

# An Investigation into the Impact of Children's Literature through a Review of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*

A. Rachelle Foss\*

*MacEwan University, Canada*

## **Abstract**

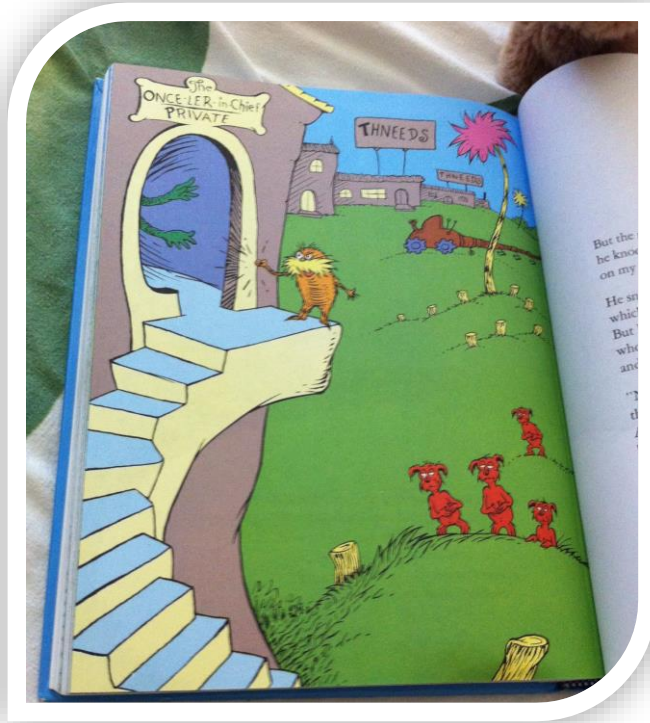
This article is a brief overview of *The Lorax*, by Dr. Seuss, the story of a repentant ex-industrialist who tells a tale of environmental degradation in the name of industrialism, progress, and profit, heedless of warnings from the Lorax—who speaks on behalf of nature. The book imparts lessons on finding a balance between ecology and industrial progress, and taking the first steps to righting the environmental errors of the past. *The Lorax*, positioned as an important ecological text, has resonated with generations. It is the generations that follow who inherit the earth, making it paramount humankind upholds a sense of responsibility and imparts an understanding of equilibrate approaches to both nature and industry. In addition, this book review examines the importance of engaging, environmental children's literature as a tool for instilling a lifelong awareness within the formative years, as a strategy for introducing the significance of ecological cognizance.

## Introduction to Dr. Seuss

Children's literature can be overlooked as an important text for ecology education. However, Baratz and Abu Hazeirawhich (2012) note an important point; children's literature both reflects the culture that distributes it (p. 33) and promotes cultural integration (Abstract), and as such it is an invaluable source for introducing an "ideological infrastructure that will become a way of life" (Abstract). When learning and experiencing ideas in childhood, children then take them into their adult years. Children's author, Theodore Giesel understood the influence his stories had on a child's insight into his or her world. Children's books "offer a wealth of examples for guiding [their] behaviour and helping them learn social skills and problem-solving strategies for handling challenging situations" (Lacina & Stetson, 2013, p. 34). When Seuss (1971) saw the need to generate awareness about conservationism, his understanding of children's literature as a tool motivated him to write the well-known children's ecology book, *The Lorax*.

Renowned, American children's author and illustrator, Theodore Seuss Giesel, best known by his pseudonym, Dr. Seuss, published 44 children's books in his lifetime, including the *The Lorax*, in 1971, which is still celebrated for bringing environmental awareness to children (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 4). His stories, although playful and filled with nonsensical words, were intended to engage children and raise their awareness of social and societal issues. As he wrote in his essay, "Writing for Children: A Mission"—originally published in the *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1960—"children's reading and children's thinking are the rock-bottom base upon which this country will rise. Or not rise. In these days of tension and confusion, writers are beginning to realize that books for children have a greater potential for good or evil than any other form of literature on earth" (Nel, 2012, *Flood of Treacle*, para. 4, *New Found Potential*, para. 1). As Phil Nel explains in his review of Seuss's work, the author "also hoped to teach [children] how to think" (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 1).

