

ANALYSIS OF FIVE TEXTS USING RUSSIAN FORMALIST FRAMEWORK

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**This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Education with Honours
(Teaching English as a Second Language)**

**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
(2009)**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to devote my sincere thanks to Allah for giving me strength and determination throughout the journey of completing this study.

I would also like to extend my greatest gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Ahmed Shamsul Bahri for his unconditional guidance and support, his continuous patience and precious time spent on this study. Without this ray of sunshine, I would have lost in darkness. To other lecturers, their constructive advices are highly appreciated!

This gratitude also goes to the faculty and university for giving me the opportunity to endure this bittersweet journey of completing my very first own research (where I experienced many things throughout the way!).

To the beloved of my life, Hj. Zainul b. Ishak and Hjh. Asmah bt. Berahim, the great distance never seems to be the problem for their undivided love and constant prayers. This piece of work is for both of you. And to my sister, Juliana, thanks a lot for the books!

This appreciation also goes to the best friend of mine, Andy. Thanks for always being there for me. I owe you the world! Not forgetting, to the members of double M&N for their cheers and support that have kept me going.

Last but not least, this goes to my fellow course mates for their concern and generosity.

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ABSTRACT

ANALYSIS OF FIVE TEXTS USING RUSSIAN FORMALIST FRAMEWORK

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This study aimed to analyse the plot in relation to the characters found in the selected texts. The objectives are to unravel the extent to which the plot and characters of the selected serial texts conform to the framework used and to investigate how consistent this plot arrangement throughout the texts. The five texts selected for the purpose of this study were written by Lemony Snicket from The Series of Unfortunate Events. The texts “Book the Second: The Reptile Room” (1999), “Book the Forth: The Miserable Mill” (2000), “Book the Sixth: The Ersatz Elevator” (2001), “Book the Eight: The Hostile Hospital” (2001) and “Book the Tenth: The Slippery Slope” (2003) are stories that contain the spheres which are the main subject of the analysis. These spheres; villain, helper, donor, sought-for person, and hero are elaborated in Russian Formalist framework, the theory in which was applied in conducting the textual analysis of plot in relation to characters in the study. The findings revealed that the plots and characters of the texts studied still conform to the framework which was first used by Vladimir Propp on fairy tales even if they do not belong to the same genre as the fairy tales. Nevertheless, only five spheres were found in the texts studied suggesting that not all spheres can work in any story. The plot identified is also consistent throughout the series of texts whereby each of them followed the same pattern described in the framework.

ABSTRAK

KAJIAN KE ATAS LIMA TEKS MENGGUNAKAN TEORI FORMALIS RUSIA

Nur Hidayah Bt. Zainul

*Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat plot sambil mengaitkannya dengan karektor yang terdapat di dalam teks-teks yang digunakan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti sama ada plot di dalam teks tersebut menyamai plot yang diterangkan di dalam teori serta mengetahui sejauh mana plot tersebut konsisten di dalam setiap teks yang dikaji. Lima teks yang dipilih untuk tujuan kajian ini telah dikarang oleh Lemony Snicket yang diambil daripada karya beliau *The Series of Unfortunate Events*. Buku-buku tersebut “*Book the Second: The Reptile Room*” (1999), “*Book the Forth: The Miserable Mill*” (2000), “*Book the Sixth: The Ersatz Elevator*” (2001), “*Book the Eight: The Hostile Hospital*” (2001) and “*Book the Tenth: The Slippery Slope*” (2003) telah memuatkan sifat-sifat karektor yang merupakan subjek utama dalam kajian ini. Sifat-sifat karektor ini ada diterangkan di dalam teori *Formalis Rusia* yang digunakan untuk analisa teks bagi mengkaji plot sambil mengaitkannya dengan karektor. Hasil kajian menunjukkan plot di dalam tek-tek berkenaan menyamai plot yang diterangkan di dalam teori tersebut yang mana pada mulanya digunakan oleh *Vladimir Propp* untuk mengkaji cerita khayalan walaupun teks tersebut mempunyai genre yang berlainan dengan cerita khayalan. Namun begitu, hanya lima sifat-sifat karektor yang telah dikenalpasti dan ini menunjukkan bahawa tidak semua sifat-sifat karektor tersebut dapat diaplikasikan di dalam mana-mana cerita. Plot tersebut juga adalah konsisten sepanjang siri teks-teks tersebut dan setiap satunya menyamai bentuk yang telah dibincangkan di dalam teori yang digunakan.*

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the background of the study seeks to give basic information related to the study and followed by statement of the problem which contains previous research related to the study and other aspects that are not yet covered which leads to the purpose of the study. This chapter also presents research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, operational definitions of the terms and the scope of the study.

