



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR  
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

**“...NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES,  
LET THE VIRGINIAN WOLFSNAKE NEAR A  
TYPEWRITER.”**

Theory of Incongruity, Bakhtin's Theory of the  
Carnavalesque and Metafiction in Lemony Snicket's  
*A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

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**Title:** “...never under any circumstances, let the Virginian Wolfsnake near a typewriter.”: Theory of Incongruity, Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnavalesque and Metafiction in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

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**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to map out and examine the various forms of humour present in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In addition, this essay analyses what purpose the humour serves to the text. The essay's claim is that humour is ever-present in the books and provides not only comic amusement, but also dismantles general ideas and norms. Due to the humour's complexity, I argue that several theories need to apply as frameworks in order to fully understand the humour and to what extent it occurs. Upon identifying the different recurring features I analyse the texts in relation to the theory of incongruity, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and ideas about metafiction. In extension, the essay will show how the theories interlink with the humour found within the novels.

**Keywords:** *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Lemony Snicket, theory of incongruity, carnivalesque, metafiction, humour in children's literature

**Abbreviations:** ASoUE (A Series of Unfortunate Events)

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# 1.Introduction

*A Series of Unfortunate Events* follows the life of Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire, who become orphans after their parents die in a mysterious fire. During the course of the books they time and time again have to protect their fortune, which their parents left behind, from the evil Count Olaf, a distant relative who constantly plots to steal their money. The stories of the children are told through the book's Lemony Snicket, who is presented as both narrator and author. In reality Snicket is only the pen name of the book's actual author, Daniel Handler.

The series, consisting of 13 books, have been well received and have sold over 65 million copies worldwide. The sophistication of Snicket's language and his use of humour have helped attract the attention of not only children but also adults who desperately want to find out what happens to the three unlucky orphans. The books have received a lot of praise from critics, particularly for their unusual style. *Kirkus Review* notes, for example, their use of "...bold narration, dark humor, exaggerated emotions and dialogue, humorously stereotypical characters, and an overriding conflict between good and evil" (2001).

Even though there is a dark gothic tone, there is a lot of humour present in the books and despite the fact that the books are well known for their use of humour, not a lot has been written in relation to it specifically. In this essay I am interested in mapping out recurring features of humour, in order to prove that humour is a ubiquitous aspect within the books. I will analyse the humour in relation to the theory of incongruity as well as Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and metafiction, which I argue is necessary due to the complexity of the humour. Furthermore, I argue that the humour used to serve only as comic amusement but also dismantles norms and provides social critique through the use of parody and other metafictional narrative devices. Subsequently, I will demonstrate how these three theories interlink in regard to the humour used within the series.

## 2. Previous research

Relatively little has been written academically about ASoUE: the books have not garnered the same popularity among scholars as other modern children's bestsellers, such as *Harry Potter*. The majority of the articles that have been published have a pedagogical aim and focus on Snicket's use of language in the books. In 'Using Lemony Snicket to Bring Smiles to Your Vocabulary Lessons' (2009), Lisa Arter and Allen Nielsen encourage teachers to use the books in their English teaching. Patricia Wood discusses, in 'Reading Instruction With Gifted and Talented Readers: A Series of Unfortunate Events or a Sequence of Auspicious Results?' (2008), the benefits of Handler's incorporation of advanced vocabulary. She explains how the use of the novels has been proven useful when trying to develop children's appreciation for reading.

In 'Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events: Daniel Handler and Marketing the Author' (2012) Kendra Magnusson explores Handler's use of the character Lemony Snicket as the author of the books, the use of paratexts, and the metafiction they bring to the books. Laurie Langbauer in 'The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X' (2007) also touches upon the subject of the book's use of metafiction. Langbauer concentrates particularly on how the books, that are aimed for children aged 8-14, also appeal to adolescents, as a result of metafictional techniques. All of these articles mention the humorous nature of the books, but only in passing.

An exception is Julie Cross who writes about ASoUE in relation to its use of humour in "Frightening and Funny: Humour in Children's Gothic Fiction" (2009). In it she draws connections to several children's gothic works such as Roald Dahl's books *Matilda* and *Jack and the Giant Peach*, and Henrietta Branford's books about Dimanche Diller to Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and their use of incongruity. However, she fails to draw these connections to ASoUE which is why her essay is helpful for the research of this essay but also leaves a gap to be explored.

### 3. Theoretical framework and method

This essay will use close reading, in relation to the theories and concept described below, as a method to analyse the texts, demonstrating the presence of recurring themes and stylistic features. Only texts from the first three books (*The Bad Beginning*, *The Reptile Room* and *The Wide Window*) are being analysed, as studying all 13 books would be too expansive a sample for an essay this length.

#### 3.1 Theories of humour and incongruity

The field of humour studies is largely dominated by three theories: the superiority theory, the release theory and the incongruity theory. In *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* Noël Carroll describes all three theories. The superiority theory grounds itself in malice towards others, especially people who are vain, stupid, ugly or people with physical disabilities. Thomas Hobbes suggest that the reason we laugh is due to the sense of superiority we feel towards these individuals (2014: 8-9). The release theory, developed by Sigmund Freud suggest that laughter works as a relief and in doing so, reveals our suppressed desires (2014: 38). Last of the three theories is the incongruity theory. In this theory jokes and situations that challenge our preconceptions are seen as humorous since they break away from what is thought of as being ‘normal’ (2014: 17).

