

**CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES IN LEMONY SNICKET'S *A SERIES OF
UNFORTUNATE EVENTS***

by © Jillian Hatch A thesis submitted
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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies themes of conspiracy in children's literature through the lens of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (*ASOUE*). The evolution of conspiracy theory, from traditional to postmodern, is mirrored in the journey of the Baudelaire children. Starting out as eager detectives, the children develop into survivors, keenly aware of humanity's many flaws. Despite this dark, conspiracy-laden journey, *ASOUE* is remarkably enjoyable, largely due to the playfulness with which the theme of conspiracy is treated. The characters, Lemony Snicket (as character, narrator, and author), and the reader all partake in this conspiratorial playfulness; and these modes of play serve to entice the reader into active reading and learning. The themes of conspiracy and play within *ASOUE* provide the child reader with the tools needed to address and master linguistic challenges, to overcome anxieties, and to engage with our frequently scary and chaotic world by way of realistic optimism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the late 1990s while trying to get his first novel, *The Basic Eight*, published, Daniel Handler unexpectedly found himself pitching “an idea for a gothic novel, which had been falling apart as [he] was writing it,” to children’s editor Susan Rich (Robinson). Although *The Basic Eight* definitely did not belong with a children’s publisher, Handler realized that his gothic novel, originally intended for adult readers, could be repurposed as a series of children’s books “about terrible things happening to a family of orphans” (Minzesheimer). This idea became a reality in 1999 when Handler, writing under the pseudonym of author/narrator/character Lemony Snicket, released *The Bad Beginning*, the first of thirteen books in his *A Series of Unfortunate Events (ASOUE)*. Although *ASOUE* hasn’t captured the global imagination (or financial returns) that J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series has, it has still become enormously popular. Since their publication, the thirteen novels in the series have spent more than a combined six hundred weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, been translated into over forty languages, and sold more than fifty million copies (Beckett 165-6). In 2004, a major blockbuster adaptation of the first three books was released starring Jim Carrey and Meryl Streep. And in October 2014 it was announced that Netflix, in association with Paramount Television, would be adapting *ASOUE* into an original ‘TV’ series (Ng).

The success of *ASOUE* has also carried over to the many supplemental works that have been released by Handler/Snicket. Some of these works are driven by the same mysteries enshrouding *ASOUE*, such as *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2002) and *The Beatrice Letters* (2006). While neither of those works is necessary to an understanding of the series, they serve to enhance the reader’s enjoyment

of *ASOUE*'s central mysteries (both books would be incomprehensible to someone who has not read any of the thirteen novels). A new series, called *All the Wrong Questions* (*ATWQ*), featuring Lemony Snicket as the narrator and main character, began publication in 2012 with the first novel, *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* This four-part series has been touted as a prequel to *ASOUE*, as it inhabits the same world and features Lemony Snicket; however, aside from Snicket, the presence of a certain secret society, and a preoccupation with conspiracies, this new series shares little in the way of narrative continuity with *ASOUE*. The second novel in the *ATWQ* series, *When Did You See Her Last?*, was published in 2013; the third book, *Shouldn't You Be in School?*, was published in 2014; and the last novel in the series is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2015. There are also a number of other works under the Snicket name whose only connection to *ASOUE* is the wry narratorial voice of Snicket himself.¹ The influence of this series, and Snicket, on younger generations is vast, growing, and worthy of exploration.²

Like many fictional heroes, particularly in children's literature, the Baudelaire children—Violet, Klaus and Sunny—are extremely clever, and resilient, and each possesses a special skill that frequently turns out to be useful in foiling the plots of their

¹ For example, Snicket has released varied material over the years, from a Hanukkah/Christmas story called *The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming* (2007) to an online post about the Occupy Wall Street movement.

² Strangely, as Julie Barton notes in "Power Play: Intertextuality in A Series of Unfortunate Events," the series has been "largely ignored by critics," which is particularly odd in light of their popularity (322).

enemies. According to the eighth novel, Violet is “probably the finest fourteen-year-old inventor in the world”; thirteen year-old Klaus is a great reader, with a “real knack for remembering nearly every word of nearly all of the thousands of books he had read”; and Sunny is an infant with four teeth, each of which is as “sharp as that of a lion” (4-5). These abilities play a vital role in the characterization of the children and remain constant throughout the series. Only Sunny changes: she begins as an infant and is three years old by the last book, *The End*, and her interest in biting evolves into a passion for cooking.

The fictional author, narrator, and character, Lemony Snicket is a morose and mysterious man who has been compelled to spend years of his life researching, writing, and ensuring the publication of the tragic tale of the Baudelaire children. Snicket is without a doubt the most intriguing of the characters in the series. He rarely discusses himself in any detail or length, but his story haunts the narrative of *ASOUE*. As Kendra Magnusson puts it, Lemony Snicket “is manifest in the text yet [he is] impossibly elusive” (89). Snicket begins each novel with a poetic dedication to his deceased beloved, Beatrice,³ and a warning to the reader that the story contained within will not end well. He frequently breaks through his third-person omniscient narration by directly addressing the audience (sometimes with warnings about the dire future of the protagonists, and

³ Although it does not become clear until *The End*, the Beatrice that Snicket dedicates each book to is, in fact, the Baudelaire children’s deceased mother. Snicket’s devotion to the mother of our protagonists helps to explain his single-minded commitment to following the story of her children, as well as employing a playful allusion to Dante’s descent and redemption in *The Divine Comedy*.

sometimes to bring up an intriguing tidbit from his past or present situation). Each of the novels ends with a hastily written note from Snicket, ‘To My Kind Editor,’ hinting at the next episode of the series, and often describing the strange measures that must be taken in order to ensure the safe transmittal of his manuscripts.⁴ As becomes clear by reading around the edges of the main plot, Snicket is the “Eternally pursued and insatiably inquisitive” center of the series, and “the world-wide-web of conspiracy which surrounds him” holds the attention of the reader just as much (if not more) than the mysteries that the Baudelaire children find themselves swept up by (*The Afflicted Author*). As with the story of Charles Kinbote, the putative editor of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, the story of Lemony Snicket begins, inch by inch, to move from the margins into the foreground of the narrative.

The series begins, in the aptly titled *The Bad Beginning*, with the untimely and highly suspicious death of the Baudelaire parents. The fire that kills their parents also consumes the Baudelaire family home, leaving Violet, Klaus, and Sunny not only orphaned, but also homeless.⁵ Adrift, and cut off from almost everything that had been a

⁴ This is even true of the thirteenth novel, which has a secret chapter (number fourteen) at the end of *The End*.

⁵ After the horrible news is broken to the children in *The Bad Beginning*, Snicket notes that, “As I’m sure you know, to be in one’s own room, in one’s own bed, can often make a bleak situation a little better, but the beds of the Baudelaire orphans had been reduced to charred rubble” (12). The loss of their home effectively makes the transition of the children into the scary world of the orphaned even more abrupt.

constant in their lives, the children soon come to a deep understanding of their vulnerable status within the world. Initially Mr. Poe, the executor of their parents' will, places the children under the guardianship of the nefarious Count Olaf, who quickly develops a scheme to acquire the Baudelaire fortune by marrying his fourteen-year-old (and distantly related) ward, Violet. Although the Baudelaires escape the clutches of Olaf at the end of the first novel, he unrelentingly pursues the children over the course of the series, determined to get his hands on their inheritance. For the second through seventh novels, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are passed from guardian to guardian, most of them terribly incompetent and very often cruel. As Kevin McFarland points out in an article for the AV Club, "After the first book covers the necessary exposition for the Baudelaires and Count Olaf, it's a constant cycle of Poe taking them to a relative, Olaf showing up in disguise, adults ignoring the orphans' pleas, and the orphans revealing Olaf's scheme before he escapes and they move on to the next relative" (Cruikshank and McFarland). This cycle continues until the end of the seventh novel, when the Baudelaires make the decision to set out on their own, fleeing a mob of angry villagers who are (mistakenly) convinced that the children are murderers.⁶ This effectively turns the children into 'criminals' in the public eye, forcing them to be on the run from both the police and Count Olaf.

Cut off from the system of legal guardianship that has failed them so miserably, the Baudelaires find some measure of autonomy, albeit freedom that is fraught with

⁶ The individual that they are accused of murdering is Jacques Snicket, the brother of Lemony. Jacques and Lemony also have a sister, Kit Snicket, who is first mentioned in the eleventh novel and becomes a character in the twelfth.

increasing danger. In the previous novels the children were bound by the rules of their various guardians and unable to pursue their own goals satisfactorily. With this newfound independence it appears that the Baudelaires will finally be able to focus fully on uncovering the truth about their parents' death and the mysterious secret society 'V.F.D.' Unfortunately, despite their seeming freedom, it becomes no easier for Violet, Klaus, and Sunny to follow the clues that they find; they have no access to money in order to attain the necessities of life, they have no easy mode of travel, and they must frequently maintain disguises, as they are wanted criminals. Although the format and plot of the later novels are far more interesting than the repetition present in the first seven, "the tales become increasingly dark as the line between good and evil blurs, exposure to the negative side of humanity intensifies, and the siblings face increasingly difficult moral decisions" (Russell 25). The 'freedom' achieved by Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, from the eighth novel until *The End* (the thirteenth and final novel), is therefore a double-edged sword for both the characters and the readers.

Finally on their own, but in hiding from both Olaf and the law, the Baudelaires are entirely motivated by the pursuit of various mysteries, most particularly the truth behind the "sinister secret" of V.F.D. (Book 8 30). The mysterious V.F.D. is introduced in Book Five as an important piece of information that Duncan and Isadora Quagmire,⁷ friends of the Baudelaires, reveal before being kidnapped by Count Olaf. The meaning of the acronym 'V.F.D' is a bit of a cipher, changing from moment to moment, standing for

⁷ Duncan, Isadora, and their triplet brother Quigley, are also orphans who have lost their parents in a mysterious fire and who are set to inherit a large fortune.

whatever it needs to at the time.⁸ The children eventually discover that V.F.D. is also the name of a secret society that seems at times good and at times evil. It is eventually revealed that nearly every adult character in the series has been or is a member of this group. The children later discover that the secret organization underwent a schism at one point, producing “two groups of bitter enemies” who operate under the same name, use the same tools, and have the same hideouts (Book 12 7). By the end of the series the plurality of meanings and uses for ‘V.F.D.’ turns the formerly charged acronym into something remarkably empty. The secret that drives the Baudelaires and the readers does not culminate in any big revelations in *The End*; the journey that the children and the reader go through is thus itself the point of the series, process rather than result, with the elusive “answer” to the conspiratorial riddle functioning as a MacGuffin.

The thirteen books that comprise Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events (ASOUE)* and the many supplemental materials which accompany them have become enormously popular with both children and adults. A large part of this success is owing to the playfulness of the conspiratorial narrative which permeates the series, inspiring active participation and critical thinking skills in the reader. A product of our contemporary culture of paranoia, *ASOUE* both reflects and plays with the now well-entrenched characteristics of conspiracy theory within Western culture. Conspiracy

⁸ For example, in the seventh novel, when given a choice about their placement for the first time, the children chose the guardianship of something called ‘V.F.D.’, hoping to finally uncover the truth; rather than solving any mysteries however, they discover that in this instance V.F.D. stands for Village of Fowl Devotees.

narratives have changed a great deal over the past century, from relatively linear to labyrinthine, and the series mirrors this in its own shifting approach to paranoia and meaning-making in the increasingly chaotic world of *ASOUE*. The series takes the reader on a representative journey through conspiracy theory's evolution, from its early, scorned beginnings, to its present state of cultural ubiquity. The series effects this evolution by mapping the growth of the child heroes, and their journey to 'adulthood', onto the movement from a modernist perspective to a postmodern one.

The codes of conspiracy theory⁹ that are embedded within the series, such as secret societies, the "us" versus "them" mentality, hidden messages, the corruption and untrustworthiness of those in power, and the webs of connections, as well as the frequent literary allusions, invite the audience to read deeply and playfully and thereby to participate in the creation of a sub-narrative. The novels of Lemony Snicket are incisive and playful critiques of the cynicism and paranoia of conspiracy culture, rather than mere reflections of it. In this thesis I examine the conspiratorial elements within *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and demonstrate its keen interest in the history of conspiracy

⁹ Conspiracy theory has become ubiquitous both in mainstream popular culture and on the paranoid fringe (which occasionally intersect, such as in Glenn Beck's short-lived but hugely popular hour on Fox News), but is perhaps best summed up by Fredric Jameson in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* where he asserts that conspiracy theory's "minimal basic components" are "a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility" (9).

narratives, both modern and postmodern. I will also investigate the series in relation to its cultural context as a product for children.

This thesis is comprised of three main chapters, two of which are divided into subsections. Specifically, this thesis begins with a brief introduction of *ASOUE*. The second chapter (The Baudelaire Orphans and the Arc of Conspiracy) sets out a primer on conspiracy theory criticism, followed first by an exploration of the traditional (modernist) conspiracy elements within Books the First to the Seventh, and then by an analysis of the postmodern conspiracy in Books the Eighth to the Thirteenth. In Chapter Three (The Textual Play of Conspiracy within *ASOUE*) the analysis shifts to examine play theory, before delving into the three levels of conspiratorial play within the series: the play of the characters; the play of Lemony Snicket as a character, narrator, and author; and the play of the reader. The fourth chapter presents a brief assessment of the impact of conspiracy on the child reader of *ASOUE*.

Chapter 2: The Baudelaire Orphans and the Arc of Conspiracy Theory

This chapter is responsible for outlining the way in which the ‘growth’ of the protagonists in Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and their narrative journey mirrors the evolution of the history of conspiracy theory, from modern to postmodern. First, however, we must survey and define the pertinent terms, and contextualize the history of this paranoid worldview.

2.1 Conspiracy Primer

Richard Hofstadter, author of the classic study of conspiracy theory “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” states, “Notions about an all-embracing conspiracy on the part of Jesuits or Freemasons, international capitalists, international Jews, or Communists are a familiar phenomenon in many countries throughout modern history” (6).

Nonetheless, conspiracy theory has had a distinctly American character in the second half of the twentieth century; for that reason, this thesis will confine its analyses to examples of American conspiracy theory. Mike Davis, in his *Reading the Text That Isn’t There: Paranoia in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*, notes that “the American political arena has had, from its inception, a paranoid component” (1). David Brion Davis elaborates upon the idea of America as having always been “paranoid” in the introduction of *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*, noting that “conspiratorial subversion acquired new meaning in a nation born in revolution and based on the sovereignty of the people” (xvi). He states:

[T]he continuing condition of social fluidity and personal insecurity [in this new-born nation has] made Americans especially susceptible to the

belief that appearances [are] deceiving, that things [are] not what they seemed to be. In a nation in which every man is supposed to be on the make, there is an overriding fear of being taken in. (xvi)

The United States was born out of a revolution against British monarchical rule, a distant, patronizing, and powerful parent; the idea of America as an inherently paranoid state due to its struggles with the powerful ‘Other’ ties in well with the themes in *ASOUE*, as Violet, Klaus, and Sunny also struggle with, and are inspired to cut themselves off from, a powerful system of guardianship that is ineffective and often corrupt. Despite the fact that, as Lemony Snicket, Daniel Handler does not specifically situate *ASOUE* in a specific time or space, the great and enduring romance between conspiracism and America is relevant to this thesis. Handler is an American citizen who writes and is published in the US; and although *ASOUE* has become an international success, it is, first and foremost, a product of and for American readers.

