the books; these strategies include:

...inclusion of the fantastic in a familiar framework, stacking-procedures, the accrumental devices used over and over, logical phenomena to make the illogical plausible, poetic justice, extolling virtues such as perseverance and fidelity and enterprise (Schroth, 1978, p.748).

This section will explore ways in which Geisel mirrors real-life through the use of allegory, paces his stories through the use of emphasis and cliff-hangers, provides cohesion with frequent repetition, and concludes his stories in a variety of ways. Examining the broader organization of the stories exposes another layer of Geisel’s careful craftsmanship, further demonstrating the

often-unrecognized sophistication of his works. The list of devices that follows outlines the tactics Geisel uses at the whole-book level and what function these devices play in the verse.



1. *Allegory:* A sustained metaphor continued through whole sentences or whole discourses.

The Dr. Seuss stories considered the “message books” are all allegories that express specific political or personal views. Geisel uses these allegorical works to expose children to issues from which they might otherwise be “protected,” and often, to promote subversive values that run counter to mainstream views.



2. *Text Features: Capitalization, Italicization, and Font Sizes*

Throughout his stories, Geisel employs many different strategies for emphasizing particular portions of the text, most notably capitalization and italicization. Evelyn Schroth, in her analysis of the language use in the Dr. Seuss stories, noted that Geisel “consistently marked stress for the reader by italicizing a word or a phrase or by capitalizing it to give the word a special twist or emphasis” (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). Scholars argue that the use of these text features to add emphasis highlights the “accent of the verse” and makes the reader especially cognizant of the meter (MacDonald, 1988, p. 104).

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, the use of capitalization and italicization emphasizes the key parts of the story, draws attention to danger, builds suspense, and underscores strong emotions. The manipulation of these text features alters how the reader interacts with the text and the weight they attach to specific aspects of the work.



3. *Pacing: Changing Line Lengths and Words Moving Across the Page*

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses varying line lengths to alter the pacing of the story by changing the speed at which the reader can read the lines. He frequently uses different line lengths to set dialogue apart from the rest of the verse and to emphasize important sentiments or ideas. Additionally, as Morgan and Morgan point out, Geisel tends to “accelerat[e] words as the plot quicken[s],” causing the reader to hurtle faster and faster through the text as the suspense builds near the climax and conclusion of the story (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 155).



4. Pacing: Page Breaks and Cliffhangers

Geisel frequently uses page turns as a way to build suspense and to carry the reader through the story. Having to turn the page to find out information increases the reader's curiosity and also gives the reader ample time to try to brainstorm her own predictions and ideas about what may appear on the next page.



5. Repetition

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses repetition not only at the syntactical levels discussed earlier, but also in broader ways throughout entire books. Geisel felt repetition could serve as a powerful tool in verse: "It become part of the pattern," he said, "to teach, you have to repeat and repeat and repeat" (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 155). Repetition in the Seuss books, however, never seems overused, but rather dynamic, exciting, and even essential to the story. As Ruth MacDonald argues, Geisel expertly avoids the irritating redundancy of repetition that can be tempting to use when the emphasis of the book is on teaching students to read:

The use of verse permits the author to reinforce new words by repeating them.

However, a writer of children's books [must] make sure the device of repetition is used to reinforce the words, not simply used gratuitously; the story must call forth the repetition, a feat which Seuss has carried off admirably (1988, p. 120).

Through the use of repetition, Geisel manages not only to link his stories together cohesively, but also to repeat the messages and ideas that form the central themes of his stories.

Geisel uses repetition of phrases in many of the Dr. Seuss books in order to provide cohesion to the stories from beginning to end. The use of this repetition simultaneously highlights the key thoughts, emotions, and ideas in the stories.



6. Conclusions: Granting the Reader Responsibility

By giving readers a sense of responsibility at the conclusion of the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel encourages them to think about pertinent issues, their roles in the problems, and what they can do to make things better.



7. Conclusions: Sense of Justice

Many of the Dr. Seuss books end with a sense of justice; the resolutions of these stories help to reinforce the notion that those who act in appropriate and admirable ways will be rewarded while those who harm or take advantage of others will eventually endure negative consequences. Concluding the stories with fairness and justice not only leaves readers feeling satisfied with the outcome with the tales, but also helps to encourage children to adopt the admirable qualities that the stories reward.



8. Conclusions: Lack of Closure

Geisel not only gives responsibility to his readers at the conclusions of some of the Dr. Seuss books, but also occasionally leaves the determination of the ending completely up to them. Critics lambasted *The Butter Battle Book* not only for its discussion of the nuclear arms race, but also because he makes the decision to leave the ending wide open:

By using this open ending, Dr. Seuss violates one of the prime conventions of children's literature—that works for children should have closed endings, preferably happy ones, with all important questions answered and with no loose ends left unresolved. But for Seuss's purposes, there can be no resolution. He places the burden of finishing the story squarely in the lap of the reader (MacDonald, 1988, p. 156).

Though the most obvious example of this concluding strategy occurs in *The Butter Battle Book*, Geisel does use this strategy in more subtle ways by suggesting an ending, not stating it explicitly; for example, in *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, the protagonist gets a bat and declares himself capable of fighting off his troubles, yet the reader never sees him tested or whether this strategy will prove effective. This open-endedness in the stories, whether explicit or subtle, ensures that readers will continue thinking about the stories long after they close the books.

Though sharply criticized for doing so, Geisel refuses to provide neat closure to his stories when a solution doesn't exist in the real world. Leaving a few loose ends in the Dr. Seuss books encourages readers to consider their own ideas about how to resolve the complicated issues and scenarios with which Geisel presents them.



9. *Conclusions: Circularity of Stories at Closure*

Many of the Dr. Seuss stories, particularly those that feature strong themes about the power of the imagination, tend to circle back to where the story began in their conclusions. Literary scholar Alison Lurie criticizes this technique because the return to the beginning of the story suggests that the imaginings of the protagonist only have a place inside of the book:

Though these stories are full of euphoric vitality, there is occasionally something unsatisfying about them. Seuss' verbal inventions can become as shaky and overblown as the structures in his drawings. At the end of many of his books the elaborate language often does collapse. There is an abrupt return to simple diction, and a simple, realistic final illustration implicitly declares that Seuss's protagonist was only fantasizing" (Lurie, 2003, p. 94).

While Lurie classifies this circularity as a "collapse," other critics argue that the technique ensures that the stories possess a sense of cohesion and symmetry (Heald 230). Furthermore, though the conclusions of the Dr. Seuss stories often resemble the beginnings, the conclusions are not "mirror image[s]" (Arakelian 20). In other words, the ending of a Dr. Seuss book takes into account what has transgressed in the story, meaning that even if the words sound similar, the feelings of the protagonist –and the reader—have not remained the same throughout the course of the story. I believe that the circularity at the end of the Dr. Seuss books not only provides a neat sense of symmetry to these works, but also gives his readers a chance to see how their thinking has altered since they began reading the story.

That many of the Dr. Seuss books conclude by bringing the story full circle helps not only to provide cohesion to the book as a whole, but also to remind readers of the key themes and ideas discussed in the story while giving them an opportunity to reflect on what they've read.



Inventing Language: Neologisms in the Dr. Seuss Books

Geisel's endless manipulations of language are not limited to just the English language; Geisel is known, perhaps more than any other children's author, for his frequent and varied use of neologisms. Of all the features of his language use, the *New York Times* felt that "the Seuss-speak he created when English seemed too skimpy for so rich an imagination" made Geisel's writing "irresistible" to his readers (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 290). The strange Seuss-ian terms that abound in the Dr. Seuss books captivate and delight readers while also showing them that language can serve as a plaything. "He tickles us with unexpected collocations and with ingenious concoctions," writes Evelyn Schroth when describing Geisel's use of language (Schroth 750). The Seuss-ian neologisms, though they seem randomly generated and easily invented, are, like all other facets of the Dr. Seuss books, meticulously crafted with particular attention to both sound and composition. Though the neologisms seem (and are) strange and wholly unique, most of these words do adhere to the standard rules of English, feature manipulation of different affixes, and even incorporate English words within them. Geisel's masterful invention of neologisms, then, not only demonstrates that language can be a fun thing with which to play, but also shows that with the addition of just a few strange syllables, the familiar can become far more interesting and exotic.

Almost paradoxically, a simultaneous sense of novelty and familiarity marks one of the most striking characteristics of the neologisms in the Dr. Seuss books. While some of Geisel's neologisms feel extremely foreign, many of his concoctions mirror the sounds of English words or incorporate English words within them. For example, Quilliagan Quail, a creature from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, takes the word "quill" as its base, adds a common English ending "gan" onto the end, and then concludes with an actual English name for a bird. This

melding of English within Seuss-ian language helps create words that seem bizarre but also slightly recognizable, meaning that readers have some context for the words at the same time as they are delighted by their oddity. Thus, when Geisel transforms standard words into peculiar neologisms, he produces words that are “all seemingly logical and sensible and useful, if unorthodox, and all perfectly meaningful” (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). The blending of English and nonsense allows readers to decipher Geisel’s neologisms by locating familiar sounds and syllables within them. At the same time, decoding these unfamiliar words shows readers the malleability of the English language and showcases the idea that, with imagination, one can create her own new and meaningful words.

In addition to his hybrid blends of English and nonsense, the adherence of Geisel’s invented words to English conventions often makes his neologisms sound like real words. The reader rarely wonders to which part of speech a Seuss-ian word belongs because these neologisms contain “linguistic markers” [just like] “genuine nouns, verbs, and adjectives do” (MacDonald, 1988, p. 3). These linguistic markers typically take the form of standard suffixes added onto the fabricated words that help readers identify them as particular parts of speech. For example, in *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*, one of the characters described receives “piffulous pay” for his unpleasant work. The “ous” suffix at the end of the word lets the reader know, even without the word “pay” appearing next to it, that “piffulous” is an adjective. Furthermore, the sound of the word also helps the reader to understand its meaning, as the way the word sounds reveals “the connotation of positive or negative value” assigned to the word (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). “Piffulous” reminds the reader of “pitiful” or “poor” and simply sounds like a negative term, hints which allow the reader to attach even greater meaning to the word. Similarly, the word “grinch-ish-ly” in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* can clearly be identified

as an adverb because it ends in “ly,” just like authentic adverbs commonly do. The inclusion of affixes in many of the neologisms helps the reader to assign meaning to these words by providing helpful connections to English parts of speech, thereby allowing the reader to classify the word into a standard category.

Not only do these affixes permit the reader to link nonsense words to actual words, but they also help the reader to begin to understand the common rules of how language operates, whether the words are English or Seuss-ian:

[Geisel] takes a few highly productive bound morphemes such as –un, -ish, -ly, -ed, -ler, -est, and constructs vocabulary which though non-standard is logical and meaningful, since these morphemes are part of children’s linguistic competence (Schroth, 1978, p. 749).

That the manipulation of affixes allows for associations between Seuss-ian words and standard English words helps to make Geisel’s neologisms seem as though they *could* be real, because they don’t violate the familiar organization of words with which young readers are familiar. Though Geisel uses “open juncture” to create words of daunting length, such as “Fizza-ma-Wizza-ma-Dill” in *If I Ran the Zoo*, the combination of words and non-words helps guide the reader through the decoding of the neologism (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). If the Seuss-ian words defied linguistic classification and lacked context, readers would be unable to impart meaning onto these words, at which point the words would confuse readers more than delight them; whimsical words are less fun if the reader can’t understand them.

That Geisel’s neologisms often seem so close to English words helps to demonstrate that languages can evolve over time. In fact, one of Geisel’s words, “nerd,” which appears as the name of an animal in *If I Ran the Zoo*, evolved from that text and has since been integrated into

contemporary English. Any of Geisel's neologisms could easily have followed (and still could follow) the same route, as they are just different enough from standard English to seem fresh and exciting to readers. In other words, Geisel's language use reveals the possibilities of language while rejecting the notion of language as static and unalterable:

The mix of nonsense syllables—especially ones that sound similar to real words, like *preep* (rhymes with *creep*) and *proo* (sounds like *prude*) with real words shows the ability of [Geisel's] imagination to play with words and invent tangible equivalents by the suggestibility of the real words. It also shows Dr. Seuss's interest in words, which he claims originated with his schoolboy studies of Latin, which imparted to him an admiration and love of language and an awareness of its possibilities (MacDonald, 1988, p. 68).

Though Geisel's use of neologisms illuminates the potential language holds for infinite manipulations, he carefully scatters apt neologisms throughout his stories without bogging the reader or the pace of the story down with invented word after invented word. The use of casual, everyday slang and common terms throughout the Dr. Seuss books help to keep the reader “earthbound in our heady encounter with Seuss-land adventure” (Schroth, 1978, p. 750). The variance in the use of language also captures the interest of readers, as they have no idea what kinds of words to expect when they turn the page. Another way Geisel keeps the reader grounded during what could be a confusing experience with language is by having the neologisms fit into the end rhyme of the line. Completing a rhyme with a neologism automatically connects the word, at least in terms of sound, with other, standard words surrounding it, allowing the reader to remain firmly planted in the context of the verse. For example, in *Horton Hears a Who!* Geisel introduces a new meaning for the verb “bungle” by using it as a noun to satisfy an end rhyme:

“Such carryings-on in our peaceable jungle! / We’ve had quite enough of your bellowing bungle!” The controlled usage of the neologisms and their frequent use to complete a rhyme help to keep readers firmly tuned into what’s happening in the story and allow them to enjoy the fun of invented words without sacrificing the bigger picture and overarching themes of the book.

Geisel firmly believed that poetry for children ought to rhyme, yet while writing, he encountered many pesky words that he claimed “won’t rhyme and are therefore...no good to poetry and poets” (Cohen, 2004, p. 48). Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel devises words that not only fulfill the rhyme scheme of his stories, but also delight readers with their sound and ingenuity. Appendix two features a list of just a few of the neologisms used in the Dr. Seuss books, organized into the categories where Geisel most frequently invented words: place-names, animal names, and names for things and objects. These lists highlight the blending of common English words and affixes with nonsense syllables and show how Geisel uses linguistic markers to infuse his invented words with meaning. At the same time as he provides a meaningful context for his Seuss-ian words by tying them to standard English, Geisel “frees letters and punctuation from practical obligations” and illustrates how language “is the outcome of revisable conventions” (Pease, 2010, p. 127). In other words, through his use of neologisms, Geisel shows the reader that the imagination can make a plaything of anything, even something that can seem as restrictive and fixed as language often does.

Conclusion: Language Use in Dr. Seuss

Though this language analysis has broken Geisel's use of language down into distinct pieces, it is essential to maintain the understanding that the Dr. Seuss books prove so effective and captivating because all of the individual components come together to produce a cohesive and engaging whole. As wholes, the stories powerfully demonstrate the boundless potential of language and wordplay and encourage the use of imagination to make the world a more fascinating place. The use of the literary devices described in this analysis allows Geisel to "[separate] words from their normal function of making meaning and [give] them over to linguistic fun" (Pease, 2010, p. 125). The emphasis in the Dr. Seuss books on wordplay not only intrigues and delights young readers, but may also improve their understanding of language as a whole. Citing linguist David Crystal, Rachel Cumming argues that one's grasp of language improves through the use of wordplay, because "the greater our ability to play with language, the more we will reinforce our development of metalinguistic skills" (2007, p. 95). In terms of wordplay and language manipulation, Geisel stands out as master in the field of children's literature, exposing children perhaps more than any other author to the magic of wordplay:

...the good Doctor's inventiveness of language and zany hyperbole never flags.

There are few places where a child can get a better sense of the richness of language [and] the infinite possibilities it offers a lively imagination (Lanes, 1971, p. 50).

The playfulness of the Dr. Seuss books and Geisel's willingness to challenge the conventions of standard language use helps readers to develop their linguistic competency at the same time as they discover ways to move beyond the mundane and predictable uses of language.

With his language use in the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel "capitalize[s] on th[e] delight"

children experience when hearing language that engages in wordplay (Cott , 1983, p. 121). Not only does Geisel know what kind of language children enjoy hearing and reading, he also knows what types of stories children tell themselves. Though Geisel masterfully exploits language in many different ways, he never writes in a lofty or convoluted way, but rather writes the same “way [that] people talk to one another” (Lanes, 1971, p. 50). The “unfailing direct language” that characterizes the Dr. Seuss books attracts children because it mirrors the way that they themselves speak, often in the simplest terms possible (Lanes, 1971, p. 49). Perhaps, more than anything, what makes the Dr. Seuss books so attractive to children is that Geisel’s writing mirrors the stories that they themselves might share or write:

And concerning the little stories very young children themselves make up, Brain Sutton-Smith, in his essay, ‘The Child’s Mind as Poem,’ has noted certain recurring features in these stories—their verselike quality (rhythm, alliteration, and rhyme); their simplified syntax and use of nonsense; their expressive as opposed to referential features (melody proceeding meaning); their use of exaggeration and of emphatic and pantomimic effects; and their reliance on theme-and-variation, repetitive, and cyclical forms of organization (Cott, 1983, p. 115).

Geisel clearly knows to what types of stories and language use his audience will respond, and uses this information to create books that above all else, show children that reading can be fun.

Rudolf Flesch, author of the hard-hitting book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, loved Geisel’s work and felt that more stories like his could help to ameliorate the literacy epidemic in the United States. “There is something about it,” Flesch said, “a swing to the language, a deep understanding of the playful mind of a child, an undefineable something that makes Dr. Seuss a

genius pure and simple” (Schroth, 1978). Though others have often tried to replicate the language use in the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel remains distinctive in the field of children’s literature precisely because of this “undefineable something.” The appeal of the Dr. Seuss books goes far beyond the alignment of Geisel’s use of language with the preferences of children, as language use alone cannot make for a story that young readers will devour:

Unless a poem says something to a child, tells him a story, titillates his ego, strikes up a happy recollection, bumps his funny bone—in other words, delights him—he will not be attracted to poetry regardless of the language it uses (Groff, cited in Kupiter & Wilson, 1993, p. 181).

Thus, though this section has explored Geisel’s language use in some depth, one must remember that, as a writer, Geisel did far more than simply arrange words in interesting ways on the page of a book – his language use and philosophy about writing for children coupled with his outstanding creativity provide young readers with stories that not only possess tremendous literary merit, but also make reading seem fun, interesting, and worthwhile.

Chapter Five: The Language of Dr. Seuss and Children's Literacy

"I meant what I said and I said what I meant."

"I Meant What I Said and I Said What I Meant": The Language of Dr. Seuss and Children's Narrative Comprehension

When educators or parents identify quality writing for children, the content of the story or the critical reception of the text tends to receive more attention than the medium in which the tale is presented. While books written in verse or that use language in interesting ways are sometimes shared with students as exemplars of creativity, very little empirical research has focused on whether language use in books can lead to positive learning outcomes for children. This study examines the relationship between language use and children's narrative comprehension by using stories written by the unofficial master of linguistic wordplay in children's literature: Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss). In devising this experiment, I expected to confirm one of two ideas about the influence of language use on narrative comprehension: either language features would draw readers deeper into the text and increase their understanding of the narrative, or the sophisticated language use would confuse or distract them from the content of the story. The literature, with a few exceptions, supports the latter view, that rhyme and phonological similarity in a text tends to decrease performance on comprehension tasks.