## The Book



A grim illustration of our future and far from “the brightness and laughter” (Miller, 2012, para. 9) associated with the well-known author; the story’s opening scene is reminiscent of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. “At the far end of town/where the Grickle-grass grows/and the wind smells sour and slow when it blows/and no birds ever sing excepting old crows. . . /is the Street of the Lifted Lorax”(Seuss, 1991, p. 285). But the effect was intentional. As Seuss explains, “In *The Lorax* I was out to attack what I think are evil things and let the chips fall where they might” (Miller, 2012, para. 9).

The Once-ler, the story’s narrator, comes upon a natural paradise and the plentiful resources it holds: “One morning I came to this glorious place/And I first saw the trees!/. . . Mile after mile in the fresh morning breeze” (Seuss, 1991, p. 296). “All my life I’d been searching for trees such as these” (p. 301). And as is so often the reality, the Once-ler overlooks the natural ecology, only seeing the natural resources as a commodity he “. . . chopped down a Truffula Tree with one chop”(pp.301-302). Finding the Truffula tufts to be a great source of profit, the Once-ler “. . . went right on biggering . . . selling more Thneeds. And I biggered my money, which everyone needs” (p.323). Seuss is credited for using mnemonics—a device used to assist with learning and retaining information, which he produces using anapaestic tetrameter—“a metrical foot in a line of a poem that contains three syllables wherein the first two syllables are short and unstressed followed by a third syllable that is long and stressed” (Literary Devices, 2014, para. 1). Anapaestic tetrameter is a lyrical meter that “plays a very important role in poetry and . . . the foot used in the limerick for comical effects” (Literary Devices, 2014, para. 7). Music (Carlton, 2006, para. 2) and humour (Klein, 2003, p. 125) are established tools for educating young children.

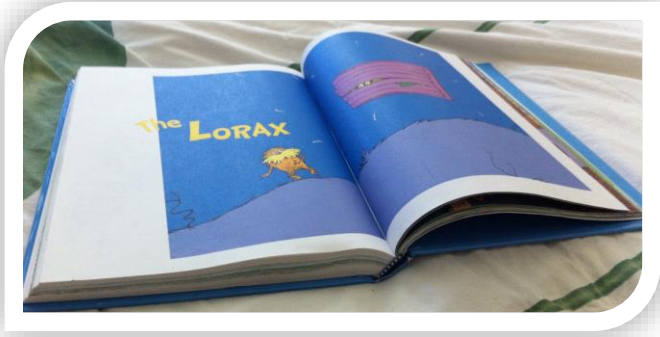
The Once-ler's assault against the, once pristine, environment continues until, "From outside in the fields came a sickening smack/of an axe on a tree. Then we heard the tree fall. *The very last Truffula Tree of them all!*" (p.334) ". . . Now all that was left 'neath the bad-smelling sky/was my big empty factory . . ./ the Lorax . . . /and I" (p.337). Relying heavily on visual metaphor, Seuss deviated from the primary colours he consistently used in his other books. He intended "the contrast between . . . [the] bright colors depicting unspoiled nature and the grays, browns, and dark blues of the polluted landscape . . . [to emphasize] the need to take care of the environment" (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 3). Seuss could have ended his tale there, as a warning against industrialism. But as Amy Sloane (2010) notes to simply "side with him [the Lorax] is not adequate to the task of overcoming human violence to natural life" (p. 424), and Seuss had a greater vision for his work than simply condemnation. Instead, he places impetus on action and the Once-ler has an epiphany about the importance of the child to whom he is relaying the tale. "'But *now*,' says the Once-ler, /'Now that *you're* here, /the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. /It's not'" (Seuss, 1991, p.342). Once again we see that Seuss has created a metaphorical link between the child character in the story and the child listening to the story being read to him or her. Johansson (2011) points out that "the message seems to be that we have to trust our children, that they are our only hope. How can we even think otherwise? Who else will take responsibility for the future of humanity?" (p. 361). This call for readers to take action appreciates that we simply borrow the earth from our children, and, therefore, it is paramount that we educate the world's youth on how to care for their planet.

