

Dr. Seuss's Hidden Political Agenda



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 English 100
 Final Research Project

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Theodore Seuss Geisel, more commonly known as Dr. Seuss, wrote numerous children's books. Dr. Seuss is one of history's greatest authors of children's literature. He causes children to be excited about reading. His wife said, "Ted doesn't sit down and write for children. He writes to amuse himself. Luckily what amuses him also amuses them" (Bunzel). This could be the reason that many of the books Dr. Seuss wrote for "children" contain political undertones. These political undertones are a statement to the children reading his writing. A few of these books are *The Lorax*, *Yertle the Turtle*, *The Sneetches*, and *The Butter Battle Book*. By taking a closer look at the writings of Dr. Seuss, it can be noticed that his books contain many themes typically viewed to be not for children. Seuss calls out to children in his writing. He is calling for the young to stand up and take notice of the issues going on in the world around them. He believes that they need to be informed about the issues as much as adults do. He writes to children to inform them early. He does not believe they need to be adults in order to make a stand on these issues. He uses his writing to try and accomplish this. Several of Dr. Seuss' children's books dealt with the politics of war.

Yertle the Turtle (1958) is a classic children's story. It is also said to be representative of Hitler and the Nazi Regime during World War II. It is a story about a turtle king who is depicted as a dictator. Yertle the Turtle is the king of his pond. He decides that his small pond is not good enough for him. By stacking his subjects on top of each other, Yertle can then see more, and thus be king of more. He has no regard for the pain and suffering of those under his rule. He only cares about bettering his own situation. His pride becomes his downfall. He does not think anything should be higher or better than he is. Finally, his own subjects bring him down, and the Turtle King's rule comes to an end. The end of the book leaves the reader with this sentiment: "And the turtles, of course... all the turtles are free. As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be" (*Yertle the Turtle*).

Yertle the Turtle is a power hungry dictator who uses his power to oppress the masses. He is said to represent leaders like Stalin, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein, and Hitler. In the original sketch of the Turtle King, Yertle had a mustache to make him look like Adolph Hitler (Fields). This mustache may have been removed so as not to limit the reader to only think of Hitler, but all dictators. This book demonstrated the problems with Authoritarianism. Yertle is a ferocious dictator who has complete disregard for anyone other than himself. He becomes angry when the moon is higher than him. His subjects are afraid of him. They only obey out of fear. When looking through history, there have been several leaders like this. This characteristic was obvious in Hitler, and more recently Hussein. He is finally brought down because of his pride. This can also be seen throughout history. Mack, a lowly turtle, burps and shakes the entire turtle tower. This simple turtle brings down the King and the entire selfish, totalitarian kingdom. Yertle becomes "King of the mud, because that is all he can see" (*Yertle the Turtle*). The

end of the book states that all creatures should be free. This can be taken to also be speaking of the Jews in Germany, or any group that is or has been oppressed. By looking at *Yertle the Turtle* in this light, it is not hard to see the political undertones in this classic children's story.

Another story that can be viewed as dealing with World War II is *The Sneetches* (1961). *The Sneetches* is a story about racial tolerance and equality. Seuss himself said that it was based on his "opposition to Anti-Semitism" (Beardsley). In this story, there are two types of Sneetches: the ones with stars on their bellies and those without. Those with the stars made those without feel inferior. They are teased and not included in any of the activities of the "better Sneetches" with the stars. This can be seen through history on many different occasions. There are a plethora of examples of one group being intolerant of another. This discrimination has gone on for quite a long time. One day, Sylvester McMonkey McBean comes to town. He shows the plain-bellied Sneetches how to get stars on their bellies. These Sneetches pay the fee because they would do anything to fit in. Conformity is an issue that faces today's society as well. McBean profits from this willingness to conform and the sadness of the plain bellied Sneetches. This upsets the original star-bellied Sneetches, so they go to Sylvester to have their stars removed. Suddenly, having stars is not the way to be anymore. The Sneetches that now have stars have them removed again. The now plain-bellied Sneetches have their stars put back on. This chaos of removing and reapplying stars went on for some time. This shows the problem with conformity. When it all ends, no one can tell the difference between which Sneetches were supposed to have stars and which ones were not. The moral of this story is that "Sneetches are Sneetches and no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches" (Sneetches).