Although conspiratorial paranoia is certainly not a new phenomenon, it is only within the last century (and more particularly within the last six decades, or so) that conspiracy theory has become a topic of broad cultural interest. This interest has snowballed in recent decades to the point where the “association of conspiracism with major television networks and motion picture studios [has] give the material an implied stamp of legitimacy,” opening up the Western market for conspiracy saturation (Barkun 230-1). In the preface of *Empire of Conspiracy: the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Timothy Melley writes that “conspiracy theory has animated [America’s] political culture from the early Republican period to the present, at times powerfully swaying popular opinion. But its influence has never been greater than now” (vii).

Hofstadter wrote his seminal essay in 1964; Melley's book came out in 2000; I write this thesis at a time when a critical mass of Americans believe their president to be a secret Muslim plotting against the republic, as exemplified by the obsession over Barack Obama's birth certificate or the constant attempts to parse his mixed heritage as evidence of un-American inclinations (such as Newt Gingrich's assertion that the president embodies a "Kenyan anti-colonial" worldview). Clearly, conspiracy narratives continue to play a major role in American culture.

Not only have conspiracy theory and paranoia become popular themes in the arts, over the past half century they have also become increasingly discussed topics of scholarship. As noted above, the first writer to tackle the subject of the "grandiose theories of conspiracy" in a meaningful and influential way was the American historian, Richard Hofstadter, in his 1964 article "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (4). As "the most prominent and influential account of conspiracy theory and populist 'extremism,'" Hofstadter's essay has essentially served as the foundation for subsequent study on the subject (Fenster xvi);¹⁰ thus it becomes necessary to use him as a base for this study as well. Hofstadter's historical survey of the "paranoid style" in American politics begins by linking the term 'paranoia' with "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (3). This association of paranoia with fantasies of conspiracy continues in his work until the two terms become essentially interchangeable. This conflation of concepts has since been carried on throughout most of

¹⁰ Mark Fenster, in *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, dedicates the entirety of his first chapter to Hofstadter's seminal essay.

the scholarship on conspiracy theory and paranoia, and shall be in effect within this thesis as well. I must note, however, as Hofstadter does, that, in using the word ‘paranoia,’ “I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes” (3). Although there are undoubtedly many mentally ill people who believe and promulgate conspiracy theories of all sorts, there are also a number of very real conspiracies that have taken place, and a certain amount of world-weary paranoia is justifiable in any sane person.

Conspiracy theory arguably pervades all realms of thought in U.S. culture. According to Mark Fenster, an “extensive body of research and analysis on the politics and history of American conspiracy theory was developed in the 1950s and 1960s by American historians and political scientists” and “[t]heir work remains influential in academic and popular conceptions of the politics of conspiracy theories” (3). However, as this is a study of children’s literature, my focus is not on politics but on conspiracy narratives and conspiracy culture. The works on conspiracy theory that are particularly relevant to this thesis are Richard Hofstadter (1964), Patrick O’Donnell (2000), Peter Knight (2000), Brian McHale (1987; 1992), and Timothy Melley (2000).

In the introduction of *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*, Peter Knight frequently refers to a ‘shift’ that has taken place in conspiracy theories and culture over the past century. Knight is not alone in his conclusion that,

The style of conspiracy culture has ... changed from a rigid conviction about a particular demonized enemy, to a cynical and generalized sense of the ubiquity – and even the necessity – of clandestine, conspiring forces in a world in which everything is connected. Certainty has given way to

doubt, and conspiracy has become a default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone. (3)

Although Timothy Melley views the new version of conspiracy as a “postwar model” which is particularly dependent on mass media, Knight locates the moment of change (or trauma) as the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 (*Empire of Conspiracy* 3).

Knight is not alone in his claim that the assassination of J.F.K. was the locus of this shift in conspiratorial focus¹¹ as the “ambiguous point of origin for a loss of faith in authority and coherent causality – the primal scene, as it were, of a postmodern sense of paranoia” (4). Regardless of the point of origin, however, it is this shift from modernist conspiracy

¹¹ Patrick O’Donnell, in *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*, posits that “the Kennedy assassination has served as the site of a national trauma in the United States” from which it has never fully recovered (45). In fact, O’Donnell devotes a chapter of his book to the effect that Kennedy’s death has had on American culture. Michael Barkun, in *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, notes that, “the period since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 has seen the rise of a veritable cottage industry of conspiracism, with ever more complex plots and devious forces behind it” (2). And Samuel Chase Coale, in his *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*, wrote that “Postmodern theory began to flourish in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and era in which, as a result of the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, an antiauthoritarian skepticism grew and exploded” (1).

narratives to ones of postmodern paranoia that is illustrated in the story arc and growth of the Baudelaire children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

2.2 The Arc of Conspiracy Narratives in *ASOUE*

Brian McHale goes to great lengths in *Constructing Postmodernism* to distinguish between modernist and postmodernist fiction. According to McHale,

modernist fiction is fiction organized in terms of an epistemological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of accessibility, reliability or unreliability, transmission, circulation, etc., of knowledge about the world.... Postmodernist fiction, on the other hand, is fiction organized in terms of an ontological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the mode of being of fictional worlds and their inhabitants, and/or reflect on the plurality and diversity of worlds, whether 'real,' possible, fictional, or what-have-you. (146-7)

According to McHale's definition, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* straddles the two modes of fiction in question, as the changing nature of conspiracy narratives over the series shifts from one mode to the other. The series begins as a straightforward detective mystery with clear-cut villains and heroes and turns into a morally conflicted homage to the ubiquity and incoherence of postmodern conspiracism.

2.2.1 Modernist Conspiracy Narratives: The Baudelaire Detectives (Books 1 – 7)

The main story in the *ASOUE* series is that of the Baudelaire orphans, who have been caught up in a web of intrigue. From book to book, Count Olaf repeatedly conspires

to grasp hold of the Baudelaire fortune, and, as his plots frequently threaten the children with serious (and often fatal) harm, they are forced to play the role of detectives in order to uncover these plots and survive. McHale points out that “Classic detective fiction is the epistemological genre *par excellence*,” and a “modernist novel looks like a detective story” (147). And on a very basic level, especially in the early volumes, *ASOUE* falls within the mold of the cut-and-paste classic detective serial, as “The necessity to decipher the mystery of their lives [and their parents’ death] leads the children (and by extension, the reader) to adopt the role of the detective” (Russell 34). In the first half of *ASOUE*, however, the Baudelaires are still obliged to work within the structures of power and authority as defined by the adult world, which places strict parameters on their agency as detectives—still working within, in McHale’s terms, the assumption of epistemological certainties as defined by their adult keepers.

Hofstadter depicts the types of people who are drawn to conspiracy theories as persecuted minorities with deep-seated feelings of powerlessness and a tendency to obsessively research and amass vast quantities of evidence. Although Hofstadter views typical conspiracy theorists as ‘cranks,’ the Baudelaire children, who are both sane and the victims of actual conspiracy, still fit his profile. In the traditional mode of conspiracy theory, “[t]he feeling of persecution is central,” and “In America [paranoia] has been the preferred style only of minority movements” (Hofstadter 4-7). The focus on persecuted minorities is central to Hofstadter’s argument, as it is only those who feel they are being actively repressed who seek out a cause for their situation. As children (members of perhaps the largest minority on the planet), Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are subject to oppression and discrimination by the adults and institutions that are ostensibly meant to

protect them. Aside from the obvious violent persecution instigated by their first guardian, Count Olaf, the Baudelaires are the victims of a more subtle ageism, one which all children experience at one time or another: the power imbalance between themselves and the adults who maintain authority over them. Although I discuss this power dynamic more in later chapters, the analysis in this chapter is focused on the effect of the imbalance in fostering a feeling of persecution within *ASOUE*'s three protagonists.

The legal system consistently invalidates Violet, Klaus, and Sunny's status as people. For example, in the first book Violet is forced by her legal guardian (Count Olaf) to marry him, while they are both disguised as actors in a play. Because a Judge officiates and they follow the legal ceremony to the letter within the play, the marriage is deemed to be "legally binding," despite the dubious circumstances (such as Violet's age, and the conflict of interests involved in Olaf being both guardian and husband) (Book 1 150). Although Violet outwits Olaf and evades the marriage, the fact that it was presented as a legal possibility within this fictional world allegorizes the very real persecution that children can face at the hands of circumscribed power. An adult has the authority and power to say no, but as a child, Violet is almost defenseless against the whims of her legal guardian.

The series offers numerous examples of how the legal system repeatedly fails the Baudelaires. The children are passed from one inept guardian to the next, like property, while being afforded no input into their own future or well-being. At the end of the first novel, for instance, Justice Strauss offers to take the children in, and although the Baudelaires "wanted very badly to live with this kind and generous woman," their parents' will explicitly states that the children "must be adopted by a relative" (160-1).

The adult authority of the Baudelaire parents has a remarkable posthumous reach over the children. And, although the parents most likely had only the best of intentions for their kids, their actions result in a significant decrease of agency for Violet, Klaus, and Sunny. After Olaf, the procession of adult guardians who take the Baudelaire children into their care frequently treat them with condescension at best, and neglect or abuse at worst, factors that allegorize the failings of legal systems and the caprices of jurisprudence. Although the Baudelaires are initially inclined to trust and seek out help from the adults around them, they quickly learn that their voices do not carry weight, and that those in positions of power do not hear, or do not want to hear, what they have to say. This persecution, especially when combined with the lack of voice that the children have in adult society, leaves the Baudelaires feeling powerless and all the more aware of the necessity of achieving their own independence.

Such powerlessness, Melley argues, gives rise to what he refers to as “agency panic,” which is “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control” (*Empire of Conspiracy* 12). Under the care of their wealthy and easy-going parents the Baudelaires had a greater share of autonomy than many children.¹² The stability and protection that they received from their parents shielded them from an awareness of their own powerlessness in the world. According to Melley,

¹² For example, although Violet, Klaus, and Sunny lived in “the heart of a dirty and busy city,” “occasionally their parents gave them permission to take a rickety trolley ... alone to the seashore, where they would spend the day as a sort of vacation as long as they were home for dinner” (Book 1 2).

the idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for events in a clear, if frightening, way. To put it another way, by offering a highly adaptable vision of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a ‘master narrative,’ a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events. (*Empire of Conspiracy* 8)

A master narrative of conspiracy not only affords the individual a sense of control and autonomy, but also reinforces the boundaries of individual and community identities. By creating or vilifying a “them,” the singular identity of the “us” is strengthened. Olaf’s repeated acts of villainy toward the Baudelaires bring the children closer together, and as they learn that they can only rely on each other they become surer of themselves and their abilities.

In addition to harboring feelings of persecution and ‘agency panic,’ the traditional conspiracy theorist also hoards information. A typical theme in all conspiracy theory is a tendency towards the “laborious study of documents” (Hofstadter 32) and the obsessive accumulation of “evidence” (Hofstadter 36). Michel Foucault notes that “knowledge emerges from networks of power and the exercise of power produces certain types of knowledge” (qtd. in Mallan 43). The accumulation of evidence, or knowledge, can therefore be seen as an assertion of individual power, in which the individual potentially functions as one of Foucault’s “nodes” around which power gathers. The collection of information is a natural and relatively easy part of being human; possession of knowledge gives the owner a feeling of power; and the expression of that knowledge has the potential to have real-world impacts. The feelings of power and the possibility of

impacting the world around them makes information gathering something of an instinctive response for those who feel persecuted. The marginalized conspiracy theorist builds agency as she builds the case against her conspirators by collecting information about them. The modern conspiracy theorist believes that if sufficient proof of the various misdeeds perpetrated by the conspirators is brought to light, justice will prevail; the ‘villains’ will be punished and the theorist will not only be freed from the conspiracy, but their efforts will be seen as heroic as well.

An emphasis on information gathering can be seen in many of the characters. The Baudelaire children share a love for books and libraries; and Klaus’ aptitude for research, in particular, is put to good use time and again in foiling the schemes of Count Olaf. In fact, most of the solutions that the Baudelaires have to Olaf’s many plots come, in part, from research. In the fifth novel the children again find themselves in the ‘care’ of an oblivious guardian, and when Olaf shows up in disguise with another scheme to acquire the children and their money, they begin the task of gathering evidence of Olaf’s identity and his plot. This time, however, they have the help of their new friends, Duncan and Isadora Quagmire, who keep notebooks full of interesting pieces of information. These notebooks, and the mysteries contained within, become a vital part of the next few novels, as the children learn at the end of the fifth book that they contain important information about Olaf and something else called ‘V.F.D.’ The tantalizing knowledge contained within these notebooks remains just out of reach, however, as Olaf steals them along with the Quagmire siblings at the end of *The Austere Academy*. In the seventh novel, the children nearly get their hands on the notebooks, which they learn contained “all the information [the Quagmires could find] about Count Olaf’s evil plan, and the secret of

V.F.D, and Jacques Snicket's murder" (245). Unfortunately, the books are almost completely destroyed by one of Olaf's minions at the end of the seventh novel. The Baudelaires gather the remaining pages, many of which are damaged in some way, and for the next few novels in the series the children treat this package of remnants as sacred, a reminder of the knowledge, and power, that was lost.

The casual cruelty and penchant for destructive behavior evinced by Olaf and his minions is consonant with the standard figuration of the conspiratorial enemy. The traditional conspiratorial enemy is, as Richard Hofstadter notes, "clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He is a free, active, demonic agent" (31-2). This is a perfect description of Count Olaf as he appears in the novels (at least up until the tenth book) where Olaf is presented as the ultimate in evil, and the head of the conspiracy as the children know it. Hofstadter's description of the conspiratorial villain is like a laundry list of Olaf's characteristics in the early novels. In nearly every chapter, he is portrayed as deeply sinister, with a cruel smirk and the "bright, bright shine" of avarice in his eyes (Book 3 43). His association with the symbol of the eye, which is very prominent in *ASOUE*, links him together with the notions of surveillance and omnipresence. As quoted in the first book, he "had an image of an eye tattooed on his ankle, matching the eye on his front door. [The Baudelaires] wondered how many other eyes there were in Count Olaf's house, and whether for the rest of their lives, they would always feel as though Count Olaf were watching them even when he wasn't nearby" (Book 1 25). The children's sense of Count Olaf's almost

ubiquitous power is demonstrated in his ability to always know where the Baudelaires will be, and in managing to stay one step ahead of them at all times. Olaf's ability to *always* find them once they've been placed with a new guardian is a source of constant worry and befuddlement for the Baudelaires. His powerful ubiquity terrorizes the children until the ninth novel, when the children discover Olivia, the woman who had been keeping Olaf informed as to their whereabouts (159). And Olaf's love for luxury, shown in details such as his "expensive-looking running shoes," is clearly the driving force in his plot to acquire the Baudelaire fortune (Book 5 66). That said, while the early novels characterize Olaf as a completely two-dimensional villain, free from history and emotional motivation, the last three novels complicate those assumptions, and call into question who the villain of the stories really is.