This essay will use incongruity in order to analyse and identify how humour works in the books. From this I will analyse the texts in relation to the carnivalesque and metafiction in order to show how the humour presented in the books interlinks with all three theories.

#### 3.2. Theory of incongruity

The theory, developed in the 18th century, has gained a significant following among humour theorists. Carroll summarises the premise of the theory as the following:

According to the incongruity theory, what is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm—that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be. (2014: 17)

This means that we experience something as humorous when it challenges our preconceived notions, when something is not how it is meant to be, or how we think it should be. This is often

achieved through the element of surprise. However, surprise is not itself enough to produce incongruity, as Carroll points out.

If we want to employ the language of *expectations* with respect to comic amusement, then we should not be thinking of specific expectations, such as ‘How exactly will Pat in the opening joke respond to the bartender?’ Rather, we should be thinking of our global expectations about how the world is supposed to be. (2014: 18)

He uses the expression ‘If pigs could fly’ to illustrate this idea. This absurd saying misplaces pigs in the category of objects able to fly, thus violating a standing concept which is why it is perceived as funny. The way we see the world is shaped by an enormous number of norms, or congruities, which is why the occurrence of incongruities is likely in numerous aspects.

Incongruities are created in a wide range of ways: contradictions, mistakes, absurdities and ambiguity can all be the cause of incongruity, which is partly why the theory is so popular. Francis Hutcheson, who contributed to the development of the incongruity theory in the 18th century, argued that laughter is derived from contrasts, such as ‘grandeur, dignity, sanctity and perfection and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity.’ Carroll uses American comedienne Sarah Silverman as a contemporary example of this notion saying: “Sarah Silverman is comically effective because it is so incongruous that such a sweet-looking young woman spouts such obscenities and vitriol; she appears stereotypically ‘innocent’ but then speaks in a way that would make a sailor blush” (2014: 19). Silverman’s use of foul language takes us by surprise as it challenges our global preconceptions of how ‘sweet looking’ young women ought to talk like. All other ‘sweet-looking young women’ must remain innocent in order for Silverman to be the exception. If this changes, the comic amusement is lost as she would no longer be an incongruity; therefore, the incongruous is always dependent on the congruous. If everything were anarchic there would be no expectations to break away from, which is why there always has to be norms, dominant orders and ideologies that shape the way we think in order for incongruity to exist.

The use of incongruous humour in regard to children is very common. In *Children’s Humor* McGhee and Chapman propose that children as young as four months are capable of processing incongruity stimuli as humorous. At that early stage it is incongruity in its most primitive form, such as disappearing and reappearing when playing peek-a-boo or having the child play with a Jack-in-the-box. As the child becomes older their ability to process more complex forms of incongruity develops. At around the age of 7 or 8 the child’s brain is developed

enough to process that not all events occur in real life but can be events of the imagination. Upon realising this, the child can begin to experience fantasy incongruous events as amusing (1980: 4-5). This is why when someone uses the term ‘If pigs could fly’ the child at this age usually has enough understanding to grasp the incongruity and possibly perceive it as humorous. Carroll notes that another crucial aspect to children’s perception of incongruity is that the environment where the incongruity occurs needs to be safe and harmless in order for them to be amused. For example, the use of violent acts, or people falling and actually hurting themselves, can cause a sense of unease or danger, which can lead to the affected being traumatised (2014: 34).

### 3.3 Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque

A popular element in children’s literature is the use of the carnivalesque. Similar to the theory of incongruity, the carnivalesque derives its humour from opposing the dominant order. To illustrate his theory Mikhail Bakhtin uses the medieval carnival: “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (1984: 10). The carnival was held before Lent each year and during the feast what was thought of as the ‘natural order’ was temporarily switched around. The slaves would become masters, the wise would become fools and so on. Andrew Stott explains the carnival further as “... a fixture of the medieval calendar, carnival was a special holiday that permitted the temporary suspension of social rules and codes of conduct and deference” (2005: 34). This switch was not in a literal sense, but with everyone playing along creating a “... ‘world-turned-upside-down’ scenario where slave governs master...” (2005: 2) that, at the end of the feast, would switch back to its ‘natural order’. The limitation of this switch is vital. Maria Nikolajeva writes that “the necessary condition of carnival is the reestablishment of the original order, that is, return to normal life. Carnival is always a temporary, transitional phenomenon—so is childhood.” (2000: 136-137). Due to this, people are not able to overturn the prevailing order, but only allowed fleeting moments of dominance, on the conditions set by the dominant order.

In carnivalesque children’s literature it is the children who are wise, independent and brave, whilst the adults are often the ones who get fooled. Among the academic work written on the theory present in children’s literature, John Stephen’s *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* (1992) is the most notable. He describes the traits of a carnivalesque text as the following:



Carnival in children's literature is grounded in a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity. It expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness and is often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres, or as literature in non-canonical forms. Its discourse is often idiomatic, and rich in a play of signifiers which foregrounds the relativity of sign-thing relationships, and hence the relativity of prevailing 'truths' and ideologies. (1992: 122-123)

While claiming language as a central part, he points out that carnival in children's literature rarely uses foul and harsh vocabulary, as the language of the people of the feast does. Instead, the focus is on using idiomatic language to mock authority; parents, guardians, teachers and their rules, which children must comply to. Furthermore, Stephens' point about the carnival not wanting to conform can be related to ideas of incongruity. The carnival relies on people's preconceived ideas about what the dominant order is, then being able to break that norm and therefore create comic amusement. The relationship between the carnivalesque and the dominant order, therefore, is comparable to the one of the incongruous and the congruous. They exist due to the norms which govern worldviews: without these there can be no carnival or incongruity.