Language Use and Comprehension

A number of studies have compared the performances of children exposed to either a rhyming or non-rhyming text on comprehension tasks (Johnson & Hayes, 1987; Hayes, 1999); Sheingold & Foundas, 1978). In an experiment which asked preschoolers to recall a story following exposure to either a rhymed or un-rhymed version of the text, Hayes (1999) found that

children who heard the prose story retained more information from the narrative than the children in the rhyme condition. Similarly, Sheingold and Foundas (1978) demonstrated that the presentation of a narrative in rhyme did not enhance children's ability to remember details from the story. In his analysis of student performance on the recall task, Hayes (1999) pinpointed several areas of story details that children seem to struggle to recall when exposed to a rhyming text: the actions of a protagonist as she strives to achieve a goal or resolve a problem and the outcome of these actions. These findings led Hayes (1999) to suggest that rhyme may inhibit student comprehension and recollection of these essential aspects of narratives while a text written in prose may actually bolster retention of these particular components of stories. Taken together, these studies support the idea that rhyme can negatively influence student recollection and, seemingly, comprehension of stories.

The phonological overlap of rhyming words provides one explanation for why rhyming texts may negatively influence student retention of story details. Studies on the “tongue-twister effect” suggest that it is much more difficult to comprehend sentences with lots of similar-sounding words than sentences with greater phonological differentiation (McCutchen, Dibble, & Blount, 1994; Baddeley & Lewis, 1981; Acheson & MacDonald, 2011; Keller, Carpenter, & Just, 2003). In particular, study participants take longer to read sentences with significant alliteration (repeated initial sounds) than sentences with a wider range of sounds (McCutchen, Dibble, & Blount, 1994; Baddeley & Lewis, 1981). Not only do tongue twisters take longer to read than more phonologically diverse sentences, they also contribute to poorer sentence comprehension. Acheson and MacDonald (2011) confirmed that sound repetition adversely impacts reading comprehension, even when children read these texts silently. In a neural-imaging study that used fMRI scans to compare the brain area activation of participants silently reading either tongue-

twisters or control sentences Keller, Carpenter, and Just (2003) found brain activity patterns which supported the claims that tongue-twisters lead to slower reading times as well as decreased comprehension.

In a similar vein, studies have shown that when asked to recall lists of items, participants perform better when asked to remember phonologically-diverse words and words that vary in terms of initial sounds (Baddeley & Lewis, 1981; Robinson & Katayama, 1997). Finally, while studies of tongue twisters reveal the difficulties inherent in sound repetition through devices like alliteration, Crain-Thoreson (1996) found that rhyme tends to confuse children even more than alliteration, suggesting that rhyme may pose a greater challenge to comprehension than sound repetition. The research on rhyme and comprehension and the tongue twister effect confirms that phonemic information plays an important role in comprehension.

While the literature proposes that rhyme adversely impacts recall of story details, a few studies suggest that rhyme aids student performance on recitation tasks (Johnson & Hayes, 1987; Sheingold & Foundas, 1978), suggesting that children do in fact attend to and are aware of rhyme and other language features while reading. Johnson and Hayes (1987) found that preschoolers exposed to a rhyming version of narrative text performed better on a recitation task than students who heard a non-rhyming text. The children who heard the rhyming text gave more accurate, sequentially-correct recitations and more frequently provided verbatim word-for-word responses than those exposed to the non-rhyming text. This finding confirms the work of Sheingold and Foundas (1978), who also found that rhyming narrative texts enhanced first graders' ability to put story events in the proper sequential order and Rubin (1977), who demonstrated that narrative texts with stronger rhythmic patterns, such as verse, are easier to remember than non-rhythmic texts. Taken together, these findings suggest that rhyme may

positively impact children's ability to recall the sequential order and specific aspects of a narrative. Thus, according to the literature, rhyme seems to enhance children's ability to present information from the story in sequential order and to recall verbatim details while inhibiting their ability to comprehend specific details in a narrative.

However, as Hayes and Johnson (2001) point out the ability to recall word-for-word details from a story does not imply that children actually comprehend the story. The majority of these previous studies that examined at the influence of language use on comprehension focused on a very literal, simple level of comprehension. Specifically, in the experiments which focused on comprehension after exposure to either a rhyming or non-rhyming version of the same text (Hayes & Johnson, 1987; Sheingold & Foundas, 1978), the participants were asked basic recall and sequencing questions – questions which can be answered using material explicitly stated in the text. None of these studies tested what influence language features might play in higher-order comprehension tasks such as inference and evaluation. These more challenging types of comprehension questions become particularly important when considering Dr. Seuss texts, as these stories often present difficult material or morals which are not explicitly stated in the text, but which are essential to gaining a true understanding of his works and moving past mere delight in the linguistic fun that his books offer.

Levels of Comprehension

All comprehension questions are not created equal – these questions can range from assessments of superficial understanding of the events of the story to evaluations of students' ability to infer why an author might have wanted to tell a particular story. Clearly, comprehension questions can vary significantly, both in terms of complexity and difficulty.

Reading research confirms that not only are there certain “classes” or “levels” of comprehension, but that the higher the level of questions asked, the more students who perform poorly on comprehension tasks (Veeravagu, Muthusamy, Marimuthu, & Michael, 2010; Dewitz & Dewitz, 2003; Alonzo, Basaraba, Tindal & Cariveau, 2009). Literal comprehension, the most basic level of comprehension, involves questions that can be answered using information directly stated in the text. Students tend to perform the best on these types of comprehension tasks (Alonzo et al., 2009; Veeravagu et al., 2010). Questions that assess inferential comprehension, a more demanding type of comprehension, as the name suggests, requires students to make inferences, as the answers to the questions are not explicitly stated in the text. Dewitz and Dewitz (2003) identified two types of inference questions – text-based and knowledge-based – and found that children tend to perform better when making inferences based on background knowledge than questions which require making inferences based solely on information presented in the text. Finally, evaluative comprehension, another category of higher-order comprehension, involves making critical assessments of a text based both upon the story, personal experiences, and background knowledge. In comparing the relative difficulty of literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension, Alonzo et al. (2009) identified literal comprehension as the simplest level, with both inferential and evaluative comprehension being significantly more difficult. No conclusive variation in difficulty emerged between inferential and evaluative comprehension, though both were classified as higher-order comprehension levels than literal comprehension.

Dr. Seuss and Children’s Poetry Preferences

While Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), with an astonishing sixteen books on the list of the 100 best-selling children’s books of all-time (Nel, 2003, p. 6), may just be the most popular

American children's author, the popularity and style of his books have led many to disregard his works as nonsensical amusements, rather than high-quality and carefully-crafted children's literature. Children tend to voraciously devour his works, yet Geisel and his books are "held at arms length by the children's literature establishment" due to their drastic departure from previous works for children and their handling of "adult" subject material (Roth, 1989, p. 142). While Geisel believed children can understand more than adults give them credit for and that there is no difference between adult meanings and children's meanings (Nel, 2003, p. 129), it is unclear whether children actually understand the complicated subjects that his books tackle. From my observations and experiences working with children, it seems clear that young readers almost universally love Dr. Seuss books; yet, liking a story and finding it amusing is something entirely different than truly understanding it. One of Geisel's fans, Dr. William O. Baker, once claimed, perhaps facetiously, that "his books had been computer-tested with other print media and proved uniquely effective in conveying information" (Morgan & Morgan, 1995, p. 271). While this comment may have been meant to be a joke, it is possible that the Dr. Seuss books, with their distinctive use of language and meter actually *are* better at conveying complicated subject matter to children than other works. If the Dr. Seuss books not only delight and entrance young readers, but also get them thinking critically about injustices and problems in our society, the benefits of and opportunities for using them in the classroom – a place from which these texts have traditionally been shunned—are limitless.

The overwhelming popularity of the Dr. Seuss books and the persistent appearance of children's books written in rhyme point to a continuing belief that children prefer stories written in rhyme and whimsical language. Research regarding the type of poetry to which children are attracted consistently confirms that children possess a partiality for rhyme and rhythm (Sloan,

2001; Kutiper & Wilson, 1993; Kelly, 2005). One possible explanation for this partiality is that children find these types of poems entertaining, especially when the rhymes and wordplay contribute to a humorous storyline. Cumming (2003) found that children hold deeply-rooted beliefs that all funny poems rhyme and that all rhyming poetry is funny, even after being exposed to poems – both rhyming and non-rhyming that contradicted this assumption. Another, and perhaps more interesting explanation, is that children possess an innate preference for word play. Indeed, young children not only favor rhyme and sound devices such as alliteration, but also seem to possess an incredible ability to discriminate these verbal features, even before they can read independently (Goswami & Bryant, 1990). Not only do children possess an ability to identify rhyme, but exposure to rhyme increases their awareness of and sensitivity to phonological aspects of words (Hayes, 2001). In a study that compared the performances of preschool children exposed to a rhyming or non-rhyming story on a word-discrimination task, Hayes (2001) found that children who heard the rhyming story not only differentiated similar sounds from dissimilar sounds with greater precision, but were also more likely to respond to a phonological deletion task with rhymes than the children who heard the non-rhyming story. Taken together, this research suggests that young children not only prefer rhymes and other poetic devices, but may also possess a particular sensitivity to hearing this type of language, which not only attracts their attention and interest but also makes them more aware of word sounds and verbal play.

Children's attraction to rhyme and verbal play provides one possible explanation for why they love Dr. Seuss books, as Theodor Geisel is arguably the master of linguistic play in children's books. The litany of poetic devices used in the Dr. Seuss stories boggles the mind (see Schroth, 1978), but ultimately, the rhymes and steady meter function as the driving forces of his

work. In terms of rhythm, children prefer a perpetual beat rather than alternations between various meters (Sloan, 2001), something Geisel capitalizes on by his nearly unbroken use of anapestic tetrameter in his books. Boyd (2001) describes the use of language and meter in Dr. Seuss books as “a verbal equivalent of the play-face, the gamboling-gait, the rhythmic romp” (p. 204). With their rhymes, infinite proliferations of sound, and unshakable beat, then, the Dr. Seuss books cater to the child’s natural inclinations and preferences to draw them into the text. Yet, while children enjoy reading Dr. Seuss books, this does not mean that they understand the often-complex messages contained within them. In fact, in a review of the research on the connection between rhyme awareness and reading development, Macmillan (2002), declared the evidence of a link between rhyme and reading unconvincing. Thus, though children possess a preference for rhyme and word play, it does not directly follow that these poetic devices assist children in making sense out of what they read.

The Present Study

In thinking about Theodor Geisel’s assertion that children must be exposed to material that matters and the presence of some complex and controversial topics in his books – the nuclear arms race, fascism, and environmental destruction, to name just a few – I realized that in order to understand many of the stories in the Seuss canon, children reading these books need more than just a superficial ability to recall passages of the text word-for-word. Given that children love the unique language usage in the Dr. Seuss books, I wondered if this linguistic play could enhance higher-order comprehension or if, as the research would seem to suggest, the whimsical language might impair readers’ abilities to extract meaning from the text. While prior research suggests that rhyme impairs literal comprehension of details from a story, none of the

previous studies tested this claim using the work of an author with language use as calculated and complex as that of Dr. Seuss. Therefore, based on my experiences reading Dr. Seuss books with students and my knowledge of Geisel's meticulous writing process, I predicted that students exposed to an authentic Seuss book would perform better on higher-order comprehension tasks than students exposed to a pseudo-Seuss text, which retained all the details of the narrative but lacked the rhymes, alliteration, and other poetic devices that make Dr. Seuss books so distinctive. In other words, I expected that creative and exciting language use in children's books would enhance student performance on both the inferential and evaluative levels of comprehension.

Method:

Participants:

Fourth-grade students at an upper elementary school in Maine were recruited for this study via two rounds of parental permission slips. Of the 111 fourth-grade students solicited, 79 returned slips, with 5 of these students declining to participate in the study. Due to absences, the final sample included 71 students (26 male, 45 female, 6 students of color), yielding a 64% participation rate. 36 students (14 boys, 22 girls) read *The Sneetches* while the remaining 35 (12 boys, 23 girls) heard *Yertle the Turtle*. Equal numbers of students read each version of the two books; 18 students (7 boys, 11 girls) read the original *Sneetches*, 18 students (7 boys, 11 girls) read the pseudo-Seuss *Sneetches*, 18 students (6 boys, 12 girls) read the original *Yertle the*

Turtle, and 17 students (6 boys, 11 girls) read the pseudo-Seuss *Yertle the Turtle*. Approximately 48% of the participants received free or reduced lunch. A very small portion of the children (8 students) felt they had some familiarity with the texts, but only two were certain that they'd read one of the texts previously. These students were switched to the opposite text if they knew of the stories; no student claimed to be familiar with both texts.

Materials and Procedures:

Two Dr. Seuss texts – *The Sneetches* (1953) and *Yertle the Turtle* (1950) – were selected for the study based on their clear ethical perspectives, cultural critiques, and expected obscurity as compared to other, more popular Dr. Seuss titles. I created a pseudo-Seuss, prose version of each text by removing or altering as much of the Seuss-ian language (rhymes, alliteration, etc.) as possible, while still retaining the narrative structure, plot, and story details (see appendix for an example of a transformation). The original texts were scanned and manipulated using Photoshop so as to maintain the same illustrations in both the originals and the pseudo-Seuss books. The original and pseudo-Seuss texts were printed and bound in the same fashion in order to ensure continuity of the paratext – the packaging material surrounding a text (i.e. the cover) – between the two versions of the text. No version of the books read to students featured the name “Dr. Seuss” on the cover in order to minimize associations with the author instead of the present text. The grade level measures for the each book using the Fry Readability Scale were as follows: original *Yertle* – upper 3rd grade, pseudo-Seuss *Yertle* – lower 4th grade, original *Sneetches* – 5th grade, pseudo-Seuss *Sneetches* – upper 4th grade.

Interviews were conducted with individual students in the quiet, isolated classroom of the school literacy coach. I read the text aloud to the students while they followed along with the text

on the page and looked at the illustrations. After reading the story aloud, I immediately asked the students to answer the questions on the reading comprehension task that corresponded to the title they read, scoring their answers as they replied while also recording their responses. Interviews typically lasted between 12-20 minutes with the student response portion of the interview lasting anywhere from three to eight minutes.

The narrative comprehension tasks were based on the work of Alonzo et. al (2009) which divided comprehension into three levels: literal, inferential, and evaluative. I designed two questionnaires, one for *Yertle the Turtle* and one for *The Sneetches*, which contained three questions from each of the three levels of comprehension, for a total of nine questions in all (see appendix for a listing of the questions on each reading comprehension task). During the post-reading interview, student responses were scored on a rubric loosely modeled after those used for the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Student responses for each question were ranked on a scale from one to four, with four being the maximum points possible for each response. Thus, there were twelve points available for each of the three comprehension levels, for a maximum performance score of thirty-six.

After conducting the interviews, however, I found that the four-point scale did not accurately represent the data, as the majority of responses fell between a three and a four, yet there were wide disparities in the quality of these responses which could not be adequately represented with the original scale. The disparities of responses required the addition of a whole step, rather than a half step, since the difference between a response earning a score of 3 and a response earning a score of 3.5 was of equal magnitude as the difference between a 1 and a 2 or a 2 and a 3. Therefore, I adjusted the scale to a five-point scale, correlating the original 1 with a 0 and so on, until the new score of four represented a new category. In order to recode the data

according to the new scale, I listened to the audio recording of each interview and adjusted the scores accordingly. While listening to the files, I knew which of the two stories the student heard, but I did not know whether she'd been exposed to the real or fake version of the text. In this way, the recoding exercise actually provided an opportunity to eliminate some of the potential for an unintentional scoring bias that may have occurred during the original interviews, when I did know which version of the text students had heard. As an additional inter-rater reliability check, a peer listened to a selection of the files and scored the responses using the five-point rubric. The variation between our scores was minimal, with my peer recording just slightly lower scores across all of the samples, both real and fake, which suggests that I was not unintentionally inflating scores of students exposed to the real texts.

Results:

Seuss v. Pseudo-Seuss: Literal, Inferential, and Evaluative Comprehension

For each of the three levels of comprehension (literal, inferential, and evaluative), the mean scores on the comprehension task were significantly higher for students exposed to the authentic Seuss text (see table one). Mean scores for the authentic Seuss condition were 9.568 for literal comprehension, 8.469 for inferential comprehension, and 8.533 for evaluative comprehension. In the pseudo-Seuss condition, mean scores were 8.492 for literal comprehension, 6.739 for inferential comprehension, and 7.443 for evaluative comprehension. It follows, then, that the total comprehension score of students in the authentic Seuss condition was higher than the total score of participants exposed to the pseudo-Seuss text. Additionally, the

higher-order comprehension score (summation of the inferential and evaluative scores) also was greater for students in the authentic Seuss condition than in the pseudo-Seuss condition (17.001 to 14.181).

TABLE 1
Mean Scores for Each Level of Comprehension

Condition	Literal	Inferential	Evaluative	Higher-Order (INF + EVAL)	Total
Seuss	9.568	8.469	8.533	17.001	26.570
Pseudo-Seuss	8.492	6.739	7.443	14.181	22.673

The comprehension task data was analyzed using a univariate analysis of variance for each level of comprehension, higher-order comprehension (inferential comprehension + evaluative comprehension), and total comprehension score. Mean scores are based out of a possible 12 points for each of the three levels of comprehension, 24 points for the higher-order comprehension category, and 36 points for the measures of total scores.

The mean scores on the literal level of comprehension were 9.568 for the original Seuss text and 8.492 for the pseudo-Seuss text. A p-value of 0.052, however, renders the Seuss/pseudo-Seuss score difference for the literal level of comprehension insignificant, which fits with previous findings that rhyme and language features do not enhance performance on literal text recall. Effects for story (*Yertle v. Sneetches*), sex, and all interaction variables (story X Seuss/pseudo-Seuss, story X sex, Seuss/pseudo-Seuss X sex, and story X Seuss/pseudo-Seuss X sex) were all also non-significant (p values > 0.02) at the literal level of comprehension.

For the first of the higher-order levels of comprehension, inferential comprehension, the mean score of students exposed to the original Seuss text was 8.469 while the mean score of the students in the pseudo-Seuss condition was 6.739. These differences are highly significant (p ~

.000), suggesting that the differences in comprehension scores at the inferential level are at least partially attributable to the version of the Seuss text to which students were exposed. The effects for story, sex and all interaction variables (p values > 0.02) were non-significant at the inferential level of comprehension.

Mean scores for evaluative comprehension, the other higher-order level, were 8.533 for the original Seuss condition and 7.443 for the pseudo-Seuss condition. The p -value of approximately 0.033 is slightly higher than the acceptable significance value of 0.02, so the differences between the scores in the Seuss/pseudo-Seuss conditions at the evaluative level are statistically insignificant. This p -value is lower, however, than that found at the literal comprehension level, which possibly suggests that the exposure to the Seuss v. the pseudo-Seuss text mattered more at this higher-order level of comprehension than at the literal level. The effects for story, sex, and all of the interaction variables (p values > 0.02) were also non-significant at the evaluative level of comprehension.

