

## Constraining the Carnival: Aetonormativity in Health and Hygiene books for children

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### **Abstract:**

*Throughout history, the significant influence of stories and books on young children has been widely acknowledged. Many children's books are designed to instil accepted social norms and promote the development of productive members of society. The subject of health and hygiene is a commonly discussed topic in children's literature, and adults have long struggled to educate children about the transition from nature to culture. Stories remain a popular form of entertainment and learning for children, and adults often employ them as a suitable means of teaching children about essential knowledge related to health and hygiene. Most children's books focus on the carnivalesque experiences of child characters and the lessons they learn from them. This paper seeks to analyze how the carnival experiences of child characters are restricted for the greater good, thereby imparting health and hygiene lessons to child readers who engage with the text. Through a review of selected books, this study aims to shed light on the theory of Aetonormativity in children's literature and its implications for understanding health and hygiene education in children's books.*

The influence of stories and books among young children has been proven undeniably

in the course of history. Most of the children's books are intended to teach them accepted social norms and guide them to be productive individuals in society. A frequently discussed topic in children's literature is health and hygiene and adults have always found it difficult to convince children about the journey from nature to culture. Stories are a constant matter of interest in child consciousness and adults find them as the most suitable way to educate children regarding the mandatory knowledge concerned with health and hygiene. Most children's books are interested in the carnivalesque of child characters and their impact on them. The paper attempts to analyse how the carnival undertaken by the child characters is constrained for the common good thereby providing health and hygiene lessons to the child readers who are involved with the text. The review of the selected books helps in understanding the theory of Aetonomativity in children's books from the perspective of comprehending health and hygiene.

Carnavalesque refers to a literary device that features a reversal of typical social norms, often characterized by chaos, humour, and satire. In children's literature, the use of carnivalesque elements can be seen in stories that challenge established power structures or societal norms, often through the subversion of familiar fairy tales or fantasy tropes. For example, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, Alice encounters a world that defies logical rules and traditional notions of order, allowing her to challenge and subvert societal expectations. Carnavalesque elements in children's literature can serve several purposes, including promoting critical thinking and encouraging readers to question authority, as well as providing an outlet for creativity and imagination. By upending established norms, these stories challenge readers to think outside the box and explore new possibilities, fostering a sense of curiosity and wonder. Ultimately, the use of carnivalesque

elements in children's literature can help to cultivate a sense of independence, individuality, and open-mindedness in young readers.

Heterology, a discourse on the Other, encompasses a variety of theories that explore unequal power dynamics in both real life and literature. While feminist theory has highlighted male authors creating female characters as the Other, and postcolonial theory has revealed alterity in depictions of ethnicity, a heterological approach to juvenile literature scrutinizes the power balance between the adult author and the presumed young audience. This balance is most notably demonstrated in the relationship between the seemingly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character, and their perception of the fictional world. In essence, the manner in which the adult narrator presents the child character unveils the degree of alterity that exists, though it must be acknowledged that alterity is inevitable in writing for children. Children's literature provides a unique medium for examining power structures, as it has long been utilized to educate, socialize, and subjugate a specific social group. As such, it is a distinct form of art and communication deliberately created by those in power for the powerless.

The theoretical foundation for this assertion is based on the notion of Aetonormativity, which was introduced by Swedish literary critic Maria Nikolajeva. Aetonormativity is the idea that adult norms are considered normative, while children's norms are viewed as non-normative. This concept was initially presented as a conference paper in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in July 2008, and was later published as "Theory, Post-Theory and Aetonormative Theory" in the special edition of *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universalum* in 2009. In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*, Nikolajeva affirms that "children's literature is a unique art and communication form, deliberately created by those in power for

the power-less.” (8) She analyses that “adults have unlimited power in our society, as compared to children, who lack economic resources of their own, lack voice in political and social decisions, and are subjected to a large number of laws and rules which the adults expect them to obey without interrogation. This is regarded as norm, in real life as well as in literature.” (9) The lessons of health and hygiene provided in the selected texts can be interpreted in terms of Aetonormative theory.

The primary texts taken for the study are *The Tooth Book* by Dr Seuss, *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Elhert, *Sick Simon* by Dan Krall, *Something Smells* by Blake Liliane Hellman, *Harry the Dirty Dog* by Gene Zion, *The Girl Who Wouldn't Brush Her Hair* by Kate Bernheimer, *My Hair is a Garden* by Cozbi A Cabrera, *Down at the Dino Wash Deluxe* by Tim J Myers, *How Do You Take a Bath?* By Kate McMullan, *Oh, the Things You Can Do That Are Good for You: All about Staying Healthy* by Tish Rabe, *Smelly Socks* by Robert Munsch, *Little Bunny, Big Germs* by Rosemary Wells and *Hair-Pocalypse* by Geoff Herbach. All these works explain the carnivalesque journey of different characters not necessarily human, but childlike so that the child readers can relate to themselves in the same situations concerning health and hygiene. The lessons of health and hygiene are imposed upon the characters in different ways so that the child has to return to the norms and regulations to be a responsible adult in the future. This affirms the Aetonormative hold visible in almost all children's literature though analysed here with reference to those books concerning health and hygiene.