Stephens further identifies three types of carnivalesque texts within children's literature. The first one consists of stories that offer the characters 'time-out' and where adults are rarely present. The second one mocks in order to "dismantle socially received ideas and replace them with their opposite", Stephens refers to this one as 'value inversion'. The third, called 'transgression', composes books which are "endemically subversive of such things as social authority, received paradigms of behaviour and morality" (1992: 121). In addition to identifying the different text types, Stephens also notes different characteristics found within the three texts (See appendix A). For example, he classifies the different moods, modes, registers and textualities to which each text type conforms to 'Value inversion' and 'transgression' both possess parodic modes and self-reflexive textuality, whilst 'time out' is more serious and lacks self-reflexivity. The registers differ between all three text types; 'time out' being idiomatic and acceptable, 'transgression' being idiomatic and taboo and 'value inversion' being ironic and situational. However, all three text types possess playful moods, one of the main characteristics of the carnivalesque text according to Stephens. The application of Stephens' ideas, regarding the theory of the carnivalesque, on the texts from *ASoUE* will allow the analysis to go more in-depth on the humour used, which is not bound only to jokes relating to the theory of incongruity.

### 3.4 Metafiction

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "...a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." (1984: 2). This often involves inversion of the relation between fiction and reality. Here we see a link to the carnivalesque whose texts also use inversion to 'draw attention to its status as an artefact'. To achieve inversion, non-traditional narrative and discursive techniques are commonly used. According to *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* metafiction uses:

overtly intrusive narrators who directly address readers and comment on their own narration; disruptions of the spatio-temporal narrative axis and of diegetic levels of narration; parodic appropriations of other texts, genres and discourses; typographic experimentation; mixing of genres, discourse styles, modes of narration and speech representation; multiple character focalizers, narrative voices and narrative strands. (McCallum, 2014: 397)

By using these techniques, as opposed to monological and story-driven narratives, McCallum argues that the reader is allowed greater interpretive space when reading a text since they frequently oppose traditional expectations regarding closure and meaning (2014: 398).

Metafiction is characterised by self-reflexivity, the act of openly reflecting and referring back to its own fictional status, and parody, where texts imitate other works of fiction or genres in order to ridicule. In addition, metafictional devices share characteristics presented by Stephens for the carnivalesque text. Linda Hutcheon takes note of this similarity between the two and even argues that "contemporary metafiction is decidedly characterized by a very Bakhtinian, ironic use of parodic forms." (1985: 72). Through the use of nonconforming narrative techniques and parody, metafiction challenges the norm of traditional ways of storytelling. The use of these new techniques helps create incongruities, which in conjunction with the use of parody, frequently lead to comic amusement. However, metafictional narrative is not by any means bound to only comic amusement. Using, for instance, parody and irony in a text, the humour derived can also provide social critique and political implications. This relates to Stephens' idea of the carnivalesque, where he claims that carnival texts often use mockery in order to dismantle general ideas and norms.

In *The Metafictional Nature of Postmodern Picturebooks* (2014) Sylvia Pantaleo identifies and lines up metafictional devices found in literature (See appendix B). Several of the devices

pointed out by Pantaleo regard narration. These include narrators that directly address the reader, narrators who become one of the characters and narratives containing discontinuities, for instance, interruptions. Other devices include the use of parody and intertextuality as well as making the readers aware of different methods being used in the text. However, as McCallum points out these techniques and devices are not metafictional in themselves; rather they have the ability to work in those ways when combined with other devices or other narrative and discursive modes. (2014: 408)

The general notion of metafiction is that it requires a certain level of literacy proficiency from the reader since it relies, to some extent, on the reader's previous experience with said text or genre. It has therefore been argued that metafiction can be too complicated for children to grasp, as their referential literary framework would still be rather restrictive. However, there are those that oppose this, Peter Hunt argues "it may be correct to assume that child-readers will not bring to the text a complete or sophisticated system of codes, but is this any reason to deny them access to texts with the potential of rich codes? (1991: 101).

## 4. Incongruity in *ASoUE*

In the *ASoUE* book series the story is revealed to the reader solely through the narrator Lemony Snicket. He retells all the terrible events the Baudelaire siblings have to endure after their parents die, whilst constantly adding his own thoughts and remarks to the story. Snicket often takes it upon himself to explain to the reader certain words, concepts and stories in a quite non-traditional way. Through the use of these narrative incongruities, Snicket challenges the reader's idea of what comes next. This chapter will illustrate the various ways in which the incongruities occur throughout the three books.

On the first page of each book in the *ASoUE* series there is a personalised dedication written to an anonymous woman called Beatrice. Book dedications often express gratitude towards someone or something who has helped the author in writing the book the reader is about to read. There is no template for how a dedication ought to be written or what they should contain; they can be long, short, sentimental and even humorous. However, the mentioning of death is generally not a typical feature in dedications for children's literature. The dedication in Snicket's first novel *The Bad Beginning* reads out "To Beatrice - Darling, dearest, dead." (1999a). In the example Snicket starts with a seemingly traditional dedication, showing signs of emotion and sentiment; however, at the end of the alliteration he writes 'dead'. Through the use of this anomaly, Snicket takes the reader by surprise. The dedication from the third novel *The Wide Window* lacks the sentimental beginning but still mentions death; "For Beatrice - I would much prefer it if you were alive and well." (2000). Due to Snicket's clinical approach in these dedications, he immediately sets the tone for the books which are filled with dark humour. One should bear in mind that this type of incongruity might not induce laughter with all readers, as it all depends on whether they find this use of dark humour humorous or not.