In terms of total comprehension scores (summation of literal, inferential, and evaluative scores), the mean score of students exposed to the original Seuss text was 26.570 while the mean score of participants in the pseudo-Seuss condition was 22.673. This Seuss/pseudo-Seuss conditional difference in total scores is statistically significant ($p \sim 0.004$). This wide score difference indicates that the version of the text to which students were exposed influenced their overall comprehension score, with exposure to the authentic Seuss text enhancing overall comprehension across the three levels. No other variables (story, sex, or any of the interaction variables) were found to be significant in the total score category.

Seuss v. Pseudo-Seuss: Higher-Order Comprehension

The primary objective of this study was to investigate whether exposure to an original Seuss text would yield higher performance on higher-order comprehension tasks than exposure to a pseudo-Seuss text. In order to assess total higher-order comprehension, a variable was created which combined the scores from the inferential and evaluative levels of comprehension. Students exposed to the authentic Seuss text had a mean score of 17.001 on the higher-order comprehension measure while students exposed to the pseudo-Seuss text had a mean score of 14.181. The Seuss/pseudo-Seuss conditional differences are highly significant ($p \sim 0.002$), which lends support to the hypothesis that students in the authentic Seuss condition would perform better on higher-order comprehension tasks. None of the other variables (story, sex, or any of the interaction variables) were significant for the higher-order comprehension measure.

Gender Effects

Although the sex effects are not statistically significant for any of the comprehension measures assessed in this study (all p values > 0.02), an interesting trend emerged which is worthy of noting. On all measures (literal, inferential, evaluative, higher-order, and total scores), females in the pseudo-Seuss condition consistently, and sometimes dramatically, outperformed males. (See table 2). However, for all conditions, when students were exposed to the authentic text, the differences in performance between the sexes were minimized or even reversed. While the significance of the interaction effect between exposure to the Seuss/pseudo-Seuss text and gender is not significant, these findings suggest that an unexpected gender effect may emerge through exposure to authentic Dr. Seuss texts and might be worthy of further research.

TABLE 2
Gender Differences on Comprehension Measures

Condition	Literal	Inferential	Evaluative	Higher-Order (INF + EVAL)	Total
Seuss					
Male	9.887	8.500	8.524	17.024	26.911
Female	9.250	8.437	8.542	16.979	26.229
Pseudo-Seuss					
Male	8.208	6.048	6.679	12.726	20.935
Female	8.775	7.430	8.207	15.636	24.411

Discussion:

This study was conducted to observe how exposure to an authentic Dr. Seuss text versus a pseudo-Seuss text would influence performance on a reading comprehension task. Specifically, it was hypothesized that students in the authentic Seuss condition would out-perform students on higher-order comprehension questions at both the inferential and evaluative levels of comprehension. The findings of this study provide evidence to support this hypothesis, as students in the original Seuss condition significantly outscored participants exposed to the pseudo-Seuss text in terms of total higher-order comprehension score (inferential plus evaluative scores). Moreover, students exposed to the authentic Seuss text outperformed the students in the pseudo-Seuss condition not only in the inferential and evaluative categories, but also in total, overall comprehension score.

The results of this study confirm the findings of Alonzo et. al. (2009) that students perform better on literal comprehension questions than on inferential or evaluative comprehension tasks. Across both the Seuss and pseudo-Seuss conditions, comprehension scores were higher for the literal level than for the evaluative and inferential levels. The mean performance scores also support the claim made by Alonzo et. al. that inferential and evaluative

comprehension are much closer in difficulty to each other than to literal comprehension. The findings of this study contribute to this work by suggesting that certain types of texts and language features may enhance student performance on comprehension tasks.

That the students in the authentic Seuss condition outperformed the students exposed to the pseudo-Seuss text across all levels of comprehension runs counter to previous research about the impact of rhyme, alliteration, and phonological overlap on reading comprehension (Hayes (1999, Sheingold & Foundas, 1978, Acheson and MacDonald, 2011; Crain-Thoreson, 1996). Previous research demonstrated that rhyme seems to have a negative impact on reading comprehension, specifically in the recall of events and details of a the story (Hayes, 1999; Sheingold & Foundas, 1978). Recalling story details falls under the literal level of comprehension, so it is interesting that the results of the present study were statistically insignificant at this level of comprehension. However, while the present study did not conclusively demonstrate that exposure to the authentic Seuss text enhanced student performance on literal comprehension tasks, it also did not indicate that students in the prose, pseudo-Seuss condition outperformed students exposed to the authentic Seuss text. Though the assertion that prose passages lead to enhanced comprehension when compared to texts composed in verse is fairly well-established in the literature, the present study does not replicate these findings. Furthermore, the results of the present study suggest that texts written in verse may enhance student performance on higher-order, more difficult, comprehension questions.

The current study has several limitations that provide opportunities for further research in this area. First, since students were read the stories and then asked to answer questions about them, this study assessed listening comprehension. While there is a strong research base which asserts that reading comprehension and listening comprehension are part of the same language

process (Lehto & Anttila, 2003; Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefillidou, Papageorgiou, 2004; Kintsch & Kozminsky, 1997; Crain-Thoreson, 1996; Schmitt, Hale, McCallum, Mauck, 2011; Berger & Perfetti, 1977), student performance on the comprehension task could differ when asked to read the text on their own. Cain and Oakhill (2006) suggest that reading and listening comprehension should both be assessed in order to get a fuller sense of a student's comprehension ability.

Moreover, measuring narrative comprehension is not an easy task. While the present study used the levels of comprehension outlined by Alonzo et. al. (2009) as an organization method, this is by no means the only way to measure comprehension. Even when selecting open-ended questions as the mechanism for assessing comprehension, a decision must be made about whether to have students give answers verbally or to have them provide written responses. In order to solidify the findings of the current study, alternative input/output modalities could be utilized, for example reading the text and giving verbal responses, reading the text and writing responses, and hearing the text and providing written responses. The use of multiple modalities in the assessment of comprehension would help to provide a fuller picture of the comprehension performances of students in the Seuss and pseudo-Seuss conditions.

Additionally, while reading comprehension performance was enhanced in the authentic Seuss condition for the students in the sample, these findings cannot be generalized to all samples. This particular sample consisted of fourth-grade students from a small city in Maine. It would be interesting to observe whether similar patterns emerged in younger or older students in a variety of locations in the United States or even across the globe. Furthermore, investigating the influence of the authentic Seuss text on students of color or students from low-SES homes would also add an interesting dimension to the present findings.

Another limitation of the study is that it focused on Seuss-ian language as a whole, rather

than looking at single text features (i.e. alliteration, rhyme) in isolation. While the results of the study suggest that the language use in the authentic Seuss text may enhance higher-order comprehension performance, it is not possible to pinpoint which individual features of Geisel's language use positively impact comprehension. That the present study used two different Dr. Seuss texts lends supports the idea that the results of this study are not limited to only one Dr. Seuss text, but somehow specific to the style of writing and language use employed by Geisel throughout his work. However, without being able to distinguish which specific language features used in the Dr. Seuss texts enhanced comprehension performance, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other authors or to more general texts. That is, the results of this study suggest that something about the language use of Geisel seems to enhance comprehension, but cannot point specifically to which features in the complex verbal play in the Dr. Seuss books cause this effect.

Finally, while statistically insignificant, the gender effects observed in the present study are worthy of further study. That girls consistently outperform boys on all aspects of comprehension is well-documented in the research literature (Logan & Johnston, 2009; Lynn & Mikk, 2009). In the present study, exposure to the authentic Seuss text seemed to close, and even reverse, the gap between male and female performance on the comprehension tasks. The scores of students in the pseudo-Seuss, prose condition, however, followed the expected pattern, with girls significantly outscoring boys. Follow-up in this area might yield insights into whether the language use in a text may enhance comprehension performance, especially for boys.

Exactly why students in the authentic Seuss condition performed better on the comprehension task is unclear. It could be that the more whimsical use of language in the original Seuss text helped to make the story seem more interesting, which led to deeper

engagement in the text by the students in that condition. Alternatively, students could possess a particular sensitivity to the use of specific language feature that helps to increase their understanding of a text. Moreover, Geisel as an expert and meticulous writer, may use language in precisely the way that children can best comprehend it, with just the right balance of simplicity and complexity, slang/invented English and conventional words, and vivid description and zany detail. Furthermore, Jonathan Cott (1997) has argued that Geisel's stories mirror the stories that young children tell themselves

And concerning the little stories very young children themselves make up, Brian Sutton-Smith, in his essay, 'The Child's Mind as Poem,' has noted certain recurring features in these stories—their verselike quality (rhythm, alliteration, and rhyme); their simplified syntax and use of nonsense; their expressive as opposed to referential features (melody proceeding meaning); their use of exaggeration and of emphatic and pantomimic effects; and their reliance on theme-and-variation, repetitive, and cyclical forms of organization (Cott, 1997, pp. 114-115).

While understanding exactly what language features enhance comprehension is beyond the scope of the present study, the results of this experiment suggest that textual characteristics may play an important role in children's higher-order comprehension skills. Furthermore, these findings suggest that Dr. Seuss books should not be labeled as simply frivolous or fun, as children are capable of understanding the often-complex messages and material presented in these works far better in his trademark verse than in prose. That the students in the study comprehended the stories better in the authentic Seuss condition confirms Geisel's view that "children's abilities and their imaginations exceed adults' expectations" (Cohen, 2004, p. 300), and suggests that even advanced ideas can be conveyed to children with the right medium and style of expression.

Chapter Six: Implications and Conclusion

**“We’ve got to make noises in greater amounts! So, open your mouth, lad!
For every voice counts!”**

“Is this a Dr. Seuss Book?”

“I love Dr. Seuss. He is funny and rhymes a lot and he has weird illustrations and makes up weird creatures.”

“I like Dr. Seuss because he makes funny rhymes and makes stories that have meanings.”

“I like Dr. Seuss because he rhymes and is creative.”

- Responses from students at my research site. (While neither version of the books identified the author as Dr. Seuss, several students recognized the work simply from the illustrations and language use.)



Thus far, we have explored the writing philosophy of and language use in the Dr. Seuss books and identified that *something* about Geisel’s linguistic wordplay seems to increase children’s comprehension of the complicated themes in his stories. In this final section, drawing on the conclusions of the previous chapters, I argue that the Dr. Seuss books represent quality literature and outline six reasons why they ought to be more widely included in classroom libraries. Geisel’s work deserves greater consideration from educators because the stories deal with real-world issues, refuse to impose explicit morals, encourage critical thinking, are largely stereotype free, feature highly effective language use, and make reading fun and exciting.

The previous chapters of this investigation suggest that the Dr. Seuss books possess far more than a just a “kind of frivolity that [is] not appropriate for school” – in fact, the texts, as reformed Seuss-advocate Rita Roth argues, ought to be taught in schools because his “work is replete with social commentary and critique” (Roth, 1989, p. 142). I firmly believe that the Dr. Seuss books exemplify quality literature for children because they deal with real-world

problems, avoid explicit didacticism, encourage critical thinking, are (mostly) stereotype-free, and make children genuinely excited about reading. Furthermore, the stories prove especially effective for bringing issues of social justice into the classroom while “empowering children and encouraging mastery and independence” (MacDonald, 1988, p. 165). When we are able to see the complex language manipulation and sophisticated subject matter hidden beneath the deceptive simplicity of Geisel’s verse, the opportunities for and worth of using these stories in the classroom becomes increasingly apparent.

First and foremost, the Dr. Seuss books feature real world problems and center around topics that many critics of Geisel believe are too advanced or frightening for young children. Texts in the Dr. Seuss canon run the gamut from championing the imagination (*And To Think That I Saw it On Mulberry Street*, *McElligot’s Pool*, *On Beyond Zebra!*), overcoming challenges (*I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*), the difficulties of aging (*You’re Only Old Once!*), environmental destruction (*The Lorax*), prejudice (*The Sneetches*), fascism (*Yertle the Turtle*), and the threat of nuclear war (*The Butter Battle Book*). While these topics do not frequently find their way into children’s books, children can benefit from being exposed to these sometimes-difficult issues, as they can help them to gain a fuller understanding of the world around them – for better or for worse. Keeping children insulated from difficult topics maintains their naïveté, but ultimately prevents them from having an opportunity to ponder these issues and to develop their own viewpoints and opinions. The Dr. Seuss books provide an effective introduction to key social issues by presenting them in ways that children can easily comprehend, yet without downplaying the significance of these topics. As Seuss scholar Philip Nel points out, the content of Geisel’s work “offers preparation for the often dangerous world beyond his books” (2003, p. 62). Furthermore, as the results of the Seuss v. Pseudo-Seuss study suggest, the language Geisel

uses in his works may improve children's ability to comprehend the complicated issues presented in the Dr. Seuss books. Therefore, the Dr. Seuss texts provide interesting opportunities for educators to bring real-world issues – particularly issues related to social justice – into the classroom; when we correctly recognize Geisel as a “cultural critic,” the possibilities for using his books for educational purposes expand almost infinitely (Nel, 1999).

While the Dr. Seuss books provide critical commentary on contemporary social issues and sometimes advocate for a particular point of view, the stories never practice complete didacticism. Geisel's refusal to indoctrinate or shoehorn children into a particular stance with an ultimate moral serves as the second strength of using his works in the classroom, as they leave room for children to develop their own viewpoints. By refusing to indoctrinate children into a certain stance, Geisel avoids one of the major issues with children's literature: the hierarchy of power and authority between the adult author and the child reader. As Jack Zipes argues, the majority of children's books are not “children's literature by and for children in their behalf,” but rather present “a script coded by adults for the information and internalization of children” (1981, p. 19). While Geisel obviously was not a child writing books for children, his stories do speak to the real-world concerns of children, and privilege the world and the imagination of the child over that of the adult and the dominant culture. The Dr. Seuss texts provide a refreshing antidote, then, to the majority of children's stories which “reflect and support the television-dominated ideological environment that continues to swaddle them” (Zornado, 1997, p. 109).

Though the alternative viewpoints of the Dr. Seuss books offer a much-needed reprieve from the didacticism of children's literature, his stories are not entirely absent of morals – Geisel once commented that six out of his forty-two books have explicit morals (Macdonald, 1988), but also added that he didn't believe kids felt inclined to accept the morals, since they “gag at having

morals crammed down their throats” (Jennings, 1965). Geisel’s discomfort with positing explicit morals to children manifests itself in the way that he does present the morals of his stories; he tends to ask questions instead of provide statements, provide scenarios without any foregone conclusions, and favor shades of gray or ambiguity over simplistic binaries. As Philip Nel argues, the books “offer not ‘amens’ but questions to provoke the reader” (1999, p. 151). The refusal to impose morals on children also expands the educational possibilities for the Dr. Seuss texts because they not only provide space for diverse interpretations and viewpoints, but also make the books accessible and useful for students of all ages. Geisel claimed late in his career that he wrote for “people,” not children (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 283), and his books reflect this mentality – even college-aged students exposed to the Seuss books in a college course did not view them as being too simplistic for their purposes (Juchartz, 2004, p. 337). By dealing directly with social issues while leaving room for children to develop their own opinions, the Dr. Seuss books distinguish themselves from other works of children’s literature in terms of their respect for the reader as an individual capable of determining her own viewpoint.

A third and closely-related reason why the Dr. Seuss books represent quality children’s literature is their consistent encouragement of critical thinking. As discussed during the chapter on Geisel’s writing philosophy, the Dr. Seuss books use nonsense as a mechanism for invoking readers to develop critical consciousness of the world around them, and attempt to “shake [the] audience out of their habits of thought and cause them to rethink their assumptions” (Nel, 1999, p. 151). Geisel felt that writing for children was about “satirizing the mores and habits of the world,” and raising children’s awareness of the flaws in the dominant culture, rather than providing unchallenged socialization into the culture (Nel, 2003, p. 164). The reader of a Dr. Seuss book, then, is not a passive being taking in information, but rather an active participant

developing critical consciousness of the world around him. In almost of the Dr. Seuss stories, children are encouraged to both hone and hold onto their imaginations as a source of empowerment; often, the imagination is presented as in direct opposition to the world of adults, which gives many of the stories a potent “antiestablishment moral” (Lurie, 2003, p. 95). Yet, though the Dr. Seuss texts deal with and encourage critical thinking serious, real-life issues, his stories are not meant to shock or terrify children, but rather to empower them as individuals capable of eradicating the ills of society. Geisel acts towards his readers as the mayor of the Whos does toward the young shirker in *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), urging them to use the power of their voices to serve the greater good: “We’ve GOT to make noises in greater amounts!/ So, open your mouth, lad! For every voice counts!” The Dr. Seuss texts, then, not only encourage readers to think critically about social issues, but also foster a sense of hope and possibility about their abilities to spur change.

Finally, the vast majority of the Dr. Seuss books serve as powerful tools for social justice due to their lack of racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes. While critics such as Alison Lurie (2003) argue that girls in the Dr. Seuss texts seem to play “silent secondary roles” while “small boy[s] or male animal[s] serve as the heroes and main characters of the tales (p. 98), the majority of his characters do tend to defy gender stereotypes. Geisel defended himself against outcries about the treatment of girls in his texts by emphasizing the fact that his characters tend to be genderless animals; “If she can identify their [the animals] sex, I’ll remember her in my will,” Geisel once quipped in response to an angry letter (Nel, 2003, p. 105). Other scholars have also noted that while many of the characters in the Dr. Seuss stories are male, the books present “a variety of masculinities,” particularly in the message books, and thus help to debunk and complicate the cultural norms surrounding masculinity (Nel, 2003, p. 112). In many of his books,

such as his most popular work, *Green Eggs and Ham*, Geisel does not use gendered pronouns to describe his characters, a move which suggests that the gender of the protagonist has no influence on the course of the story (Wolf, 1995). In terms of racial or ethnic stereotyping, while his political cartoons were occasionally filled with stereotyped images, Geisel's books for children feature very few incidents of stereotyping. In fact, one literacy program geared towards minority children used the Dr. Seuss stories as the basis of their program specifically because "the characters are asexual and free of ethnicity" (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 278). Thus, the Dr. Seuss books encourage and invite children of all genders, races, or ethnicities to think critically about the world around them without indoctrinating them into a particular, culturally-sanctioned ideology.

The results of the Seuss v. pseudo-Seuss study further support the claim that the Dr. Seuss stories represent quality literature; not only do they center around real-world, complex issues, but the language use in the books seems to enhance how well students comprehend the messages and themes of these texts. That such wide disparities in performance on higher-order comprehension tasks emerged between students in the authentic Seuss condition and students exposed to the pseudo-Seuss text underscores the fact that children gain a deeper understanding of these issues when they are presented in a linguistically-playful way than when the story is written in more standard prose. The findings of the study reveal that even advanced ideas can be conveyed to children with the right medium and style of expression – and suggest that this right stylistic mode might be the type of entertaining verbal play Geisel uses in his stories. While the study was not designed to identify any specific features of the language use in the Dr. Seuss books that influence comprehension, further research into the effects of particular literary devices on children's narrative comprehension could help to identify what linguistic features aid

comprehension. Pinning down these specific features could have implications for identifying effective, quality children's literature and change the way we think about teaching narrative comprehension and also alter expectations about just what children are capable of comprehending. The results of the present study begin this work, by suggesting that something about the Seuss-ian use of language seems to not only aid comprehension of complex themes and ideas, but also allows that learning to happen in the context of an entertaining story.