The early machinations of Count Olaf eventually develop, in the eyes of the Baudelaires, into what Hofstadter, speaking of the paranoid style generally, refers to as a "vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (29). The conspiracy surrounding the children begins with Olaf's continued attempts to steal their inheritance. Their understanding of the conspiracy grows once they realize that the symbol of the eye, which Olaf has littered about his home and tattooed on his ankle, is used by other people, some of whom are in cahoots with him. In the fourth novel, for example, the children encounter Dr. Georgina Orwell, whose office is housed in "a building that looked just like the tattoo of Count Olaf" (Book 4 14). The connection between the symbol of the eye and villainy is reinforced when the Baudelaires discover that Orwell is hypnotising Klaus to respond to a verbal cue with deadly obedience, much like character Raymond Shaw in Richard

Condon's *Manchurian Candidate* is being brainwashed by his mother to become a sleeper agent. The scope of the conspiracy that the children are focused on grows exponentially once the name of the secret society (V.F.D.) is known to them, and even more so once it is linked with the symbol of the eye. The traditional notion of conspiracy acts as "*the motive force* in historical events" (Hofstadter 29). The Baudelaires, once they are aware of the larger conspiracy at work, immediately begin to forge causal links between Olaf (a known arson who easily employs violence to achieve his goals), V.F.D. (which is sometimes an acronym for Volunteer Fire Department), and the fiery death of their parents; and at the end of the seventh novel, with the little information they have acquired, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny set out on their own in the hopes of "discovering the secret of V.F.D." and "defeating Count Olaf" (Book 7 253).

In such modern conspiracy thrillers as Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) and Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), the hero is clever, resourceful, and dogged in pursuit of the truth. He usually finds himself accidentally involved in a conspiracy, discovering that the only way to extricate himself and survive is to take the conspiracy down. With the stakes so high, he mirrors Hofstadter's paranoid spokesman: "the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish" (Hofstadter 31). With the tragic death of their parents, the Baudelaires find themselves at the center of plots and conspiracies that they could not have dreamed of in their prior lives. And yet, like Joe Turner in *Three Days of the Condor* or Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, when dropped into a nightmare of conspiracy the Baudelaire children adapt. They use their collective knowledge, resourcefulness, and tenacity to their advantage in fighting against conspiratorial forces. The combination of

Violet's practical inventiveness, Klaus' inclination to research, and Sunny's ability to 'sink her teeth' into things turns the collected Baudelaires into the perfect conspiracy-fiction protagonists in the traditional, modernist mode. Unlike the heroes of Hitchcock and Pollack's films, however, the Baudelaire children do not uncover the secret truth, they do not bring down the conspiracy, and, although they survive the series, they cannot be characterized as having won the battle.

2.2.2 Postmodern Conspiracy Narratives: The Baudelaire Survivors (Books 8 – 13)

As argued above, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* grounds its initial tropes and motifs—that is, those of the first seven novels—in a modernist sensibility. The novels that follow, as the Baudelaires cut themselves loose from extrinsic power structures (embodied by adult supervision), begin to display a postmodernist sensibility, one in which conspiracy becomes increasingly pervasive and nebulous. According to Peter Knight,

Popular conspiracism has mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces. It has shifted, in effect, from a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one's sense of identity, to a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion. In short, there is now a permanent uncertainty about fundamental issues of causality, agency, responsibility and identity. (4)

I intend to demonstrate that the historical shift in modes of conspiracy from modern to postmodern is echoed in the journey of the Baudelaire children as they become progressively more grown up and independent.

With the advent of the internet, postmodern conspiracy theorists – or, as cultural critics like Melley now call them, ‘conspiracists’ – can be, and often are, anyone and everyone. Information about real conspiracies, such as Project MKUltra, is easily available online, and conspiracy theories of all sorts are commonplace in the news, on television, in movies, in novels, as well as on the internet. Surrounded as we are by a culture of paranoia, it is unsurprising that the postmodern conspiracist would become cynical and distrustful, seeing a combination of connection and chaos everywhere.

The Baudelaire children spend most of *ASOUE* (when they aren’t on the run for their lives) trying to uncover more information regarding their parents’ demise, and the mysterious secret society, V.F.D. (of which, they eventually discover, their parents were members). Significantly, however, not all of the clues and connections that are uncovered lead to anything at all. Some of the clues that the children discover are red herrings, such as in the sixth novel when they bid on a lot titled “V.F.D.” at an auction, believing it to contain their kidnapped friends (Duncan and Isadora Quagmire), and end up having purchased a lot of Very Fancy Doilies.¹³ There are also a number of MacGuffins in the series that mislead the Baudelaires and the reader, such as the mysterious sugar bowl.

¹³ Ironically, the Baudelaires discover (too late) that the triplets *are* being moved though the auction. However, they are placed within a large statue of an actual red herring, rather than inside of the box labelled ‘V.F.D.’

Characters from both sides of the V.F.D. schism seem to know a great deal about this sugar bowl and the quest to acquire it is a major plot point of the eleventh and twelfth novels, but the importance of it is never made clear to the Baudelaires or the reader. By the time the children have reached the events in the last book they discover that there is no ultimate pattern, no classic detective resolution, and many of the major questions raised throughout the series remain unanswered.

There are numerous diversions and simple dead ends in the increasingly labyrinthine plot, and in this way *ASOUE* evolves into more of an “anti-detective story,” which, according to McHale, “has proliferated in postmodern writing” (151), such as Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*. Put another way, what initially appears to be a localized and simplistic plot by Count Olaf to steal the Baudelaire fortune reveals itself, book by book, to be much larger in scope; and eventually the conspiracy is revealed to be massive, all-encompassing, and potentially super-powerful, while at the same time chaotic and remarkably ineffectual. Particularly in later books, such as *The Penultimate Peril*, Handler (via Snicket) parodies the ridiculousness of conspiracy theory in general and the uselessness of secrecy in particular. In this novel the children are told that they must go undercover at a hotel as concierges and spy on the guests there to determine if it is safe enough for the ‘good’ V.F.D. operatives (the ‘volunteers’) to hold a meeting, or if the ‘villains’ have infiltrated the hotel, making it unsafe. They are specifically charged with the task of determining if one guest, known only as ‘J.S.’, is a volunteer or a villain. The Baudelaires are told that they will likely “recognize some volunteers who have been observing [them] during [their] travels,” and that they will also probably “recognize some of [their] enemies, as they will be posing as noble people” (Book 12 37). The uncertainty

regarding the affiliations of the guests at the hotel is most ridiculously demonstrated in the case of the hotel managers. The children are told that, while acting as undercover operatives, they will be able to rely on the assistance of one of the managers, Frank Denouement. The problem with this is that although Frank is one of the good members of V.F.D., his identical brother Ernest is not; and throughout the novel the children remain unsure as to whether the man they are taking orders from is Frank, or Ernest *posing* as Frank. As for the mysterious J.S., while the children spy on the guests they reveal that “Esmé Squalor¹⁴ thinks J.S. is spoiling the party. Sir¹⁵ thinks J.S. is hosting the party. Hal¹⁶ thinks J.S. might be here to help. Kit¹⁷ thinks J.S. might be an enemy. And we still

¹⁴ Esmé, along with her husband Jerome, was a guardian of the Baudelaires in the sixth novel, the *Ersatz Elevator*. Although Jerome was kind to the children, Esmé turned out to be a villain in cahoots with Olaf. At the end of the novel she runs off with Olaf to be his girlfriend; as such she shows up in many of the later novels.

¹⁵ Sir was the guardian of the children in the fourth novel, *The Miserable Mill*. Although not portrayed as an outright villain, he is certainly one of the cruelest guardians the children have, as he immediately puts them to work in his dangerous lumber mill, a job for which they and their co-workers receive no pay.

¹⁶ Hal is the head of the Library of Records in Heimlich Hospital. The children meet him first in the eighth novel, and he is one of the kinder adults that they encounter.

¹⁷ Kit Snicket, as mentioned previously, is the sister of Lemony, and a volunteer member of V.F.D. She is the one who requests that the Baudelaires go undercover at Hotel Denouement.

don't even know if J.S. is a man or a woman!" (Book 12 166). The ineffectiveness of this conspiratorial secrecy is taken to dramatic heights when Jerome Squalor and Justice Strauss both arrive at the hotel at the same time, both having been led to believe that they are the 'J.S.' that the volunteers are waiting for.

The inclination of modern conspiracy theorists to gather information is taken to new heights in the later novels of *ASOUE*. Rather than gathering specific information to *use*, there is a movement towards gathering any information simply for the sake of *collecting it*. This is not an uncommon trope in postmodern conspiracy narratives, and is perhaps most famously depicted in the figure of Nicholas Branch, the "secret historian" of the Kennedy assassination in Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*, and his description of the compendious, encyclopedic Warren Report: "Everything is here. Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions ... it resembles a kind of mind-spatter, a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language" (181). The Warren Report, Branch thinks, "is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred" (181). The various texts and libraries the Baudelaires encounter parodies this tendency, particularly in the later novels. In the eighth novel, for instance, the children meet Hal, who works in the Library of Records in Heimlich Hospital and whose life's work has been to ensure that this hospital library contains "information about everything." He mentions to the children that "paperwork is the most important thing we do at this hospital" (Book 8 65-7). While paperwork is certainly an important part of any well-run hospital, it can hardly be characterized as the *most* important thing. Moreover, despite all of the information that Hal has spent years accumulating and storing he is

horrified at the thought of reading or actually doing anything with the information contained within the files.

The children encounter something similar in the twelfth novel, when they meet Dewey Denouement,¹⁸ the “sub-sub-librarian,” who has devoted his life to compiling the research of every V.F.D. volunteer into a catalogue that is “as big as the hotel” (182-4). Unlike Hal, Dewey isn’t afraid to read the information he has been collecting; in fact, Dewey calls his research ‘evidence’ against the villains of the world, and intends to use this collection to bring those villains to justice (Book 12 200). The idea that Dewey could have collected a hotel’s worth of evidence, and only now have enough to do something with is clearly insane, and speaks to the volumes of rubbish that must be housed alongside any contents that might be useful. While both Hal and Dewey are portrayed as ‘good’ people, involved to some degree in the fight against the conspiracy that the children are facing, Snicket portrays both Hal and Dewey’s information gathering as an obsessive and essentially futile endeavor, as neither of those characters is capable of limiting the scope of their interest. They see everything as connected, and therefore almost every piece of information becomes vital to their collections. Dewey claims that he and his associates have:

retrieved Josephine Anwhistle’s files from Lake Lachrymose and carefully copied down their contents. We’ve pasted together the burnt scraps of

¹⁸ Dewey is the identical triplet brother of Frank and Ernest, accounting for some of the confusion that the Baudelaires experience at Hotel Denouement, as they try to determine which of the brothers is a villain or not.

Madame Lulu's archival library and taken notes on what we've found. We've searched the childhood home of the man with a beard but no hair, and interviewed the math teacher of the woman with hair but no beard. We've memorized important articles within the stacks of newspaper in Paltryville, and we've thrown important items out of the windows of our destroyed headquarters, so they might wind up somewhere safe at sea. We've taken every crime, every theft, every wicked deed, and every incident of rudeness since the schism began, and catalogued them into an entire library of misfortune. (Book 12 183)

The excessiveness of this research and hoarding speaks at once to the general atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty that has become common within the later novels, but also to the ways in which *ASOUE* rather gleefully parodies the self-importance of conspiracism.

Where the traditional conspiracist collects evidence under the assumption that with sufficient proof, justice will prevail, the postmodern conspiracy theorist collects information, even as there exists a distinct wariness regarding all systems of authority, particularly that of 'justice.' As a subjective system created by morally ambiguous people, the authority and incorruptibility of justice is very suspect. This is parodied in the twelfth novel, as the children are put on trial for various misdeeds (many of which they were not responsible for) alongside Count Olaf. The system itself is shown as exceptionally misguided and corrupt, as the three judges of the High Court, including Justice Strauss, interpret the idiomatic expression 'justice is blind' literally and blindfold everyone (except themselves), leading to "pandemonium" in the 'courtroom' (Book 12 280). The blinding of the court also allows for a great deal of corruption, which is not

revealed until the Baudelaires remove their blindfolds. When they do, they discover that two of the three judges of the High Court are cohorts of Olaf. Specifically, the villainous judges are ‘the man with a beard, but no hair’ and ‘the woman with hair, but no beard.’ The Baudelaires previously encountered these two people in the tenth novel, where it was revealed that Olaf works with, and perhaps for, them (123). The villains use the cover of blindness to take control of the mountains of evidence that has been collected against them, as well as to give Olaf an opportunity to kidnap Justice Strauss and flee the court. This experience proves to be one more in a long list of those that demonstrate that authority cannot be trusted and that the justice, while lovely as an ideal, may not exist in the real world.

For the first nine novels, the children are certain that Olaf is ultimately responsible for all of the bad things in their lives and that he is the head of the conspiracy against them. This makes causal sense: they have a substantial inheritance and are vulnerable, and Olaf preys upon that. It is easy for the Baudelaires and the reader to believe that Olaf, who has been the driving force behind most of the crimes that they have witnessed, is also the cause of those unseen as well (such as the fire that killed the Baudelaire parents). The discovery in the tenth novel that Olaf is actually acting under the orders of someone else, at least some of the time, fundamentally alters the way that the children perceive the conspiracy and understand the world around them (123). The fact that their remorseless persecutor Olaf appears “nervous” next to the “aura of menace” that clings to two total strangers indicates that the children never had a clear picture of the power dynamics or conspiracy to begin with (Book 10 123). Much like the introduction of the Syndicate (the mysterious cabal that the Smoking Man is apparently beholden to) in *The X-Files*, the

introduction of these intimidating strangers complicates the once (ostensibly) simple conspiracy. As more and more characters are implicated in the secret society of V.F.D., it becomes increasingly difficult to understand why such a large number of people are plotting against the Baudelaires. Eventually, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell *if* the children are actually being targeted by anyone other than Olaf, or whether they just happen to frequently be in the wrong place at the wrong time. As Violet notes in the eleventh book, “Olaf isn’t the only enemy” anymore (75).

The proliferation of possible antagonists reflects the way in which the individual and collective identities of the Baudelaire children are measured against what they are not. The Baudelaires’ narrative journey is (ultimately) more about self-realization than the solving of the great mystery of VFD, and the characters they encounter—good and bad—serve to delineate the Baudelaires’ own sense of self. They are not willing to let fear rule their lives like Aunt Josephine, their guardian in the third novel; they are not inconsiderate or rude, like Carmelita Spats, a classmate from the fifth novel; and most importantly, they are not prone to deception, which appears to be Count Olaf’s primary mode of existence. The obviously villainous Olaf and his minions frequently employ disguises and subterfuge to create plural identities, which help them to get what they want, and to evade capture. These same tactics would be useful for the Baudelaires; however, in the earlier novels they resist the temptation to do so, instead focusing on their roles as detectives of the conspiracy rather than purveyors of it. From the very first novel on, the children are made aware of the liminal boundaries between reality and performance when Violet’s role as the bride in Olaf’s play very nearly leads to a real marriage between the two.

In the beginning of the ninth novel, *The Carnivorous Carnival*, the children find themselves at perhaps their lowest point in the series. After sneaking into the trunk of Count Olaf's car to evade capture in the eighth novel, the children find themselves surrounded by enemies "in the middle of nowhere, with no place to hide, and the whole world [thinking they are] criminals" (Book 9 23). In these rather dire circumstances, the Baudelaires decide that it is time they "find out how criminals take care of themselves" (Book 9 23). Left with no other option than to adopt disguises (from Olaf's collection) and work for their enemy, they start to lose hold of their centered identities. In each book up until this point, the children reinforce their collective identity at the very end of the story, noting something along the lines of how, "No matter how many misfortunes had befallen them and no matter how many ersatz things they would encounter in the future, the Baudelaire orphans knew that they could rely on each other for the rest of their lives, and this, at least, felt like something that was true" (Book 6 259). As the children disguise themselves, as a two-headed freak and a wolf baby, to fit in at the Caligari Carnival they feel as though they are "melting into Olaf's clothes," and they begin to lose the sense of exactly who "us" and "them" really are, "as if there were no Baudelaires there at all" (Book 9 45).