Humour linking to the theory of incongruity inside the books is also visible in the portraying of the youngest of the Baudelaire siblings. Sunny, who is still a toddler at the start of the *ASoUE* books, does not know how to speak properly yet and merely lets out shrieking sounds which her older brother and sister always know how to decipher. In one example, Snicket writes "Meeka!" Sunny said, which probably meant "Good-bye, Mr Poe. Thank you for driving us." (Snicket, 1999b: 16). For one thing, the amount of information her siblings can understand from a single non-word is incongruous, and the subject of comic amusement. One does not expect to be able to get that much information from a single word, which in turn does not even

have any real meaning to it. Additionally, there is incongruity in the fact that Sunny seems to understand what is going on and is able to react and answer accordingly. Related to Carroll's example of Sarah Silverman, Sunny's speech is comically effective since children this young are generally not able to process and respond this accurately. Snicket himself makes note of how illogical it is in *The Bad Beginning*: "'Yeeka!" Sunny shrieked, which appeared to mean "How interesting!"' although of course there is no way that Sunny could understand what was being said.'" (Snicket, 1999a: 35). This incongruous remark is also metafictional, which adds another dimension to the joke and creates double layered incongruities. Stacking incongruities on top of each other takes the reader further away from the norm which adds to the comic value and this is something that Snicket does repeatedly throughout the books. Aside from adding to the comic value, the use of double layered incongruities allows Snicket to dismantle the reader's general idea of what is normal twice over. First by having Sunny speak and understand like the others, he normalises her behaviour. Then when he mentions that this, of course, is not possible since she is still just a toddler, the reader is once again thrown about what is possible and perceived as 'normal'.

Except for Sunny's speech, most of the incongruities from the books are derived through Snicket's narration and the remarks he makes. A recurring type of joke throughout the series are short, absurd remarks lacking any narrative relevance for the storyline, mentioning something that is wildly unreasonable and illogical. In *The Wide Window* Snicket writes about animals performing actions which are not possible in real life.

I have seen many amazing things in my long and troubled life history. I have seen a series of corridors built entirely out of human skulls. I have seen a volcano erupt and send a wall of lava crawling toward a small village. I have seen a woman I loved picked up by an enormous eagle and flown to its high mountain nest. (Snicket, 2000: 109)

The act of an eagle picking up small animals and flying away with their prey is possible; however, for an eagle to pick up a full grown adult woman is wildly unreasonable. We know it is not possible, it contradicts everything we have previously been taught and know, and that is where the comic amusement lies.

However, a more theoretically interesting example can be found in *The Reptile Room* when Snicket describes the various reptiles that are in Uncle Monty's possession: "There is a pair of snakes who have learned to drive a car so recklessly that they would run you over in the street

and never stop to apologise.” (Snicket, 1999b: 27). The comedy in this example lies not only in the fact that he proposes that snakes, who are limbless, are able to drive a car, but also in his remark on the thoughtlessness of their driving. So on one hand there is an initial anomaly writing about snakes that can drive, but then by making the remark about how recklessly they drive, he almost normalises the idea of having snakes drive a car, which we all know they cannot. This, similar to Snicket’s comment about Sunny’s speech, creates another double layered incongruity.

There are other instances in the books where Snicket describes events that do not violate a standing concept *per se*, but are so bizarre that people would view their actions as incongruous nevertheless. In *The Wide Window* he writes “If you are allergic to a thing, it is best not to put that thing in your mouth, particularly if the thing is cats” (Snicket, 2000: 90). Having a food allergy and being allergic to cats is not uncommon. However, when discussing food allergies, the thought of cats, more specifically putting cats in your mouth, is usually far away. The thought of even attempting to try and put a cat, with all its fur, into your mouth is so unreasonable that Snicket’s statement becomes absurd. As illustrated above, a lot of the incongruity is found within these meaningless remarks: however, there are other ways in which Snicket’s narration is incongruous.

A recurring topic in Snicket’s remarks is the issuing of a moral. Similar to the other incongruities mentioned, these explanations often lack any real meaning to the storyline. For example: “For some stories, it’s easy. The moral of ‘The Three Bears,’ for instance, is “Never break into someone else’s house.’ The moral of ‘Snow White’ is ‘Never eat apples.’ The moral of World War I is ‘Never assassinate Archduke Ferdinand.” (Snicket, 2000: 180). The moral of stories refers to lessons to be learned upon finishing a story. The first example is relatively true to what is thought of as being the moral of the story. However, the second example offers a slight variation; he claims *Snow White* is rather focused on eating apples than about not being vain, an incongruity that might amuse adults and children. The third example does not refer to a story, but a real life event, which is the initial anomaly. Morals do not refer to particularities: it is not possible for one to learn to ‘never assassinate Archduke Ferdinand’ since the deed has already been done. Morals can be drawn from historic events, but not morals as specific as in his example. This, like the examples of the snakes and Sunny’s speech, creates a double layered incongruity with him first claiming the ‘wrong’ moral for a story and then using a historic event when referring to stories, which in turn is too specific. In doing so he self-consciously brings to

light the difficulty of drawing morals from stories, insinuating that they have to be very general and simple in order for the moral to be clear. In addition, he also makes a point about how interpretation rarely is straightforward and that even stories with 'simple morals' such as *Snow White* can be interpreted differently.