1.1 Background Of The Study

The study of narrative has long been done at various levels which includes from the smallest level of the sign to a wider aspect of structure. Some even look at the grammar that underwrites and generates narratives (Greimas, qtd. in Lye 4). Looking at the narrative requires a consideration of two fundamental aspects which would further help in studying this particular literature text. Knowing the meaning and the constituent features of a narrative (Green and LeBihan 64-65) could aid us in

understanding its nature. Essentially in narrative, a distinction has been made between the events that can be said to happen in 'real' time and the artistically treated version which is in the text presented to the reader (Green and LeBihan 64). This particular distinction is also known by various terms such as the *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Tomashevsky, qtd. in Harland 148), *histoire* and *recit* (Ganette, qtd. in Selden 61) and 'story' and 'text' (Rimmon-Kenan, qtd. in Green and LeBihan 64).

Looking specifically at children literature, there were many studies done by researchers on the elements within the narrative. Knowles and Malmkjaer (29-34) talk about the arrangement of events and the readers' prediction about what may happen in a text including at the level of plot. They argue that if most of the predictions made by the readers are confirmed, it shows that the text is easy and perhaps boring to some extent as the plot can be easily guessed and identified. This argument has brought us to the fact that there is a dominance of a general clichéd pattern of children narrative especially in the classic children's books (Hunt 35-62). This kind of linear plotline gives emphasis on the 'closedness' of the text that keeps to the fixed framework besides making the whole story an idealized one. This idealized story is normally belongs to classical genres such as an epic and fairy tales where the whole concept of story works towards the conclusiveness (Sax 166) and thus, this rejects the potential for a real continuation as happened in reality.

In contrast to the pattern of classic children books, Edward Lear's prose writings contain a different way of portraying the story. He presents the readers with seemingly sensible texts but as the story gradually develops, event after event, it then enters the phase where most of the things go against the reader's expectations and finally end in ways that usually contradict the premises from which the story had moved in the first place (Sala 20). Apart from that, in some parts of the world, for instance in Turkey, the plot arrangement of the children narrative is influenced by external factors such as the military coup especially in 1980 (Erdogan 9). The plot

therefore, was set up in a way that the superior forces was destroyed by those who were more inferior and this type of plot was commonly used at that particular time.

The study of literary structuralism begins with the language theories of Ferdinand de Saussure in which the emphasis is on the literary form such as the structure rather than social or historical content (Selden 52-56). In structuralism, a clear distinction has been made between *langue* and *parole* where the former refers to the social aspect of the language that is the shared system of rules that governs utterances while the latter relates to the actual utterances or the particular occurrence of the language. Saussure also argues that in analyzing this shared system, it requires a thorough study at the relationship among the elements of language and this has to be done within its systemic framework as suggested by Roman Jakobson (Davis & Schleifer 122-124). The discussion of Saussure's works leads us to the core of this study that is to look at this systemic framework that is the structure pattern, from the Russian Formalist viewpoint. Here, this particular theory concerns with relationship between the forms and how they are seen. It is from the concept of *ostranenie* or defamiliarisation where this particular relationship is emerged and it is primarily developed by one of the Formalists, Victor Shklovsky.

1.2 Statement Of Problem

Research on plot especially in children literature suggests there is a demand of 'normal' existence of the object which requires that they must become to some extent 'automatised'. This somehow conforms to the regular expectations that always happen in narrative writing where the plot of the story fulfills the expectation of readers instead of having it the other way around (Selden 9). Most studies however, have been conducted on individual text as in a novel or a story that is not published in serial be it adult fiction or children narrative. Little is known of plotline study especially when it comes to serial fiction of children literature.

While the study of pattern in stories proves that the structure has remained remarkably stable over the years (Sax 166), this however does not include the plot in serial fiction. In most previous studies related to the structure of literature texts, various frameworks have been utilized in analysing the plot and this includes the frameworks proposed by Russian Formalists. However, the function of the characters in the serial story is not thoroughly dealt although they contribute in developing the plot. One way to address this issue is to consider Russian Formalist framework which was proposed by Vladimir Propp as it describes the different functions served by different characters in the story and this allows for a thorough look at how the characters build up the plot in the serial story.

Based on the functions served by the characters in the books, it helps to provide information on the development of plot in the selected texts and thus contributes to the study which aimed to analyse the plot of the selected texts using Russian Formalist framework.