*The Tooth Book* authored by Dr. Seuss is an ideal literary work for young readers who are beginning to acquire knowledge pertaining to teeth and oral hygiene. This literary piece, characterized by whimsical rhymes, imparts comprehensive information regarding toothed

and toothless creatures, as well as essential measures for maintaining proper oral health. The book's arrangement facilitates a pleasurable reading experience for children, likely inducing them to request its recital during bedtime, while simultaneously stimulating their eagerness to brush their teeth. Lois Elhert's *Eating the Alphabet* presents the idea that instilling healthy eating habits in children should commence at an early age. The book proposes a combination of learning the alphabet and acquiring knowledge about nutritious fruits and vegetables as an effective approach. This literary work serves as a viable resource to initiate the child's education on proper health practices. Moreover, *Eating the Alphabet* figuratively represents the assimilation of cultural norms.

Dan Krall's *Sick Simon* offers insight into the unhygienic tendencies of children, including behaviours such as wiping nasal discharge on their arms and consuming nasal mucus. The book entices young readers with its initial portrayal of the protagonist, Simon, suffering from a runny nose but declaring his readiness for the "best week ever." The narrative then proceeds to depict Simon's enjoyment of various activities such as greeting his family, sharing snacks with friends, participating in a school field trip, and playing with peers during recess, all while being ill. In a reverse psychological approach, the book culminates in Simon receiving acclaim from the antagonists, the germs, for being a "germ hero." The germs admonish Simon for his failure to follow proper hygiene practices such as hand washing, covering his mouth when coughing or sneezing, and his affinity for spreading germs. This comedic yet impactful portrayal of Simon's interaction with the germs not only entertains young readers but also enlightens them on the importance of hygiene.

Blake Liliane Hellman's *Something Smells* narrates the tale of Elliot, who awakens one morning to a repulsive odour. Puzzled by its source, he speculates if it is emanating from

the garbage, their dog, father, sister, baby, or his grandmother's renowned *gerfartzenschanffel*. Despite Elliot's thorough search, he is unable to identify the source of the putrid smell, which is driving him and his nostrils to madness. Moreover, his mother insists that he takes a bath, which means relinquishing his beloved skeleton costume, donned since Halloween. Ironically, following Elliot's bath and his mother's decision to launder his costume, the offending odour dissipates.

Gene Zion's *Harry the Dirty Dog*, a comical picture book, has stood the test of time. The narrative centers around Harry, a white dog with black spots, who adamantly refuses to take a bath. After a day of exciting adventures, Harry becomes so filthy that he no longer resembles a white dog with black spots, but instead a black dog with white spots. For decades, Harry the Dirty Dog has delighted young readers, especially dog enthusiasts who share Harry's aversion to bathing. This edition, designed for young children, features durable pages and dimensions suited to their size. The story exhibits a clever combination of art and text, effortlessly conveying everyday absurdity with humorous finesse.

In Kate Bernheimer's *The Girl Who Wouldn't Brush Her Hair*, the protagonist exhibits neglect towards her long hair. However, an event unfolds when a mouse takes residence within a particularly tangled strand of hair, ultimately leading to the arrival of numerous mice. As a result, the girl's disheveled hair becomes an elaborate mouse palace, complete with hidden pathways and a cheese cellar. Nonetheless, the girl undergoes a realization of the significance of health and hygiene, as she grapples with the daily living conditions of over a hundred mice on her head. Cozbi A Cabrera's *My Hair is a Garden* portrays the protagonist, Mackenzie, as a victim of taunting by her peers due to her unkempt hair. Seeking solace, Mackenzie confides in her knowledgeable and supportive neighbour, Miss Tillie. Employing

the metaphor of a serene garden in the backyard, Miss Tillie imparts to Mackenzie that nurturing healthy hair is not an arduous task nor is it a subject of trepidation. Significantly, Mackenzie gains insight into the aesthetic allure of natural black hair.

In Tim J Myers' *Down at the Dino Wash Deluxe*, the setting is a vintage car wash where prehistoric creatures called Dinosaurs are the patrons, and cleanliness is the top priority. Within the *Dino Wash Deluxe*, a comprehensive cleaning experience is offered, accommodating features such as scales, spikes, wings, frills, and horns. The narrative centres around the introduction of a new visitor, a tyrannosaurus rex with imposing characteristics of sharp teeth, elongated claws, and a menacing disposition. Rich in dinosaur trivia and merriment, this amusing storybook serves as a gentle reminder to children that intimidating individuals may not be as fearsome as they appear.