In this longer passage from *The Reptile Room* Snicket explains what the real moral of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* ought to be. In the story, a boy, who has been known to shout wolf when there was no wolf around, gets eaten since no one came to his rescue when the wolf actually showed up.

The story's moral, of course, ought to be "Never live somewhere where wolves are running around loose," but whoever read you the story probably told you that the moral was not to lie. This is an absurd moral, for you and I both know that sometimes not only is it good to lie, it is necessary to lie. (Snicket, 1999b: 124)

This is rather an unexpected saying as this story is told by many, almost solely to children, in an attempt to illustrate what might happen to you if you are not honest and tell lies. He instead offers a different view on it, saying rather ironically that the story's moral ought to be 'Never live somewhere where wolves are running loose' and stressing the importance of 'that sometimes not only is it good to lie, it is necessary to lie'. This is an incongruity which might not be liked by everyone; perhaps, children will appreciate this fresh take on it but some parents might get annoyed by the fact that Snicket is telling their children that it is acceptable to lie. Nevertheless, it is an unusual and fresh take upon this story for a children's novel. In this last example Snicket again discusses the topic of morals, but rather a person's ethics than the moral of a story.

Stealing, of course, is a crime, and a very impolite thing to do. But like most impolite things, it is excusable under certain circumstances. Stealing is not excusable if, for instance, you are in a museum and you decide that a certain painting would look better in your house, and you simply grab the painting and take it there. But if you were very, very hungry, and you had no way of obtaining money, it would be excusable to grab the painting, take it to your house, and eat it. (Snicket, 2000: 116)

Here Snicket might surprise the reader by saying that if you are hungry it would be okay to steal a painting to be able to eat it in order to ease your hunger. Perhaps, one could expect him to end the sentence by saying that it might be excusable to sell the painting in order to be able to buy food, not eat the picture itself. This, of course, is an absurd idea, seeing as eating a painting is virtually

impossible. Again his way of explaining a situation contains an anomaly, making the whole statement ridiculous and therefore possibly perceived as humorous.

As illustrated above, a lot of the humour found in *ASoUE* is often from the narrator Lemony Snicket and his use of incongruity. There are examples in the dialogue, such as Sunny's speech, but the majority of the humour applicable to the theory of incongruity is derived from his own remarks and explanations of concepts and stories, thus making most of the incongruities metafictional. In addition, there is also the occurrence of what is referred to as double layered incongruities. Using several incongruities in the same text makes the reader forget about the initial incongruity and in a way normalises it, as in the example of the snakes driving a car. The double layered incongruities also allow for the humour to carry subversive messages, as seen in the extract regarding drawing morals from stories.

## 5. Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnavalesque in *ASoUE*

The use of humorous remarks, explanations and stories pertaining to the theory of incongruity allows Snicket to maintain a sense of playfulness in the text. As Stephens notes, this is a characteristic for carnivalesque texts. Although the Baudelaire children are constantly going through hardships, such as becoming orphans, being chased by Count Olaf and having numerous caretakers die, Snicket manages to undermine the seriousness through the use of his narrative voice.

The books do not share a lot of the characteristics, except for mood, with Stephen's first carnivalesque text type 'time out', but rather uses the mode, textualities and registers of 'value inversion' and 'transgression'. The novels are both parodic and satiric towards the gothic fiction genre, and use ironic and idiomatic language. The books have elements of taboo present, for instance: having Count Olaf trying to marry Violet, who is a child and a relative. Both 'value inversion' and 'transgression' are defined as self-reflexive text types, another characteristic of Snicket's narrating.

In children's literature it is the relationship between children and adults that becomes inverted. In *ASoUE* the adults constantly get outsmarted by the three Baudelaire children. This is largely due to Violet, Klaus and Sunny performing acts which are far from what children their age are usually capable of. Sunny Baudelaire, who is only an infant "scarcely bigger than a



boot” (1999a: 12) is too young to walk but still able to communicate and comprehend what is going on. Sunny communicates through shrieking noises, due to not being able to speak properly, which only her siblings can understand. Nevertheless, she always knows when and how to help her older siblings, acts that usually involve her sharp four teeth, another one of her carnivalesque traits. Klaus, who is said to be 12 at the beginning of the books, has spent all of his free time reading books. This in turn had led him to be highly literate, possessing a huge amount of knowledge regarding almost everything. Violet is an inventor who constantly invents new gadgets and tools. When working on an invention she ties her hair up with a ribbon in order to concentrate better. As Stephens notes, carnivalesque texts use “signifiers which foregrounds the relativity of sign-thing relationship” (1992: 123). The act of Violet tying her back allows her to focus on the task that lies ahead of them, enabling her to think like an adult, if only momentarily. The children always put their set of skills to use when trying, and succeeding, to escape from Count Olaf and his accomplices.