Regardless of the other merits of the Dr. Seuss books, however, the simple fact that they make reading fun and engaging makes these stories deserving of a place in the classroom. Though Geisel's stories deal with serious, real-life issues, they always do so in a way that is entertaining and enjoyable – in fact, Geisel believed that kids learn more from books when they genuinely take pleasure in the story and the reading experience (Cohen, 2004). The whimsical stories and linguistic play in the Dr. Seuss texts delight readers of all ages and demonstrate the power of limitless imagination and mastery of language. Even students who don't enjoy reading often find the world of the Dr. Seuss books irresistible, and students who have long "outgrown picture books cling to him in unashamed joy" (Renthal, 1960, p. 38). Though Geisel hoped to challenge his readers to rethink their assumptions about the dominant culture, he was also simply content to make kids laugh at things that are funny, as he believed that "[c]hildhood is the one time in an average person's life when he can laugh just for the straight fun of laughing" (Jennings, 1965). Thus, I believe that the Dr. Seuss books prove so uniquely effective at delighting young readers because they provide the humor and zaniness that children love through Geisel's unconventional use of language, while also telling stories that speak to children's genuine concerns and observations about the world around them.

Taken together, the components of this project have taken steps to prove that the Dr.

Seuss books deserve to be more widely recognized for their literary merit and more frequently viewed by educators as powerful opportunities for teaching about social justice in the classroom. Though his books often seem simplistic and juvenile, this investigation has revealed that this perception of The Dr. Seuss canon fails to take into account the meticulous writing process and unorthodox philosophy underlying Geisel's final products. John Cech (1987) argues that rather than critiquing subversive children's books for their seemingly-questionable morality or suitability, we should instead look for what value they can offer to young readers:

“In the end, what we should ask of these works is not whether they satisfy some uncertain moral of theoretical criteria of appropriateness, and not whether they are really picture books for young children or picture books for adults masquerading as children's books. Rather, what we may well ask ourselves is whether or not these books matter, or will matter, to our own lives and our children's (Cech 2006).

The enduring popularity of the Dr. Seuss books suggests that these stories *do* matter and will continue to matter to new generations of children. Rather than shunning these important books in classrooms and libraries or only celebrating them once a year, educators should capitalize on the opportunities these stories afford for making contemporary issues accessible and empowering children to look critically at the world around them – after all, something about Geisel's language use seems to make these messages particularly salient in his works. Recognizing the merit of the Dr. Seuss canon would also support one of the Geisel's hopes for his work: that his stuff “become useful, not just amusing” (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 286). “You'll miss the best things if you keep your eyes shut,” the wise Cat in the Hat warns in *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*; this investigation demonstrates that appearances can be deceiving and that we'll miss out on the value of the Dr. Seuss books if we continue to read them with our eyes shut.

Appendix One: Catalog of Literary Devices in Dr. Seuss

A. Syntactical Devices: Repetition of Words

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel liberally uses repetition of words and phrases; Morgan and Morgan rightfully claim that “repetition [serves as] a vital tool in the rhythm of the books” (Morgan & Morgan, 2006, p. 87). The following catalogue of literacy devices will demonstrate the various ways that the Dr. Seuss books use repetition and what function it serves within the story.⁸ Interestingly, Geisel varies his use of repetition so greatly throughout his stories that he uses the same literary devices in very different ways and for a myriad of purposes.

⁸ All literary device definitions come from The Forest of Rhetoric, a web dictionary of literacy terms created and maintained by Dr. Gideon Burton of Brigham Young University. <<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>>

A. Anadiplosis: The repetition of the last word (or phrase) from the previous line, clause, or sentence at the beginning of the next.

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“Now Now! Have no fear. /
Have no fear!” said the Cat.”
- *The Cat in the Hat*

The Cat’s repetition of the phrase “have no fear” reassures Sally and her brother that he will not cause any trouble during his visit to their home. As their adult-like goldfish has just reminded the children that the Cat should not be there, this statement also carries a defiant tone, encouraging the children to resist what might be considered the “right” thing to do.



“And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.”
- *Yertle the Turtle*

The repetition of “happy” at the beginning of *Yertle the Turtle* underscores the bliss that all of the turtles experience in their pond. This reiteration, however, also signals that this happiness may soon come into question and may be too transient to last.



“We took a look.
We saw a Nook.
On his head
he had a hook.
On his hook
he had a book.
On his book
was “How to Cook.”
- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

In this passage from *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, Geisel uses anadiplosis not for emphasis, as seen in the *The Cat in the Hat* and the *Yertle the Turtle* examples, but to increase the pace of his verse while simultaneously accruing overlapping details as he rapidly descends up from the Nook’s head.



A. Anadiplosis (con'd)

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“Oh, the THINKS
you can think up
if only you try!

If you try
you can think up
a GUFF going by.”
- *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!*

In this example, the anadiplosis highlights the theme of the entire story: the possibilities of the imagination when one tries to utilize it. By repeating the phrase “if you try,” Geisel provides examples of some of the kinds of creations kids can dream up if they only use their imaginations. In fact, this repetition of “if you try” sets off the litany of strange “thinks” that Geisel presents throughout the whole of the story.



Summary: Anadiplosis appears in the Dr. Seuss stories in order to reiterate specific points, to provide emphasis, and to speed up the pace of the verse by having the sentences overlap and run into each other.

B. Anaphora: Repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines.

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“He should not be here.
He should not be about.
He should not be here
When your mother is out!”
-*The Cat in the Hat*

The goldfish’s repetition of “he should not be” at the beginning of these three successive lines underscores the parental disapproval of the Cat. If Sally and her brother (and the reader) want to have an adventure with the Cat, this use of anaphora emphasizes that they risk getting in trouble.



“But, as Yertle the Turtle King, lifted his hand
And started to order and give the command,
That plain little turtle below in the stack,
That plain little turtle whose name was just Mack
Decided he’d taken enough. And he had.
And that plain little lad got a little bit mad
And that plain little Mack did a plain little thing.
He burped!
And his burp shook the throne of the king!”
-*Yertle the Turtle*

The repetition of “that plain little lad” at the beginning of four lines in this stanza emphasizes that Mack possesses no extraordinary qualities and isn’t a superhero. This reiteration is important in *Yertle the Turtle*, an allegory about Hitler and other dictators’ powerful reigns, because it highlights that anyone, no matter how ordinary or how small, can spur dramatic change.



“The more that you read,
the more things you will know.
The more that you learn,
the more places you’ll go.”
- *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

The use of anaphora in the above passage underscores the idea that the benefits of reading accrue over time and build upon on another. The message the reader takes away from this stanza is that reading exposes them to “more,” and therefore, serves as a worthwhile endeavor.



B. Anaphora (con'd)

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.
I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads.”
- *The Lorax*

The repetition of “I biggered” at the beginning of these four brief sentences emphasizes the greed of the Once-ler, as well as his utter lack of concern about the impacts his actions have on the environment. The sparseness of the line also increases the pace of the verse and shows that this bigger-ing happened very rapidly, and that things at his Thneed factory quickly got out of control.



Summary: Geisel uses anaphora in the Dr. Seuss stories to highlight specific attributes, themes, or occurrences. Though used primarily for emphasis, the repetition can also help to propel the reader through the verse at a more rapid rate.

C. Antanaclasis: The repetition of a word or phrase whose meaning changes in the second instance.

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“He got stuck only once, for a moment or two.
Then he stuck his head out of the fireplace flue.”
-How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

In the passage above, Geisel repeats the word stuck, but draws on both definitions of the word to describe what happens to the Grinch as he slides down his first chimney. In the first instance, “stuck” refers to the Grinch getting physically stuck inside the chimney, while in the second, “stuck” refers to the Grinch poking his head out of the chimney to take a look around the Who house. In this example, both meanings involve the word “stuck” being used as a verb.



“But I’ve bought a big bat.
I’m all ready, you see.
Now my troubles are going
To have troubles with *me!*”
- I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew

Geisel uses “troubles” as a noun in two different ways in the above passage. In the first, “troubles” refers to a collection of problems and difficulties the protagonist has experienced throughout the story, while in the second, “troubles” refers to the threat the protagonist now poses to his troubles as a result of obtaining a way to defeat them.



“And you’re so, *so*, *So* lucky
you’re not a left sock
left behind by mistake
in the Kaverns of Krock!”
- Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?

In this passage, Geisel uses two meanings of the word “left” to describe a situation that the reader should feel lucky not to occupy. The first “left” uses the word as an adjective, to describe that the sock is for the left foot. The second instance uses “left” as a verb to indicate that someone has lost or abandoned this sock. This example illustrates that antanaclasis can be used to repeat a word, even when the words are two completely different parts of speech.



Antanaclasis (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations

“So...

If you wish to wish a wish.”

- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

The above example of antanaclasis, from *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, shows the playful potential of antanaclasis. This passage requires the reader to really think about what parts of speech each of the words represent in order to comprehend the line. The first “wish” serves as an verb meaning to desire to do something, the second “wish” as a verb meaning to hope or to actively wish, and the third “wish” as a noun meaning the actual thing for which one hoped. The close proximity of the different forms of “wish” provides linguistic wordplay.



Summary: Antanaclasis allows Geisel to use the sound continuity of repetition while providing ample opportunity for wordplay through the use of the multiple definitions of words.

D. Antimetabole: Repetition of (identical) words, in successive clauses, in reverse grammatical order.

Chiasmus: Repetition of ideas in inverted order. Repetition of grammatical structures in inverted order⁹

Dr. Seuss examples with explanations:

“Think! Think and wonder. Wonder and think.”
- *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*

The above antimetabole underscores the main theme of *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*, that using the imagination can be a rich and rewarding experience. The inversion of the words think and wonder emphasizes that there’s no specific order or correct way to think, wonder, and use the imagination.



“From there to here,
from here to there.
Funny things
are everywhere.”
- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

The inversion of there and here in this antimetabole emphasizes the narrator’s claim that funny things can be found “everywhere.” Whether the reader looks here or there, Geisel claims, they will be able to find something humorous.



“Whether this one was that one...or that one was this one.
Or which one was what one...or what one was who.”
- *The Sneetches*

The grammatical inversions in the above passage from *The Sneetches* verbally illustrates just how jumbled up and confused the Sneetches are as they race through Sylvester McMonkey McBean’s machines and have stars repeatedly put on and removed. The reader has to pause and consider what the passage is actually saying, an action that mirrors the difficulties the Sneetches have in discerning what type of Sneetch those around them actually are and used to be.



⁹ Antimetabole and chiasmus are not exactly the same, as antimetabole requires the inversion of identical words. However, the two devices are very similar and provide essentially the same effect.

Antimetabole & Chiasmus (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations

“I meant what I said and I said what I meant.”

-*Horton Hatches the Egg*

The above antimetabole occurs repeatedly throughout *Horton Hatches the Egg*. The inversion of the phrasing emphasizes the sincerity with which Horton made his promise to Mayzie that he would watch her egg and also displays his commitment to keeping that promise. The phrasing also presents the possibility that one might not always mean what one says, though the narrator makes it clear that this is not true in Horton's case.



“Fritz needs Fred and Fred needs Fritz.

Fritz feeds Fred and Fred feeds Fritz.

Fred feeds Fritz with ritzy Fred Food.

Fritz feeds Fred with ritzy Fritz Food.”

- *Oh Say Can You Say?*

The above passage appears in *Oh Say Can You Say?*, a book of tongue twisters. The grammatical inversions in this passage then, serve the purpose of allowing for excessive repetition of certain sounds in a way that still makes sense grammatically. The two characters this passage describes are a man and his dog, so the inversions in this passage also reveal their interdependence.



Summary: Antimetabole and chiasmus are used in the Dr. Seuss books to emphasize key themes or claims made in a story, to mirror the contextual situation of the plot, and to provide the basis for linguistic tongue twisters.

E. Diacope: Repetition of a word with one or more between, usually to express deep feeling

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“I do not like
green eggs and ham.
I do not like them,
Sam-I-am.”

- *Green Eggs and Ham*

Since the story uses only fifty words, *Green Eggs and Ham* provides the quintessential example of the importance of repetition in the Dr. Seuss books. In this passage, the protagonist avers his disdain of the culinary oddity. As this phrase repeats throughout the story, the intensity of the hatred becomes more clearly defined and full of strong passion.



“There’s nothing, no, NOTHING, that’s higher than me!”

-*Yertle the Turtle*

Geisel emphasizes the significance of this nothing not only by capitalizing it in its second occurrence, but by repeating the word twice in the same sentence. At the height of his rule, Yertle believes there is nothing that could possibly be more powerful than him – this nothing underscores not only Yertle’s sense of superiority, but also invokes a sense of terror because of the dangerous degree of power that he seems to possess.



“Then he got an idea!

An awful idea!

THE GRINCH

GOT A WONDERFUL, AWFUL IDEA!”

- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

The above passage serves as an early climax in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* After describing his hatred of Christmas and desire to stop the whole thing from coming, this passage informs the reader that the Grinch has devised a wicked idea. The repetition of the phrase “awful idea” emphasizes the villainy inherent not only in the idea, but in the Grinch himself.



E. Diacope (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations

“Quite likely there’s two. Even three. Even four.

Quite likely...”

- *Horton Hears a Who!*

The use of diacope in the above statement emphasizes Horton’s convictions that there are Whos living on the speck he’s discovered. The repetition of the phrase “quite likely” also underscores the notion of possibility that pervades the story.



Summary: The Dr. Seuss books use diacope in order to articulate strong feelings, to reveal convictions and ideas held by characters, and to provide dramatic emphasis during key events in a story.

F. Epanalepsis: Repetition of the same word or clause after intervening matter. More strictly, repetition at the end of a line, phrase, or clause of the word or words that occurred at the beginning of the same line, phrase, or clause.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“There I was!
With more Poozers than I’d ever seen!
There I was!
With my shooter and only one bean!
There I was!”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

The above example of epanalepsis uses repetition of the phrase “There I was!” to situate the reader in the protagonist’s position. After reading the first “There I was!,” the reader discovers the perilous position in which the character finds himself. The “There I was!” that concludes the stanza amps up the danger and drama of the situation by reiterating that the protagonist finds himself in the midst of a potentially-hazardous scenario.



“Suppose, just suppose, you were poor Herbie Hart,
Who has taken his Throm-dim-bu-later apart!
He never will get it together, I’m sure.
He never will know if the Gick or the Goor
fits into the Skrux or the Snux or the Snoor.
Yes, Duckie, you’re lucky you’re not Herbie Hart
Who has taken his Throm-dim-bu-later apart.”
- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*

The story *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* follows a pattern throughout the book of describing people and places the reader should be glad not to be or to visit. In the above passage, the narrator introduces the character of Herbie Hart and then provides information about this individual, before reiterating the fact that the reader should be glad not be in Herbie’s shoes. The repetition of the same phrase at the beginning and end of this stanza helps to add emphasis and increase the readers’ relief that they haven’t taken apart a Throm-dim-bu-later.



Summary: The use of epanalepsis in the Dr. Seuss books provides circularity to stanzas or ideas and emphasizes key situations in which characters find themselves.

G. Epizeuxis: Repetition of words with no other between, for vehemence or emphasis

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“So all we could was to
Sit!
Sit!
Sit!
Sit!
And we did not like it.”
- *The Cat in the Hat*

This passage, from the opening of *The Cat in the Hat*, emphasizes the boredom Sally and her brother feel when their mother departs and leaves them home on their own. The repetition also illustrates the monotony of the situation in which they have been placed.



“And he sat
and he sat
and he sat
and he sat.”
-*Horton Hatches the Egg*

The repetition in the above passage highlights Horton’s commitment to sitting on Mayzie’s egg until it hatches. This use of epizeuxis also signals that time is elapsing and propels the plot forward.



“All that deep,
Deep, deep snow,
All that snow had to go.”
-*The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*

The use of epizeuxis in this passage from *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* emphasizes the banality of the task of shoveling to which Sally and her brother have been assigned. The repetition of “deep” also underscores that the children have no time for distractions because their task will take a considerable amount of time to complete.



G. Epizeuxis (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations

“And clover, by clover, by clover with care
He picked up and searched them and called, “Are you there?”
But clover, by clover, by clover he found
That the one that he sought for was just not around.”
-*Horton Hears a Who!*

The repetition of “clover” in this passage helps to convey the sheer number of clovers which Horton looks through in order to find the one on which he placed the speck that houses the Whos. The use of epizeuxis in this case also highlights the passage of time, as it linguistically reiterates that Horton spends a large portion of time dedicated to his quest.



“Bump!
Bump!
Bump!
Did you ever ride a Wump?
We have a Wump
With just one hump.”
- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

The repetition of the word “bump!” at the beginning of this passage serves to compel the reader’s interest in discovering on what kind of creature the characters are riding. Additionally, the use of epizeuxis underscores that travel on a Wump is anything but smooth, and as a result, very exciting.



“And *then!* Oh, the noise! Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise!”
That’s *one* thing he hated! The NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!”
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

The repetition of “Noise” in this passage emphasizes the sheer hatred that the Grinch has for Christmas morning in Who-ville. Geisel further underscores this abhorrence by first capitalizing the beginning letter of each “noise” and then capitalizing the entirety of the word.



Summary: Geisel’s uses epizeuxis in the Dr. Seuss stories to express strong emotion, signal the passing of time, and to attract the interest of the reader.

H. Mesodiplosis: Repetition of the same word or words in the middle of successive sentences

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand
And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command.
He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone.
And, using these turtles, he built a new throne.
He made each turtle stand on another one’s back.
And he piled them all up in a nine turtle stack.”
-Yertle the Turtle

The use of mesodiplosis in the above passage helps to anchor the lines in the middle, while also emphasizing the fact that even though Yertle is the ruler, he is still a turtle, just like the turtles that he rules over in the pond.



“One droopy-droop feather. That’s all that she had.
And, oh! That one feather made Gertrude so sad.”
-Gertrude McFuzz

The repetition of the word “feather” in this passage highlights Gertrude’s frustration with the fact that she possesses only a singular feather by ensuring that the reader’s attention is drawn to that particular word, as it connects the two lines together.



Summary: Mesodiplosis is used in the Dr. Seuss books to connect lines through the use of repetition and to emphasize key terms or ideas.

I. Polypotton: Repeating a word, but in a different form. Using a cognate of a given word in close proximity.

Examples of Polypotton abound in the Dr. Seuss book as it is one of Geisel's most frequently used devices. Polypotton is literally a play on words; to employ it, one begins with a set root word and then adds various prefixes and suffixes in order to change the word's meaning. As Evelyn Schroth remarks, Geisel uses the device "to turn and tease language in order to approximate the turnings and twistings of thought which the form provides" (Schroth 749).



Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

"And with great skillful skill and great speedy speed,
I took the soft tuft. And I knitted a Thneed."
-*The Lorax*

In the use of polypotton above, Geisel manipulates the roots "skill" and "speed" to provide a pattern where an adjective "skillful" precedes a noun of the same root "skill." In so doing, he explores the "various grammatical uses of a word" and shows that even though words look and sound similar, they can function as completely different parts of speech (MacDonald 122).