Dr. Seuss uses an imaginary race in this story to portray issues relevant to the human race. This story focuses on discrimination and stereotyping between different groups. The end of the story shows that the differences in people should not determine their worth. Differences should be celebrated, not used as a mark for judgment. The narrator of this story is not part of either group, which allows the reader to see the story from an outside, unbiased point of view. The Sneetches are a fictional race. This allows the reader to relate to the story because it does not focus specifically on a particular group. It can relate to all people throughout history. When reading this story, the genocide in Rwanda comes to mind. This genocide was one of racial ideology and ethnic cleansing caused by small differences between the two parties involved. This is also similar to the Jews in Nazi Germany. They were forced to wear stars so that everyone around them could see that they were different. In today's society there are numerous groups forced to wear figurative "stars" to mark their differences. Homosexuals, vagrants, alcoholics, and those with sickness and disease are just a few examples of these groups with modern day "stars". Many times, people use these "stars" as a means to discriminate just as in Seuss' story. This story is and will be applicable to everyone who reads it. Politics relating to war and discrimination are common underlying themes in Dr. Seuss' writing.

The Butter Battle Book (1984) is another one of Seuss's books that deal with politics and war. It is a satire on war and Dr. Seuss' most blatant political statement. This book mirrors the arms race during the Cold War. It discusses the battle that rages between two groups of people, the Yooks and the Zooks. The Yooks, aka Yanks, are

dressed in blue to represent Americans while the Zooks are dressed in red, a color which symbolizes communism, to represent the Russians. These two sides are arbitrarily indistinguishable (Wolosky) and are fighting over which side of the bread the butter goes on. The issue of buttering bread becomes one of national pride and worthy of dying for. There is a wall dividing these two people. This wall is reminiscent of the Berlin Wall which divided East and West Germany where people were essentially alike, but looks more like the Great Wall of China which denotes a “sense of historical longevity” (MacDonald). It is representative of any wall that divides people. Dividing walls can be either literal or figurative. These walls always lead to discrimination.

This book starts out with a grandfather Yook telling his grandson the story about how the war began. In the beginning, there was a simple low wall between the two sides. The guards of this wall defended their respective side with sling shots. As the years went on, there were increasing defenses and weapons. The increasing technological advances remind the reader of the arms race. Just as the Americans and Russians increased the technology used in their weapons of mass destruction during the Cold War, so did the Yooks and the Zooks. In both the book and recorded history, neither side ever fired a weapon. The scare tactics became the most effective weapon (MacDonald). Also, this story is told from one point of view, that of the Yooks (Americans). This is the same as the way the Americans only saw one side of the story during the Cold War. That one side was abounding with propaganda.

The Grandfather tells his grandson of the culmination of the weaponry which is called the Bitsy Bit-Boy Boomeroo. This is a very small pellet that has the ability to blow up all of the Zooks. This leads the reader to think of the atomic bomb. He has been chosen to be the one to deliver the Boomeroo and destroy the other side, much like the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. All of the Yooks are underground waiting for the war to be over. These underground shelters (bomb shelters) are meant to protect the Yooks (Americans) from the Boomeroo (nuclear fallout). This is symbolic and very clearly shows the Cold War. The grandson stays by the wall to watch his grandfather make history. As the grandfather climbs the wall to drop the Boomeroo, he is shocked to see his Zook counterpart holding the same weapon, ready to drop it on the Yook side. These two characters are nearly indistinguishable. This shows that these groups are almost the same and should not use bread as a reason to destroy each other. Each side pauses and stares back at the other in shock because of the impending annihilation of each other's worlds and way of life. This entire book shows “escalating competition of mutual threat and weaponry until the two sides are poised with identical bombs which could destroy everyone” (Wolosky). The grandson calls out “Who’s going to drop it? Will *you*...? Or will *he*...?” The grandfather can only answer “We will see!” (Butter Battle Book). This book ends inconclusively as the following page is left blank. Is this final page an indication of total destruction and nuclear fall out, or is it an indication that the reader is to fill it with his own vision of the end (MacDonald)?