As previously mentioned it is the Baudelaire children who are the logical and brave whilst the adults are easily fooled. Their traits of the adults and the way they act also pave the way for humour. In *The Wide Window* the children get sent to their Aunt Josephine who is scared of almost everything. She refuses to use the stove since it apparently can catch on fire, so all food is served cold and she never lets anyone use the door knob since she is scared that it will break and shatter into a million pieces that will end up in your eyes, causing you to go blind. The children try to talk sense into her, explaining the unlikeliness for any of those things to happen but she does not listen. This is a recurring trait for all adults in the books; they do not listen to the children. “How many times must I remind you that it’s not polite to interrupt?” Uncle Monty interrupted, shaking his head.” (1999b: 63). In the books Count Olaf disguises himself in order to get close to the children and being able to steal their fortune. The children are always able to see through the disguise but not the adults. Count Olaf has two distinctive features, a monobrow instead of two eyebrows and a tattoo of an eye on his left ankle. If the adults are not able to see any of these features, they are not able to identify that it is actually Count Olaf in disguise. In *The Reptile Room* their uncle Monty is convinced that his new assistant Stephano, who is bald, wears glasses and high boots, is not Count Olaf but rather a spy sent from The Herpetologist Society. In *The Wide Window* their aunt Josephine, falls in love with Captain Sham who in fact is Count Olaf, dressed as a sailor with a peg leg. The children time and time again tell them, and Mr. Poe,

that it is Count Olaf in disguise but no one ever believes them, again because they are children. For example:

Remember when you lived with your Uncle Monty? You were convinced that his assistant, Stephano, was really Count Olaf in disguise.”  
“But Stephano was Count Olaf in disguise,” Klaus exclaimed  
“That’s not the point,” Mr Poe said. (2000: 73)

However, at the end of each novel the children always succeed in blowing Count Olaf’s cover and he is seen escaping from the scene and the children once again get sent to a new caretaker. They are still children who, according to the law, need adults to act as caretakers and look after them, and so the cycle repeats itself. The carnivalesque can only be temporary, as Nikolajeva points out. The reestablishment of the normal order is unavoidable and a necessity, as the whole premise of the carnivalesque is built upon the relationships between the dominant order and the subaltern. This relates to the theory of incongruity which also relies on people’s set assumptions and global preconceptions on how something is meant to be. When the relationship between adult and children is inverted, the readers are given a glimpse into how the world could be if it was the other way around. The actions from the people involved can then be perceived as funny, but also provide subversive messages, for instance, on how injustice can be turned around. In order to achieve this, the carnivalesque commonly use inversion, self-reflexivity and parody, all of which can be used as metafictional devices.

As a final point in the analysis, though the novels end in a seemingly carnivalesque manner it can be argued that the series instead follow a narrative structure similar to the one developed by Tzvetan Todorov. In it he claims that “All narrative is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical” (1975: 163). It is true that at the end of each book the children get sent to a new caretaker, but the end provided for them is always provisional. They never end up home with their parents, who they lost in the first book, which is why no real re-inversion is given to the children. The children never return ‘back to normal’ but rather end up in a situation which is similar, but slightly different, to the one they were in at the start of each novel.

## 6. Metafiction in *ASoUE*

Metafiction present in *ASoUE*, relating to the books' use of incongruity, and to the carnivalesque, is most prevalent through Lemony Snicket's narrative. Several of the devices described in Pantaleo's chart are present in the books. Snicket establishes his narrative voice from the beginning of the books, making himself present as a narrator by directly addressing the reader.

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. [...] I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes. (1999a: 1)

Snicket not only addresses the reader but also supplies the reader with additional information outside the storyline, constantly disrupting the telling of the story, such as explaining words that are being used. For example; "the word "aberrant" here means "very, very wrong and causing much grief" (1999a: 162) or more humorous remarks such as "Tears are curious things, for like earthquakes or puppet shows they can occur at any time, without any warning and without any good reason." (1999b: 69). There are also longer explanations about concepts being used in the books.

There is a type of situation, which occurs all too often and which is occurring at this point in the story of the Baudelaire orphans, called "dramatic irony." Simply put, dramatic irony is when a person makes a harmless remark, and someone else who hears it knows something that makes the remark have a different, and usually unpleasant, meaning. For instance, if you were in a restaurant and said out loud, "I can't wait to eat the veal marsala I ordered," and there were people around who knew that the veal marsala was poisoned and that you would die as soon as you took a bite, your situation would be one of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is a cruel occurrence, one that is almost always upsetting, and I'm sorry to have it appear in this story, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny have such unfortunate lives that it was only a matter of time before dramatic irony would rear its ugly head. (2000: 28)

It is worth noting is that Snicket, whilst telling the stories from an outside perspective, is a part of the same story world as the Baudelaire children. Several times he hints that it is his duty to tell the rest of the world about their miserable life and all the hardships they had to endure. From the back cover of *The Bad Beginning* Snicket writes "It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing" (1999a). Snicket's self-reflexive

approach adds to the book's playfulness which creates humour and a sense of carnival. However, the metafiction within the books does not only create humour. When Snicket explains the term dramatic irony, he enables the reader to consider the relationship between fiction and reality and how dramatic irony crosses the bound between them.