"We have two ducks. One blue. One black.
And when our blue duck goes "Quack-quack."
Our black duck quickly quack-quacks back.
The quacks blue quacks make him quite a quacker
but black is a quicker quacker-backer."
- *Oh Say Can You Say*

The use of polypotton in this example helps to provide sensible repetition for the tongue twister. The word "quack" appears many times, yet with the addition and alteration of suffixes, the stanza maintains linguistic sense. In this example, "quack-quack" serves a dialogic phrase, "quack-quacks" as a verb, "quacks" as both a noun and a verb, "quacker" as a noun, and "quacker-backer" as a noun. The multiple uses of "quack" help increase the number of times that the word – and most significantly in the case of a tongue twister, the sound – can logically appear in the stanza.



I. Polyptoton (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“There are so many THINKS
that a Thinker can think!”
-Oh the Thinks You Can Think!

In this brief passage, three different uses of the word “think” appear; first, “THINKS” functions as a noun meaning thoughts, a “Thinker” as a title and a noun, and “think” as a verb. That the words appear in close proximity allows for the word “think” to become particularly salient.



“Think!
Think a ship.
Think up a long trip.
Go visit the Vipper,
the Vipper of Vipp.”
-Oh the Thinks You Can Think

The above example of polyptoton demonstrates that Geisel doesn’t employ this device exclusively on real words, but also on his neologisms. What is significant about this passage, however, is that it reveals Geisel’s propensity to adhere to the standard rules of English, even when using nonsense words. In other words, he uses traditional English suffixes on his word “Vipp,” which allows the reader to discern which part of speech each manipulation of “Vipp” functions as. A “Vipper” is a person or a title and the phrase “Vipper of Vipp,” with its capitalization of “Vipp” suggests that the person serves that role in a location called “Vipp.”



Summary: Polyptoton appears frequently in the Dr. Seuss books. It provides linguistic wordplay while demonstrating that changing just a few letters in a word can alter its meaning completely. It allows for repetition of words without a stanza veering into an indecipherable jumble of sound.

J. Symploce: The combination of anaphora and epistrophe: beginning a series of lines, clauses, or sentences with the same word or phrase while simultaneously repeating a different word or phrase at the end of the each element in this series

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Pete Briggs pats pigs.
Brigg pats pink pigs.
Briggs pats big pigs.”
- *Oh Say Can You Say?*

The use of symploce in the above passage from *Oh Say Can You Say?* allows for a build-up of similar sounds to occur in this tongue-twister. That so many of the sounds repeat several times makes pronouncing the words correctly very difficult. The device also neatly links all of the lines together. Furthermore, that so many of the words repeat increases the pace with which one reads the lines.



Summary: Symploce provides a sense of symmetry to successive lines and allows for repetition that alters just slightly from line to line. The device provides structure for tongue twisters by offering a structure for the repetition of similar sounds.

K. Synonymia: In general, the use of several synonyms together to amplify or explain a given subject or term. A kind of repetition that adds emotional force or intellectual clarity.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“But that bird couldn’t fly! Couldn’t run! Couldn’t walk!”

- *Gertrude McFuzz*

In above passage from the short Seuss work *Gertrude McFuzz*, Geisel emphasizes that after growing so many feathers, Gertrude finds herself unable to move in any fashion. The use of “fly,” “run,” and “walk,” all words for different types of movement, builds drama into the passage by amplifying the problematic nature of the situation in which Gertrude finds herself and also emphasizing the negative consequences that result from her vanity.



“And nothing, not anything, ever went wrong.”

- *I Had Trouble in Solla Sollew*

The use of “not anything” immediately after the word “nothing” in the above passage serves as a way to underscore the idyllic bliss that the city of Solla Sollew can offer if only one can get there. Synonymia provides a way to repeat an idea without having to use the same word twice in the same passage.



“It’s high time that you knew
of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do.”

- *The Butter Battle Book*

The following passage appears in the very beginning of *The Butter Battle Book*, when the grandfather takes his grandson out to see the wall that divides the Yooks and the Zooks. Describing the thing the Zooks do as “terribly horrible” adds extra emphasis to the notion that the Zooks commit an egregious felony with their actions. The use of synonymia is particularly apt in this situation, as it is this “terribly horrible thing”—that the Zooks butter their toast the opposite way of the Yooks—that spurs the entire arms race.



K. Synonymia (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Make every *Who* holler! Make every *Who* shout!
Make every *Who* scream!”
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

In this passage, Horton desperately attempts to get the Whos to make a loud noise so that his fellow creatures will realize that the Whos exist and not destroy the clover. The use of anaphora in this passage makes the synonyms stand out, as they are the only words that alter from line to line. The synonyms “holler,” “shout,” and “scream” build upon one another and allow the lines themselves to mirror the urgency and intensity of the situation Horton and the Whos occupy.



Summary: Synonymia provides a way for an idea to be repeated in a passage without having to repeat the words verbatim in order to add emphasis. The device can add emotional drama to a situation or highlight a specific idea, inclination, or feeling.

L. Traductio: Repeating the same word variously throughout a sentence or thought

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“The glorious moment of victory is near!
And the glorious general led the advance.
With a glorious swish of his sword and his lance.
And a glorious clank of his tin-plated pants.”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

In the above passage, the use of traductio causes the emphasis of the lines to fall on the repeated word “glorious.” The device also provides linguistic wordplay, as the repetition of the adjective allows the reader to see that many different things can be described by the same word. Additionally, the repetition of “glorious” allows the reader to share in the awe felt by the protagonist who finds himself in this situation.



“ ‘Signed
Bus Line President Horace P. Sweet.’
So I went on by feet, thanks to Horace P. Sweet.
And that Horace P. Sweet almost ruined my feet.”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

In this passage, also from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, the use of traductio produces a different effect than the first example. Not only does this passage provide linguistic wordplay, but it also makes the frustration and disdain the protagonist feels for Horace P. Sweet palpable. On his way to Solla Sollew, the protagonist experiences set-back after set-back, and the use of traductio in this stanza emphasizes his aggravation.



“Schlopp. Schlopp. Beautiful schlopp.
Beautiful schlopp
with a cherry on top.”
- *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*

As opposed to the two examples from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, which each served distinct purposes, this passage from *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!* seems to be all about sound and wordplay. Schlopp is one of Geisel’s nonsense words, and the repetition of the word lets the reader get familiar with the sound of the word while also giving them an opportunity to read or say the word several times simply because it is fun to do so.



L. Traductio (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Some people are much more...

Oh, ever so much more...

Oh, muchly, much-much more

unlucky than you!”

- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*

The use of traductio in this passage helps to underscore the lesson that the old man in *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* hopes to instill in the young protagonist. This passage occurs near the end of the story, after the old man has provided a litany of places and people the protagonist (and the reader) should be happy they are not, and therefore, serves as the concluding remark to his argument. Repeating the word “much” so many times in the stanza emphasizes the idea that the protagonist should feel happy with his own situation, as he really is quite luckier than many people.



Summary: The use of traductio in the Dr. Seuss books allows Geisel to repeat particular words or sounds for emphasis; it can be used in order to highlight strong emotions, underscore key ideas, or simply to provide a bit of linguistic fun.

Syntactical Devices: Repetition of Sounds

As a writer concerned with sound, Geisel frequently uses the literary devices of alliteration, assonance, and consonance to provide a sense of symmetry in sound, while also writing lines and stanzas that tickle the tongue. Perhaps more than any other set of literary devices, it is these strategies for repetition of sound that occur most often in the Dr. Seuss books. Whether repeating sounds in English or in his nonsense words, Geisel uses these devices to add excitement and verbal interest to his poetry.

A. Alliteration: Repetition of the same letter or sound within nearby words. Most often, repeated initial consonants.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“THEY’VE INVENTED
THE BITSY
BIG BOY BOOMEROO!”
- *The Butter Battle Book*

The alliteration in “Bitsy Big Boy Boomeroo” draws emphasis to the name of this weapon, the largest and most powerful one devised in *The Butter Battle Book*.



“Just doodle around, crooning very sad tunes
About peppermint, peanuts and pebbles and prunes
About paint pots, and polka dots, pin heads and pigs.”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

The use of alliteration in this list anchors and provides cohesion to the items catalogued, allowing Geisel to include obscure and outlandish items without making the list seem disjointed or erratic.



“The Perilous Poozer of Pompelmoose Pass.”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

The implementation of alliteration in this individual’s title helps to hold the phrase together as the words Geisel uses become increasingly more bizarre and out of the ordinary.



“I’ll bring back a Gusset, a Gherkin, a Gasket
And also a Gootch from the wilds of Nantasket.”
- *If I Ran the Zoo*

The alliteration in the names of these Seuss-ian creatures provides a sense of connection between the creatures and helps the reader to picture them as similar or somehow related to one another.



A. Alliteration (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“I was downright despondent, disturbed, and depressed.”
- *The Butter Battle Book*

The coupling of alliteration with the use of synonymia in this passage enhances the emotional emphasis that the synonyms provide. By using the words “despondent, disturbed, and depressed” in such close proximity, these synonyms become linked by their similar initial sounds, as well as their definitions, an effect that underscores the intensity of the protagonist’s feelings.



Summary: Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses alliteration as a way to play with the sounds of words. Though he sometimes uses the device to create tongue twisters, more often than not, the device is used to add a sense of repetition and rhythm to his poetry. Moreover, knowing that the words will begin with the same initial sound provides another scaffold for early readers.

B. Assonance: Repetition of similar vowel sounds, preceded and followed by different consonants, in the stressed syllables of adjacent words.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“And under the trees, I saw Brown Bar-ba-loots
frisking about in their Bar-ba-loot suits
as they played in the shade and ate Truffula fruits.”
- *The Lorax*

In the above passage from *The Lorax*, Geisel not only repeats the word “Bar-ba-loot,” but also connects it to the words that follow it – “suits” and “fruits.” The assonance in the lines provides a sense of unity to the stanza as it describes these fictional animals.



“My New Zoo, McGrew Zoo, will make people talk.
My New Zoo, McGrew Zoo, will people gawk.”
- *If I Ran the Zoo*

The repetition of the vowel sounds in “new,” “zoo,” and “McGrew” provides further cohesion between these two lines beyond the anaphora that already connects their beginnings. As this example shows, assonance and other devices of sound repetition can be, and are frequently, coupled with other literary devices in order to enhance their linguistic effects.



“You can read about trees...
...and bees...
and knees.
And knees on trees!
And bees on threes!”
- *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

As Geisel introduces the three words “trees,” “bees,” and “knees” in this passage, the similar vowel sounds link them all together, despite the fact that these words may seem to have little in common. With these connections established, when Geisel begins making strange combinations of these words, the sounds still hold the words together, despite their nonsensical arrangements.



B. Assonance (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

But
we know a man
called Mr. Gump
Mr. Gump has a seven hump Wump.
So...
if you like to go Bump! Bump!
just jump on the hump of the Wump of Gump.
- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

In this tongue-twister from *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, Geisel uses assonance to provide the similar sounds that make it difficult to pronounce this stanza accurately. Additionally, that the words are all linked in sound helps to tie the neologisms “wump” and “Gump” to the rest of the words that young readers would recognize.



“Those yekkos love echoes, and this is their motto:
‘For best Yekko echoes, try Gekko, our grotto!’”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

The above passage contains two sets of rhyming words – “yekkos,” “echoes,” and “Gekko,” and “motto” and “grotto.” These two different word sets are held together by the common “o” vowel sound that occurs in each of these words, providing a multi-directional sense of wordplay.



Summary: The use of assonance in the Dr. Seuss books allows for certain words, phrases, and stanzas to cohere in terms of sound. This proves especially effective when Geisel includes zany words, as the similar sounds can aid pronunciation and provide a sense of connection that helps to ground the wacky words and maintain logical sense. Additionally, when coupled with other literary devices, assonance can help to enhance the effects of these devices.

C. Consonance: The repetition of consonants in words stressed in the same place (but whose vowels differ). Also, a kind of inverted alliteration, in which final consonants, rather than initial or medial ones, repeat in nearby words.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Those horns carry all that he needs on a trip:
A thread and a needle for mending his socks,
His tooth brush,
A cup,
And two three-handed clocks.
And his velvet umbrella,
His vegetable chopper
And also his gold-played popping-corn popper
And a grasshopper cage for his favorite grass hopper,”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

In the above example, from *On Beyond Zebra!*, the repetition of the “pp” sounds helps to hold this stanza together at its conclusion. As the litany of items the Spazzim carries with him goes on, the items get more and more peculiar and the unification of consonant sounds helps to link these seemingly-unconnected items to one another.



“Those boys in the Back Room sure knew how to putter!
They made me a thing called the Utterly Sputter
and I jumped abroad with my heart all aflutter.”
- *The Butter Battle Book*

The repetition of the double “tt” sound at the conclusion of each of these lines helps tie the stanza together linguistically. As this example shows, consonance, as well as assonance, frequently occurs at the end of lines, as these two devices can provide metric rhymes.



“I tossed and I flipped and I flopped and I flepped.”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

The double “pp” sound in the middle of “flipped,” “flopped,” and “flepped” help to join these words together. That this “pp” sound remains constant allows Geisel to insert the nonsense word “flepped” into the list without it seeming out of place or meaningless.



C. Consonance (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“And speaking of birds, there’s the Russian Palooski
Whose headski is redski and belly is blueski.
I’ll get one of them for my Zooski McGrewski.”
- *If I Ran the Zoo*

This final example of consonance, drawn from *If I Ran the Zoo*, shows Geisel’s propensity for using literary devices for his nonsense words as well as more standard words. In this passage, Geisel tacks the suffix “ski” onto the ends of standard words in order to create nonsensical words that are all linked in sound. This has the effect of making ordinary words seem slightly more odd and intriguing, while also helping to maintain unity and sense in the stanza.



Summary: Consonance appears frequently in the Dr. Seuss books and helps to provide a sense of cohesion in sound for lines and stanzas. When used with nonsense words or in odd lists, it can prevent the words from seeming unrelated to one another and also help to maintain logic and give meaning to words by providing a consistent sound context.

Syntactical Devices: Devices of Meter

While Geisel writes in a steady, anapestic tetrameter throughout his works, he employs a number of different strategies for making his lines read faster or slower. By adding or omitting conjunctions and breaking his lines in the middle of a thought, Geisel controls the pace at which his readers navigate his poetry. Thus, though the poetry in the Dr. Seuss books follows a consistent “bump-biddy-bump meter,” the rate at which the anapests are read can be accelerated or decelerated through simple linguistic manipulation (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 92).

A. Aphaeresis: The omission of a syllable or letter at the beginning of a word.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Whose nose is so high that ‘most nobody pats it.”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

While dropping the “al” from “almost” in the above passage may seem like a minor change, the omission of these beginning letters increases the pace of the meter. If the “al” were included, then “almost” would take two beats, rather than the one that “most” does. Additionally, if the “al” were included, it would alter the metrical emphasis of the line by throwing off the number of stressed and unstressed syllables.



“Now all that was left ‘neath the bad-smelling sky
was my big empty factory...
the Lorax...
and I.”
- *The Lorax*

Like the example from *On Beyond Zebra!*, the omission of the “be” from “beneath” helps to accelerate the pace of the meter by eliminating a syllable from the line. This use of aphaeresis helps to set the first line of this stanza apart from the three that follow it; while the first line reads quickly, the shortened length of the other three lines slows the pace, especially with their use of ellipses.



Summary: The use of aphaeresis in Geisel’s poetry speeds up the meter by dropping syllables and therefore, extra beats, from words, meaning that the reader gets to the end of the line sooner than they would otherwise.

B. Asyndeton: The omission of conjunctions between clauses, often resulting in a hurried rhythm or vehement effect

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“It’s strange! It’s amazing! It’s wonderful! New!”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

This passage from *Horton Hatches the Egg* illustrates how asyndeton accelerates the pace of the line. The omission of conjunctions makes the line read much faster than if Geisel had written “It’s strange *and* it’s amazing *and* it’s wonderful *and* new!” In this example, the pace increases right to the end of the line, with even the “it’s” being omitted in the final part of the line.



“Pop guns! And bicycles! Roller skates! Drums!
Checkerboards! Tricycles! Popcorn! And plums!”
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

The manipulation of conjunctions in this example shows how Geisel possesses control over the pace of his lines. He uses “and” only once in each line in order to even out the number of syllables in matching places in the lines and otherwise lets the pace run rapidly throughout the list. The lack of conjunctions and quick pace also highlights the excitement the Grinch feels as he steals toys from the Whos.



“Off again! On again! In again! Out again!”
- *The Sneetches*

Like the other examples, the absence of conjunctions in this passage from *The Sneetches* helps to increase the pace at which the reader navigates the line. The rapid pace and quick succession of ideas also provides a verbal mirror for the confusion the Sneetches experience as they run in and out of McBean’s machines.



Summary: The use of asyndeton in the Dr. Seuss books provides a way for Geisel to accelerate the pace of his lines. Using this device can also verbally emphasize the strong emotions that characters feel at different points in time.

C. Enjambment: As opposed to an end-stopped line enjambment occurs when a thought or line continues onto the next.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“...And they sent him home
Happy
One hundred percent!”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

The enjambment in this example from *Horton Hatches the Egg* works to build up the reader’s suspense at the conclusion of the poem. Rather than merely saying how Horton felt after being released from the circus in a single line, Geisel propels the reader into the next by putting “happy” on its own line. Additionally, this maneuver also puts the emphasis of the line on the word “happy.”



“And that handy machine
Working very precisely
Removed all the stars from their tummies quite nicely”
- *The Sneetches*

In this instance of enjambment, breaking the lines up works to slow down the pace of the meter by stretching the content of one idea out over multiple lines. In this way, the lines mirror the time passing as the Sneetches enter the Star-off machine and also help to build the reader’s curiosity about whether or not the machine will work.



“Then carefully,
Tenderly,
Gently he crept
Up the trunk to the nest where the little egg slept.”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

The use of enjambment in this stanza helps to slow down the pace of the line, and also enhances the linguistic effect of the synonymia. The slow pace of the stanza as a single idea spreads out to multiple lines helps to mirror the care Horton takes in climbing up to sit on Mayzie’s nest. The enjambment also urges the reader to continue reading by carrying her directly into the next line.



Summary: The use of enjambment in the Dr. Seuss books tends to slow the pace of the lines by spreading out over several lines an idea that could be contained in a single line. Enjambment can mirror the actions of a character and often builds suspense.

D. Polysyndeton: Employing many conjunctions between clauses, often slowing the tempo or rhythm

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“I’m tired and I’m bored
And I’ve kinks in my leg.”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

As opposed to asyndeton, which accelerates the pace of lines, polysyndeton slows down the lines by including more conjunctions than are actually necessary. In this example from *Horton Hatches the Egg*, the slower pace of the line due to the multiple appearances of “and” helps to linguistically emphasize the unpleasantness of Horton’s experience sitting on the egg.



“Way back in the days when the grass was still green
and the pond was still wet
and the clouds were still clean
and the song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space...”
- *The Lorax*

In this passage from *The Lorax*, Geisel places the word “and” between each component of this list, which reduces the speed of the line. While Geisel already emphasizes each item of the list by putting them each on their own line, the slower pace of the line makes the reader actually consider the harm that the Once-ler has caused, rather than merely rushing through the list.