1.3 Research Objectives

The focus of this study was on the arrangement of the plot in relation to the characterisation from the perspective of Russian Formalism. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the extent to which the plot and characters of the selected texts conform to Russian Formalism Theory.
2. To find out the consistencies of this arrangement of plot in the selected texts.

1.4 Research Questions

Corresponding to the objectives of the research are the four research questions:

1. How the characters are portrayed in the texts?
2. How these characters help to develop the plot?
3. How the plot and characters studied conform to Russian Formalist framework?
4. What are the consistencies of this arrangement of plot in the selected texts?

1.5 Significance Of The Study

The findings gathered from this study are essential particularly in the area of Russian Formalist literary criticism as it may add to the related body of research through the presentation of certain aspects which may have not been thoroughly covered in the previous studies related to the theory of Russian Formalism. The aspects which include a detailed analysis of the plot of the texts could help in identifying the patterns related to the theory besides clarifying how they are arranged in the texts. In fact, the study also included the analysis of main characters that help in developing the plot where Russian Formalist framework was used to carry out this analysis.

The findings of this study may also act as a basis and reference for researchers who intend to further their studies in the area of Structuralism since it relates to Russian Formalism in the sense that both theories attempt to look at the structure of literature text in general. The findings could provide readers with information that shows how these two theories are interrelated and how they affect one another in any way. Besides, the used of selected texts in the study allows for the fulfillment of the

objectives and research questions through the analysis of the recurring general pattern in each of the book. This is one of the main criteria for the texts to be used in the study besides representing the serial fictions written within children literature. The finding thus enables to highlight the development of plot in the texts as the story progresses.

1.6 Operational Definitions Of The Terms

1.6.1 Structuralism

Structuralism is a modern literary theory that looks at the way of thinking about the world which is mainly concerned with the perceptions and description of structures (Siegel 10). Structuralist, Saussure stresses that each element of the language could not stand on its own and thus all elements involved in that specific situation have to be considered in order to make sense out of it (Harland 135-137). Besides, most of structuralist studies tend to be textual analysis (Chandler 6) where there is a need for a close examination of the text because the theory beliefs that any unit or element cannot be perceived unless it is placed into its original structure of which it forms a part and this was what done in this study.

1.6.2 Russian Formalism

This is another modern literary theory that generally looks at the pattern or the form of a literary text. It treats literature more as a group of literary devices and investigates the relationship among the smaller parts in literature text (Holcombe 5). The theory also considers literature as a system where each and every component in it plays its own function in making up the whole text and this is where it came out with the distinction between the story (Russian *sjuzhet*) and its telling (*fabula*) (Pateman 15).

For Russian formalism, the literary text is an autonomous structure with no meaningful connection to social history. Saussure's concept of *langue* (the general system of language rules) and *parole* (the individual utterance) had significantly influenced Russian formalists and their view of the literary text as a unified, self-contained entity that articulated an individual artistic consciousness rather than a social consciousness (qtd. in Paton 166-194). The study therefore, attempted to look at every element that helps in making up the unified entity in the selected texts.

1.6.3 Plot

Plotting is a way of looking at things besides serving as a basis in deciding what is important before showing its importantness through the way the major events of a particular story are constructed and connected to each other. It is also a way to show things mattering where in general sense, it is not just what happens, but precisely how the incidents are presented and the patterns that they make (Dibell 6). For the Russian Formalists as a whole, the plot or structure (both terms are used interchangeably in the study) is what makes something art, so in order to understand a work of art as a work of art one must focus on its form.

1.7 Scope Of The Study

The study attempted to look at the extent to which the plot in the selected books of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* conforms to Russian Formalist viewpoint. The portrayal of characters and how they build the plot were thoroughly analysed using the functions or spheres proposed by Propp. The selected texts of the series are *Book the Second: The Reptile Room*, *Book the Forth: The Miserable Mill*, *Book the Sixth: The Ersatz Elevator*, *Book the Eight: The Hostile Hospital* and *Book the Tenth: The Slippery Slope*. Since there are a few characters that reappear in every text, each of them was carefully analysed as their portrayal in

the texts is crucial in making up the structure of the story. Besides, the study also looked at the consistencies of this plot throughout the selected texts since they are serial fictions.

The analysis of the meaning that can be inferred from the pattern found in the books was therefore not covered as the study only concerned with the consistency of the pattern in the texts. Besides, the analysis of the characters only revolved around the seven character roles as described in Propp's framework and this includes four main characters, three Baudelaire orphans and Count Olaf who appear in all the selected series as well as other characters that turn out to be different people in different books. Other character roles which are not in the list of Propp's seven spheres of actions thus were not studied. In addition, the aspects that have been analysed as elaborated above were not presented using other literary theory frameworks.