Another characteristic of metafiction is the use of intertextuality, which is ever present in *ASoUE*. The three orphans named Baudelaire after the poet Charles Baudelaire. Arthur Poe, who is in charge of placing the children with new guardians as well as looking after their fortune, is named after the author Edgar Allen Poe. Baudelaire and Poe are often mentioned together, as Baudelaire translated several of Poe's text into French. Poe was a pioneer of the gothic fiction genre during the 19th century, and one of the most famous authors within the genre. The *ASoUE* have in turn often been categorised as comic gothic fiction for children (Cross, 2008: 57). McCallum mentions that metafictional novels often apply "parodic appropriations of other genres" (2014: 397) and *ASoUE* adopt a lot of classic gothic tropes. The children often find themselves in frightening places, especially when in Count Olaf's and Aunt Josephine's houses. There is the presence of an arch-villain in Count Olaf along with his associates who are all villainous stock characters. The general setting of the books is gloomy and dark, and death seems to follow the children wherever they go.

Furthermore, Snicket refers to other famous authors in the books: "He taught them not to give the Green Gimlet Toad too much water, and to never, under any circumstances, let the Virginian Wolfsnake near a typewriter." (1999b: 33). This example, as argued by critics, might be too sophisticated for an 8-year-old to grasp. But along the lines of Hunt's argument for the use of metafiction in children's literature, the access to these text offers the possibility of a 'delayed reward'. When the child becomes older and possibly familiarised with the works of Virginia Woolf the quote might still linger at the back of its mind and all of sudden make sense. Nevertheless, if the child is not able to understand the intertextuality of the quote it will find the incongruity of not letting a snake near a typewriter amusing.

As illustrated in previous chapters, the intertextuality of the books also occurs in Snicket's narration. During the course of the book Snicket refers to numerous other literary works, typically stories the children reading *ASoUE* would already be familiar with e.g. "The Boy Who Cried Wolf", "Snow White" and "The Little Red Riding Hood", more often than not mocking them. As previously mentioned, mockery is a characteristic of the carnivalesque. Stephens notes

that ‘value inversion’ text types try to dismantle general ideas through the use of mockery, much like Snicket does.

There is another story concerning wolves that somebody has probably read to you, which is just as absurd. I am talking about Little Red Riding Hood, an extremely unpleasant little girl who, like the Boy Who Cried Wolf, insisted on intruding on the territory of dangerous animals. You will recall that the wolf, after being treated very rudely by The Little Red Riding Hood, ate the little girl’s grandmother and put on her clothing as a disguise. It is this aspect of the story that is the most ridiculous, because one would think that even a girl as dim-witted as Little Red Riding Hood could tell in an instant the difference between her grandmother and a wolf dressed in a nightgown and fuzzy slippers. If you know somebody very well, like your grandmother or your baby sister, you will know when they are real and when they are fake. (1999b: 142-143)

Not only does this example show Snicket’s metafictional style but it also is incongruous. In the excerpt Snicket disrupts our normative readings of the fairy-tale, through criticising the absurdity of the grandchild not recognising that it is not the grandmother in the bed but the wolf. In doing so, he inverts the values associated with such readings. As a common feature in the books, both humour and social critique can be derived from the text.

Another common feature where metafiction and incongruity clearly collide and multiply each other is when Snicket repeatedly warns the reader from reading any further. The reader first encounters this on the book’s back cover, which all contain a letter written from Snicket to the reader. *The Bad Beginning* starts “Dear Reader, I’m sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children.” (1999a) and *The Reptile Room* follows the same theme, “Dear Reader, If you have picked up this book with the hope of finding a simple and cheery tale. I’m afraid you have picked up the wrong book altogether.” (1999b). It is not common for narrators to urge the reader not to read book they have written; this incongruous advice challenges the readers preconceived ideas and creates comic amusement.

These back-cover texts, along with the dedications to Beatrice at the beginning of every book are paratexts. Paratexts refer to texts which do not belong to the main text but help frame it. Gérard Genette defines it as “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text” (1997: 2). Magnusson describes that in *ASoUE* “such elements are carefully crafted from, and impressively integrated into, the novels’ narrative.” (2012: 87). The book’s use of paratexts correlate with Pantaleo’s description of metafiction as usually having something about the layout which is unusual.

The warnings to the reader continue to the pages inside the book as well. At the end of *The Bad Beginning* Snicket writes “At this point in the story, I feel obliged to interrupt and give you one last warning. As I said in the very beginning, the book you are holding in your hands does not have a happy ending. [...] If you like you may shut the book this instant and not read the unhappy ending that is to follow.” (1999a: 156). *The Reptile Room* and *The Wide Window* both share these stylistic features. Early on in both of the books Snicket again warns the reader of the terrible stories they are about to read: “So I must tell you that if you have opened this book in the hope of finding out that the children lived happily ever after, you might as well shut it and read something else.” (1999b: 3). “If you are interested in reading a story filled with thrillingly good times, I am sorry to inform you that you are most certainly reading the wrong book, because the Baudelaire’s experience very few good times over the course of their gloomy and miserable lives.” (2000: 2). Apart from being incongruous, and therefore comedic, these warnings rather add curiosity for the reader who wants to find out what exactly happens to the Baudelaire orphans instead of wanting them to put the book down.

The *ASoUe* books are highly metafictional using several of the devices from Pantaleo’s list, for instance the use of parody and self-reflexivity. Snicket’s use of intertextuality throughout the series is omnipresent: in the characters, in the narration, in the dialogue, and even the initial mentioning of Beatrice in the dedications of each novel is a reference to Dante Alighieri, and his unrequited love for Beatrice in *Divine Comedy*. The humour derived from metafiction is often linked to the theory of incongruity as the new modes of narrative often lead to incongruity. At the same time, it also correlates with the carnivalesque as they both use inversion, parody and self-reflexivity as methods. This is all made possible through the narrator Lemony Snicket.