One criticism of this book is that it trivializes the already oversimplified world view of the nuclear-freeze movement. Many people also view this book as being too soft on communism. This book depicts the conflict between the Americans and the Russians as a cultural misunderstanding, which side of the bread the butter should go on. This leads to a senseless arms race fueled solely by technological advances (National Review). Critics claim that this book does not allow for the idea that there were actual evils in the

Cold War. Instead, there were only meaningless issues evident by misunderstanding. The Zook chosen to drop the Boomeroo on the Yook side was named Van Itch. This name implies that the threat he poses is no worse than that of an itch. This leads the reader to believe that he should be tolerated not obliterated. This book subtly suggests that if the United States had stopped modernizing their own weapons, the Russians would have done similarly, and the conflict would die down (MacDonald). “Seuss shows energies of invention may unleash forces that threaten to be disruptive and destructive” (Wolosky).

This book has also been criticized as violating one of the “prime conventions of children’s literature” (MacDonald). Children’s books are supposed to have closure and not leave any questions unanswered. They are supposed to have happy endings. This book does the complete opposite. There is no end to this book. There is no nuclear holocaust nor is there an arms-control agreement. Dr. Seuss said that “posing any ending would make the book propagandistic and unrealistic as well, since the answer in real life is not at all clear” (MacDonald). “The last page of *The Butter Battle Book* is an eloquent affirmation of the value of nuclear deterrence – the Zooks do not dare nuke the Yooks for fear of being nuked themselves” (National Review). Seuss leaves the burden of concluding the book up to the reader. Unlike many other books, Seuss does not show children an imaginative antidote or escape to the threat of nuclear war. He shows that there is a very real danger from which there is no escape. There is no happy ending which is what children’s books are expected to have.

This book clearly shows the grandfather putting his grandson in danger by allowing the child to accompany him to the wall rather than be in the shelter with the others. The child’s final question to the grandfather depicts an indictment of the adults for letting the matter get out of hand and come to such an impasse. The tension of the situation is the motivation to come to a solution. The children will have the role of resolving the conflict later in their lives, but this book shows that the actions of the adults are the real issue (MacDonald). This book shows children that the adults have been foolish. The foolishness of those who are the supposed intellectuals and leaders of society have endangered the entire way of life for both sides. One conclusion of this book is that the Yooks are lucky to invent the bomb. This ensured that the Zooks did not attack. This leads to the inference that “remaining strong is the surest way of achieving peace” (National Review). This shows children that weapons are a necessary evil and that war is needed to keep peace. Messages like this show Seuss’ political views; however, not all of his political statements deal with war.

Dr. Seuss has commented that *The Lorax* was his best book (San Diego Museum of Art). This book, written in 1971, came under fire from the logging industry, and was actually banned in some states. This book came out during the middle of the environmentalist call to action of the 1970s which shows its place in history. *The Lorax* deals with subjects like environmentalism, pollution, industrialization, mass production, greed, and a harsh look at the logging industry. It was released at the height of ecological consciousness and “violated the expectations of those familiar with Seuss’ beginner books” (MacDonald). At the onset of this book, the setting is dark and dreary. Everything is old and abandoned. It is a world under the shadows of “apocalyptic consumption” (Wolosky). The Once-ler still lives there. All that is ever seen of him is his hands. The hands are human ones. They are always busy and never idle. They have

complete disregard for everything they touch. They destroy everything they come in contact with. By not drawing a body, Seuss allows the reader to picture a terrible creature who is destroying everything good (MacDonald). He agrees to tell the story of the Lorax and how he was lifted away. He sends down the Wisper-ma-Phone so that this story can be heard.

