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It's OK Struwwelpeter

Struwwelpeter, a popular children's book, contains many silly illustrations that are both realistic yet comically brutal. The children are described as performing horrible acts while the adults in the book are satisfied by punishing the children. However, there are many stories in Struwwelpeter where the children's actions do not seem very naughty yet the theme of the children getting punished is consistent. After analyzing these discrepancies, we find that the author shows how children's abnormalities are ignored by adults who blame the abnormalities on the children, and we realize the author is telling children that it is okay to have abnormal dreams and ambitions, as long as they are balanced with critical thinking.

Shock-headed Peter, the first story in Struwwelpeter, establishes the narrator as untrustworthy and hints at how adults ignore children's abnormalities by blaming the children for behaving poorly. The first thing the narrator says is "Just look at him!" and describes Peter's appearance as "disgusting." Right from the start we can tell that the narrator is a biased narrator and injects their personal opinions about the children / scenes into their narration. The narrator does not just call Peter a sloven, he explicitly declares it, as if his view is the only correct view. We will see that throughout the stories, the narrator frames the children as bad kids that perform horrible acts and they do not even consider the children's perspectives. We will also see how the

narrator acts as though these children's abnormalities are of their own fault and disregards the chance that their actions could be the result of some preexisting condition.

For example, in this first story, we are told that Peter is a bad child because he doesn't cut his hair or nails. However, there may be a deeper reason for this behavior that is overlooked. For example, Peter could have hemophilia and would be in danger of dying if he cut himself, so maybe it is the fault of his parents who do not help him groom because they do not want to acknowledge their son's disease, are too lazy, or are afraid of cutting their son but do not find an alternative. The narrator explicitly blames Peter for being unkempt while in reality, the situation may be out of his control.

While it may be a bit of a stretch to say that Peter has a blood clotting disorder, the next story about Frederick clearly demonstrates the narrator's active disregard for children's disorders. Many children love acting as powerful kings. Frederick is no exception and desires to be above everyone else. He kills birds that would normally fly high above him, bringing them down to the ground; he breaks chairs, making people that would normally be seated fall to the ground; he throws a cat down the stairs, and he even whips "his" Mary like he is whipping a slave. Frederick's horrible actions should have him be severely punished and brought back down to reality, but we do not see him being punished. If the narrator wanted to show Frederick as a bad child, he would include how Frederick is punished, but all we see is Frederick lying in bed, implying that something else is amiss.

We find a potential discrepancy at the end of the first paragraph of the story—Frederick "whipp'd his Mary, till she cried." While this wording makes Frederick seem cruel, it implies that he stopped whipping Mary when she started crying, showing that Frederick does have empathy.

This is another example of the author portraying the child as the villain, but we see that Frederick has empathy and is not punished. We also see that the reason Frederick has such crazy thoughts is not because he likes to be disobedient, but because he has a disorder. On the second page, there is a man who looks like a doctor holding a spoon with a bottle labeled "For Frederick," and we see Frederick calmly laying in bed. The spoon and the name implies that it is medicine prescribed for Frederick, so it is reasonable to say that Frederick has ADHD or a similar disorder that makes him hyper, and the medicine calms him down. The narrator does not explain that Frederick has ADHD or even that Frederick is sick, implying that the narrator is purposefully ignoring Frederick's illness and just labeling him as a bad kid to tell children not to be like him. Again, this supports the view that the narrator is downplaying children's conditions and blaming the children themselves for their abnormal behavior.

This theme of portraying the children as the villains continues throughout most of the stories. I will quickly go through a few more. For Harriet, we are told that the matches burn, crackle, spit, and flame, and that Harriet's "Mamma, too, often does the same." This image implies that the mother does not care that much about Harriet -- not enough to teach her basic fire safety. Moreover, the cats cry a pond, eliciting a bit of irony in that the cats could have saved Harriet with the water, but instead just "mew" and scold her. The narrator does not acknowledge these points and simply blames the fire on Harriet's naughtiness.

In the sixth story, Conrad won't stop sucking his thumb and gets it cut off. Cutting off fingers is weird in a modern day context, but it was once common to get rid of fingers if they were infected so that the infection would not spread to the rest of the body. One can imagine how itchy Conrad's thumb would have been if it were infected, so sucking it may not be a purely

disobedient action, especially if Conrad's parents do not help treat his infection. Therefore the cutting of Conrad's thumb is not a punishment for his poor listening skills, but a way to save Conrad's life, something the narrator completely overlooks.

The next story describes a "naughty" Augustus that "scream(s)" about how he does not want to eat, but with the earlier examples of illnesses and disorders, we can reasonably guess that Augustus has anorexia, a medical condition associated with a loss of appetite.

In the last story, we meet Robert, who goes outside when it's raining and is blown away. The narrator compares Robert to other good children, who "stay at home and mind their toys" when it rains, while Robert thinks "it is better out of doors." From a quick glance, the story seems relatively plain and neutral, until the narrator says that "no one heard [Robert's] screams and cries." We then see Robert's blood red umbrella and realize that Robert isn't being blown away by the wind, but by his parents' abusive relationship. If we look at the story with the lens of Robert running away from home, we notice that the rain symbolizes tears being shed by Robert; the good kids distract themselves from the pain by playing with their toys, while Robert understands that being out of the house means he's safe. The red umbrella symbolizes Robert's feelings of anger and anguish, which normally distracts him from crying, but eventually drives him to run away.