## 7. Conclusion

This essay set out to identify and analyse the various forms of humour used in *ASoUE* in relation to the theory of incongruity, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and metafiction. Through the analysis I was able to show how the different theories apply to different aspects of the texts and where they interlinked with each other.

In analysing the humour within the novels in relation to incongruity I found that although some might come off as 'simple', a lot of incongruities take place on a more complex level, consisting of several layers. This is apparent in the example of the snakes, where Snicket normalises the idea of having snakes drive cars through remarking the carelessness of their driving. Through the use of double layered incongruities, the reader is taken further away from reality. In addition, the double layered incongruities show that not only humor can be derived from the remarks, since they often contain some form of social critique or political implication, as in the example of drawing morals from stories for instance. In doing so the humour in the books constantly dismantles norms and general ideas. This was often accomplished through self-reflexivity, a narrative device used in both the carnivalesque and metafiction, which lead me to analyse the humour in more detail.

The carnivalesque in the texts is mostly present through the inversion of the relationship between children and adults. In the books, adults and authorial figures are constantly being mocked. Whereas the adults never seem to see through Count Olaf's disguises, the Baudelaire siblings time and time again use their adult-like traits in order to blow his cover. In addition, the adults are made out to be unreasonable, their Aunt Josephine being scared of practically everything, whilst the children have to act as the reasonable and brave ones. Related to the carnivalesque, metafiction also derives humour from inversion. In contrast, however, it is the relationship between fiction and what is real that becomes inverted through the use of self-reflexivity.

The use of Snicket as a self-conscious narrator can be related to all these theories, not just metafiction. Having him present, constantly disrupting the storyline, adding in his own remarks, creates incongruities. It also allows for the use of parody, for example, when Snicket's mocks the moral of *Little Red Riding Hood*, applying to both the carnivalesque, metafiction and the theory of incongruity. Another metafictional device is the novel's use of intertextuality. Upon reading the first page of the first book, where Snicket refers to Dante Alighieri's unrequited love Beatrice in

the dedications, the reader is instantly thrown into the chaotic intertextuality which characterises the novels. Snicket uses gothic names for the main characters (Baudelaire and Poe), refers to modern authors in the text (Woolf) and mentions numerous literary works for children (“Little Red Riding Hood”, “Snow White”, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”, etc.). Similar to the double-layered incongruities, this also distances the reader from reality, as it is hard to tell where one intertextuality ends and the other one begins.

Due to the sophistication present in the humour in *ASoUE* I have argued that in order to fully understand the complexity, and to what extent the humour occur, several theories have to be applied. It is not possible to draw conclusions from just the theory of incongruity as the presence of metafiction and the carnivalesque characteristics are so widespread within the books. I hope the findings of this research can contribute to more research within the field since so little has been written on the subject to date. Suggestions for further research could include the use of more extensive sample within the series, as only a small amount has been covered in this research. There is also the possibility of trying to research why or even if this sort of humour, or rather the mix of humour, is enjoyable for children. Finally, it would also be possible to investigate the extent to which children understand metafiction in children’s literature.



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# 9. Appendices

126 LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY IN CHILDREN'S FICTION

	<b>Time Out</b>	<b>Value Inversion</b>	<b>Transgression</b>
<b>Mood</b>	Playful	Playful	Playful
<b>Structure</b>	Return	Overcoming	Separation
<b>Ending</b>	+Closure +Disclosure	+Closure +Disclosure	+ -Closure + -Disclosure
<b>Mode</b>	Serious	Parodic	Parodic/ satiric
<b>Register</b>	Idiomatic, acceptable	Ironic, citational	Idiomatic, taboo
<b>Textuality</b>	-Self-reflexive	+Self-reflexive	+Self-reflexive
<b>Focus</b>	Social familial	Social personal	social political familial
<b>Effect</b>	Interrogate → understanding	Interrogate → revision	Interrogate → rejection
<b>Characters</b>	Subject → Subjection	Subjection → Subject	Subjection → Subject
<b>Roles</b>	Hero	Non-hero	Anti-hero

Figure 4.1: Characteristics of interrogative texts

Appendix A: Stephens chart of characteristics of interrogative texts. (1992: 126)

## Figure List of Metafictive Devices

- a) Narrator(s) who directly address readers (either in words or gestures) narrator(s) who directly address character(s)
- b) Character(s) who directly address the narrator character(s) who directly address readers (either in words or gestures)
- c) Characters who comment about their own stories or other stories
- d) Situations in which a narrator becomes one of the characters
- e) Multiple narrators or characters telling stories
- f) Multiple narratives/stories
- g) Stories within stories
- h) Disruptions of time and space relationships in stories/narratives
- i) Narratives/stories that do not have a chronological or linear structure—narrative discontinuities (breaks or interruptions in the telling of the story)
- j) Intertextuality
- k) Parody
- l) Typographic experimentation (arrangement, style, or appearance of matter printed from type)
- m) Mixing of genres, language styles and speech styles, and ways of telling stories
- n) A pastiche of illustrative styles
- o) Mise-en-abyme (an image that is embedded within another image as its miniature replica)
- p) Something about the design or layout of the book is new or unusual
- q) Something makes readers aware of the processes/methods that are being used to create/make up the story
- r) Indeterminacy

Appendix B: Pantaleo's list of metafictional devices. (2014: 326)