“But, as Yertle the Turtle King, lifted his hand
And started to order and give the command,
That plain little turtle below in the stack,
That plain little turtle whose name was just Mack
Decided he’d taken enough. And he had.
And that plain little lad got a little bit mad
And that plain little Mack did a plain little thing.
He burped!
And his burp shook the throne of the king!”
- *Yertle the Turtle*

The use of polysyndeton in this example from *Yertle the Turtle* enhances the use of anaphora by slowing the pace of the lines and therefore, placing more emphasis on each word. Rather than making the burp seem like a rapidly-concocted action, the use of multiple conjunctions emphasizes the premeditation Mack put into this action.



D. Polysyndeton (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“And it klonked. And it bonked. And it jerked. And it berked”
- *Sneetches*

The use of polysyndeton in this passage from *The Sneetches* slows down the pace of the line. The machine would seem to be working far more rapidly and be far less suspenseful if the line read “And it klonked, bonked, jerked, and berked.” By employing so many conjunctions, Geisel mirrors the anxiety the Sneetches feel while inside his machine as they wonder whether it will work and also increases the reader’s curiosity to know the outcome.



Summary: When used in the Dr. Seuss books, polysyndeton slows the pace of a line by adding additional syllables. The slower pace of the line can mirror ways the characters feel, emphasize specific ideas, and enhance the reader’s suspense.

Syntactical Devices: Diction, Lists, Figurative Language

The wordplay in the Dr. Seuss stories not only takes the form of repetition and metrical manipulation, but also occurs within the words and phrases contained in the poems. Geisel frequently explores switching parts of speech, using words and phrases as the objects in his sentences, and devising words that sound like what they represent. At the level of the phrase, Geisel dots his stories with frequent exclamations and exaggerations and often invites his readers into the plot by asking them questions and soliciting their opinions. Though the Dr. Seuss books contain examples of many different literary devices, it is particularly interesting that Geisel rarely uses metaphors or similes in his poetry. This omission may provide another reason why the stories entice young readers, as research has shown that the use of complicated figurative language in poetry often confuses children and makes reading poems far less enjoyable for them (Sloan, 2001, p. 54). Geisel, then, as a master craftsman, sprinkles his stories with words and literary devices that captivate readers, while omitting those that prove too complex and could turn his readers off from his poetry.

A. Anthimeria: Substitution of one part of speech for another (such as a noun used for a verb)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“They’ll start questionnairing!”
- *You’re Only Old Once!*

In this example of anthimeria from *You’re Only Old Once!*, Geisel transforms the noun “questionnaire” into the verb “questionnairing.” In so doing, he shows the manipulability of parts of speech, thus revealing the infinite possibilities of linguistic wordplay.



“For moose-moss gets scarce when the weather gets freezy.”
- *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*

In the above passage from *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*, Geisel takes the word “freeze,” typically used as a verb, and turns it into an adjective in order to describe a certain type of weather. This transformation not only allows him to devise a word that will serve as an end rhyme, but also underscores the idea that language can be altered to suit one’s purposes.



“ ‘Pooh-pooh to the Whos!’ he was grinch-ish-ly humming.”
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

In this example of anthimeria from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, Geisel begins with the word grinch, which is used as a noun throughout the story, and then adds “ish-ly” onto the end of the word in order to turn it into an adverb used to describe how the Grinch hums. Geisel uses this hyphenated style of word alteration very frequently in the Dr. Seuss books; the hyphens highlight the manipulation of the word and therefore call attention to the fluidity of language.



Summary: Through the use of anthimeria, Geisel subverts the notion that a word can only function as a single part of speech and therefore demonstrates the endless possibilities of language manipulation.

B. Adynaton: A declaration of impossibility, usually in terms of an exaggerated comparison.

Dr. Seuss Example with Explanation

“You’d grow a long beard
long before you’d catch fishes.”
– *McElligot’s Pool*

In this example from *McElligot’s Pool*, the adult figure in the story tells the young child that he’s wasting his time fishing in McElligot’s Pool. The use of adynaton in this situation underscores the adult’s condemnation of the child’s actions and makes his transformation in thinking at the conclusion of the book more powerful and compelling.



Summary: The use of adynaton provides a tool for Geisel to convey the opposition adults often feel toward the convictions of children while also providing an opportunity for humor and wordplay.

C. Ecphonesis: An emotional exclamation

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Because most people stop at the Z
But not me!”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

This use of ecphonesis in *On Beyond Zebra!* highlights the imagination of the young protagonist as well as the sheer pleasure he takes in being different from the majority of other people. Through the protagonist’s excitement and his litany of letters that begin after Z, Geisel celebrates the power of the imagination.



“FOR I HAD A STORY THAT NO ONE COULD BEAT!
AND TO THINK THAT I SAW IT ON MULBERRY STREET!”
- *And To Think that I Saw It On Mulberry Street*

Geisel makes palatable the excitement Marco feels as he concocts his story on his way home from school by the use of ecphonesis. That the letters of these exclamations are printed in all capitals further enhances the emotional effect, by making it seem as if Marco yells these words at the top of his lungs.



“Did he run?
He did not!
HORTON STAYED ON THAT NEST!”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

The use of ecphonesis in this passage from *Horton Hatches the Egg* calls attention to the bravery Horton exhibits in the face of the hunters who creep up on the nest. The first exclamation, “He did not!” heralds Horton for staying put, while the capitalization of the second exclamation serves as an emotionally-charged avowal of Horton’s courageous action.



“Now my troubles are going
to have troubles with me!”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

In the above example, from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, the use of ecphonesis extols the transformation of the protagonist from a person who tried to run away from his problems to someone who confronts his problems without fear.

C. Ecphonesis (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Think of something to do!
You will have to get rid of
Thing One and Thing Two!”
- *The Cat in the Hat*

In this use of ecphonesis in *The Cat in the Hat*, the parentally-minded goldfish warns the children that they must think of a way to contain Thing One and Thing Two before their mother returns. While the exclamation reveals the Goldfish’s anxiety about this situation, it also provides a moment where the children are placed in a position to make a decision and to determine their own fates.



Summary: Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses ecphonesis to express joy in the moments of empowerment for his young protagonists. Additionally, he uses the device to highlight significant attributes of characters or to add emotional emphasis to words or phrases.

D. Hyperbole: Rhetorical exaggeration. Hyperbole is often accomplished via comparisons, similes, and metaphors.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor.”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

This example of hyperbole from *On Beyond Zebra!* emphasizes the shock the uncreative Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell has when his friend begins to describe his alphabet of letters that begins where the standard alphabet ends. That Geisel uses exaggeration in this situation highlights the jarring effect that imagination can have on conventional thinking.



“I can read them
with my eyes shut!

That is
VERY HARD
to do!”
- *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

The entirety of *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!* is based on the hyperbolic claim of one of the protagonists that he can read without opening his eyes. Throughout the story, the wiser protagonist undermines this claim by demonstrating that reading with one's eyes open is far more fruitful. The use of hyperbole in this intriguing claim generates and holds the interest of the readers throughout the story.



“And damp! Was it damp! I grew moss on my feet!”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

The use of hyperbole in this passage from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* provides a vivid description of how unpleasant the protagonist finds the dreary, dark tunnel through which he crawls on his way to Solla Sollew. That the hyperbole is coupled with ecphosis emphasizes the emotional intensity of this comment.



D. Hyperbole (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“If he isn’t muchly
more worse off than you,
I’ll eat my umbrella.
That’s just what I’d do.”
- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*

In the above passage from *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*, the wise man in the story uses hyperbole to emphasize his argument that the protagonist should appreciate his position in life. Though the reader knows that the man wouldn’t actually eat an umbrella, the ridiculousness of this claim not only provides a comical image, but also emphasizes how strongly he believes his argument is correct.



Summary: The use of hyperbole in the Dr. Seuss books provides a source of humor in the stories; the exaggerations in the stories tend to provide vibrant descriptions; generate reader interest; and underscore key feelings, thoughts, or ideas.

E. Interrogating the Reader

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Did you
ever have the feeling
there’s a WASKET
in your
BASKET?”

- *There’s A Wocket in My Pocket!*

Geisel opens his story *There’s a Wocket in My Pocket* by asking the reader the above question, a move that instantly draws the reader into the book. This particular question also invites the reader to begin using his or her imagination, as children have never encountered the neologism wasket nor considered if one dwelt inside their basket.



“And what would you do if you met a Jibboo?”
- Oh, The THINKS You Can Think!

In *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*, Geisel provides a litany of different “thinks” that the reader could dream up if she uses her imagination. With the above question, Geisel turns the thinking power over to the reader, urging her to consider what would happen if she encountered one of his fantastic beasts.



“Well, what would YOU do
if it happened to YOU?”

“You couldn’t say ‘skat!’ ‘cause that wouldn’t be right.
You couldn’t shout ‘scram!’ ‘cause that isn’t polite.”
- *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose*

In this question from *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose*, Geisel encourages the readers to put themselves in Thidwick’s position and imagine what they would do if they had guests that just wouldn’t leave. After giving the readers time to think about how they might act, Geisel proposes some constraints that might influence their behavior in order to keep the reader thinking and considering why Thidwick decides to act the way that he does.



E. Interrogating the Reader (con'd)

“...what do YOU think
we should call this one, anyhow?”
-On Beyond Zebra!

After the creative youth extols his list of letters that begin after Z, Geisel provides a list of these letters and then introduces one that wasn't discussed in the story. Upon introducing this strange letter, Geisel encourages his readers to participate in his protagonist's kind of thinking by asking them the above question and soliciting their help for naming this new letter.



Summary: Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel poses questions to his readers that invite them into the plot of the story. Often, these questions encourage young readers to use their imaginations and to think creatively, practices Geisel models for them in his books.

F. Metallage: When a word or phrase is treated as an object within another expression

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations

“Then the *Whos* Down in *Who*-ville will all cry BOOHOO!”
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

In this example of metallage from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, Geisel uses the word “Boohoo” as an object within the line. As the Grinch imagines how the Whos will react when they see that he’s stolen their Christmas decorations and gifts, he envisions them crying out with misery. “Boohoo” functions as a noun within this sentence and therefore demonstrates a different way to convey and play with dialogue.



“All those in favor of going, say “AYE,”
All those in favor of staying, say “NAY.”
- *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*

In the passage above, Geisel includes the dialogue of the animals living in Thidwick’s antlers as they take a vote on whether they should stay or leave. Within the lines above, “aye” and “nay” function as objects as they represent the words that the animals should use in the poll. This use of dialogue within dialogue provides an example of the wordplay metallage can foster.



“And all that the Lorax left here in this mess
was a small pile of rocks, with the one word...
‘UNLESS.’”
- *The Lorax*

In this example of metallage, the Once-ler describes what the Lorax left behind the last time that he saw him. Including “unless” as an object within the line allows Geisel to highlight the significance of this word in the story while also emphasizing the power that words can hold in general.



Summary: Throughout the Dr. Seuss stories, metallage provides an opportunity to play with words in different contexts and to call attention to the importance of language by allowing specific words to form the central focus of lines and sentences.

G. Onomatopoeia: Using or inventing a word whose sound imitates that which it names

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“Humpf!” humped a voice.”
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

This example of onomatopoeia from *Horton Hears a Who!* captures the disgust the other animals have regarding Horton’s belief that the Whos exist on the speck that he discovers. That Geisel uses the “Humpf” not only as the word spoken, but also as the “said” verb emphasizes this disdain and provides a whimsical sense of sound and wordplay.



“Then the voom...
It went VOOM!”
- *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*

In *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, the Cat and his little cats make a mess in the snow that can only be cleaned up by using the mysterious substance called “voom.” Using the name of the substance as an onomatopoeia allows the readers to more fully envision what such a concoction might be like.



“Fell off his high throne and fell *Plunk!* in the pond!”
- *Yertle the Turtle*

At the conclusion of *Yertle the Turtle*, the greedy king Yertle careens into the pond following Mack’s courageous burp. The use of “plunk” in the line provides readers with an auditory description of the splash Yertle makes when he enters the pond before they actually read the words that tell them he’s landed in the water.



“And it klonked. And it bonked. And it jerked. And it berked”
- *Sneetches*

The above use of onomatopoeia in *The Sneetches* describes the way that the machines sound as they work to add or remove stars from the bellies of the Sneetches. This line not only helps the reader get a fuller sense of the situation of the story, but also helps to build suspense about whether or not the machine will work.



G. Onomatopoeia (con'd):

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“I am the Lorax,” he coughed and he whiffed. He sneezed and he snuffled. He snarggled. He sniffed.”

– *The Lorax*

In the above example of onomatopoeia, Geisel uses a series of sound words to describe what the Lorax sounds like when he speaks. Within the context of these other noises, the reader can make sense of the neologism “snarggled” and realize that it is a word designed to sound like the noises made by the Lorax.



Summary: The use of onomatopoeia provides Geisel with ample opportunities for inventing and using neologisms in his stories while also allowing for fun wordplay as the words sound like what they represent. With its simplicity and amusing nature, onomatopoeia is one of the most frequently used devices in the Dr. Seuss stories.

H. Simile: An explicit comparison, often (but not necessarily) employing "like" or "as."

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

"Then he heard a small sound like the coo of a dove."
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

In the above passage, from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, Geisel compares the voice of Cindy Lou Who to the coo of a dove. This simile works in the story because it is very concrete; children can probably envision the sound of a bird and therefore, can grasp the comparison Geisel makes in this line.



"Why, that speck is as small as the head of a pin."
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

In this simile, the speck that Horton finds and in which the Whos reside, is compared to the head of a pin. Like the example from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, this simile provides a very concrete comparison, as pins are common objects which most children likely know are very small. Even if the reader doesn't know exactly what a pin is, the inclusion of the word "small" in the simile allows them to understand that the speck is miniscule.



"The touch of their tufts
was much softer than silk.
And they had the sweet smell
of fresh butterfly milk."
- *The Lorax*

In this example, from *The Lorax*, Geisel uses two similes back-to-back. The first comparison is very concrete, as silk is a texture with which many children will be familiar. The second comparison is more abstract, yet shouldn't confuse a young reader because the concept of butterfly milk seems so bizarre that children would most likely recognize that butterfly milk is fictitious. With the second use of simile, then, Geisel offers the opportunity for his readers to stretch their imaginations as they consider just what butterfly milk might smell like.



Summary: Similes appear very rarely in the Dr. Seuss books; when they do, they tend to either make easily-understood, concrete comparisons or encourage readers to use their imaginations by making connections to unfamiliar and invented words or concepts.

Whole Book Devices: Allegories, Pacing, Repetition, and Conclusions

While Geisel employs a myriad of literary devices at the syntactical level, he also uses several different strategies at the broader page and whole-book levels in order to provide cohesion and a sense of purpose to his stories. In her analysis of the Dr. Seuss stories, Evelyn Schroth heralds the effective use of “story line tactics” in the books; these strategies include:

...inclusion of the fantastic in a familiar framework, stacking-procedures, the accrumental devices used over and over, logical phenomena to make the illogical plausible, poetic justice, extolling virtues such as perseverance and fidelity and enterprise (Schroth, 1978, p.748).

This section will explore ways in which Geisel mirrors real-life through the use of allegory, paces his stories through the use of emphasis and cliff-hangers, provides cohesion with frequent repetition, and concludes his stories in a variety of ways. Examining the broader organization of the stories exposes another layer of Geisel’s careful craftsmanship, further demonstrating the often-unrecognized sophistication of his works.

A. Allegory: A sustained metaphor continued through whole sentences or whole discourses.

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

Horton Hears a Who!

The Dr. Seuss book *Horton Hears a Who!* is widely regarded as an allegory for the United States' occupation of Japan after the conclusion of WWII. Despite criticism from the other animals in the jungle, Horton stands by the speck on which the Whos live and protects them from the otherwise inevitable doom of being boiled into stew. Taken as an allegory, the story encourages stronger entities, specifically America, to defend those weaker than themselves, in this case, Japan. The conclusion of the story, when the Whos manage to make themselves heard, also argues, however, that people who seem smaller and weaker can also speak for themselves.



Yertle the Turtle

The story *Yertle the Turtle* functions as an allegory for Hitler's rise to power. In the story, Yertle dominates the pond and stacks up more and more turtles in his throne in order to increase the distance he can see, and consequently, how much area he rules and power he possesses. At the conclusion of the story, the subversive action of the regular turtle named Mack topples the throne and ends Yertle's tyrannous reign. *Yertle the Turtle* warns of the dangers of unchecked power while simultaneously heralding dissident behavior in the face of injustices.



The Butter Battle Book

The Butter Battle Book serves as an allegory for the nuclear arms race and the uncertainty of a world with weapons of mass destruction. Throughout the story, as the disagreement between the Yooks and Zooks – who differ in their views about how toast ought to be buttered – escalates, the weapons they use to threaten each other also grow in sophistication. The story ends on a note of ominous uncertainty, as the military leaders of both the Yooks and the Zooks stand poised to destroy one another. While this book received sharp criticism for its rendering of the arms race, the story, particularly its lack of a neat conclusion, mirrors the uncertainty and sense of danger experienced as more and more nations acquire more powerful weapons.



The Sneetches

Geisel tackles the harmful and unnecessary practice of prejudice in his book *The Sneetches*. In this story, the Sneetches with stars on their bellies believe themselves to be superior to the plain-belly Sneetches. Sylvester McMonkey McBean capitalizes on the intolerance of the Sneetches and creates machines that take stars on and off and eventually steals all of the Sneetches' money, thus emphasizing the harm and fruitlessness of prejudice. Penniless and confused, the Sneetches decide that neither type of Sneetch is superior to the other and learn the error of their ways.



A. Allegory (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

The Lorax

The Dr. Seuss book *The Lorax* functions as an allegory for the dangers of failing to properly care for the environment. The story revolves around the Once-ler recounting the destruction of the environment that took place as he continued to expand his business without considering the consequences of his actions. At the end of the story, he tosses the last Truffula Seed to the child who has been listening to his story, signaling that future generations must be responsible for repairing the damage done to the environment by their elders if the earth is to be preserved.



How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

One of the most well-known of the Dr. Seuss books, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, is an allegory that criticizes the commercialization and materialism of the Christmas holiday. After taking all of the Whos' decorations and presents, the Grinch finds that he hasn't actually stolen Christmas – the Whos still gather together and sing merrily. While the Grinch does return the gifts, he, and presumably, the Whos, learn that the true meaning and value of Christmas can't be purchased at a store.



Summary: The Dr. Seuss stories considered the “message books” are all allegories that express specific political or personal views. Geisel uses these allegorical works to expose children to issues from which they might otherwise be “protected,” and often, to promote subversive values that run counter to mainstream views.

B. Text Features: Capitalization, Italicization, and Font Sizes

Throughout his stories, Geisel employs many different strategies for emphasizing particular portions of the text, most notably capitalization and italicization. Evelyn Scroth, in her analysis of the language use in the Dr. Seuss stories, noted that Geisel “consistently marked stress for the reader by italicizing a word or a phrase or by capitalizing it to give the word a special twist or emphasis” (Schroth, 1978, p. 749). Scholars argue that the use of these text features to add emphasis highlights the “accent of the verse” and makes the reader especially cognizant of the meter (MacDonald, 1988, p. 104).



Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“The lions and tigers and that kind of stuff
They have up here now are not *quite* good enough.
You see things like these in just any old zoo.
They’re awfully old-fashioned. I want something *new*!
-*If I Ran the Zoo*

As Gerald McGrew begins to imagine what he’d do if he ran the zoo, the italicization in the above passage emphasizes the key words that will reinforce the theme of imagination that runs throughout the story. The italicization of “quite” emphasizes that Gerald believes that he can make some changes that will improve the zoo, while the italicization of “new” underscores both his desire to make those changes and the role that imagination will play throughout the story as Gerald introduces his strange creatures to the reader.



“This machine was *so* modern, *so* frightfully new,
no one knew quite exactly just *what* it could do!”
- *The Butter Battle Book*

The use of italics in the above passage from *The Butter Battle Book* emphasizes the danger inherent in the new weapon that the general will bring to the wall. That Geisel highlights the unpredictability of this weapon not only heightens the suspense of the story, but also foreshadows the unsettling absence of a conclusion to the story.



They’d sing! *And they’d sing!*
AND they’d SING! SING! SING! SING!”
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

The capitalization in the above passage, coupled with the use of epizeuxis emphasizes the disdain the Grinch feels for the Whos and Christmas. That the emphasis progresses from standard type, to italics, and then to full capitalization mirrors the escalation of the Grinch’s anger as he thinks more and more about Christmas morning.



B. Text Features: Capitalization, Italicization, and Font Sizes (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

That *can't* be my story. That's only a *start*.
I'll say that a ZEBRA was pulling that cart!"
- *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*

The above example of emphasis from *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street* demonstrates the use of both italicization and capitalization. As Marco begins to imagine the story he'll tell his father when he returns from school, the italics stress his dissatisfaction with the simple horse and cart he saw on the street – he knows that such a mundane observation won't make for a compelling story, which Geisel emphasizes by italicizing the words “can't” and “start.” The use of capitalization in the next line highlights both the exoticism of the zebra as well as Marco's excitement at the new path his story is taking.



“My friend,” came the voice, “you're a *very* fine friend.
You've helped all us folks on this dust speck no end.
You've saved all our houses, our ceilings and floors.
You've saved all our churches and grocery stores.”
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

Throughout *Horton Hears a Who!*, whenever the Whos speak to Horton, their dialogue is printed in a much smaller font than the rest of the text on the page. This difference in font size pictorially represents the nearly inaudible volume at which the Whos speak. Ruth MacDonald argues that the use of smaller font also “slows the reader down and makes him read more carefully” (1988, p. 85). Variations of font size in this story not only make the dialogue of the Whos stand out from the rest of the story, but also emphasize that even the smallest voices deserve to be heard.



Summary: Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, the use of capitalization and italicization emphasizes the key parts of the story, draws attention to danger, builds suspense, and underscores strong emotions. The manipulation of these text features alters how the reader interacts with the text and the weight they attach to specific aspects of the work.

C. Pacing: Changing Line Lengths and Words Moving Across the Page

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

You're going to be roped! And you're going to be caged!
And, as for your dust speck...*hah! That* we shall boil
In a hot steaming kettle of Beezle-Nut oil!

"Boil it"...gasp! Horton!
"Oh, that you *can't* do!
It's all full of persons!
They'll *prove* it to you!"
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

The above passage from *Horton Hears a Who!* provides an example of Geisel's tendency to alter line lengths as a way to change up the pace in his stories while also emphasizing the key events and ideas of the narrative. The difference in line lengths between these two stanzas serves to distinguish Horton's dialogue from that of the other animals in the jungle. The shorter length of the lines when Horton speaks also slows down the pace of these lines, which emphasizes the importance of what Horton is saying, because the reader can't simply fly or skim over his lines.



"I'm off to the City of Solla Sollew
On the banks of the beautiful River Wah-Hoo,
Where they *never* have troubles! At least, very few."
[page break]
"It is not very far.
And my camel is strong.
He'll get us there fast.
So hop on! Come along!"
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

The alteration in line lengths in the above passage from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* occurs following a page break, meaning that the longer lines occur on the left-hand page and the shorter lines on the right-hand page. Interestingly, the entire passage above consists of one character speaking; the changing length of the lines helps to keep this dialogue interesting, while also distinguishing the part of the speech where the character invites the protagonist, and therefore, the reader, along with him on his journey. Since this passage marks the turning point of the story and the source of the adventure discussed throughout the book, the emphasis placed on these short lines helps to ensure that the reader doesn't gloss over this section, but rather feels impelled and curious to partake in the adventure.



C. Pacing: Changing Line Lengths and Words Moving Across the Page (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“So, on beyond Zebra!
Explore!
Like Columbus!
Discover new letters!
Like WUM for Wumbus,
My high-spouting whale who lives high on a hill
And who never comes down ‘til it’s time to refill.”
- *On Beyond Zebra!*

In the above passage from *On Beyond Zebra!*, Geisel increases the line lengths throughout the stanza and even deviates slightly from his rhyme scheme and meter. The series of exclamations at the beginning of the stanza encourage the reader to take part in the over-arching theme of the book: using the imagination to take you places far from conventional thought. With their shorter line lengths, these exclamations stand apart from the rest of the stanza, which provides again emphasizes how one can use her imagination to dream up new things. The short lines also help to prevent the line lengths from becoming monotonous and therefore, add interest to the verse by altering the pace at which one reads.



So all we could do was to
Sit!

Sit!

Sit!

Sit!

And we did not like it.
Not one little bit.”

-*The Cat in the Hat*

Geisel enhances the use of epizeuxis in the above passage from *The Cat in the Hat* by not only repeating the word “sit” to underscore the boredom Sally and her brother feel while their mother is out, but also by making the word move across the page. The deviation from the standard form of the lines helps to change up the pace of the story while also emphasizing the time passing as the pair sit with nothing to do.



Summary:

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses varying line lengths to alter the pacing of the story by changing the speed at which the reader can read the lines. He frequently uses different line lengths to set dialogue apart from the rest of the verse and to emphasize important sentiments or ideas. Additionally, as Morgan and Morgan point out, Geisel tends to “accelerat[e] words as the plot quicken[s],” causing the reader to hurtle faster and faster through the text as the suspense builds near the climax and conclusion of the story (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 155).

D. Pacing: Page Breaks and Cliffhangers

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

Throughout his stories, Geisel frequently makes use of the suspense that can build when a reader must turn a page in order to see how a certain situation unfolds. Ruth MacDonald writes that Geisel mastered the ability to propel readers through the story, as “[t]he turning of the page, the brevity of the text per page, and the pause to view the picture before the page turn” produce a sense of “rapid pacing and satisfactory progress” that make the reader want to continue reading (MacDonald, 1988, p. 17). Moreover, he also creates cliff-hangers by asking questions directly before a page flip, an act which not only encourages the reader to consider the inquiry, but also instills her with a curiosity to find out more and therefore, to keep reading (MacDonald, 1988).



From now on, I'm going to protect them with you!
And the young kangaroo in her pouch said... **[page flip]**
“...ME, TOO!
From sun in the summer. From rain when it's fall-ish,
I'm going to protect them. No matter how small-ish!”
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

The page flip in the middle of this passage from *Horton Hears a Who!* helps to propel readers through to the conclusion of the story by building up their curiosity about whether the young kangaroo has had a change of heart. The absence of a complete idea at the end of the page encourages the reader to continue reading while also giving her time to develop her own opinion about what the young kangaroo might say.



“Until...well, one day I was walking along
And I guess I got careless. I guess I got gawking
At daisies and not looking where I was walking... **[page flip]**
And that's how it started.
Sock! What a shock!
I stubbed my big toe
On a very hard rock.”
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*

At the conclusion of the first part of this passage, the reader knows that *something* ominous is about to happen to the protagonist, but she must wait until after she turns the page to discover just what occurs. Having to turn the page builds suspense while also letting the reader develop her own prediction about what may happen. Furthermore, that the line lengths shorten after the page flip helps to emphasize these lines and to alter the expectations the reader may have about the pace of the story.



D. Pacing: Page Breaks and Cliffhangers (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“He gasped! He felt faint! And the whole world grew fuzzy!
Thidwick was finished, completely...

...or *WAS* he...? [page flip]

Finished...?

Not Thidwick!

DECIDEDLY NOT!

- *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose*

The above passage demonstrates Geisel’s propensity to use questions to build suspense prior to a page flip. The reader senses the imminent danger in which Thidwick finds himself as the hunters approach and has time to ponder how he might escape as she turns the page of the story. The reader’s curiosity isn’t immediately satisfied, however, as the first line following the page turn is a repetition of the same question the reader has already been pondering. By using questions in this manner, Geisel captures and holds the reader’s interest, while also directly involving him in the plot by soliciting his thoughts and opinions in the text.



And he *did* hear a sound rising over the snow.

It started in low. Then it started to grow...

[page flip]

But the sound wasn’t *sad*!

Why, this sound sounded *merry*!

- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

In this example, from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, Geisel gives the reader ample time for brainstorming ideas about what sound the Grinch may hear from the top of Mount Krumpit. In the first part of the passage, he informs the reader that the Grinch hears something, and then toys with the reader’s curiosity by saying that the noise grows louder directly before the page turn. Rather than finding her inquisitiveness immediately satisfied following the page flip, the reader is given more descriptions of the sound without actually being informed what it is. Withholding this information from the reader increases her curiosity while also making her read on.



Summary: Geisel frequently uses page turns as a way to build suspense and to carry the reader through the story. Having to turn the page to find out information increases the reader’s curiosity and also gives the reader ample time to try to brainstorm her own predictions and ideas about what may appear on the next page.

E. Repetition

Throughout the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel uses repetition not only at the syntactical levels discussed earlier, but also in broader ways throughout entire books. Geisel felt repetition could serve as a powerful tool in verse: “It become part of the pattern,” he said, “to teach, you have to repeat and repeat and repeat” (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 155). Repetition in the Seuss books, however, never seems overused, but rather dynamic, exciting, and even essential to the story. As Ruth MacDonald argues, Geisel expertly avoids the irritating redundancy of repetition that can be tempting to use when the emphasis of the book is on teaching students to read:

The use of verse permits the author to reinforce new words by repeating them.

However, a writer of children’s books [must] make sure the device of repetition is used to reinforce the words, not simply used gratuitously; the story must call forth the repetition, a feat which Seuss has carried off admirably (1988, p. 120).

Through the use of repetition, Geisel manages not only to link his stories together cohesively, but also to repeat the messages and ideas that form the central themes of his stories.



Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“If I wait long enough, if I’m patient and cool,
who knows what I’ll catch in McElligot’s Pool!”

- *McElligot’s Pool*

The protagonist of *McElligot’s Pool* repeats the above two-line stanza many times throughout the course of the story as he envisions the different fish he might catch. The repetition of this phrase not only reinforces how strongly the protagonist believes that he will catch something interesting, but also underscores the message the story provides about the infinite possibilities of the imagination.



“And that is a story that NO ONE can beat
When I say that I saw it on Mulberry Street!”

- *And To Think that I Saw it On Mulberry Street*

As Marco’s story develops in complexity throughout *And to Think That I Saw it On Mulberry Street*, he repeats the above couplet with each new set of changes. Repeating the phrase so many times underscores Marco’s pride in and excitement about the story he’s imagining in his head while also showcasing the power of the imagination of a child.



E. Repetition (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...
An elephant’s faithful—one hundred percent!”
- *Horton Hatches the Egg*

The above phrase, repeated throughout *Horton Hatches the Egg* emphasizes Horton’s commitment to watching over the egg despite the numerous challenges he encounters as well as the undesirability of the task. Not only does the phrase signal Horton’s perseverance, it also heralds the attractive qualities of determination and honesty.



Oh, the THINKS you can think!
- *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*

This title phrase is repeated throughout *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*, usually before or after Geisel presents an example of a zany “think.” The frequent repetition of this line not only reinforces the excitement that comes with thinking up new creatures or places, but also underscores the power and potential of imagination, the overarching theme of the book.



“A person’s a person, no matter how small.”
- *Horton Hears a Who!*

Horton the elephant repeats the above phrase many times during *Horton Hears a Who!* as he defends the clover on which the Whos dwell from the skeptical animals who want to destroy it. Not only does the repetition of this phrase reaffirm Horton’s conviction to stand by the Whos, but it also presents a powerful message for the primary readers of Dr. Seuss books by asserting that children, though frequently excluded or discounted, possess valuable insights and importance in the world.



Summary: Geisel uses repetition of phrases in many of the Dr. Seuss books in order to provide cohesion to the stories from beginning to end. The use of this repetition simultaneously highlights the key thoughts, emotions, and ideas in the stories.

F. Conclusions: Granting the Reader Responsibility

Dr. Seuss Example with Explanation:

“SO...
Catch!” calls the Once-ler.
He lets something fall.
“It’s a Truffula Seed.
It’s the last one of all!
You’re in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds.
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.
Then the Lorax
and all of his friends
may come back.”
- *The Lorax*

Rather than concluding *The Lorax* by hammering home an environmentalist message, Geisel ends the story by giving the reader a role and a choice about how to fulfill that role. The reader can either accept the responsibility of caring for the Truffula Seed and the environment, or he can choose to let the seed wither without being tended and continue to participate in harming the environment. Though Geisel’s opinion about what the child should do comes across both loudly and clearly, rather than indoctrinating readers into sharing his views, he appeals to their ability to make their own decisions while also empowering them with the idea that they possess the ability to make a difference.



Summary: By giving readers a sense of responsibility at the conclusion of the Dr. Seuss books, Geisel encourages them to think about pertinent issues, their roles in the problems, and what they can do to make things better.

G. Conclusions: Sense of Justice

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

And he called to the pests on his horns as he threw ‘em,
‘You wanted my horns; now you’re quite welcome to ‘em!
Keep ‘em! They’re yours!
As for ME, I shall take
Myself to the far distant
Side of the lake!’

And he swam Winna-Bango and found his old bunch,
And arrived just in time for a wonderful lunch
At the south of the lake, where there’s moose-moss to munch.

His *old* horns today are
Where *you* knew they *would* be.
His guests are still on them,
All stuffed, as they *should* be.”
- *Thidwick, The Big-Hearted Moose*

In these final stanzas from *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose*, the animals who had taken advantage of Thidwick’s kindness get what they deserve by being abandoned in the face of the hunters. This sense of justice helps to emphasize Thidwick’s admirable qualities while ensuring that the reader realizes that the behavior of the other animals was out of line and undesirable.



“And the chances are good that this greedy pair never
Will find such a wonderful seed again, ever.
But *if* they should find one, that cat and that duck
Won’t wish for so much. And they’ll have better luck.”
-*The Bippolo Seed*

The little-known Dr. Seuss story *The Bippolo Seed* concludes with the two protagonists learning the harmful consequences of greedy behavior. Throughout the story, the two argue about what they should wish for using the Bippolo Seed, with their desires growing increasingly sophisticated as the tale unfolds. At the end of the story, the pair drops the seed in the water in their excitement about dreaming of lavish objects and finds themselves unable to use the seed to grant them anything at all. This sense of justice at the conclusion underscores the undesirability and dangers of excessive greed to the reader; yet Geisel also shows that one can learn from one’s mistakes by leaving the possibility open that the pair may someday find the seed again.



G. Conclusions: Sense of Justice (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

“IT’S AN ELEPHANT BIRD!!

And it should be, it *should* be, it SHOULD be like that!
Because Horton was faithful! He sat and he sat!
He meant what what he said
And he said what he meant...

...And they sent him home
Happy,
One hundred percent!”
-*Horton Hatches the Egg*

At the conclusion of *Horton Hatches the Egg*, Mayzie returns just in time for the hatching of her egg and decides that now that Horton has completed all of the hard work, she wants to take her baby bird home with her. However, when the egg hatches, the creature that emerges is half bird and half elephant, a mutation that recognizes and rewards the contributions Horton made to caring for the egg. The story ends with a sense of justice because Horton gets the reap the benefits of his hard work while the lazy, cheating Mayzie goes to an empty nest.



“And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he,
Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see.
And the turtles, of course...all the turtles are free
As turtles, and, maybe, all creatures should be.”
-*Yertle the Turtle*

Following Mack’s subversive burp, *Yertle the Turtle* ends with Yertle falling from the top of his tremendous stack of turtles into the pond. Rather than being able to see for miles, Yertle can see only the mud that surrounds him, an ending that seems fitting because it reiterates the idea that those who treat others poorly will eventually a taste of their own medicine.



Summary: Many of the Dr. Seuss books end with a sense of justice; the resolutions of these stories help to reinforce the notion that those who act in appropriate and admirable ways will be rewarded while those who harm or take advantage of others will eventually endure negative consequences. Concluding the stories with fairness and justice not only leaves readers feeling satisfied with the outcome with the tales, but also helps to encourage children to adopt the admirable qualities that the stories reward.

H. Conclusions: Lack of Closure

Geisel not only gives responsibility to his readers at the conclusions of the some of the Dr. Seuss books, but also occasionally leaves the determination of the ending completely up to them. Critics lambasted *The Butter Battle Book* not only for its discussion of the nuclear arms race, but also because he makes the decision to leave the ending wide open:

By using this open ending, Dr. Seuss violates one of the prime conventions of children's literature—that works for children should have closed endings, preferably happy ones, with all important questions answered and with no loose ends left unresolved. But for Seuss's purposes, there can be no resolution. He places the burden of finishing the story squarely in the lap of the reader (MacDonald, 1988, p. 156).

Though the most obvious example of this concluding strategy occurs in *The Butter Battle Book*, Geisel does use this strategy in more subtle ways by suggesting an ending, not stating it explicitly; for example, in *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, the protagonist gets a bat and declares himself capable of fighting off his troubles, yet the reader never sees him tested or whether this strategy will prove effective. This open-endedness in the stories, whether explicit or subtle, ensures that readers will continue thinking about the stories long after they close the books.



Dr. Seuss Example with Explanation:

“Be patient,” said Grandpa. “We’ll see. We will see...”
- *The Butter Battle Book*

On the last page of *The Butter Battle Book*, the generals of the Yooks and the Zooks stand on opposite sides of the wall, Big Bitsy Boomeroots, weapons – which ensure complete destruction of their enemies – in hand. Since the story allegorizes the nuclear arms race, the lack of closure at the ending of this story mirrors the uncertainty and danger that pervades a world with weapons of nuclear weapons. That the story lacks a neat ending also means that readers must keep pondering the issue and work on thinking of their own ideas about how the issue could be resolved.



Summary: Though sharply criticized for doing so, Geisel refuses to provide neat closure to his stories when a solution doesn't exist in the real world. Leaving a few loose ends in the Dr. Seuss books encourages readers to consider their own ideas about how to resolve the complicated issues and scenarios with which Geisel presents them.

I. Conclusions: Circularity of Stories at Closure

Many of the Dr. Seuss stories, particularly those that feature strong themes about the power of the imagination, tend to circle back to where the story began in their conclusions. Literary scholar Alison Lurie criticizes this technique because the return to the beginning of the story suggests that the imaginings of the protagonist only have a place inside of the book:

Though these stories are full of euphoric vitality, there is occasionally something unsatisfying about them. Seuss' verbal inventions can become as shaky and overblown as the structures in his drawings. At the end of many of his books the elaborate language often does collapse. There is an abrupt return to simple diction, and a simple, realistic final illustration implicitly declares that Seuss's protagonist was only fantasizing" (Lurie, 2003, p. 94).

