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20 May 2022

Thinking Inter-Diegetically: A Renewed Model for Realizing Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as Figuring
Subjective Experience and an Ethic of Care

Dr. Seuss's works have long entertained readers of all ages, equally for their potential as tools for literacy and their merit as individual works of literature. His books are often fantastical and always enchanting, though they rarely deal in the historical tendency of children's literature to overt moralization. Although a few of his works deviate from this last quality, there is one which stands out in terms of both didactic purpose and richness of implicit moral and political material: 1971's *The Lorax*. Corresponding to the rise of the environmental movement in the United States that took place in the 1960s, *The Lorax* was influenced by and reflected its specific historical and political contexts in its telling of the antagonistic Once-ler's arrival to the Edenic Truffula Forest, degradation of it, and subsequent conflict with the eponymous Lorax. Combining the whimsical style of Dr. Seuss with its specificity and its nuanced understanding of its subject matter made *The Lorax* not only one of the author's favorite works of his own oeuvre, but also fruitful terrain upon which to support scholarly investigation into the popular understandings of its respective reference events, such as the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the publicization of the famous *Blue Marble* photo of Earth (Blair).

Although the initial scholarship that concerned the book was focused on its educational value, research and criticism since the 1990s has largely focused on two distinct conclusions regarding the events, characters, and perspectives that *The Lorax* presents. Employing a more

traditional, empathy-based approach to literary interpretation, the first of these conclusions takes up the effort of problematizing the simplistic conceptions of the characters of the Lorax and the Once-ler as representations of environmentalists and greedy business interests. Such approaches have, in effect, asked readers to abandon the idea of the narrative as a mere metaphor and instead to extend their personal identification with the narrative to characters with whom readers would typically disagree: for loggers to understand the position of the Lorax and for environmentalists to understand the motivations of the Once-ler. The second of these conclusions, on the other hand, has drawn from more philosophical approaches to focus on the ways in which *The Lorax* unsuccessfully attempts to remedy the environmental degradation that has characterized the time just before and since its publication. From across disciplines of literary analysis, the environmental humanities, ecocriticism, animal ethics, and political theory, then, *The Lorax* has given home to a vast breadth of fascinating, though disparate, academic investigations into the relationships humanity has between itself, other species, and the environment more broadly. Rather than forming a mosaic of interpretations, however, I argue that the existing scholarship on this book, when united under an inter-diegetic framework that respects the dialogues that occur both within the story and between the story and its readers, neither presents a wholly progressive and empowering message of a future human relationship with the environment nor condemns the book wholeheartedly as an failure in promoting a reconsideration of this relationship. *The Lorax* is in many ways like any work of literature, arising out of its imperfect context and therefore carrying many of the same imperfections that plagued the era in which it was written. Under this inter-diegetic approach, however, *The Lorax's* distinction from most literature becomes clear, as despite its failure as a piece of environmentalist propaganda, it provides a unique literary, pedagogical, and philosophical field on which readers of all ages and backgrounds can engage

not only with the story but with each other in order to rehabilitate human conceptions of our relationships and duties across individuals, generations, and species.

Perhaps the most overt re-consideration of the characters of *The Lorax* was conducted by the professor of English at Penn State Altoona, Ian Marshall. His “The Lorax and the Ecopolice” works from theories of rhetoric to problematize the Lorax as an ideal representative of the will of nature, instead casting him in the role of an “ecopolice” figure that relies too heavily on ethos to save the precious environment. This position, Marshall is careful to argue, does not negate the environmental damage done by the Once-ler, but rather brings into new light the more wholesome motivations and qualities the Once-ler may have had in the process of building his company: self-reliance, wise use of scarce resources, the development of jobs for his family, and playing what he saw as a productive role in his society. He argues the Lorax, on the other hand, is a “poor advocate” for the environment for which he speaks, his “insulting,” “sneering,” and “obnoxious” tone responsible for his inability to convince the Once-ler of the damages his actions will perpetrate (Marshall 89). So pompous and righteous can his mannerisms be described that Helen Kopnina, an environmental and sustainability researcher at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, utilized the term “The Lorax complex” to describe an emotional, cognitive, philosophical, and sometimes religious attitude that can characterize some so-called “radical environmentalists” (241). Applying a pedagogical perspective, Bob Henderson, Merle Kennedy, and Chuck Chamberlin – each professors of various disciplines in ecology and the humanities – seem to agree, at least in part, with Marshall’s conclusions, similarly problematizing the Lorax as a spokescreature for the truffula forest while blaming the Once-ler’s harms not simply on greed but on a surplus of “obedience” to assumed market incentives (Henderson, Kennedy, Chamberlin 134). Yet other scholars have taken a slightly different