With the aforementioned breakdown in the formerly clear-cut identities of both the protagonists and the antagonists, there is a certain amount of identity bleeding or transference in the last six *ASOUE* novels. In these later novels, the children find themselves in situations where they have no choice but to adopt the tactics of their adversaries by incorporating the plural identities of disguise and even engaging in criminal activities (such as Count Olaf's favorite: arson). Similarly, the last novel, *The*

End, portrays Count Olaf in a much more humane light: he is shown to have a personal and emotional history, and in saving the child of Kit Snicket he is shown to be capable of at least “one kind act” (316). The strict ‘good’ and ‘evil’ dichotomy collapses as the Baudelaires learn that their parents, whom they idolize for the first part of the series, were not only members of V.F.D, but also implicated in theft and the murder of Olaf’s parents.¹⁹

The Baudelaires’ struggle to understand their own motivations and ethical selves is reflected in—and aggravated by—the great deal of confusion in regards to the status of the secret society and its volunteers. In the *Carnivorous Carnival*, the children learn more about V.F.D., and they discover that at some point in the not-so-distant- past, there was a schism in the society, or rather, a “great big fight between many of the members – and since then it’s been hard...to know what to do” (158). This confusion is brought to a peak in the twelfth novel, in which members of both sides of the schism have assembled at the same location, and it is nearly impossible to determine who is on which side, or whether there is even a “side” to be on. With the growth and chaotic fluidity of the conspiracy, there is also a diffusion of its intensity. The postmodern fluidity of identity and values creates a terrain that is increasingly difficult for the children to navigate in the same manner that they had grown accustomed to in the first several novels.

¹⁹ *The Penultimate Peril* reveals that Count Olaf was orphaned at a young age when his parents were killed by poison darts (308). This circumstance strongly suggests that the Baudelaire parents were the ones who orphaned Olaf, as the children are told earlier in the novel that their parents had been in possession of ‘a box of poison darts’ (Book 12 8).

The character development of the Baudelaires is a curious thing, as certain aspects of the children do not change from the first book to the last. Their personalities remain consistent: they are clever, brave, independent, and adaptable. They also maintain their particular skills and interests: Violet in inventing, Klaus in reading, and Sunny in biting and eating, an interest which develops into a love of cooking. However, as this is a story written from the perspective of someone who exists within the same world as the Baudelaires, it is understandable that the focus of the story is on the external, rather than the internal. It is Snicket's external focus on the journey of the Baudelaires, his preoccupation with their defining traits, as they experience more and more of the chaotic and confusing world, which ultimately focuses on the children's shifting experience of conspiracy. This is an experience that the reader shares with the protagonists, as more and more 'clues' are piled on top of each other, many of which result in dead ends and further confusion. As Peter Knight notes, "In a world in which everything is connected, individual and national boundaries begin to blur, and an older, more comforting form of paranoia which dealt with rigid certainties and organizations in effect gives way to a schizophrenia of immediacy" (208).

In the twelfth novel Kit Snicket enlists the aid of the Baudelaires to go undercover at the Hotel Denouement. When they suggest that they are hardly capable of performing such a task alone, she notes that the children have matured greatly since their parents' deaths; Violet now has "the eyes of someone who has faced endless hardship," Klaus is now "an experienced researcher," and Sunny is "standing on [her] own two feet" (43). She goes on to note that the Baudelaires are not children anymore, but people who are "ready to face the challenges of a desperate and perplexing world" (43). After

experiencing so many horrible things, and witnessing the connectedness and chaos of the world, the Baudelaires are no longer sure of anything; they don't know who to trust or who to blame, they don't know which clues are important and which are dead ends, and it has become increasingly likely that such knowledge may not be possible at all. What they do know, however, is that sometimes it is necessary to compromise our values in order to survive.

In the twelfth novel the children remember a poem by John Godfrey Saxe that their father was very fond of, about six blind men who, upon encountering an elephant for the first time, are incapable of agreeing on what they have just experienced (158-160). The Baudelaires liken the poem to their own experience of the mysteries that they have encountered:

‘That poem could have been written about us,’ Violet said. ‘We’ve each observed one tiny part of the puzzle, but none of us have seen the entire thing.’

‘Nobody could see the entire thing,’ Klaus said. ‘There’s a mystery behind every door at the Hotel Denouement, and nobody can be everywhere at once, observing all the volunteers and all the villains.’

(Book 12 160)

In its vastness, a postmodern conspiracy, much like the elephant in the poem, is impossible to totally comprehend; and when you cannot tell who to trust, what is important, or even identify who the enemy is, winning becomes less important than surviving.

2.3 Summary

In *ASOUE*, what begins as a repetitive detective mystery turns into a morally ambiguous and convoluted web of conspiracy and chaos. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny make their way through the modern and postmodern expressions of conspiracy theory, learning a great deal about life in the process. They start out as intrepid sleuths, with a single, simplistic conspiracy to foil, and end the series as weary survivors of a grim world in which causality is often out-played by random chance. As Laurie Langbauer writes, the Baudelaires have learned the importance of “doing the best with what you have, giving up the desire for larger truths and grand plots, even after the world in all its horror has laid waste to you in every way it can” (512). Despite all of the loss and failure and treachery in the world, they decide “to go on,” because, as evidenced by the birth of Kit Snicket’s daughter in *The End*, there is still hope in the world (307); and, as they realize in the final chapter of the series, as scary as it may be, it is much better to be a part of the world than to cut themselves off from it.

Chapter 3: The Textual Play of Conspiracy within ASOUE

This chapter outlines the three levels of conspiratorial play within *ASOUE*: the play of the characters; the play of Lemony Snicket as a character, narrator, and author; and the play of the reader, the interaction of which functions to complicate conspiratorial narratives. First, however, we must lay a foundation for further argument by surveying and defining the pertinent terms, and summarizing the history of play as a discursive concept so that we may begin to see how Handler/Snicket's conspiratorial saga comes to at once subvert conspiracy's expectations and deploy its principal tropes.

3.1 Introduction

Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* could, and often has,²⁰ been characterized as unremittingly dark and dreary. With each new novel, the children encounter yet another thread in the conspiracy that surrounds them, more threats of violence, and further evidence of the random cruelty of humanity and the world. The plot contains few moments of joy or relief for the Baudelaires, playing out exactly as Lemony Snicket claims it will, with "170 chapters of misery" (Book 13 2). There is a certain

²⁰ "At its best, *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* is the stuff nightmares are made of, a sick joke of a film that realizes the best children's entertainment doesn't hide from the bleaker side of life, but plunges into the void and respects kids enough to assume they can handle it." (Rabin). Although Nathan Rabin is reviewing the 2004 film, this description is just as applicable to the series.

amount of fun to be had in reading about or watching terrible (fictional) things, as their removal from reality provides a safe opportunity for readers to examine the things that frighten them and, to a certain extent, gain power over such fears. That said however, misery is definitely not the “only reward” for the reader of *ASOUE* (Book 13 2). As noted above, the dark conspiracism and gothic horror of the series is intertwined with textual play, and Daniel Handler’s “obvious joy in the possibilities of language” entices the reader to keep reading and “to play along with the linguistic conventions, learning along the way” (Barton 329). Handler, as Snicket, takes the elements of conspiracy and turns them into a game for the reader to play.

This next section of the analysis demonstrates how the aesthetics, innovation, and self-conscious literariness of *ASOUE* are intertwined with the conspiracy narrative to produce a series of novels that demand a playful response from, the reader. The conspiracism of *ASOUE* is intertwined with the language of games and play: characters gather clues, evidence, pieces of one seemingly grand puzzle; conspirators, and their victims, make moves, as though they were part of an elaborate chess game; and the text is rife with codes to decipher. There are three main levels of the textual play in *ASOUE*: the play of the characters; the play of Lemony Snicket as the Author/Narrator/Character; and the play of the reader with the text. These levels of textual play are all conflated with conspiracism, as well as with each other, and lead to the pleasing and addictive nature of the series, despite its dire plot.

3.2 Play Primer

In many ways, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* seems to be specifically designed for a “play” or “game” theory approach. Despite (or because of) the overwhelmingly dreary events presented in *ASOUE*, the series exhibits a playful style and approach to the otherwise sombre subject matter it depicts. Much of this playfulness coincides, parallels, and even toys with varied aspects of conspiracism, particularly those of its more recent postmodern incarnation. The playfulness of the postmodern paranoia in *ASOUE*, I argue, transforms this “unhappy chronicle” from a series that readers would more likely opt not to read (as pseudo-author Lemony Snicket constantly implores us) into one that is a joy to read, grabbing its audience’s attention and keeping it rapt (Book 13 2). For the purposes of this study, I look to Peter Hutchinson (*Games Authors Play*, 1983), Ruth E. Burke (*The Games of Poetics: Ludic Criticism and Postmodern Fiction*, 1994), and Brian Edwards (*Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, 1998) as authorities on play in literature.

Like ‘culture,’ ‘art,’ and many other catch-all words, the term ‘play’ has proven to be difficult to pin down. In the OED, for example, there are nineteen entries for the noun ‘play,’ and thirty-two entries for the verb ‘to play.’²¹ Although some of these definitions are obsolete, many are currently in heavy cultural rotation. Hutchinson observes that the “adjective ‘playful’ is also very widely used, stretching to practically every human and also animal activity. As far as the instinct to play is concerned, there is no single

²¹ With such an abundance of meanings and such limited space, it becomes necessary to assume that the breadth of the word ‘play,’ as both a thing and an action, is understood in general terms.

mechanism which can explain it, nor is there any clear set of external circumstances under which it ideally finds expression” (3). As a subject which has inspired such a variety of meaning, it can be reasoned that “play” is not only pervasive, but culturally significant, and history reflects this. In Western culture, critical thought on the very nature of play can be traced back to antiquity: according to Burke, Plato’s *Republic* includes one of the earliest discussions of play in relation to art, where, “in the interests of Truth,” he condemns playful art as mere imitation (8). Although play has had, and continues to have, a prominent role in our cultural landscape, and although it has been discussed in many studies by such luminaries as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Nietzsche,²² it was not until the twentieth century that scholars treated play as a serious subject of study. Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938) and Roger Caillois’ *Man, Play and Games* (1958) have provided the foundation²³ for the numerous cultural studies that have followed on the nature of play.

²² In Chapter Two of her *The Games of Poetics*, Ruth E. Burke outlines the pre-twentieth century history of play, focusing on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and, especially, Schiller (7-14). Brian Edwards, in *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, draws attention in his Introduction to the “analyses of play in language” that can be found in “the writings of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Derrida” (xiii).

²³ Although the works of Huizinga and Caillois are foundational for the subject of ‘play’ in culture, they are not foundational to the study of ‘play’ in literature, and therefore not overly pertinent to this work.

Play encompasses a number of endeavours, which can essentially be split into two categories: play that requires mental aptitude (such as ingenuity, sagacity, and tactical ability), and play that requires physical aptitude (such as any kind of sport or physically mimetic activity). Where literature is concerned, most play is of the intellectual variety, and although there are certainly plenty of occasions when a physical game or play-act is described, Hutchinson notes that “usually” these descriptions represent “a form of parallel to the main narrative strand. Here the author is really playing a game *with* the reader by inviting him to see the relevance of the social or sporting event to plot and character” (10). This is true of *ASOUE*, which is rife with depictions of the characters disguising themselves and playing with their identities (whether for the purposes of a play, such as *The Marvelous Marriage* “by the great playwright Al Funcoot,”²⁴ or in the hopes of avoiding detection, as Count Olaf often does (Book 1 75)). As has been discussed in Chapter Two, and will be further addressed later, the liminal nature of identity – poised between what we perceive as innate traits and those imposed or assumed by society and culture at large – is an important theme in *ASOUE*, and as such is often highlighted by the kinds of play that the characters partake in.

²⁴ The children discover in *The Hostile Hospital* that the name “Al Funcoot” is the product of word play. After learning about anagrams, Klaus notes that “‘Al Funcoot’ has all the same letters as ‘Count Olaf.’ Olaf just rearranged the letters in his name to hide the fact that he really wrote the play himself” (153).

Although Burke conflates the terms ‘play’ and ‘game’ in her study,²⁵ both Hutchinson and Edwards insist on the difference between them. Hutchinson sees the difference as one of degree, favouring game as the more precise and definite of the two. To him, “‘Play’ operates at a more superficial level, it is ostentatious, it is incidental. ‘Game,’ on the other hand, suggests a more developed structure, it represents more of a challenge to the reader, [and] involves greater, more prolonged intellectual effort” (Hutchinson 13-14). Hutchinson views games functioning under the umbrella of play and playfulness as traditionally defined by “‘rules’ or conventions” which have no effect on the freedom of play (14). On the other hand, Edwards, while seeing the value in game theory in relation to literature, believes that “as the more expansive term, ‘play’ is more productive for the appreciation of the nature of cultural engagements, including the operations of language and texts” (xii). For the purpose of this thesis, I keep the two terms separate as much as possible, with ‘games’ being specific and limited (often by ‘rules’) and ‘play’ being expansive and often transformative.

Along with their diverging stances on the differences between, and the importance of, the two terms ‘play’ and ‘game’, Hutchinson, Burke, and Edwards also each focus on diverging aspects of play within the literary text. Hutchinson, for example, states that the goal of his study “is to call attention to the various means by which an author can draw the reader into a closer, essentially enquiring or speculative relationship with the text” (1). Hutchinson’s focus is almost solely upon the author as actor, as puppet-master, and the

²⁵ Burke also frequently notes that “art is *by definition* and essence play,” thus melding two immense subjects into one (8).

reader as the ‘spell-bound listener,’ lured into the writer’s web. Hutchinson’s interest lies in the actions of the author. On the other hand, Edwards and Burke prefer to cast their gaze upon the unfixed and interactive nature of language, and, thus, more upon the role of the reader. Edwards focuses exclusively on the reader, with chapters such as “Play: The Reader as Scheherazade.” Burke is more moderate than Edwards, dwelling upon the connection “between author, mind, and text” (51), and states that her goal is to present play “as an alternative strategy for understanding and ordering talk about modern literature in general,” and as a lens through which we can read literature (3). These three perspectives will each have an important role in the following exploration of *ASOUE*.

3.3 Levels of Play in *ASOUE*

As I have noted previously, there are three layers of play at work within *ASOUE*, each with a connection to themes of conspiracy theory. The first layer is the play of the characters within the story, and the games that they play in the series. The second is the play of Lemony Snicket with, and as a character within, the story. And the third is the play of the reader with the text. Within this chapter I will explore each layer, and examine how each relates to the cultural phenomenon of conspiracism.

3.3.1 Level One: The Conspiratorial Play of the Characters

The Baudelaires begin this story with a great deal of child-like naiveté (which is understandable, given their ages). This inclination to view the world in sympathetic and optimistic terms leaves them unprepared for the adult-inflicted sorrow that will plague them through the rest of the series. From time to time (in between running for their lives,

and trying to jury-rig solutions to impossible situations) the children have brief moments in which they reminisce fondly about playing games with each other, their parents, and of the simpler times in which they merely had the leisure to play on their own terms and pursue their own interests, not to survive threats, but for the sake of sheer pleasure. The first novel demonstrates Violet's love of inventing, Klaus' adoration of books (and the knowledge contained therein), and Sunny's joy in biting things as their preferred modes of 'play,' and the first time the reader encounters the three protagonists, they are doing just that.