1.8 Chapter Review

This chapter has discussed the main purpose of the study that is to look at how the plot (structure pattern) in the selected texts are arranged and portrayed and the extent to which this pattern conforms to the Russian Formalist viewpoint. This chapter also presents the background of the study, the statement of problem, the research objectives, the research questions, the significance of the study, the operational definitions of key terms and scope of the study. The next chapter will give a review of related literatures concerning the study of plot or the structure pattern in literature.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter Overview

The early section of this chapter gives a detailed review of the studies done on children narrative which includes Vladimir Propp's work on fairy tales. The succeeding part would include the views of Russian Formalism on narrative where the focus is on the mechanical aspect which is the plot and structure. This is then followed by the discussion on structural pattern of narrative where all major frameworks that look at the structure of narrative would be dealt in details. This part also includes the review of previous studies that incorporate Propp's framework in the analysis of plot.

2.1 Children Narrative

At first glance, it seems the truth is universally acknowledged; the juxtaposition of children and 'live happily ever after' is a wondrous thing and is most welcomed in children narrative. Most of children's books typically extol the advantages of working towards happy ending. And up until now, more books of this

kind are kept coming in as to maintain and fulfill the expectations of young readers of children's narrative.

Looking back at the fairy tales that fill with prince, princess, magic, witches and even fairies, they all have almost the same storyline that usually begins with a hero facing a conflict and later fighting with the villain before re-establishing harmony and achieving dreams of happy ending. These narratives are written using more or less the same structure as argued by Vladimir Propp in his well-known research *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) that most plotlines lied behind fairy tales endure so-called 'conventions' where the sequence of events is basically the same for all fairy tales (qtd. in Harland 153-226). The structure of earlier narratives is mostly fixed to the conventions. Even in Turkey before Second World War, most of novels and stories written for children appeared in which heroes were either local warriors or poor village boy who fight for their nation or city, gaining victory at the end and this somehow assumed the structure of basic fairy tales (Erdogan 7). Nevertheless the sequence may not be applied to later *literary* fairy tales due to the ever-changing sequence of events in them.

From the structure of children narrative then leads to the study of characters that are crucial in building the plot of the narrative since different character in the story would carry different or same function in the development of the storyline. Referring to Propp's seven spheres characters as found in the fairy tales, it clearly shows that each character identified plays his or her role efficiently and brings the story towards the ending that is expected (Green & LeBihan 66-68).

2.2 Russian Formalism Theory On Narrative

A range of aspects in narrative have been the main subjects of many research especially in literature field. An analysis of a particular text not only helps to

highlight the linguistic characteristics of the story which is thought to be best done by the linguist, but also many sociological issues that lie behind all those lines. This sociological information which can also be considered as the basic of narrative can be gathered through a thorough study on the story (Franzosi 519). Essentially in narrative, a distinction has been made between the events that can be said to happen in 'real' time and the artistically treated version which is in the text presented to the reader (Green and LeBihan 64). For Formalists, this particular distinction is also known by various terms such as the *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Tomashevsky, qtd. in Harland 148), *histoire* and *recit* (Genette, qtd. in Selden 12) and 'story' and 'text' (Rimmon-Kenan, qtd. in Green and LeBihan 64).

The story or rather defined as the chronological succession of events plays an important role in narrative as it implies a change in situations as presented by the author through the sequence of events in narrative (Franzosi 520). Each of the actions is treated artistically as to maximize the effects that each can bring into the telling of the whole story. When the events are arranged in particular orders, making used various techniques in their sequencing such as enchainment, embedding and joining, this would bring us to the plot of narrative (Selden 12). The plot itself may range from the simplest as in introduction, crisis, climax and resolution to the more complicated ones where many twists and turns are included to produce narratives that call for a close reading in for a better understanding of the texts.

Many studies by renowned researchers such as Todorov (1981) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983) have been done at this level especially on the use of such sequencing techniques within narrative (qtd. in Franzosi 520). The techniques used allow for a variety of structures to be incorporated in the narratives which then increase the production of more diverse genres of writings. However, different kinds of narrative are written in different ways as White (1978) argues that narrative is set according to the universal psychological need into different structures which then leads to

'textuality' (qtd. in Brendle 444-445). He makes a distinction between the writings produced by an author and a historian where the way they deal with the fact is different from one another. For him, an author is rather seen as the inventor of fictional story while a historian plays with the facts which create true stories. Continuing the discussion he says that some of literature elements namely metaphor, metonym, synecdoche and irony are included by the author in the ordering of narrative making the story less different from the ordering of factual events imposed by historian and these orders help make up the plot.