While Lurie classifies this circularity as a "collapse," other critics argue that the technique ensures that the stories possess a sense of cohesion and symmetry (Heald 230). Furthermore, though the conclusions of the Dr. Seuss stories often resemble the beginnings, the conclusions are not "mirror image[s]" (Arakelian 20). In other words, the ending of a Dr. Seuss book takes into account what has transgressed in the story, meaning that even if the words sound similar, the feelings of the protagonist—and the reader—have not remained the same throughout the course of the story. I believe that the circularity at the end of the Dr. Seuss books not only provides a neat sense of symmetry to these works, but also gives his readers a chance to see how their thinking has altered since they began reading the story.



Dr. Seuss Examples With Explanations

Beginning:

"Young man, laughed the farmer,
'You're sort of a fool!
You'll never catch a fish
In McElligot's Pool!"

Ending:

"And that's why I think
That I'm not such a fool
When I sit here and fish
In McElligot's Pool!"

- *McElligot's Pool*

Though the beginning and ending of *McElligot's Pool* use almost the same diction, the ending reflects the sense of empowerment the protagonist gains from imagining what kinds of fish lurk in the pond. As opposed to the beginning, where the adult possesses control of the dialogue, at the conclusion, the young boy openly refutes the judgment made by the adult. That the end of the story returns to nearly the same language as the beginning allows the reader to see just how much the protagonist has changed throughout the course of the book. It is particularly significant that the illustration accompanying the text on the last page shows the adult also looking down into the pond, as this suggests that the child's imagination may even have altered the adult's thinking.



I. Conclusions: Circularity of Stories at Closure (con'd)

Dr. Seuss Examples with Explanations:

Beginning:

“Just tell yourself, Duckie,
you’re really quite lucky!
Some people are much more...
oh, ever so much more...
oh, muchly, much-much more
unlucky than you!”

Ending:

“That’s why I say, “Duckie!
Don’t grumble! Don’t stew!
Some critters are much-much,
oh, ever so much-much,
so muchly, much-much more unlucky than you!”

- Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?

The circularity at the end of *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* serves not only to refocus the reader on where the action of the story has actually taken place – within the imagination of the protagonist and the elderly man – but also helps to reinforce the overarching message of the book, that one should not complain about one’s position or problems in life, but rather appreciate that there is always someone in a worse position than oneself. After the litany of unpleasant circumstances and scenarios detailed in the story, the reader could easily lose sight of the point of the story, so reaffirming the message at the conclusion not only leaves the idea salient in the reader’s mind, but helps to bring the story back to reality and to a cohesive close.



Beginning:

“It’s a pretty good zoo,”
Said young Gerald McGrew,
‘And the fellow who runs it
Seems proud of it, too.”

“But if *I* ran the zoo,”
Said young Gerald McGrew,
‘I’d make a few changes.
That’s just what I’d do.”

Ending:

“Yes...
Said young Gerald McGrew.
‘I’d make a few changes
That’s what I’d do,”
If *I* ran the zoo.”

- If I Ran the Zoo

Like the conclusion of *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You?*, the ending of *If I Ran the Zoo* helps to bring the reader back to reality after the litany of wild beasts Gerald presents during the story. While the ending reminds the reader that the animals were dreamt up in Gerald’s head, this conclusion doesn’t undermine the value of and entertainment offered by Gerald’s imagination, but rather reaffirms the belief that Gerald, a child, could generate great excitement in the world.

Appendix Two: Selected Neologisms

Places: When inventing place names, Geisel frequently appropriates real place names (Lake Winna-bango), uses multiple conjunctions or hyphens (Zomba-ma-Tant), and pairs his neologisms with real words (Bunglebung Bridge).

West Bunglefield
Yupster
Younce
- *On Beyond Zebra!*



Lake Winna-Bango
- *Thidwick, the Big-Hearted Moose*



Valley of Vung
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*



Sala-ma-Sond
- *Yertle the Turtle*



Zomba-ma-Tant
Matta-fa-Potta-fa-Pell
Desert of Zind
Yerka
Kartoom
River of Nobsk
Ka-Troo
Hippo-no-Hungus
Island of Gwark
- *If I Ran the Zoo*



Desert of Drize
Bunglebung Bridge
Ga-Zayt
Ga-Zair
Hawatch-Hawatch
Ruins of Ronk
Kaverns of Krock
- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*



Fotta-fa-Zee
- *You're Only Old Once!*



Nupp
Da-Dake
- *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*



The Jungle of Nool
Eiffelberg Tower
Horton Hears a Who!

-

Animals: Geisel most commonly uses neologisms in his stories when devising names for animals. He frequently creates names which help to satisfy the rhyme and meter of his lines, feature many conjunctions, and which play with the names of actual animals (humming-fish). While his names are often outlandish, *nerd*, one of his animal names in *If I Ran the Zoo*, has been transformed into a part of English and now appears in the dictionary.

Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz
Wumbus
Umbus
bird-of-a-bird-of-a-bird of!
Flunnel
Itch-a-pods
- *On Beyond Zebra!*



Knox
tweetle beetles
- *Fox in Socks*



Grox
Klotz
Glotz
- *Oh Say Can You Say?*



Crumple-horn, Web-footed,
Green-bearded Schlottz
- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky
You Are?*



Bustard
Flustard
Lunks
scraggle-foot
Mulligatawny
Iota
Thwerll
Chuggs
tizzle-topped Tufted
Mazurka
a wild Tick-Tack-Toe
Gusset, Gherkin, Gasket,
Gootch
Russian Palooski
Nerd
Nerkle
Seersucker
It-Kutch
Preep
Proo
Bippo-no-Bungus
Fizza-ma-Wizza-ma-Dill
- *If I Ran the Zoo:*



Lorax
Swomee-Swans
Bar-ba-loots
Humming-Fish
- *The Lorax*



Wump
Gox
Ying
Yink
Zeds
Ish
Gack
Zeep
- *One Fish, Two Fish*



Quilliagan Quail
River Wah-Hoo
Key-Slapping Slippard
- *I Had Trouble in Getting
to Solla Sollew*



Guff
Snuvs
Bloogs
Zong
- *Oh, the THINKS You
Can Think!*



Things: Whether describing an invention, a disease, or a weapon, Geisel often relies on neologisms to provide names for his unique and outlandish ideas. The neologisms used for names of things in the Dr. Seuss books tend to feature many conjunctions or hyphens (Throm-dim-bu-lator), provide a mix of real and invented words (Jigger-Rock Snatchem), or to rearrange or combine real words in interesting ways (Chimney Sweep's Stupor).

muddle-dee-puddles
Three-Seater Zatz-it Nose-Patting Extension
- *On Beyond Zebra!*



Skeegle-mobile
- *If I Ran the Zoo*



Bus Driver's Blight
Chimney Sweep's Stupor
Prune Picker's Plight
- *You're Only Old Once!*



Snick-Berry Switch
Triple-Sling Jigger
Jigger-Rock Snatchem
Kick-a-Poo Kid with Poo-a-Doo Powder
Eight-Nozzled, Elephant-Toted Boom-Blitz
Utterly Sputter
Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo
- *The Butter Battle Book*



Schlopp
- *Oh, the THINKS You Can Think!*



One-Wheeler Wubble
The Perilous Poozer of Pompelmoose Pass
- *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*



Throm-dim-bu-lator
Gick
Skrux
Snor
wamel
faddle

- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*



Who-pudding
Who-roast-beast
- *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*



SeptUmbur
- *On Beyond Zebra!*



grickle-grass
Lerkim
Snuuv
Whisper-ma-Phone
Truffula Trees
Thneeds
- *The Lorax*



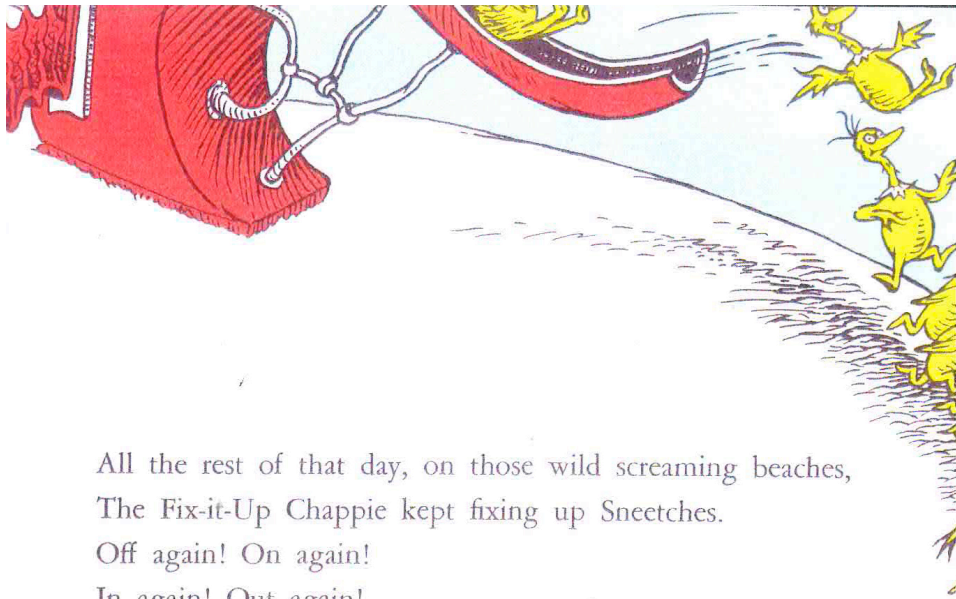
Piffulous pay
- *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*



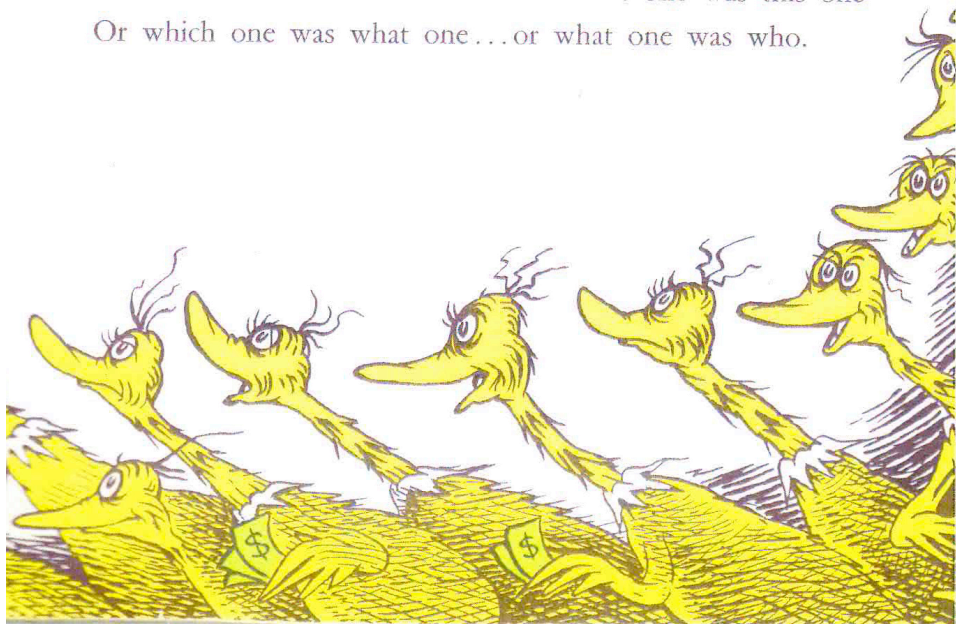
Thing-a-ma-Bobsk
- *If I Ran the Zoo*



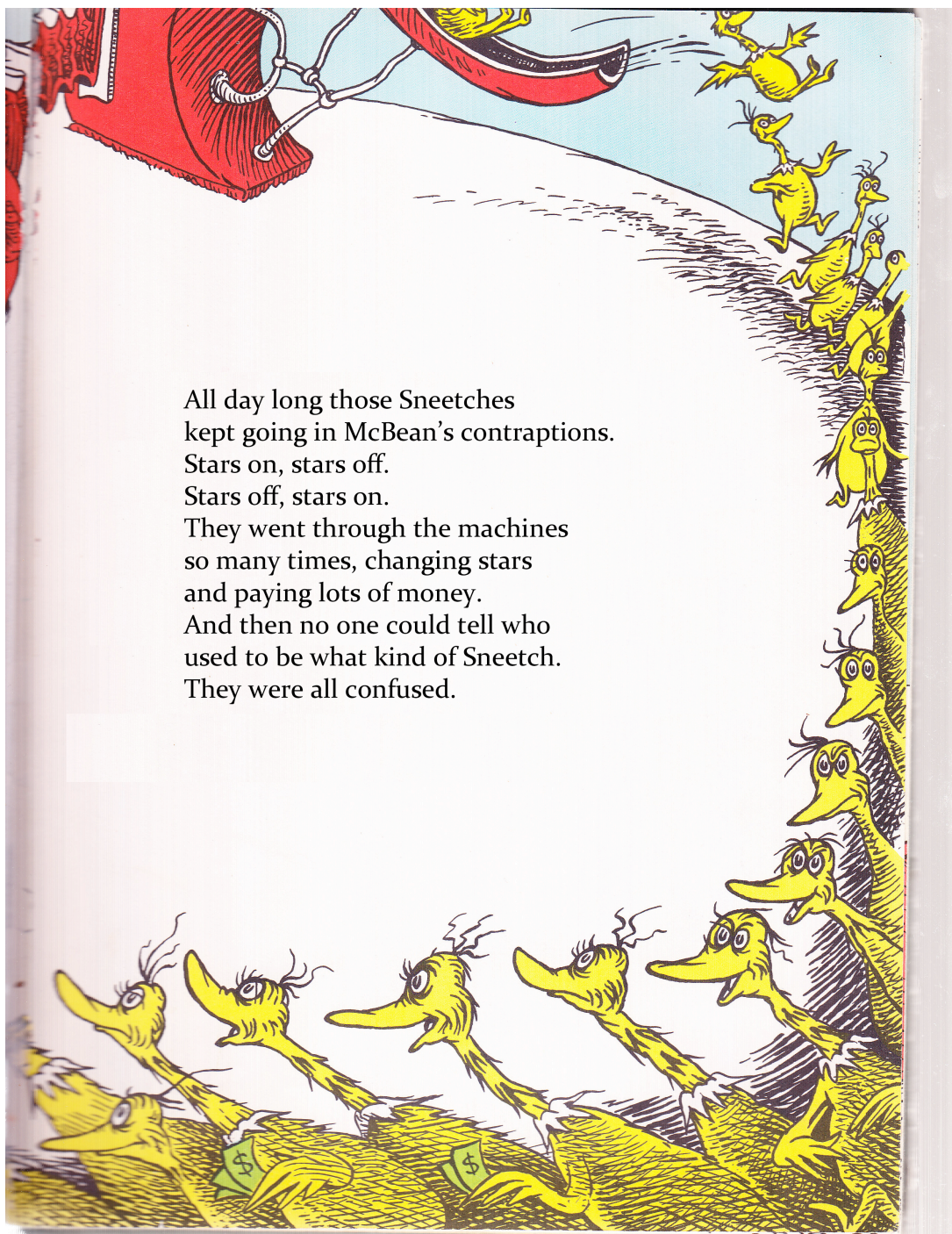
Appendix Three: Seuss v. Pseudo-Seuss book



All the rest of that day, on those wild screaming beaches,
The Fix-it-Up Chappie kept fixing up Sneetches.
Off again! On again!
In again! Out again!
Through the machines they raced round and about again,
Changing their stars every minute or two.
They kept paying money. They kept running through
Until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew
Whether this one was that one...or that one was this one
Or which one was what one...or what one was who.



Original Page from *The Sneetches*



All day long those Sneetches
kept going in McBean's contraptions.
Stars on, stars off.
Stars off, stars on.
They went through the machines
so many times, changing stars
and paying lots of money.
And then no one could tell who
used to be what kind of Sneetch.
They were all confused.

Pseudo-Seuss page from *The Sneetches*

Appendix Four: Comprehension Questions

Yertle the Turtle:

Literal:

What are some of the things Yertle was king of?
Why did Yertle's throne fall over?
Retell the story.

Inferential:

How do you think the turtles in the stack felt?
Why do you think Yertle ends up as king of the mud?
What do you think the author's message is?

Evaluative:

Is Yertle a person that you would want to be friends with? Why or why not?
Do you think Mack's burp was an accident? Why or why not?
What you think will happen next in the pond?

The Sneetches:

Literal:

What do the Sneetches disagree about?
What does Sylvester McMonkey McBean do?
Retell the story.

Inferential:

How do you think the plain-bellies felt at the beginning of the story?
Why were the stars important?
What do you think the author's message is?

Evaluative:

Do you think the Sneetches will keep getting along? Why or why not?
Is Sylvester a person you would like to be friends with? Why or why not?
Have you ever felt like the Sneetches? Is so, when?

Appendix Five: Scoring rubric

LITERAL COMPREHENSION

1. What do the Sneetches Disagree About?

Doesn't mention any information relevant to the story	Mentions info from story; doesn't mention stars	Understands Sneetches disagree because of stars	Understands some Sneetches have stars and some don't	Knows that stars function as symbol of status and difference
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2. What does Sylvester McMonkey McBean do?

Doesn't mention any information relevant to the story	Mentions info from story; answer not accurate	Knows that he makes machines	Knows that machines take stars on and off	Knows that he gets money from the Sneetches for stars; tricks them
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3. Retell the story.

1-2 events, may include incorrect information	Partial summary; some important characters and details	Adequate summary, few character names, almost all key events	Good summary, most character names, all important events	Excellent summary, all character names and events with key details
---	--	--	--	--

INFERENTIAL COMPREHENSION

4. How do you think the Plain-Bellies felt at the beginning of the story?

Fails to address the question	Offers a response with no evidence to support thinking	Sad, mad, basic response with little textual evidence	Reasonable response supported with textual evidence	Sophisticated response, thinking beyond the surface, but grounded in text
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5. Why were the stars important?

Fails to address the question	Offers a response with no evidence to support thinking	Offers a reasonable response with little textual evidence	Good response supported with textual evidence	Excellent response, evidence of sophisticated thinking
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6. What do you think that author's message is?

Little/no understanding of textual implications	Some understanding of text implications, little detail	Reasonable answer with some detail	Reasonable answer with supporting evidence	Sophisticated thinking, generalizing book to other contexts
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EVALUATIVE COMPREHENSION

7. Do you think the Sneetches will keep getting along? Why or why not?

Fails to address the question	Offers response, cites irrelevant evidence	Offers a reasonable response with little/basic evidence from text	Good response with solid textual evidence	Excellent response, includes textual evidence, but moves beyond the literal
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8. Would you like to be friends with Sylvester? Why or why not?

Fails to address the question	Offers response, cites irrelevant evidence	Offers a reasonable response with little/basic evidence from text	Good response with solid textual evidence	Excellent response, includes textual evidence, but moves beyond the literal
-------------------------------	--	---	---	---

9. Have you ever felt like the Sneetches? Why or why not?

Fails to address the question	Offers response, cites irrelevant evidence	Offers a reasonable response with little/basic evidence from text	Good response with solid textual evidence	Excellent response, includes textual evidence, but moves beyond the literal
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