Each of the children's favorite pastimes exhibits a different sense of play. Violet's love of invention is a creative force, allowing her to bring disparate and unlikely elements together, forming them into tools that are often used against their enemies. Klaus' play is more studious, with his love of books, excellent memory, and knack for linguistic and textual analysis. His analytical style of play is particularly useful when the children come up against textual coding, as they often do. And Sunny's tendency to bite is, like the play of many small children, destructive in nature. The opposite of Violet's inclination to construct, Sunny's habitual deconstruction of objects into smaller elements does tend to come in handy; however, it eventually develops into a more constructive form of play: cooking. Although the series begins with a pleasant illustration of the Baudelaires at play, this scene is soon disrupted by the news of their parents' demise (as well as the destruction of their home and all of their comforting belongings). Thus the children are set adrift in the world of adults, needing to engage their abilities as tools for survival rather than for the pursuit of fun.

Descriptions of play are common in children's literature. The early *Harry Potter* novels, for instance, contain lengthy descriptions of the fictional game of Quidditch, the wizard-world equivalent of football, or of children playing with the joke-products at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. In contrast, the scene on Briny Beach at the beginning of the first of the *ASOUE* novels is the only one where the children take part in any leisurely play.²⁶ After the bad news is revealed the books only show the Baudelaires playing for the fun of it in flashbacks. Once they are within Olaf's clutches, the children are not given time for playing, as Olaf provides them with a seemingly unending list of difficult and menial chores to perform. As the novels proceed, the Baudelaires' play evolves from mere fun to a method of survival.

This survival usually entails the evasion of strictures and rules imposed by adults in power – such as exemplified by Olaf's initial determination to use the children as indentured servants. His tedious loop of chores comes to an end when Olaf, discovering that he has no legal access to the children's enormous fortune, informs them that they will be taking part in his performance of the play "The Marvellous Marriage." The play "is about a man who is very brave and intelligent, [and] played by [Olaf]. In the finale, he marries the young, beautiful woman he loves [played by Violet], in front of a crowd of cheering people" (Book 1 75). Olaf's scheme is that, by having Justice Strauss play the role of the Judge, the "play won't be pretend, it will be real and legally binding," giving

²⁶ In *The Miserable Mill*, Snicket notes that "The three children have had no time to get into all sorts of mischief, because misery follows them wherever they go. They have not had a grand old time since their parents died in a terrible fire" (Book 4 3).

Count Olaf control over not only the Baudelaires, but their fortune as well (Book 1 97). In order to coerce Violet and Klaus' cooperation in this endeavour, Olaf has his henchmen lock Sunny in a cage that has been strung outside of a tall tower. Justice Strauss' reaction to being cast in the play serves to highlight the sense of fun and whimsy that performance often evokes. She is star-struck; she is giddy; she has dreamed of acting since childhood: and that response sits in stark contrast to the Baudelaires' mounting horror. During this episode of the children's journey, they realize that play can be deceptive, concealing and dangerous – and as the series proceeds, their own play becomes increasingly fraught.

In the first book the children not only take part in a play that is more real than pretend, but they also try to resolve their real-life conundrums with playful solutions. Both Violet and Klaus succeed in creatively combatting Olaf and his henchmen at the end of *The Bad Beginning*. Nothing highlights this use of creative play better than Violet's solution to Olaf's Marvellous Marriage plot. In their community, a marriage is legal and binding if two people are joined "in the presence of a judge, with the statement of 'I do' and the signed document in their own hand" (Book 1 100). However, Violet, in a moment of stress-induced inspiration, plays with the interpretation of 'own hand,' and, instead of signing with her right hand (which is arguably her 'own hand'), she uses her left: "It was child's play, winning this fortune," Olaf declares, believing his scheme to have worked flawlessly (Book 1 148). However, as he discovers time and time again, the Baudelaires, though young and inexperienced, are certainly not the easily beaten amateurs that he has imagined on the 'playing' field.

Peter Hutchinson notes that "Play with words would seem to be almost as old as spoken language itself, although the possibilities for many more games were introduced

by written, and especially printed, language” (17). In *ASOUE* the Baudelaire children encounter a great deal of word-play, almost all of which is encoded for secrecy. Over the course of the series the children effectively navigate the “linguistic play and codes” that seem to be omnipresent in “their own search for truth and meaning” (Barton 329). The secret society, V.F.D., which might mean ‘Volunteer Fire Department,’ uses a number of codes in their conspiratorial day-to-day. Over the course of the series the children discover and learn to decipher a number of these codes, such as anagrams, stained maps,²⁷ Verbal Fridge Dialogue,²⁸ Vernacularly Fastened Doors, and Verse Fluctuation Declarations.²⁹ Additionally, there are other codes that the Baudelaires find that they need to decipher from time to time as well, which may or may not be connected to V.F.D.

In the third novel the children find a ‘suicide’ note written by their guardian, Aunt Josephine. This note, written under duress, is actually a coded message to the

²⁷ The children learn about ‘coded’ stains on maps from Count Olaf in *The Carnivorous Carnival* (267). These intentional stains are meant to reveal the location of things that need to be hidden, in a way that looks accidental to a passerby.

²⁸ Violet, Klaus, and Quigley Quagmire discover this kind of code in the refrigerator at the destroyed V.F.D Headquarters in *The Slippery Slope*. Verbal Fridge Dialogue is a complex system of codes using food and poetry, requiring prior knowledge of the language in order to decipher it. Thankfully, the children find various scraps of instructions, teaching them how to read the code.

²⁹ As the Baudelaires come to realize, the secret society really loved to use and reuse the letters V.F.D.

Baudelaires, telling them where she will be hiding from Count Olaf. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are devastated by the note, until they realize that their grammar-obsessed guardian would never have written such a grammatically sloppy letter, even if she were about to take her own life. By finding “all the letters involved in the grammatical mistakes,” the children discover that their Aunt has fled to Curdled Cave (Book 3 115). At this point in their journey, the Baudelaires have not yet heard of V.F.D., nor have they been trained by circumstance to look for codes in everything, and yet their intuitive understanding of wordplay and ingrained interest in close reading, particularly seen in Klaus’ love of books and research, lead to their natural ability with codes of all sorts.

The instinct of the children to read closely, even when they have no idea that additional information might be coded within the text, mirrors what Brian McHale identifies as suspicious reading, and indeed mirrors the intellectual and imaginative labour of the conspiracist or paranoiac. This close reading can be seen throughout the novels, as in the seventh book when Duncan and Isadora Quagmire, the friends that the Baudelaires made while at Prufrock Preparatory School, are kidnapped by Olaf at the end of the fifth novel and become his hostages for the next two books while he tries to determine how best to steal the Quagmire and Baudelaire fortunes. Hidden inside of a fountain during much of the seventh novel, Isadora uses her poetry skills³⁰ to send the Baudelaires a series of rhyming couplets that are coded to reveal the location of the

³⁰ Poetry, like inventing, reading, and biting for Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, is a source of playful joy for Isadora.

Quagmires. The four couplets contain information about how to read the code, where they are located, and some additional information about V.F.D. as well:

For sapphires we are held in here.

Only you can end our fear.

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.

No words can come from this sad beak.

The first thing you read contains the clue:

An initial way to speak to you.

Inside these letters the eye will see.

Nearby are your friends, and V.F.D. (Book 7 194)

The sixth line, “An initial way to speak to you,” indicates that the initial letters are important, and eventually the children realize that their friends are being kept inside the Fowl Fountain in the middle of town (Book 7 196). It isn’t until later that the children realize that the ubiquitous symbol of the eye is actually composed of the letters V, F, and D, as hinted at in the last couplet.

The Baudelaires encounter anagrams quite frequently in the series, but it is not until the eighth novel that the children realize what they are, how to decode them, and how to use them. The children had previously gathered together the remnants of Duncan and Isadora Quagmire’s research into the mystery of V.F.D. and the plots of Count Olaf; and on one of those damaged pages, the children find two ‘names’: “Al Funcoot” and

“Ana Gram” (Book 8 76). Olaf and his associates kidnap Violet in the middle of the novel, intending to remove her head under the guise of surgery. And while Klaus and Sunny are trying to discover where in the hospital their sister has been taken, Sunny suggests that, since Olaf’s disguises so frequently involve a name change as well as a change in appearance, maybe he has hidden Violet under a different name. It is a can of alphabet soup that leads Klaus to the realization that “Ana Gram” is a code meant to indicate that Olaf has been using more aliases than the children had previously thought. As Klaus explains to Sunny that “An anagram is when you move the letters around in one or more words to make other words,” he also informs her that the alphabet soup will help the children to play with the placement of the letters in Violet’s name, making it easier for the them to uncover her whereabouts (Book 8 152). The lesson that the children learn, that “Olaf uses anagrams when he wants to hide something,” is an important one (Book 8 153). Up until this point the children were only aware of the ‘good’ guys using elaborate textual disguises; now they know that Olaf is a wiliier foe than previously thought.

The children discover examples of the secret society’s Vernacularly Fastened Doors in both *The Slippery Slope* and *The Penultimate Peril*. This specific type of coded lock takes the place of a doorknob. As the children find at the V.F.D. Headquarters, “The device looked a bit like a spider, with curly wires spreading out in all directions, but where the head of the spider might have been was the keyboard of a typewriter,” allowing the person who knows the correct codes to act as the spider controlling the web of secrets (Book 10 142-3). As the codes are changed every season, the hopeful code-breaker will “need to have a lot of information at their fingertips to use this door” (Book 10 144).

Once again, the children are provided with a demonstration that knowledge equates very real power.

In *The Grim Grotto*, after Sunny has been exposed to the deadly spores of the Medusoid Mycelium, Violet and Klaus manage to help her by playing with the text of a poem that is supposed to have the cure: “A single spore has such grim power/That you may die within the hour. Is dilution simple? But of course!/Just one small dose of root of horse” (244). First, through a close reading of this poem, the children realize that “root of horse” is the key to Sunny’s recovery. Then, by playing around with the meanings of the words, the two children discover that the cure is horseradish. After finding out that there is no horseradish aboard the submarine, Sunny saves her own life with her in-depth knowledge of food. Playing a game of substitution, Sunny informs her siblings that the tin of wasabi she has is really just Japanese horseradish. Once her siblings give her a dose of wasabi, Sunny begins to recover quite quickly from the “ghastly fungus” (Book 11 255).

Later, still aboard the submarine, called the *Queequeg*, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny intercept a telegram from Quigley Quagmire, including another coded message: this time, a Verse Fluctuation Declaration. This kind of hidden message involves the substitution of certain words within a poem. Once the reader identifies the substitutions, the correct words are then put together to form the message. This particular V.F.D. is a secret note providing the details of a meeting place to the Baudelaires. It includes two verses, one by Lewis Carroll and one by T.S. Eliot. Carroll’s verse is from “The Walrus and the Carpenter”:

‘O Oysters, come and walk with us!’

The Walrus did beseech.

*'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the movie theatre.'* (Book 11 273)

In this verse, the original words, “briny beach,” have been switched out and replaced with “movie theatre” (Book 11 274). The second verse is from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

*At the pink hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human
engine waits
Like a pony throbbing party...* (Book 11 276)

And in Eliot’s poem, the original words “violet,” “taxi,” and “waiting,” are substituted with “pink,” “pony,” and “party” (Book 11 318-9). Aside from the play involved in both coding and decoding messages like these, the choice of words mocks the high seriousness of *The Waste Land*. Quigley’s cipher is at once a playful allusion and an exemplar of *ASOUE*’s movement from a modernist to postmodernist sensibility—choosing a canonical modernist like Eliot for such a task, and in such a manner, highlights the interchangeability of signifiers. Or in other words, it is a practice of linguistic play with language that treats itself with canonical authority.

Another aspect of this conspiratorial word-play, particularly when it comes to such codes as Verse Fluctuation Devices, is the importance of allusions. A great number of these codes hinge upon the code-breakers knowledge and retention of classic literature, and this feeds into the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality surrounding the schism of V.F.D. into volunteers and villains. Volunteers are usually the ones creating these complex and allusive codes, and the reason for picking allusions to classic literature is simple: the kind of people who take the time to read and remember these stories are presumably the ‘right’

kind of people. The Olafs of this world may be capable of word-play on many levels, but they are hardly interested in the works of T.S. Eliot or Lewis Carroll.

At the end of the twelfth novel the Baudelaires, disgusted by the ineffectuality of the adults who were meant to protect them, decide that the best way to find answers is to follow Count Olaf. Having realized that the only people they can count on are themselves, the Baudelaires determine that the only place to uncover more information about the conspiracies around them is at the source. Feeling as though “Every noble person has failed us,” the children believe they have no other option left but to assist him in escaping from the Hotel Denouement and accompanying him afterwards (Book 12 307). After helping Olaf to break into a V.F.D. locked room and set fire to the hotel, the children, Olaf, and his hostage, Justice Strauss, take the elevator up to the roof to make their escape. This is truly their darkest hour, when the children become so morally conflicted as to assist Olaf in arson (and, possibly, murder). During this grim moment, Sunny reminds her siblings of “a prank their father had taught them, when he was in one of his whimsical moods, that can be played in any elevator” (Book 12 328-9). The prank involves pressing all of the buttons in an elevator just before leaving, so that the people left have to stop at each floor. Although it isn’t the most innocent of playful acts, Sunny’s reminiscence about a moment of joyful play in her life gives her an idea that, when backed into a corner as they are, seems to be the only viable solution. When the children press all of the buttons in the elevator that they are in with Olaf and Justice Strauss, this moment of nostalgically inspired play serves a dual purpose: they can warn people on each floor that the building is on fire, and they can stall Olaf, thereby keeping him from having the time to infect everyone in the hotel with the deadly Medusoid Mycelium.

The Baudelaire children are presented within this series as classic conspiracy protagonists: resourceful, clever, and adaptable to the quickly changing conspiracies at hand, but also, crucially, increasingly morally compromised by their hunt for the truth. Play, it emerges, is not ephemeral, but has substantive consequences. Their flight from the adult power structures governing the first seven novels frees them from their inherent strictures and limitations, but also voids their (admittedly faulty) protections. More significantly, they lose the scaffolding of social and societal identity. In the postmodern wilderness of the latter six novels, they come to understand a peculiar dimension of agency panic, insofar as it is not the absence of agency but agency's potential repercussions that haunt them.

3.3.2 Level Two – The Conspiratorial Play of Lemony Snicket

As I have previously mentioned, Lemony Snicket plays one of the most interesting and complex roles in this series. This is due to the conspiratorial playfulness with which he approaches each of his different roles. Although he is just a disguise for Daniel Handler, Snicket is the purported author of the series. As such he is responsible for the appearance, narrative construction, and plot of the story. Snicket is also a character within the series, a tragic figure who claims to have spent years of his life researching the series of unfortunate events that befell the children of his deceased love, Beatrice. As a narrator, Snicket provides the 'voice' of the author as well as some of the intimate thoughts of the character, acting as the mediator between the mystery and the reader. Snicket is an elusive figure, and there is significant overlap between the various roles that Snicket plays. In this

section, I will look at the conspiratorial playfulness with which Lemony Snicket interacts with the text, from each of his three roles.