He talks of a time when the “grass was still green, and the pond was still wet, and the clouds were still clean” (Lorax). There were Swomee Swans singing in the sky, the “Brown Bar-ba-loots frisking about in their Bar-ba-loot suits,” and the humming fish were splashing around. It was to this place that the Once-ler arrived. He was amazed by the Truffula trees. The Once-ler said “All my life I’d been searching for trees such as these. The touch of their tufts was much softer than silk. And they had the sweet smell of fresh butterfly milk” (Lorax). The opportunistic Once-ler unloaded his cart and built himself a shop. This is his first act of destruction. He chopped down one of the trees and made a “Thneed” out of the tufts. Just then, the Lorax pops up from one of the trunks. He said, “I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues” (Lorax). He is described as “sort of a man” and he is child size so that children can relate to him. The Lorax is a sort of “messenger or supernatural guardian of the living but defenseless things” (MacDonald). He can also be seen as a sort of “ghost of trees past” (Wolosky). He was angry and he yelled to the Once-ler from on top of a stump. This is his soapbox or pulpit from which he gives his message.

The Once-ler replied, “There’s no cause for alarm. I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm. I’m being quite useful. This thing is a Thneed” (Lorax). A Thneed is something that everyone needs. It can be anything that the reader wants. A Thneed can be anything, but in all actuality, it is nothing. This book is meant to show the stupidity of consumers who thoughtlessly buy useless products. This stupidity fuels mass production which in turn fuels pollution. The consumers are fueling the greed of the Once-ler, aka big business. This book is subtly calling for children to refuse to consume unnecessary products (MacDonald). The Lorax is reprimanding the Once-ler for making a product that is unnecessary when someone pulls up and buys the Thneed. This causes the Once-ler to call his whole family to come get in on the Thneed business. He is fueled by greed and the love of money. Chopping down one tree at a time is too slow because the business is growing. The Once-ler creates a Super-Axe Hacker which chops down four trees at once. This is an example of the escalating destruction of the environment and natural resources.

The Lorax comes back to tell the Once-ler that the Bar-ba-loots have to leave because there is not enough food to go around. They were so happy before, but now, they are sad and hungry. The Once-ler felt bad but did nothing. He just kept right on making Thneeds. “I went right on biggering...selling more Thneeds. And I biggered my money, which everyone needs” (Lorax). The lure of money causes the Once-ler’s disregard for the wellbeing of others. He has no interest in replacing what he has used. The Lorax was also angry about the pollution. He told the Once-ler about how the Swomee Swans had to leave because of the smog. The humming fish were leaving as well. They could not hum because their gills were all gummed. The animals have suffered, but they do not die. However, the Lorax sends them away and he says he does not know what is going to happen to them. There is hope for them, but they are in danger.

The Once-ler got angry and yelled back at the Lorax. He told of his plans to bigger his company and make more Thneeds. This “business is business! And business must grow” view is typically American. The lure to have more controls many. America tends to view resources as endless and does not replace them or have any regard for how their actions affect others. Economical growth is a measurement of success and prosperity. “Most Americans would agree that bigger is better and what is good for business is good for America” (MacDonald).

Just then, the last Truffula tree was cut down. The Once-ler’s family all left. The Lorax sadly lifted himself away. The only thing left, besides the abandoned factory and the Once-ler, was a small pile of rocks that said the word “UNLESS”. The Once-ler says “UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not” (Lorax). This leaves the reader with a glimmer of hope. Hope that all is not lost and that the evils can be undone. He leaves the very last Truffula seed with the small boy and tells him to grow it. He is attempting to undo the damage he has done. The responsibility is passed on to the young. The boy must be in charge of it because the Once-ler can do nothing but destruction. It is now up to the future generation. Seuss is calling to the children to take charge and stand up for the environment. He calls for the awareness and opposition to big business and the advocacy of the environment. The last pages of the book are left blank. Seuss does this for the same reason that he does in *The Butter Battle Book*. The reader is supposed to imagine what could be in the future.