Kate McMullan's *How Do You Take a Bath?* is a delightful and informative picture book that features endearing baby animals and their individual bathing methods. The narrative playfully inquires about the reader's own bathing routine while showcasing the grooming techniques of various creatures, such as elephants, pigs, monkeys, and hippos. The charming rhyming scheme is accompanied by the adorable illustrations of Sydney Hanson, which seamlessly shift between depictions of animals in their natural habitats and comical illustrations of children attempting to emulate their bathing behaviors. By the story's end, the child ultimately resorts to a traditional bathtub, abandoning the unconventional methods previously explored.

The book's interactive and engaging nature encourages young readers to learn about animal habits and hygiene practices in a light-hearted and amusing manner. Through the whimsical illustrations and humorous depictions of children trying to emulate the animals'

methods, the book highlights the diversity of cleaning routines across various species. The author, Kate McMullan, skillfully weaves a sense of curiosity and wonderment throughout the narrative, keeping the reader engaged until the very end. Furthermore, the book's utilization of rhyme adds to its playful tone, making it a fun read-aloud option for parents and teachers. The author's adept use of language and rhythm ensures that the book's underlying message of hygiene and cleanliness is effectively conveyed to young readers. The illustrations by Sydney Hanson perfectly complement the text, creating a captivating visual experience that will delight both children and adults.

In the revised edition of Tish Rabe's *Oh, the Things You Can Do That Are Good for You: All About Staying Healthy*, the Cat in the Hat collaborates with the Partnership for a Healthier America to educate young readers on the fundamentals of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This updated version includes 16 additional pages of supplementary materials that feature practical and enjoyable suggestions for children to increase their daily physical activity, as well as eight nutritious recipes for parents to prepare for their children. Through the guidance of the Cat in the Hat, readers learn about the significance of consuming a balanced diet based on the latest USDA MyPlate guidelines, engaging in regular physical activity, obtaining adequate sleep, practising proper hand hygiene, observing dental hygiene, donning protective gear during sports activities, and adopting effective techniques for sneezing in the absence of a tissue. The book's contents support the development of both sound physical health and mental well-being.

The plot of Robert Munsch's *Smelly Socks* centres around Tina, who becomes infatuated with her new socks to the point where she adamantly refuses to remove them for washing. Despite their initially delightful scent, the socks become increasingly malodorous



due to Tina's reluctance to take them off. Eventually, the other children in the story compel her to wash the socks in a nearby river, causing the foul smell to dissipate, albeit at the cost of driving away all the fish in the area. As a reward for this long-overdue hygiene practice, Tina's mother presents her with a new shirt, which she promptly cherishes to the point of declaring her intention to never remove it.

*Little Bunny, Big Germs* by Rosemary Wells is a well-crafted educational tool designed for the youngest of preschool readers. This book serves as a comprehensive introduction to the topic of germs and good hygiene practices. The storyline centres around Little Bunny, who, despite being aware of the importance of handwashing, harbours a deep-seated aversion to soap and towels. Unbeknownst to Little Bunny, his hands are infested with a multitude of dormant germs, some of which are capable of wreaking havoc on his health. The book underscores the importance of hygiene, particularly handwashing, in mitigating the spread of disease. When Little Bunny falls ill with a cold, he is compelled to stay home from school, underscoring the importance of protecting oneself and others from the dangers of germ proliferation. Overall, "Little Bunny, Big Germs" serves as a vital educational tool for young children, imparting essential information on the significance of hygiene and fostering an appreciation for health-conscious behaviour.

*Hair-Pocalypse* by Geoff Herbach portrays the struggles of Aiden Allen, a second-grader whose unruly hair poses significant challenges throughout his school day by taking on peculiar shapes and disrupting his concentration. Despite his best efforts, Aiden finds himself unable to control his hair, which negatively impacts his academic performance. Eventually, Aiden reaches a compromise with his hair that involves regular washing, leading to a newfound sense of control over his appearance and a more positive experience at school.

Through Aiden's journey, the book emphasizes the importance of personal hygiene and self-care, particularly as it pertains to grooming. Ultimately, "Hair-Pocalypse" serves as an entertaining and informative tool for young readers, teaching them vital lessons about the importance of personal upkeep and the empowerment that comes with taking control of one's appearance.

In conclusion, health and hygiene are crucial aspects of a child's overall development, and children's literature plays an important role in educating and promoting these values. Books that address health and hygiene topics not only provide children with practical knowledge but also help them develop positive habits that will benefit them throughout their lives. Through relatable and engaging characters and narratives, children's books have the power to inspire and motivate young readers to take care of themselves and their surroundings. The analyzed works of literature in this study demonstrate the potential for children's literature to effectively convey health and hygiene messages to young readers. Overall, it is evident that the inclusion of health and hygiene topics in children's literature is essential, and authors and publishers should continue to prioritize these themes in their works. The carnival of the child characters are optimistically intervened so that they can be trained to become better adults in future. This proves the existence of Aetonormativity in children's literature and also cautions retaining the balance of power in the narrative framework without favouring either child normativity or adult normativity.

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