3.3.2.1 Lemony Snicket – Conspiratorial Character at Play

Working backwards with the last version of Lemony Snicket that the reader is likely to encounter, we begin with an examination of the role of Snicket as a character playing with conspiracy. I should note that, for the purposes of this analysis, when I speak of the character of Lemony Snicket, I am referring to the man as he is described to the reader by others, not as he talks about himself. Certainly, the character of Snicket is the most elusive of the three aspects, and there is less to work with in terms of his characterization. Almost all of the information about Snicket the character comes from paratextual sources, such as the website or the Author/Illustrator descriptions at the end of each novel. There are two reasons for this lack of characterization. First, no other character in the series directly discusses Lemony Snicket. It is not until the fourteenth chapter of *The End* that the Baudelaires, reading a journal left behind by their parents, hear the name “Lemony” for the first time. Apparently, had Violet been born male, she would have been named “Lemony Baudelaire,” as the practice of the family was to name children after deceased friends and family (Book 13 Chapter 14, 2).³¹ The second reason why the character of Snicket is so elusive is because he wants to be. He is consistently characterized on his website, in his *Unauthorized Autobiography*, and within the marginalia of *ASOUE* as a man who is always on the run from those who are hunting him.

³¹ At the time of Violet’s birth, Lemony Snicket was presumed dead.

These characterizations are indicative of the playfully conspiratorial manner in which Snicket is commonly portrayed. In particular, descriptions of him tend to focus on aspects common to the figure of the conspiracy theorist: a secretive lone wolf, perpetually on the run, and an insatiable researcher.

The figure of the ‘lone wolf’ is common in conspiracy narratives. Sometimes this tendency comes from personal inclination, as is the case with Harry Caul in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *The Conversation* (1974). Played by Gene Hackman, Caul is estranged from humanity even before he is pulled into the conspiracy. He is paranoid and distrustful by nature, preferring to live alone and only rarely interacting with others. Sometimes this isolation is an effect of the conspiracy, as in Tony Scott’s *Enemy of the State* (1998). In that movie the hero, Robert Clayton Dean (played by Will Smith) is well-adjusted and sociable. He is initially isolated by the conspirators, who with the omniscient power ascribed to conspiracy, freeze his bank accounts, cancel his credit cards, alienate him from his wife and children by concocting evidence of infidelity, and put him on the run from the police by issuing a fake arrest warrant. Dean cuts himself off from family and friends even further when he realizes that people close to him are likely to become casualties of the conspiracy. The only associate that Dean allows close is a grizzled and paranoid survivor of other conspiracies, played by Gene Hackman in a role eerily similar to Harry Caul. The victim of conspiracies and the conspiracy theorist are often one and the same, and that sense of persecution mingled with a generalized paranoia is frequently portrayed as resulting in (or being part and parcel with) a withdrawal from society at large, and an urgent desire for secrecy.

Descriptions of Snicket play with this notion of the distrustful and wary hermit. Each novel ends with a photo and description of Snicket (as well as of the illustrator, Brett Helquist). Most of the fourteen photographs of Snicket³² are shot from behind, as though he were not aware of his picture being taken, or was trying to evade the lens.³³ Three photos out of the fourteen look like he is aware of being photographed, but would rather not be. At the end of *The Reptile Room*, the photo of Snicket is blurry, and it appears that he is running away from the photographer. The picture provided for the thirteenth chapter of *The End* shows Snicket, unobstructed, with his face toward the camera and a look of shock plastered over it.³⁴ The last image, at the end of the fourteenth chapter of *The End*, pictures the blurry form of Snicket with what appears to be a manuscript covering his face. These images ironically play with the characteristics commonly attributed to the secretive conspiracy theorist. Additionally, the author bio at the end of *The Grim Grotto* notes that “In his spare time [Snicket] hides all traces of his actions” in a seeming attempt to keep others from collecting evidence against him or tracking down his whereabouts.

³² There are two photographs and descriptions in *The End*, as the official end of the novel is the thirteenth chapter, but there is an additional fourteenth one, which is treated almost as if it were its own tiny novel.

³³ This, too, is a play on the idea of Snicket as being pursued by a great conspiracy.

³⁴ Interestingly, this image is not of Daniel Handler, whereas it appears that the rest are of him.

Snicket mirrors such conspiratorial subjects as Brill, Deep Throat in *All The President's Men*, or the Deep Throat from the first season of *The X-Files*—figures who function as mysterious helpers, assisting the protagonists with cryptic clues or (as in the case of Snicket) seeing to it that the substance of the conspiracy narrative sees the light of day. And like those they help, they are invariably mobile: while the conspiracy is afoot, so are they. The typical hero of a conspiracy narrative must be mobile, like Dean in *Enemy of the State*, Joe Turner in *Three Days of the Condor*, or Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*; otherwise the heroes are sitting ducks for the enemy to pick off at leisure. The author's bio at the end of the eighth novel describes Snicket as “widely regarded as one of the most difficult children's authors to capture and imprison.” In the next novel, he is described as “now an escapee of several indistinguishable prisons” (Book 9). The very last author bio in the series, at the end of the fourteenth chapter of *The End*, says only that “Lemony Snicket is still at large.” The image of Snicket, running away from the photographer at the end of *The Reptile Room* is symbolic of the eternally pursued author.

Snicket's constant movement is rooted in his overwhelming drive to conclude his research on the Baudelaire orphans. Snicket's obsession with gathering evidence and clues cannot possibly compare with the comically compulsive tendencies of Hal, from *The Hostile Hospital*, or Dewey Denouement, from *The Penultimate Peril*. Those two characters demonstrate no self-control as far as research is concerned; with them, conspiratorial evidence-gathering has turned into a much darker need to hoard information and inability to tell the useful from the rubbish. Snicket, on the other hand, is driven not only by his interest in research, but by his love for Beatrice Baudelaire (the matriarch of the Baudelaire family) as well. In the third novel, the author's bio notes that

“Mr. Snicket has spent the last several eras researching the travails of the Baudelaire orphans”; this is clearly due to his devotion to their mother, to whom each book is dedicated. He is also described as a consummate scholar, with excellent researching skills.³⁵ This is demonstrated in the author bio for *The Penultimate Peril*, in which Snicket “has been chronicling the lives of the Baudelaire children with only occasional breaks for food, rest, and court-appointed sword-fights. His hobbies include nervous apprehension, increasing dread, and wondering if his enemies were right after all.”

Snicket’s characterization plays with the classic tropes of the beleaguered victim of conspiracies, constantly on the run, forced into a lonely existence, and spending his days in the collection of evidence and research. As Magnusson claims, despite the many playful descriptions of the author, “Snicket’s biographical information provides no biographical details whatsoever” (92), making him as much a figure of mystery as that which he describes, and indeed suggesting his own implication in conspiratorial behaviour. The elusiveness of Lemony Snicket, the character, is repeated in the narrator and author as well, enhancing the aura of mystery and intrigue surrounding the series.

3.3.2.2 Lemony Snicket – Conspiratorial Narrator at Play

In the thirteen novels of *ASOUE*, Lemony Snicket ostensibly tells a ‘true story’ about events in the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire. In his essay, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Hayden White notes that the “value

³⁵ The author’s bio for the second novel notes that “During his spare time [Snicket] gathers evidence and is considered something of an expert by leading authorities.”

attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (271). The purportedly ‘real’ tale of the Baudelaire children is therefore problematic to begin with, and it is further complicated in *ASOUE* by Lemony Snicket the narrator. As the narrator, the voice standing in mediation between author and reader, Snicket is a playful puppet master within the series, presenting the narrative in a way that is metafictional, unreliable, and extremely secretive.

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon defines metafiction as fiction that comments “on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). Though metafiction is by no means a new phenomenon, employed by authors from Chaucer to Laurence Sterne, it is especially attractive to postmodernists for its concern with process over product and, of course, its capacity for play. It is intended to bring readers out of the comfortable and submersive act of passive reading, ideally forcing them to see the play that exists in any narrative construction. As Julie Barton notes, in “Power Play: Intertextuality in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*,” the story that Lemony Snicket presents to us “is a perfect example of a metafictional postmodern text, for there are many references made to the ‘creation’ of the story, and to the ‘craft’ needed to construct a book” (333). *ASOUE* contains a number of the conventions of postmodern metafiction, as our narrator self-reflexively comments on the work that went into the creation of the story, the act of reading, the conventions of narrative, and himself as narrator. The story even references a large notebook that the children find in *The End*, called *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Along with the main text, the paratexts are also frequently metafictional, pointing to the creation of the story from within the larger story. More than

simply metafictional, however, Lemony Snicket plays with the conventions of metafiction in a conspiratorial manner.

Perhaps most crucial to the cultivation of Snicket's conspiratorial play are the novels' paratextual elements. At the end of each book, Snicket includes a letter "To My Kind Editor." These 'letters' show up on the page as having been written on various surfaces, with various means. Most are on scraps of paper, usually damaged in some way, although the one from *The Vile Village* is a telefax, and the one from *The Penultimate Peril* is on a napkin. Some of the letters are typed, but there are also a few handwritten ones. The letter at the end of *The Slippery Slope*, for example, is handwritten, but the author's tears have caused the ink to bleed, making it difficult to read in places. These letters all hint at the next chapter of the story to come, and usually they contain information about where Lemony Snicket has been, and the difficulties that he is facing, while gathering information for the series.

In particular, most of the letters describe Lemony Snicket as the heroic conspiratorial researcher, going to great lengths to acquire the clues necessary for his 'true' story of this tragic chapter in the lives of the Baudelaires. He follows their story, going to the terrible locations of each novel, and the letters that he sends to the editor are usually from the location of the next book in the series. For example, the telefax that Snicket 'sends' at the end of *The Vile Village* is from the Last Chance General Store, which the children visit in the next novel. These letters also often outline the elaborate methods by which Snicket will deliver the manuscripts to his editor. Playing with the idea that Snicket is beset by conspiratorial enemies, the editor is directed to jump through a number of hoops in order to maintain the safety and secrecy of the series. The distrustful

paranoia inherent in these elaborate schemes is demonstrated in letter at the end of *The Wide Window*:

To My Kind Editor,

I am writing to you from the Paltryville Town Hall, where I have convinced the mayor to allow me inside the eye-shaped office of Dr. Orwell in order to further investigate what happened to the Baudelaire orphans while they were living in the area.

Next Friday, a black jeep will be in the northwest corner of the parking lot of the Orion Observatory. Break into it. In the glove compartment, you should find my description of this frightening chapter in the Baudelaires' lives, entitled THE MISERABLE MILL, as well as some information on hypnosis, a surgical mask, and sixty-eight sticks of gum. I have also included the blueprint of the pincher machine, which I believe Mr. Helquist will find useful for his illustrations.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Snicket's playful take on the conspiratorial researcher, convincing the mayor to let him investigate, directing his editor to break into a vehicle in order to acquire the next manuscript in the series, also points to the metafictional quality of the story itself. In referencing the work of research, authorization, editing, and illustration that is put into the series, Snicket focuses the reader on the act of creation.

Snicket often focuses his narrative eye on the act of reading itself. This act, especially of close reading, is, as I have already noted, connected to the ‘code breaking’ conventions of conspiracy narratives. Although Snicket portrays the children in the act of breaking the various linguistic codes that the secret society, V.F.D., is so fond of, he also depicts the protagonists in the act of reading texts for the information necessary to get out of the many troublesome situations they find themselves in. Klaus’ reading of boring law books in the first novel helps the children to uncover Olaf’s plot; and Violet’s research of the tedious and unnecessarily difficult *Advanced Ocular Science* in the fourth novel enables her to break Klaus’ hypnosis. More than providing simple solutions, however, the tomes that Violet and Klaus pore over (like the countless university students who sift through James Joyce’s difficult modernist novel, *Ulysses*) these works provide a guideline for how to read deeply (perhaps even with paranoia). As McHale notes, in *Constructing Postmodernism*, “Professional readers (reviewers, critics, scholars, instructors) and apprentice professionals (students) practice paranoid reading” which we have acquired “in response to the challenge of modernist verbal art” (169-70). In these kinds of descriptions of reading, which are peppered throughout the series, Snicket draws the reader’s attention to the power that reading and learning can grant us: that is, the processes of composition, narrative, and interpretation.

Part of the metafictional nature of the series relies upon Lemony Snicket’s status as an unreliable narrator. Hutchinson claims that “The perspective from which an author chooses to present his plot offers potential for various types of game” (31). He defines the unreliable narrator as one who “fails to prove a reliable witness,” placing the reader at a disadvantage, and forcing “the reader to speculate and to act as his own interpreter of the

action,” forcing readers from a passive role to an active, investigative one (32). Lemony Snicket’s problematic narration of *ASOUE* begins with his narrative style. Snicket’s narrative point of view vacillates, shifting between the first-person and third-person omniscient (most of the narrative is delivered to the reader through the latter). This shifting approach is problematic due to the status of the series as a supposedly factual account of the Baudelaire children. Although he is a man dedicated to providing the ‘true’ story of the Baudelaires, and is also a character within that story, it is impossible to imagine that his research has offered him insight enough to authoritatively see into the minds of his protagonists. Lemony Snicket seems to be aiming for a subjective, non-fiction, almost journalistic approach to the story, in the vein of the New Journalism style of the 1960s and 1970s; however, the vacillation of his narrative point of view points the readers to the lie (the fiction) inherent within this style, parodying the seriousness with which it is usually approached.

Every so often, our unreliable narrator breaks through his omniscient narration to offer an aside in the first person point of view. These asides provide information about Lemony Snicket’s history, or draw the reader’s attention to some aspect of the text that he wants to highlight, such as the definition of a word. Snicket’s definitions are usually playful, outlining the meaning of the word in question in the context of the story, but often omitting the full story. For example, in *The Austere Academy*, Snicket notes that “The Baudelaire orphans’ schoolday was particularly austere, a word which here means that Mr. Remora’s stories were particularly boring, Mrs. Bass’ obsession with the metric system was particularly irritating, and Nero’s administrative demands were particularly difficult...” (101). A quick look at any dictionary will tell you that Snicket is playing fast

and loose with the definition of ‘austere’ in that moment. He isn’t exactly lying to the reader, however, and the emphasis placed on these creative descriptions highlights language as a space for play.

Similarly, Snicket also occasionally provides the reader with information that is playfully false. His lies always tend towards the mischievous, rather than the cruel, such as his repeated assertion that *The Miserable Mill* “began with the sentence ‘The Baudelaire orphans looked out the grimy window of the train and gazed at the gloomy blackness of the finite forest, wondering if their lives would ever get any better’” (141). In fact, as the reader can easily discover simply by flipping back to the first page in the novel, the first sentence is actually, “Sometime during your life – in fact, very soon – you may find yourself reading a book, and you may notice that a book’s first sentence can often tell you what sort of story your book contains” (Book 4 1). This ‘lie’ on the part of Snicket actually highlights the part that disguise is playing in his narrative. The series is *supposed* to be about a grim tale of woe; and yet a reading of the actual first sentence as the thesis for the novel, as it requests to be read, indicates that the novel will be a site for playful learning. The sentence that Snicket claims is the first is more of a disguise, creating a fun and educational tale that is dressed up as a dark conspiratorial dirge.