approach, focusing their critique not on the characters of the story but on the theories of economic growth and value which led to those market incentives to which Henderson, Kennedy, and Chamberlin attributed the Once-ler's unethical behavior (Klaasen, Klaasen). Implicit in the technical aspects of these analyses is the shared understanding that the Once-ler's actions cannot be taken as the product of pure greed. As a consequence, the Lorax's actions must be reevaluated as well as his advocacy for the environment appears to be less pure when put in competition with this more complicated and understandable figure of the Once-ler. In other words, much recent scholarship on *The Lorax* has diverted attention away from more traditional analyses of its subject matter in favor of placing its central characters into a more rigorous dialogue, and in the process forcing renewed interpretations of the subjectivities of each character.

A thorough analysis of *The Lorax's* formal, literary, and artistic elements similarly yields a complicated picture of each character's motivations and their role in the overall themes and morals of the work. The establishment of a more complicated set of character perspectives than the simple battle between corporate greed and the environment is established from the earliest part of the book as the unnamed child stumbles upon the home of the Once-ler. His apparent greed is still evident as he demands "fifteen cents/and a nail/and the shell of a great-great-great-grandfather snail" in exchange for the story of how the once luscious forest came to take the dark, smoggy complexion it now holds (Seuss 6). Artistically, there is nuance within this early section of the book as well as Dr. Seuss's traditionally whimsical drawing style is ripped of its usual pastels and combined instead with dark blues, purples, and dense black lines to indicate the presence of air pollution (6-7). The Once-ler is thus hinted from the outset as being a mysterious figure unwarranting of trust, yet the story itself relies upon his narration. Potentially acting as a source of narrative doubt, this potential is quickly assuaged by the sudden

transition from the polluted wasteland of the present of the frame narrative to the beginning of the Once-ler's activities in the truffula forest in the past. Soon after, the ostensible antagonist of the story breaks the rhythm of the narrative's rhymes to that point, shifting from a perfect rhyme of "gray" and "away" to the shorter, more impactful lines with imperfect rhymes, "It all started way back.../such a long, long time back..." (10). Not only does this break in the rhythm of the narration jolt the reader to attention and prepare them for the shift that is about to take place between the grim state of the truffula forest and its rich state of old, but its specific diction – such as repeating the word "long" twice as if to wistfully hold on to the beauty of the forest that is now lost – draws attention to the Once-ler's own seeming regret at the state of the world he now inhabits. The next page immediately capitalizes on these sentiments, foisting upon the readers the pastels and whimsical art styles that are custom of the works of Dr. Seuss (12-13). The ever-hidden figure of the Once-ler encroaches upon the untouched and Edenic environment of the truffula forest in a wagon. Every creature on the page, to include the Once-ler's own unidentifiable pack animal, is smiling. Even the truffula tufts are textured in such a way as to imply a gentle ease, suggesting that the mere air of the landscape is already sufficient to bring fulfillment to all creatures who enter it. The implicit comparison between the forest and an Edenic paradise is not temporary, as the picture of Brown Bar-ba-loots playing and foraging to their contentment calls back to Renaissance artwork that figures whimsical, toil-less play as a feature of paradise (14). The Once-ler himself appears to be similarly enchanted by the forest, describing a feeling of "great ... joy in [his] heart" upon entering this environment (17). However, his conception of paradise appears to be eminently different from that of every other creature present in the forest. Whereas every animal seems to take the forest for what it is, the Once-ler sees it as a place of unrealized opportunity. As he grazes the truffula tufts for the first

time and unloads his cart in preparation for the construction of his shop, for the first time a Swomee-Swan and a Brown Bar-ba-loot are shown not with smiles but with looks of shock and uncertainty (16-17). The conflict between the Once-ler's conception of paradise and that of the forest's indigenous creatures, then, is the first sign of conflict in the story, hinting that this conflict of subjectivity and experience will be the central conflict of the narrative.