Within mere months of *The Lorax's* publication the Keep America Beautiful campaign recognized the story's potential to resonate with generations, and presented Seuss with an award (Miller, 2012, para. 11), followed shortly after by recognition from the Anti-Litter Association (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 4). Since then, the Lorax has become a representative of Earth Day (Miller, 2012, para. 11).

Further validation of the book's effectiveness occurred when the Lorax became more accessible to readers:

[The Lorax was] a fictional character with real enemies. Parents in logging communities have tried to get the book removed from school libraries and reading lists. The National Oak Flooring Manufacturers Association has published its own pro-logging rebuttal, Truax. Seuss's *The Lorax* has even made the American Library Association's annual list of challenged and banned books. (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 5).

Dr. Seuss responded to this explaining, “The Lorax doesn’t say lumbering is immoral. I live in a house made of wood and write books printed on paper. It’s a book about going easy on what we’ve got. It’s anti-pollution and anti-greed” (Nel, 2010, *The Lorax and The Butter Battle Book*, para. 6).



The enduring nature of this story and the audience for which it has been written makes *The Lorax* an important ecology text, and if doubt of its effects still exist, consider that Dr. Seuss is not the only one that recognizes the importance of presenting information throughout the developmental years. The oil

and gas industry has also taken steps to position itself within the consciousness of children. Currently, the industry is receiving backlash from both Greenpeace and from the Alberta opposition over actions that are clearly attempts to provide information and exposure to children during their influential, early years. Deron Bilous, Alberta NDP education critic, blasted the Alberta government’s plan to involve the oil and gas industry in the development of the province’s education system:

“Kindergarten to grade three is a very formative time in a child’s education where their minds are still developing. It is outrageous and appalling to have oil and gas companies involved in any way in developing curriculum for Alberta’s youngest students,’ he said.” (Linnitt, 2014, para. 4)

And that is not the only target. Greenpeace has launched a campaign against LEGO’s partnership with Royal Dutch Shell, in what they claim is the pollution of children’s ideas and imaginations (McGrath, 2014, para. 6). Greenpeace suggests the action demonstrates that “Shell is building brand loyalty with the next generation of consumers. . . . to prop up its public image, while threatening the Arctic with a deadly oil spill” (Greenpeace qtd. in McGrath, 2014, para. 6).

## Conclusion

As Baratz and Abu Hazeira (2012) point out the following:

“on the assumption that textbooks are one of the important tools for conveying ethical messages and for structuring the social reality of the students (Apple &

Christian-Smith, 1991; Helinger & Brooks, 1991), then accordingly one can also see in literature written for children an aesthetic-didactic objective, by way of examination of the cultural-ideological code of the society.” (p. 34)

And with that understanding in mind, in 2011, 40 years after the book was first published, “. . . Emma Marris of *Nature*, the science journal, called the book ‘a kind of *Silent Spring* for the playground set,’ referring to the 1962 work by Rachel Carson that is often said to have launched the modern environmental movement” (Miller, 2012, para. 11) Can it then be accepted, that Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* is an important part of environmental literature, attributed with helping to instill environmental awareness in children?

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*\*Author: A. Rachelle Foss, Bachelor of Applied Communications in Professional Writing, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Rachelle is in her third year at MacEwan University. She has worked as a writer and editor for The Western Sentinel and as a copy editor for NAIT. She has published an article in each edition of the Earth Common Journal since its inaugural year in 2011. She is an avid naturalist and draws inspiration from her passion for the environment.*

*Cadence Foss, attends Grade 6 at Namao Elementary School. She enjoys singing for an audience, and is an active member of her school community, taking part in programs like the Me-To-We Club and helping others.*

*Eden Foss, attends Grade 3 at Namao Elementary School. She has a yellow belt in karate and is a member of her school running club. She loves animals and is always looking for ways to work with them in positive ways.*

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