Lemony Snicket’s narrative is not simply unreliable, it is downright secretive. Just like his definitions, *ASOUE* only contains a playfully reimagined part of the truth. This secrecy is part of the act of metafiction, the revelation and concealment of information inspiring readers to ask questions and seek their own answers. Snicket’s secretive narration is notable in a number of ways, but never so forcefully as when he describes the children’s discovery in *The End* of a notebook, written (at least partly) by their parents,

titled *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. A “heavy, thick book,” it provides a history of the island on which they’ve landed, ““written like a diary”” (Book 13 207-8). This journal, which Snicket the character/author has clearly decided to name his investigation into the Baudelaire’s after, is described as full of many intriguing details about the secrets surrounding the Baudelaire family (Book 13 275). Despite the obvious significance of the journal, however, our narrator only provides a few short, tantalising glimpses into the information contained within the series’ namesake. As the mediator between the author and the reader in this supposedly ‘true’ tale, Snicket, the narrator, is portrayed as having a great deal more information than he reveals. His personal interruptions of the main narrative, for example, only reveal small snippets of information, enough to arouse the curiosity of the reader, but never enough for a full definition. Klaus notes, very reasonably, that “you can’t read every story, and answer every question,” (Book 13 218). However, the constant intrusion of the figure of Lemony Snicket, coupled with his elusive slipperiness, plays with the reader’s expectations and necessitates the reader’s participation in the narrative’s games.

3.3.2.3 Daniel Handler/Lemony Snicket – Conspiratorial Author at Play

Intensely melodramatic and secretive, Lemony Snicket is also fictional, the pseudonym of the author of the texts, Daniel Handler. Pseudonyms are used when the writer wants to hide their identity, and there are a number of reasons for this kind of disguise. Some writers opt to keep their real identities hidden as a way to protect their reputation from any backlash their works might elicit; some authors use pen names when they write in more than one genre, as a way to keep their separate audiences from

confusion; and, historically, many women have chosen to disguise themselves as men in order to facilitate the publication of their work.

Daniel Handler has published fiction under his own name both before and after the release of *ASOUE*. He has never expressly stated his reason for using the disguise of Lemony Snicket, but his pseudonym has turned out to be more successful than Handler by far. Extending the device of the disguise, and in keeping with the conspiratorial character of what Handler has created, Snicket himself requires a representative. Reclusive, and harried by his enemies, the ‘author’ Lemony Snicket refuses to interact directly with his adoring audience, using Daniel Handler as his intermediary. This comically complex series of disguises (comic because they are not really all that complex) serves the purpose of fun, as “Whenever Handler acts as Snicket’s representative to discourage children from reading his books or overtly mock the conventions of children’s literature, those who understand that Handler is Snicket can participate in the charade” (Magnusson 91). In essence, the author of *ASOUE* is Daniel Handler, in the guise of Lemony Snicket; but for public appearances, such as book signings and interviews, the author is Handler, in the guise of Snicket, being represented by Handler.³⁶

For my own purposes, I will be referring to the author of the series as Handler. Handler’s other published work exhibits a similar *jouissance* in linguistic play, although

³⁶ Arguably, the reclusiveness of Lemony Snicket also parodies other reclusive authors such as J.D. Salinger, but perhaps more significantly, Thomas Pynchon, whose work is unavoidable in the discussion of conspiracy theory in fiction.

the works published as Snicket have a specific stylistic consistency of their own. As the constructor of this series, and the plot contained therein, Handler engages in a great deal of play: he uses simple forms of play like alliteration and puns; he liberally sprinkles the series with intertexts that function as allusions; and he also plays with the elements of fiction as well, subverting the reader's expectations by refusing to acknowledge the location of the series in time and space.

In the construction of this series of novels, Daniel Handler employs various forms of textual play. Some of the textual play within *ASOUE* requires no external work from the reader. A form of pure literary fun, alliterations are frequent in the series. The titles of the first twelve novels all employ alliteration, as do many of the character names, such as Dewey Denouement, Quigley Quagmire, and Beatrice and Bertrand Baudelaire. Place names are often also alliterative, such as Briny Beach, the Mortmain Mountains, and Rarely Ridden Road. Apart from its lyrical pleasure, alliteration in *ASOUE* signals and reflects the series' broader tendency toward repetition and reiteration.

Although they require a bit more knowledge about the world, puns are another form of textual play used in *ASOUE* that require no additional work from the reader. As they are a bit tougher to 'get' than alliteration, they comprise a more complex level of linguistic play. In *The Ersatz Elevator*, for example, the children are taken to the restaurant, Café Salmonella. As most readers would know, a restaurant serving salmonella, a type of food poisoning, is not a place where anyone would want to eat. Although the restaurant is characterized as a popular seafood diner, rather than a breeding ground for salmonella, it serves nothing but salmon; and the description of the Baudelaire's guardian, Jerome, "taking a sip from his water glass, which had chunks of

frozen salmon floating in it instead of ice cubes,” makes the place sound just as awful as if it were serving salmonella. Later in the series, in *The Hostile Hospital*, Esmé Squalor tries to chase after the Baudelaires on stiletto heels, with heels made out of actual stiletto knives. This time around, the joke is explained to the readers, so that the image of that “slave to fashion” tottering around, and having to constantly “yank [her stilettos] out of the floor” would be funny for everyone (Book 8 115-6). Hutchinson notes that “Puns can be gratuitous, their function simply decorative” and humorous, such as Café Salmonella, or they can be functional, serving to highlight a theme, such as the pitfalls of fashion (106), and in the case of Esme Squalor, the conflation of fashion with generic cliché (i.e. the femme fatale).

Allusion builds the text’s complexity. With allusive textual play, “the author is linking two worlds and asking the reader to compare them. With literary allusion in particular, an entire work is activated, and so the reader is not solely tempted towards seeking parallels between characters or plots, but also between themes” (Hutchinson 59). As discussed earlier, allusions are a coded reference in that the reader needs to have prior knowledge in order to ‘get’ the hint. Daniel Handler uses allusion very frequently, dropping cultural references into the text at a fast pace. Names and places are common sites for intertextual allusion in *ASOUE*, such as Uncle Monty’s Virginia Wolfsnake, who should never be let near a typewriter (Book 2 36); Vice Principal Nero, who is never far from his violin (Book 5); and Hugo the hunchback, who works at the Caligari Carnival, where a carnival turns into a nightmare (Book 9). Although not invariably the case, some of the references that Handler uses have thematic importance. Heimlich Hospital is a reference to both the life-saving move, and to the German word “heimlich,” which means

secret, an apt name for such a secretive place. Heimlich is also an allusion to Sigmund Freud's classic essay on the uncanny, or "unheimlich." In *The Miserable Mill*, the children face off against Dr. Georgina Orwell, whose office is in the shape of an eye, and whose specialty is hypnosis. And Damocles Dock, with its reference to the sword of Damocles, is thematically tied to the plot of the Baudelaire children, who like those beneath that sword are in constant mortal danger. The intertextual play of the author doesn't always lead to a stunning realization, but the allusions are all fun to discern. The playful allusions within the text are not such that anyone not in the know will feel left out; however, those who do 'get it' will feel part of a secret society.

Although Handler's text is frequently coded with extra information in the form of allusions and puns, he also withholds information. Handler refuses to locate the timing and placement of the series. The children journey through a world in which the telegram is just as common as the computer. And the illustrations within the novels depict some characters in Victorian-styled clothing and others in track suits and sneakers. Similarly, although some smaller places have specific names, such as the Village of Fowl Devotees and Paltryville, other locales are referred to in more general terms, such as the City, the Hinterlands, the Ocean, and the Island. This obfuscation on the part of the author leaves these parts of the text more open to interpretive play; the City could be any city, just as the Island could be any island.

The three roles that Lemony Snicket inhabits, that of the author, narrator, and character, are similar, and yet each inhabits a different space within the text. Snicket's lonely and roaming research into the lives of the Baudelaires exists only on the edges, haunting the series with his tragedy. As a narrator, Snicket's metafictional, unreliable, and

self-reflexive style of story-telling plays with the reader, while teasing them with more information about him as a character. As the author in disguise, Snicket's intertextual playfulness hints at further knowledge, while deferring the final closure of mystery. All three of the figures play with conspiracy, and with each elusive layer the reader becomes more involved in the game.

3.3.3 Level Three – The Conspiratorial Play of the Reader

In *The Games of Poetics*, Burke argues that in the postmodern text the “unavoidably social phenomenon” of language becomes the site of a game that the author and the reader play together (51). This means that “the reader no longer stands in parasitic relationship to the text, but must work as vigorously as the writer to produce *a text*” (53). As Roland Barthes contended in his “The Death of the Author,” the act of writing, “the very practice of the symbol itself,” causes a disconnect: “the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, [and] writing begins” (185). Postmodern, metafictional texts are playfully interactive, and so far we have only focused on one side of the game.

As Edwards argues, “Reading is an exemplary play situation, where the possibilities for play in pursuit of meaning are inevitably present in the text itself (through the metaphoric nature of language and the play of signification) *and* in the processes of reception” (24). Hence, while Violet, Klaus, and Sunny go on their horrible adventure, and while Lemony Snicket doggedly researches their travails (while eluding capture himself), the reader receives comprehensive training in the art of conspiratorial game play. The tantalising elements of the series, such as the elusive nature of Lemony Snicket, the secret hidden within the sugar bowl, and the many allusions within the text, all seem

to promise secret knowledge to those who can suss them out. Not every reader is curious enough to take the bait and immerse themselves fully in the textual game. Jill P. May, in *Children's Literature and Critical Theory: Reading and Writing for Understanding*, argues that passive readers “see no direct pleasure in reading,” as they have not yet learned the joy that textual interactivity can bring (17). Active readers, on the other hand, “realize that they must read and reread a text before it is theirs” (17). Although it is possible for a passive reader to enjoy this series, *ASOUE* courts active reading.

The skills that the reader is taught over the course of the series are mostly conspiratorial in nature. The reader is taught to look for clues, gather evidence, and break a variety of codes. Along with the characters in the series, the active reader learns about allusions, alliteration, puns, codes, anagrams, and many other forms of textual interplay. With this interactive play, Handler “signals to both the child and adult reader that language acquisition is not only desirable, but is imperative to being able to fully unpack narrative” (Barton 339). This focus on active reading and linguistic skill is further emphasized for the reader in the speech of Sunny Baudelaire and mirror-text of *The Penultimate Peril*, the importance of close readings, and encouragement that the reader is given to take the play outside the text.

As far as code-breaking goes within *ASOUE*, most of the forms present in the series have already been unpacked. One that has not, yet, is an amalgam of many of them: the short ‘unintelligible’ phrases or words that Sunny Baudelaire uses to communicate. As an infant, in the beginning of the series at least, Sunny’s grasp of linguistic communication is obviously not fully developed. Although Handler never treats her as less intelligent because of her limited vocabulary, most characters that the siblings

encounter do. Sunny's communication is a playful combination of nonsense, allusion, portmanteau, anagram, phonetically spelled words, words written backwards, and words in different languages. The reader does not *need* to break this code, as either Snicket or Sunny's siblings usually translate her grander intentions. However, as the series progresses, so does Sunny's ability to communicate, and upon discovering that she has been using cleverly coded language to communicate, the reader may be inclined to look back upon her utterances and try to connect the translation to the word.

Sunny begins the series with nonsense, pointing to Mr. Poe as he moves towards them with awful news on Briny Beach, and saying "Gack!" (Book 1 4). In later books she adds literary allusion to her vocabulary, referencing "Sappho" in relation to their poetically inclined friend, Isadora Duncan (Book 5 45), and "Orlando" in reference to the associate of Olaf's who looks like neither a man nor a woman (Book 8 76). In *The Slippery Slope*, while separated from her siblings and held captive by Olaf, Sunny gets a lot of digs at the villain's expense: she calls him "Busheney," a portmanteau of George Bush and Dick Cheney and refers to his deplorable hygiene by ironically calling him "Brummel," after the famous dandy, Beau Brummel (107). Sunny's speech develops more clarity as the series goes on, but even at *The End* she is not averse to using a more complex reference to get her point across. As Ishmael, the 'facilitator' of the island begins to tell the children a story about a ring that was connected to the Baudelaire family, Sunny says "Neiklot," which is Tolkien backwards, referring to *The Lord of the Rings*, and essentially asking the man why he is providing them with such a long story that has no pertinence to the situation at hand (Book 13 229). These instances of coded language, and many more, offer the reader with an opportunity to hone their skills at linguistic play.

In *The Penultimate Peril*, Handler plays with the structure of language more formally, by mirroring, inverting, and flipping the words on some of the pages (19-20, 22, 51, 319). This kind of code defamiliarizes the text, rather than the sub-text, as allusion does. In hiding the actual text of the narrative, Handler forces the reader to either find a mirror, for easier reading, or teach themselves to read uncomfortable and obfuscating code. This uncanny form of textual play, so familiar to the reader, and yet just out of reach, is disorienting, and mirrors the larger themes at work in that particular novel. *The Penultimate Peril* depicts the Baudelaires in “the last safe place” (33). Within this supposedly secure space, the children are surrounded by familiar faces (almost every character that the Baudelaires have encountered prior to this novel –at least those who are still living – is encountered at some point during their stay at the hotel), and yet, as they soon realize, they do not know who to trust. Everyone is a part of V.F.D., but that no longer means anything. Rather than easily reading the surface of the situation and seeing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys, the children are forced to take a closer look at all of the people that they have encountered in their journey, just as the reader must take a closer look at the mirrored text. Forced to actively decipher this mirror-text, the novel also points the reader to the theme of disorientation at play within the novel.

ASOUE values and rewards close, paranoid reading, and indeed functions not just as an engaging story but a landscape strewn with riddles and the kind of sly references that have come to be known in film and video games as ‘Easter eggs.’ Under normal circumstances, a reader would probably only look at the main text of a novel, ignoring the paratexts that surround it, such as copyright information, dedications, epilogues, indices, images, and the like. *ASOUE*, however, trains the reader to read closely and fully,

rewarding such attention with further information. Each book in the series contains a dedication, numerous illustrations, a letter to the editor, and a letter to the reader on the back cover, all of which appear to contain clues to the larger mystery. By reading the dedications in the beginning of each novel and the author's bio at the end, the reader learns more about the shadowy figure of Lemony Snicket. And if the reader looks closely at the illustrations within the series, they will often discern clues about what is to come next for the Baudelaires. The actions of the orphans within the story also promote a close reading of texts, as when Violet uses the Table of Contents to orient herself within the difficult tome *Advanced Ocular Science* (Book 4 145).

As Snicket notes in *The Grim Grotto*, "Reading poetry, even if you are only reading to find a secret message hidden within its words, can often give one a feeling of power, the way you can feel powerful if you are the one who brought an umbrella on a rainy day, or the only one who knows how to untie knots when you're taken hostage" (270-1). Even though Snicket is referring to poetry, the reader of *ASOUE* is learning the importance of reading and knowledge in general, and the power that linguistic skills can impart. The reader is also invited to take the textual skills learned within the series and hone them outside of it through the supplemental works available, as well as the forums online.

In *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2003), the active reader is invited to play even more thoroughly with the figure of Snicket. The metafictional playfulness of the work raises more questions than answers, maintaining the elusive nature of their subject, while enhancing the intrigue at work. *The Beatrice Letters* (2006) provide even more enigmatic clues to the mysteries of the series, hinting to the reader that

there may be two Beatrices at play. This work also includes twelve punch-out letters, which can be used to create various anagrams, such as ‘Beatrice sank,’ and a double-sided poster with even more visual clues for the reader. There were also two empty ‘commonplace books’ released under the name Lemony Snicket, *The Blank Book* and *The Notorious Notations*. These books are all intended to inspire the reader to play with the linguistic skills that they have learned from *ASOUE* in their own lives.