The creation of the first Thneed, sewed from the tuft of a chopped-down truffula tree in a shop foreign to the natural environment of the forest, serves as the first realization of this conflict, the impact of which is sufficient to literally conjure the Once-ler's supposed counterpart: the Lorax. Interestingly, the pattern of the Lorax's characterization mirrors that of the Once-ler, being described not favorably but as "shortish," "oldish," "sharpish," and "bossy" (21). The Lorax is vaguely human but obviously occupies a space between the animal and the human, sporting a bushy mustache and a recognizable face but having it attached to a body that more resembles the Brown Bar-ba-loots than any human figure. He is thus made out to be an anthropomorphic representative of the forest, speaking eloquently "for the trees, for the trees have no tongues" (23). To echo the sentiments of Ian Marshall, the Lorax's anger at the destruction of a truffula tree and its transformation into a thneed can only be considered at first to be disproportionate as the pastels of the forest remain intact and his claim of "speaking for the trees" appears unfounded at best. It is only as the story develops, the Once-ler's operation continues growing, and the impact it has on the forest is revealed that the Lorax's position is made reasonable. The increasing number of truffula stumps, pollution in the water and the air, and displaced animals within the forest make the impact of the Once-ler's operation evident, and thus the magnitude of the Lorax's indignation proportional. His exact method of communicating his position, however, may still be considered by many to be untenable. What *The Lorax*

presents, then, is not a simple, linear narrative of a battle between corporate greed and the environment, but a more complex representation of the many ways in which various people with various interests on the various sides of this reductive analysis can fall.

The operative question within the narrative at this point would then appear to be one of identification. The Once-ler may indeed be a representation of greed, but he is equally a businessman operating in the economic interests of his family and his community; that such interests conflict with the best interests of the environment is not under his control. The Lorax may indeed speak for the trees and the creatures of the truffula forest, but the question of his authority to speak for the non-verbal inhabitants of the forest is brought into doubt as a result of their evidently purposeful expressions and affects. The boy at the center of the frame narrative as well presents an enigma, being perhaps indeed a representation of the potential of children to better the world, but also famously not definitely deciding to take on the task of bringing back the Lorax. In order to resolve these conflicts, I propose an inter-diegetic framework of analysis as a means of understanding the ways in which the complexities of *The Lorax*'s characters interact with each other and with the readers of their narrative. A professor of ecology and conservation at the University of Hawaii, Helen Spafford hints at such a framework by arguing in her "Scientists in the Politicoscientific Community: Beyond the Lorax" that *The Lorax* presents a case study for understanding the ways in which scientists should engage with the political community in order to produce not only scientifically sound, but just outcomes. Effective outcomes for environmental and scientific policy more broadly, she argues, requires scientists to inject their personal values into their policy advocacy, commenting in parallel to *The Lorax* that "facts and science do not speak for themselves" (Spafford 61). The shared experiences of the Lorax and the scientific community make them a classic example of didactic literature, allowing

for scientists to learn from the defamiliarized and yet all-too-familiar story of the Lorax advocating for worthwhile regulations to unlistening ears.

What moves *The Lorax* beyond traditional children's and didactic literature – and thus what moves the advantageous framework from that of more traditional literary analysis to a framework of subjectivities – is the very complexity of character that the narrative presents. The Lorax and the Once-ler obviously reduce each other's positions to overly-reductive caricatures, the former ignoring the latter's assertion that a "Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need" (*The Lorax* 24). Hyperbolic as this statement may be, the success of the Thneed sufficient to be bought immediately and to support an ever-growing industrial operation evidences the inadequacy of the Lorax's conception of his counterpart's position. The latter likewise ignores the former's pleading on account of the Brown Bar-ba-loots, ignoring their own value as creatures by asserting that "business is business!/And business must grow/regardless of crummies in tummies, you know" (35). Regardless of modern sensibilities surrounding *The Lorax* and the environmental issues it portrays, the characters within it are not acting out of some hyperbolic, Scrooge-level of greed nor out of unadulterated wisdom of what is right for all creatures. The creatures themselves – the Brown Bar-ba-loots, the Swomee-Swans, and the Humming Fish – are all eminently expressive in typical Dr. Seuss fashion, suggesting they, too, hold subjective experiences that the narrative values in spite of its principal characters all but ignoring them. They are indeed humanized to a certain extent, but unlike such other works of Dr. Seuss like *Horton Hears a Who*, the creatures of the forest are essentially non-human. Their subjective experience is not made more understandable, but taken for what it is: foreign to humans and yet just as obviously holding intrinsic value. The intricacies of the narrative's treatment of these respective subjectivities and the relationships between them must thus be

taken up by the reader. Even though readers could easily identify with any one of the Lorax, the Once-ler, or the animals of the truffula forest, all three principal perspectives likely hold elements with which any reader can identify.