The plot of narrative can assume a great deal of structure and this depends on the genre in which it is written. Nevertheless, the form may remain unchanged even though its content changes as evident in the Propp's classic analysis of folktales (Propp, qtd. in Harland 153-155). In his study, Propp also proposes the term 'spaces' as to represent the organization of narrative structure.

The articulation of these spaces is organized as follows: The topic space is the space of actual circumstances, the "Here". The "There" is the heterotopic space and the idealized space is the utopic space. The space is related to different "modalities" of action: to be, to want or to wish, to have willpower, and to do.

(qtd. in Quallenberg 278)

In essence, these 'spaces' can as well be equated to the two stable states - equilibrium and disequilibrium - of narrative and this agreed by Greimas (1970) who is one of Propp's followers (qtd. in Quallenberg 278-279). The topic space is basically where the subject of the story takes action and this is followed by the heterotopic space which usually contains conflict as the effect of the action before coming to the utopic space where the subject regains the state of harmony which was lost during the heterotopic space. This sort of arrangement is thus seen to fit into the narrative states of equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium especially in tales (Quallenberg 278-279).

There is however a slight difference between these 'spaces' and basic narrative form proposed by Green & LeBihan (65). They suggest that the form can also be described as:

[state] x...[event] y...[state] z where z inverts x.

This form can usually be found in tales and there is of course a need to consider characters and their functions in the narrative in order to really see the ordering of events since the basic form and the 'spaces' described above may as well be affected by other elements of the narrative itself.

2.3 Structural Pattern Of Narrative

Structure of a narrative can be examined using any of the frameworks available especially the ones proposed by Russian Formalists. Since one of the purposes of this particular theory is to look at the structure of literature texts, the frameworks within the theory are therefore appropriate to be used in analysing the structure of a text. Different narrative may be written differently especially on its structure although some would have followed the same pattern just like fairy tales (Propp, qtd. in Bruner 696).

One of the common frameworks used by many researchers previously is the study of narrative at the grammar level as started by the structural semanticist A. J. Greimas whom is more concerned with how 'social being is constructed through narratives' (Green & LeBihan 63). In his work, a semantic analysis of sentence structure is applied with an aim to arrive the 'universal' grammar of narrative. He is also interested in the relevance of narratology to experiences and therefore applied the narratology models to phenomena that are not so into the structural rules as what

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he does in *The Semiotics of Passions* (qtd. in Felluga “Greimas” 1). He proposed three pairs of ‘binary oppositions’ that includes six roles or rather known as actants:

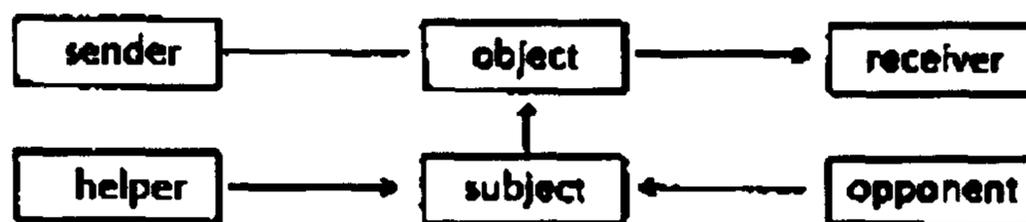


Figure 1: Greimas' binary oppositions

(Katilius-Boydston 23)

The framework shows that there are two simultaneous movements which specify that the model works in two ways: to communicate and modify the subject. The object is also known as knowledge and thus the upper level of the framework represents the structure of the basic communication situation in which it starts from the sender conveying message to the receiver (Katilius-Boydston 23-24). The two movements on the other hand, can be represented by an analogy of which the communication is the transferring of a story from one side to another while the modification is the changes that took place in that process. Apart from that, the model can also be arranged in pairs: subject/object, sender/receiver and helper/ opponent (Selden 59). These pairs basically explain three patterns which may reappear in all narrative. The first pattern would be the desire, search or aim as described by the subject/object pair. The second pattern which is the communication is elaborated by the sender/receiver pair while the last pattern, auxiliary support or hindrance is described by the helper/opponent pair.

This particular framework has been applied in the study of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and the finding claims that the analysis was better and more specific than when using Propp's framework (Selden 59). However, Greimas can be seen to be more interested in the analysis of the universal 'grammar' of narrative and