The website, lemonysnicket.com, provides the reader with further information about the ‘Afflicted Author,’ the ‘Ill-Fated Illustrator,’ and the ‘Bothersome Books.’ It also includes further spaces for the reader of *ASOUE* to play with language, through quizzes, tests, word games, and visual games. Additionally, the main website provides links to three online communities: 667 Dark Avenue, UnfortunateEvents.com, and TheQuietWorld.com. At the height of the series’ popularity, these online forums were bustling with activity, as readers of the series converged to discuss theories and sort through the clues provided. Currently, only 667 Dark Avenue is still in operation, standing alongside the Lemony Snicket Wikipedia pages and the Lemony Snicket Wikia pages as testament to the playful activity of the readers of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

In *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale makes the case that reading complex modernist or postmodernist works of fiction teaches us how to be better readers. He uses James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as an example of a text that teaches us “to assume that everything connects (*tout se tient*); to assume that every detail, however trivial, probably has more than its literal meaning; to seek analogies among the apparently unrelated details; to isolate patterns by imposing a grid that blocks out some elements, emphasizes others; above all, to read suspiciously” (170). Postmodernist texts, particularly, he notes,

“incorporate representations of (fictional) paranoid interpretations (conspiracy theories) or paranoid reading practices, or they thematize paranoia itself, thereby reflecting on and anticipating, and perhaps pre-empting, actual readers’ paranoid readings” (McHale 171). Aside from the pre-emption of paranoid reading by the readers, *ASOUE* operates in this vein. By representing the textual struggles of the Baudelaires (with difficult text, codes, etc.) in such detail, the novels teach their readers how to read critically, like a detective sorting through clues. And by providing several clues for the readers to manage on their own (such as unravelling the ‘nonsense’ language that Sunny employs) the series allows the reader many spaces in which to practice their new skills.

3.4 Summary

The conspiratorial play of the characters within the text, and of Lemony Snicket within *and* without, trains the reader in a variety of linguistic skills, and teaches them the value of knowledge and communication. The metafictional elements of the story disturb “the surface of the narrative,” pointing readers to “the artful deception of the text with its disingenuous narrator, numerous allusions, intertexts and moments of self-reflexivity” (Mallan 187). These metafictional elements alert the reader to the various power plays at work in the construction of the series, as well as their own place within that power struggle. Taught the value of their own linguistic agency through play, the reader is then ready to tackle the various conspiracies that they may face within their own lives.

Chapter 4: The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on the Child Reader

In an effort to discern the psychological impact of conspiracy narratives, three Stanford psychologists conducted a study on the effect Oliver Stone's *JFK* would have upon an educated, and politically diverse adult audience. In 1995 Lisa D. Butler, Cheryl Koopman, and Philip G. Zimbardo surveyed 53 people before the movie and 54 people after it. The study of the results, titled "The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film *JFK*: Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioural Intentions," concluded that the movie significantly impacted the viewer's sense of political agency. According to the authors of the study, the general helplessness that the audience members felt after watching *JFK* "was associated with a significant decrease in viewers' reported intentions to vote or make political contributions" (237). Whether or not the respondents changed their attitudes later in life, the conspiratorial narrative of *JFK* clearly had a negative impact on the viewers within this study by devaluing their political agency.

Along with the themes of conspiracy that wind through *ASOUE*, the series also outlines, in excruciating detail, the vulnerability and lack of agency that children have in an adult world. The series provides one bleak reminder after another of the villainy and chaos present within in society. And yet, judging by the extraordinary and continued popularity of the series, it would appear that *ASOUE* has been a positive force for the children who read it.

This sense of positivity is emphasized in the works of two writers who were children when they first read the series, Noah Cruickshank and Real Girl; No Name, as well as in the work of one mother, Patricia Zaballos, who witnessed the effect that the series had on her children. Cruickshank, a writer for The AV Club, "grew up with

Snicket” and found the “catch-the-reference game [...] to be welcoming, telling you that you’re in on the joke” (Cruickshank and McFarland). Similarly, the teen blogger, Real Girl; No Name, also grew up on Lemony Snicket. She is more gushing in her praise of Handler, stating that he and his books “have taught [her] so much,” and citing them as having “turned [her] into the writer [she is] today.” The one with the most to say about the impact that Lemony Snicket has on children is Zaballos, author and mother to three. In her essay on Snicket, she credits him as the major force that “taught [her] kids to pay attention to language.” With these three testimonials to the positive impact of *ASOUE*, the following analysis explores the ways in which the series encourages children to playfully master the conspiratorial elements within, thereby granting them the tools of agency. Finally, the analysis briefly turns to examine the ways in which the playful humour and realistically optimistic outlook of the series empowers children to be participants within the world.

4.1 Repetitive Play as Mastery

Within trauma theory, the prevailing idea revolves around the need for the traumatized individual to “repeat, work through, and master traumatic events” (Hintz and Tribunella 239). The notion of needing to repeat, work through and master, however, is not just limited to trauma theory. According to Umberto Eco, in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, fiction “has the same function that games have. In playing, children learn to live because they simulate situations in which they may find themselves as adults” (131). In both fiction and play we learn how to gain mastery over ourselves and our responses to the world; both enable us to learn to deal with the dreadful chaos that life

holds, and it is through playful interactivity and repetition that we gain mastery over our abilities.

The novels of *ASOUE* have a repetitive plot structure, especially in the first half of the series. The children encounter various adult authority figures who, well-intentioned or not, inevitably fail to protect the Baudelaires from the villainous conspiracies that surround them; and this failure means that responsibility falls solely upon the Baudelaires to foil the various plots on their inheritance and escape from their foes. Within this narrative repetition there is an obvious method. Repetition is something that children (and often adults) take comfort in, and the “comfort of the familiar – plotlines, characters, and stylistic features – provides a space in which difficult material can be explored” (Russell 31). Indeed, while *ASOUE* presents the child reader with plenty of difficult material to work through, such as the metafictional textuality and conspiratorial plot of the series, Handler also provides the reader with various games to play, like code-breaking, emphasizing the importance of research, critical thinking, and of close and full reading. As the novels progress, Handler slowly increases the complexity of the textual games and the conspiracy itself grows and shifts, while still maintaining the main elements of the repetitive formula. The novels are iterative: replaying the same basic story over and over with new elements introduced, but in an entropic way so that the situation of the Baudelaires degrades rather than improves. Arguably however, the balance to this entropy is the reader’s increasing engagement. This repetition of games and themes allows the reader—especially the child reader—the space and time to work through the linguistic complexity and conspiratorial uncanny of *ASOUE*, and to master it.

A Series of Unfortunate Events highlights the power imbalance between children and adults from the very beginning. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are presented as legally, physically, experientially, and linguistically inferior to the adults around them. As they cannot do anything about the legal system and are aware that physical power necessarily comes with age, the Baudelaires focus their attention on honing their linguistic skills and increasing their knowledge of the world. The games that the Baudelaires and the child reader play are repeated, with increasing complexity, novel by novel, until they have been worked through and mastered. As the site of communication, language “is a key feature which acts in the power struggle between children and adults, and through assisting the child reader with their own language acquisition, Snicket attempts to give the reader tools to either enter the adult’s world or challenge the adult’s power” (Barton 331). In other words, *ASOUE* provides the child reader with the tools to master linguistic challenges and compete within the adult world on an even playing field.

The elements of conspiracy which are omnipresent in *ASOUE* are a site of terror. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny live in constant fear of a great many things, particularly those involving Count Olaf. The children’s tragic tale is repeated over and over again; escape from Olaf, only for him to track them down, plot against them, and endanger their lives again. At the end of each of the novels the Baudelaires are backed into a corner with their lives in jeopardy; and each time they overcome their fear and find a way out. Although their plans do not always work the way that they want them to, and there is always some form of loss, the Baudelaire’s find the strength to pick themselves up and move forward each time. By the end of the eighth novel, the children, though still terrified of Olaf, have worked through their fears of him enough to choose sneaking into the trunk of his car

over the alternative of being caught by a mob of people who believe that they are murderers and arsonists. And once they finally find themselves in a safe and secure place on the island in the last novel, the Baudelaires make the conscious decision to face their fears and return to the City, rather than stay sheltered and far from the treachery of the world. The reader follows along with the protagonists, playing at conspiracy through the safe distance that fiction provides. By engaging in the bleak and terrible nightmare that the Baudelaires go through again and again, the reader manages to “to get some mastery over unfocused anxieties,” such as the “loss of home and security,” which will eventually “come to pass, repeatedly even, over the course of a child’s development” (Coats 83). This kind of working through and mastery prepares the child reader for the treacheries and horrors that real life can bring.

4.2 Playful Humour and Realistic Optimism

As Daniel Handler has noted,³⁷ *ASOUE* began as a play on gothic literature, and it has remained faithful to this genre in many ways. The series uses many conventions of the gothic genre, such as, “The element of fear, the presence of the uncanny, and the threatening villain”; however, the playful sense of humor in the series creates more of “a neo-gothic sensibility” (Russell 26). The ‘uncanny’ is a term used to describe that which is uncomfortably strange, such as the lengthy and dark stairwells and empty elevator shaft that the Baudelaire children discover in *The Ersatz Elevator*. Both elevator shafts and

³⁷ Handler has remarked on the gothic nature of *ASOUE* in many interviews, such as Tasha Robinson’s interview for the AV Club.

stairwells are familiar to the reader and the characters, but the dark and seeming endlessness of both turn the familiar into a terrifying space in which any and every horror could be lying in wait. In his exploration of the gothic elements of *ASOUE*, Daniel Olson notes that the series contains the following gothic tropes: despair, betrayal, melodrama, peril, morality, mortality, fate, an overlap between villains and heroes, and sexual threats (506-26). The dark gothic aspects of *ASOUE* are lightened by humor, and, as Karen Coats mentions, “This kind of Gothic story helps children because it acknowledges and validates horror . . . even as it domesticates and contains it” (83).

In no way does the series ever indicate that the things happening to the Baudelaire children are anything other than awful and tragic. However, Handler uses humour and realistic optimism to lighten the somber story and steer the child reader away from the fearful disengagement that negatively impacted the test subjects of the *JFK* study. As Noah Cruickshank notes, “Handler’s irony and wit kept the books from becoming moribund. Snicket’s narrative voice is unique: He’s funny, empathetic, [and] emotionally engaged with his characters” (*Lemony Snicket: Who Could That Be At This Hour?*).

Aside from the playful, textual humour that has already been discussed, Handler also employs the device of exaggeration to wring humour out of things that can cause anxiety, with perhaps the most obvious example of this being the exaggerated villainy of Count Olaf. Specifically, Handler’s depiction of Count Olaf in the first ten books of the series entirely divorces him from any complex motivations or priorities: he wants to be rich and adored, plain and simple. He expresses no feelings of guilt or remorse for the things that he has done, and has no qualms with performing horrific acts upon small,

defenseless children. In the eleventh novel, *The Grim Grotto*, Snicket provides a summary of the things that “appear to be necessary to every villain’s success”:

One thing is a villainous disregard for other people, so that a villain may talk to his or her victims impolitely, ignore their pleas for mercy, and even behave violently toward them if the villain is in the mood for that sort of thing. Another thing villains require is a villainous imagination, so that they might spend their free time dreaming up treacherous schemes in order to further their villainous careers. Villains require a small group of villainous cohorts, who can be persuaded to serve the villain in a henchpersonal capacity. And villains need to develop a villainous laugh, so that they may simultaneously celebrate their villainous deeds and frighten whatever nonvillainous people happen to be nearby (187-8).

This description of villainy is a lead-up to Olaf’s “villainous laugh,” which is onomatopoeically depicted as utterly ridiculous (e.g. “Ha ha ha heepa-heepa ho!”) (Book 11 191). Up until this point, Olaf has been presented as cartoonish in his evil-doing; however, with this exploration into the qualities that produce a villain, the child reader is directed to see Count Olaf as a metafictional exploration of villainy in fiction. In real life there are no true villains. The driving force for real people is not evil, because real people have their own priorities and complicated motives for everything that they do, and this realization takes a little bit of the fear out of real-life villains and evil-doers.

Understanding that everyone has motives and that there are no completely villainous or completely noble people in the world is key to growing up. Handler most

notably demonstrates this lesson in the twelfth novel, when the Baudelaires actively engage in arson, and in *The End*, with Olaf's "one kind act" (the saving of a pregnant woman) and the realization that his villainous actions, while perhaps not excusable, may, to a certain extent, be motivated by the fact that he lost his parents, too (Book 13 316). In her article, Laurie Langbauer notes that Voltaire's novella "*Candide* is perhaps the closest ethical predecessor to Handler's series, mirroring its representational dilemmas" (512). In *Candide* (1759), Voltaire argues against approaching the world from a naively optimistic standpoint, suggesting instead a more realistic and practical approach to life (and, by implication, its evils). This same realistic optimism is seen time and time again when, faced with horror after horror, the Baudelaire children pick themselves up and move on.

In *The Miserable Mill*, Handler notes the importance of the first sentence to the thesis of a novel. The same can be said for the last word of a novel. The last book, *The End* finishes with "hope" (324). At the end of the series, in the fourteenth chapter, the children are finally safe and secure, far from the treacherous world. They realize, however, that there is "more to life than safety" (Book 13 Chapter 14, 4). Rather than keep themselves free from danger, the children decide to return and "immerse themselves in the world" (Book 13 Chapter 14, 9). Life doesn't always have a happy ending, but there is always hope, and to keep oneself separate from the world is to give up. In her blog, Real Girl; No Name says it best:

In fact, there are rarely any happy endings. Bad things can happen to good people and good things can happen to bad people. Grown-ups will believe that children are silly and wrong even when they may be telling the truth. Most importantly, these books teach us that not all

questions [need] to be answered. I have read these books over and over again and also *All the Wrong Questions*, Lemony Snicket's new addition to series, and no matter how many times I read the books I leave them with more questions than answers. And that is what is so great about them. It's this idea that life is one great big mystery and that strange and unfortunate things happen, but we can get through it as long as we stick with the people that love us and keep moving forward.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Daniel Handler provides the child reader with an excellent argument in favour of engaging with the world, with eyes wide open to its many faults.

4.3 Summary

Unlike Oliver Stone's *JFK*, the conspiratorial elements of *ASOUE* are a positive force for the child reader. As can be seen in the testimonies of Noah Cruikshank, Real Girl; No Name, and Patricia Zaballos, the novels provide active child readers with linguistic "skills that college students lack" (Zaballos). The series also serves as a site of fictive play in which the child reader can master the many challenges of life; and Handler also suggests playful humour as another form of mastery over anxiety. Lastly, the realistically optimistic perspective of *ASOUE*, in contrast to its dire claims, presents the reader with a way of engaging with the world by seeing both its faults and its virtues.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has explored themes of conspiracy and play in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The evolution of conspiracy theory, from its modernist incarnations to chaotic postmodernism, is mirrored in the journey of the Baudelaire children over the course of the increasingly complex thirteen novels. Starting out as keen detectives, the children develop into world-weary survivors, who no longer see the world in white and black terms. The three levels of conspiratorial play within the series: the play of the characters; the play of Lemony Snicket as a character, narrator, and author; and the play of the reader highlight the way in which the playfulness of the series entices the reader into active reading and learning. In conclusion, the themes of conspiracy and play within *ASOUE* have had a positive impact on the active child reader, providing him or her with the tools to needed master linguistic challenges, to overcome their anxieties, and to engage our frequently scary and chaotic world with realistic optimism.

Although this series is posited as a dreadful tale that no right-minded reader would dare to open, much less read, *ASOUE* is beloved by adult and child readers alike. Educational and engaging, the series uses themes of conspiracy to coax the reader into reading and thinking critically. Ostensibly a lengthy dirge on the terrible things that can happen to orphans, *ASOUE* is instead a playfully metafictional take on the cultural paranoia that surrounds us.

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