What is created then, under a critical reading of *The Lorax*, is not just a spirit of identification and sympathy with any one character within the narrative but with parts of each of their perspectives as parts of the whole of their subjective experiences. The true nature of the conflict inherent to the book is thus not entirely contained within the story but is determined by a dialogue between all authentic experiences – all subjectivities – involved both within and without it; the negotiation between the story’s diegetic and non-diegetic subjectivities, between those of the characters and the readers, thus serves as the foundation of the negotiation that takes place between the forces of the environment, business, ethics, self-reliance, and inter-species relationships within the book.

The most impactful repercussion of this framework is yielded not from applying it to the Lorax, nor the Once-ler, nor even the Brown Bar-ba-loots or the Swomee-Swans, but to the unnamed boy who serves as the impetus of the story and the center of its frame narrative. His subjective experience is perhaps most neglected of all from both a diegetic and non-diegetic standpoint, with the Once-ler as well as readers placing all their hope for the return of the Lorax and the creatures of the truffula forest into his hands. He could be any child who encounters the book; in many respects, he is. As a result, the removal of his agency is perhaps the most singular example of *The Lorax*’s belonging in a particular genre of children’s apocalyptic literature that Gerry Canavan, a professor of English at Marquette University, states tends to “reconcile children to [an] unhappy necrofuture,” and in the process hides the responsibility of parents in creating such a future (83). However, *The Lorax* again distinguishes itself through its more

complicated presentation of opposing characters and their motivations. Like the Lorax's caricature of the Once-ler as a greedy businessman and the Once-ler caricature of the Lorax as a snobbish eco-warrior, the boy's own subjectivity is reduced by the pressures placed upon him. The Once-ler, who presumably has no authority over the boy, passes the hope and burden of the last of the truffula seeds onto him, giving him the imperative to "Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack./Then the Lorax/and all of his friends/may come back" (61). The boy and those millions of children whom he represents may, and likely do, have other hopes and aspirations in life. To force onto them the responsibility of fixing past mistakes of environmental degradation is as much subjectivity-reducing as it was of the Once-ler to destroy the habitat of the creatures of the truffula forest. Depressing as it may be, this more complex recognition and evaluation of the various perspectives in negotiation both within the narrative and without it not demonstrate an upward trajectory for our world but a trajectory that is dependent on honoring all those who live within the world. Working in the University of Stockholm's education department, Viktor Johansson uses this observation of the boy's role not to condemn *The Lorax* as ineffectual but to acknowledge the interdependence of the characters of the narrative. He writes that "the child and the Once-ler share the same fate; they both bear the responsibility and the consequences of one another's lives and actions" (Johansson 360). Despite these actions and consequences being displaced unequally in time, the mutual responsibility these characters share remains. As a result, they both have a duty of care to one another and to all the beings with subjective experiences of the world they inhabit; that the Once-ler did not act to the fullest extent of this duty does not negate the responsibility of the boy to do so.

In these ways, *The Lorax* does not deal with more complex questions of how an ethic of care may irresponsibly burden later generations with the unethical actions of the past. What it

does do, however – and what it does better than most any work of children’s or didactic literature of the past century – is call for the establishment of a rigorous ethic of care that recognizes not only the perspectives of children, nor of adults, nor of animals, nor of an idealized nature more broadly. Rather, *The Lorax* encourages its readers of all ages to jump wholeheartedly into the messy conflicts of motivations, needs, and interests that each of its characters have and may have and to take these characters not for caricatures, but for individuals with valuable and equal subjective experiences. As a piece of environmental propaganda, its potential is therefore limited. It fails to recognize the structural inequities and barriers that continue to perpetuate such ills as climate change and mass extinction. As a medium in which to develop individual understanding of other individuals regardless of species, however, *The Lorax* is unparalleled. It asks us as readers to recognize each of its expressive characters’ motivations and intrinsic value and in doing so asks us to extend this franchise of consideration between and beyond the text. By thinking inter-diegetically of not only the Lorax, the boy, or the Brown-bar-ba-loots but of the Once-ler, of loggers, of children, and of the smallest of creatures in our real lives, *The Lorax* trains us in the tools to not only regrow the forest but to replenish the diverse Eden that the forest once was, for ourselves, for other humans, for Brown-bar-ba-loots, and for the Lorax alike.

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