Something odd about this story is that the narrator never explicitly says that Robert is a bad kid. He is only compared to "good kids" at the beginning and the rest of the story is neutral. Why does the narrator complain about how naughty the kids in the other stories are? Have we overlooked something about the narrator and only looked shallowly at their words?

Going back, if we take a look at which kids are labeled explicitly as "naughty", we find that there are five kids that are not naughty. After reading these stories, we will realize there is another message about children's minds, and that the narrator might not be who we think he is. The story right before Robert is the story about Little Johnny Head-in-Air, which describes childhood as a time for children to be curious. Johnny walks with his head in the clouds, "looking at the sky" and never thinking about what is "in his way." While "watch[ing] the swallows trying, which was cleverest at flying," Johnny walks into a river. He is helped out and is laughed at by the fish for losing his notebook. The comment about how Johnny watches the "cleverest at flying," along with repeated mentions of how Johnny has his head up high and images of Johnny's notebook (Johnny's story is also the only one that mentions school) implies that Johnny is a smart kid who has even wondered how to fly. The final image shows Johnny's red notebook drifting away looking like an envelope, and Johnny standing drenched and miserable. The narrator is sending a message to the children reading that it is ok to be like Johnny and think about crazy things, like how swallows fly and how the sun appears and disappears in the sky ("Johnny watch'd the bright round sun going in and coming out").

The next story appears in the middle of the book and conveys a message to children about how adults are not always to be listened to. In this story, a "green man" goes out hunting and ends up being hunted after he takes a nap. The man is out to "have some fun" and brings his spectacles to see better. The hare steals the rifle and spectacles and uses them to hunt the man, who shouts "Help! Fire! Help!" The story ends with the hare's child getting unintentionally hurt by the adult hare, and the child cries "such fun I do not understand." This game that the adults are playing is full of deceit and power. The man dresses to hide his true skin color by blending in

with the surroundings and also cries "Fire!" when there is no fire, showing that he isn't afraid to lie in the game for power. This game of power also blinds the adults. They both have a chance to see clearly with the spectacles, but neither do as they both use the spectacles as an advantage in the game. The child here is confused as to why the adults play this game of power and lies, implying that the author is warning children of adults and their true intentions.

Taking another look at the second story with Frederick in the context of the separation between children's thoughts and adults', we see at the end of the story what Frederick would be doing if he had acted like the adults wanted him to act, as a good child. Tray, a dog, is happily sitting in Frederick's chair and eats the nice food that was laid out for Frederick. If Frederick had behaved, he would have been able to eat this nice food, but the author portrays this scene with a dog, implying that a "good child" is no more than an animal being taken care of by adults. They are saying that Frederick is a boy who does not follow the good child persona and is instead doing what he wants to do, regardless of whether or not the adults approve of him.

Finally, the first story that does not mention a naughty child is Shock-Headed Peter. The author illustrates Peter with his chest puffed out and him opening his hands, almost like he is saying "this is me whether you like it or not." We also notice that the author is showcasing Peter by putting him as the first story and even on the cover. The author is telling children that it is okay to be proud of who you are, even if people tell you otherwise.

Now if we step back and look at the order of which children are labelled by the author as naughty and which aren't, we see that the stories of children that are not labelled as naughty are 1, 2, 5, 9, and 10, an eerie symmetry. If we analyze this further, we see that the messages of the first two stories of Peter and Frederick are about being proud of who you are, no matter what

others think, and having dreams and ambitions that might not follow your parents' wishes. The last two stories about Johnny Head-in-Air and Robert that gets blown away are about thinking and not acting hastily. Johnny is always thinking about the world and trips and falls into rivers because of it. Robert thinks about what to do in context of his parents' relationship and actively decides to run away. Both are thoughtful and not afraid to act on their unconventional thoughts. The middle story about the hares is where the little hare realizes that the adult world is full of lies and power-hungry people.

The author uses this symmetry to tell children that it is okay to be proud of who you are and have dreams, but they should balance them with critical and unconventional thinking. As the stories progress, the author mirrors what he wants a child to be thinking, going from being proud of themselves in the first two stories, to realizing the adult world isn't what they thought it was in the fifth story, to forming their own opinion about the world in the final stories. To further ingrain this message, the author explicitly displays his message in the split between naughty and not naughty children. All the children that were labelled as naughty act purely on their immediate feelings. Harriet sees a match and instantly reaches for it; the inky boys see a black man and immediately jest at him; Conrad sucks his thumb immediately after his mother leaves; Augustus suddenly does not feel like drinking his soup; Fidgety Philip fidgets without thought. The author is telling readers that naughty children act without thinking, while good children have ambitions and think critically.

To connect this idea with the earlier argument about how the author argues that childhood abnormalities are ignored by adults and the children are blamed for their quirks instead of being helped, we see that the naughty children mostly have disorders and diseases while the not

naughty children mostly do not, implying that the real children with these mental illnesses are the children who act impulsively.

To summarize this essay, we first looked at how the stories show that childhood abnormalities are ignored by adults who put the blame of their children's abnormalities on the children themselves, then we found a discrepancy between who was explicitly called naughty and who wasn't. We then took a closer look at the not naughty children and found a progression of childhood of having dreams and thinking, then analyzed the differences between naughty and nice children to reinforce the earlier ideas, then linked the two main points about childhood abnormalities and acting without thinking.

Works used:

The English Struwwelpeter or Pretty Stories and Funny Pictures by Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Hollis Ma