Dr. Seuss addresses several very important themes in this book. One obvious theme is environmentalism and conservationism. The Lorax stresses the importance of protecting the environment and preserving natural resources. The Lorax shows us the dangers of disregarding our environment. He shows us what can happen to the land, air, and creatures surrounding a factory. This shows us the dangers of industrialism and increasing technological advances. At the onset of the book, the colors are bright and cheery. As the factory gets bigger, the colors get darker and darker. The smog and pollution turn the sky and the clouds a dark grey color. The Swomee Swans have to leave because they cannot sing in a smoke filled sky. The grass is no longer green and all the waste is being dumped in the rivers and ponds. This forces the humming fish to leave as well. This book also speaks of the dangers of mass production and warns society to be careful with the use of its natural resources. The Lorax offers another attitude that is American. He talks plainly and blatantly and defends the defenseless. He is angry throughout the book because of the imminent danger. This shows children that they have the right to yell and be angry when things are desperate. This book takes a harsh look at the logging industry. In order to combat this negative publicity, the logging industry wrote its own book in response to *The Lorax*.

Truax (1995) was written mimicking Dr. Seuss’ style. The logger, Truax, harvests the trees for “ballbats and houses and things such as these” (Birkett). There is also a horned green little creature that throws tantrums and says “I’m Guardbark, I tell you, keeper of trees. Our future, you know, is dependent of these. You must stop this hacking and whacking and stacking. You should NOT be here. I MUST send you packing” (Birkett). Truax goes on to tell Guardbark that he plants five trees for every tree that he cuts down. One question that can be asked of this statement is: Are the same types of trees that are being cut down being planted? He also speaks of the millions of acres of National Preserves that are around to JUST to look nice. This is an attempt to

demean environmentalist causes. He claims that by cutting down trees, he is helping to ensure biodiversity. "Cutting the trees sends SOME critters running, but others move in, some cute, and some cunning" (Birkett). Truax also addresses the subject of endangered species. "Would anyone mind if we lost, say, a tick that carried a germ that made Cuddlebears sick? Or what about something that's really quite nice, like the Yellow-striped Minnow that lives in Lake Zice? How far will we go? How much will we pay? To keep a few minnows from dying anyway?" (Birkett) At the end of the book, Guardbark and Truax shake hands. Guardbark says, "I'm glad that we chatted, conversed, and confided. I now think our views aren't quite so one-sided" (Birkett) and flies away. The logging industry is attempting to combat a one-sided view with another one-sided view. How can this solve anything?

The logging industry felt so threatened by Dr. Seuss that they wrote a book in response to *The Lorax*. Both of these books are forms of propaganda. The logging industry brings up several points that are still controversial today. Environmentalists have found arguments to counteract all of the facts presented by the logging industry. Both sides feel that they are right. Seuss forces us to take a look at the consequences of our actions before it is too late. The actions of today have lasting impacts on the environment of tomorrow. By writing to a juvenile audience, Seuss speaks to children before they have a chance to make decisions. He is hoping that by the time they are ready to lead the country, they will believe in the same ideals that he does. He is hoping to change the world by starting with the children.

The Lorax, as well as the other Dr. Seuss books mentioned, has morals for adults as well as children. Seuss' stories make it clear that he does not write solely for children. The adult themes evident in this writing are speaking to children in a subtle way, but to their parents overtly. He writes about politics and daily life in order to illuminate these points to children and to get them excited and involved. He is including his own opinion in his writing because he writes for himself. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish Seuss' personal opinions from his fictional stories and characters. He includes these tidbits of his own ideas in order to get children involved in politics and history. *Yertle the Turtle*, *The Sneetches*, *The Butter Battle Book*, and *The Lorax* are all examples of Seuss hiding themes and meanings in his literature. Seuss takes important historical events and makes them exciting to children. History can be seen unfolding in Dr. Seuss' writing. Dr. Seuss is a notorious author of children's literature, but maybe adults need to be taking a closer look at these stories.

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