

LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC IMAGES IN DR. SEUSS: Or, How To Read Between The Lines

by Don L. F. Nilsen

Dr. Seuss is an innovative illustrator, innovative bordering on absurd, and that's probably what sells his books in the first place. Seuss's innovations, and logical absurdities don't stop with the art work, but extend into the writing as well, and that's probably why they're read after they're bought. A careful analysis of Dr. Seuss's books would reveal that he violates almost every logical constraint imaginable, and therein lies much of the value of his work.

His works contain tautologies, such as [being] "small for my size," or "It's a pretty long trip, but they might and they may" (swim from Hudson Bay to McElligot's pool) (*McElligot's Pool*, 1947). He has point-of-view shifts, like "This is called teamwork. I furnish the brains. You furnish the muscles, the aches and the pains." (*I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew*, 1965). And he has numerous examples of hyperbole, like "Damp! Was it damp? I grew moss on my feet!" (*I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew*, 1965). In *Horton Hears a Who* (1954) he tells about a city of people that would make the Lilliputians giants by comparison, "You've helped all us folks on this dust speck no end. You've saved all our houses our ceilings and floors. You've saved all our churches and grocery stores..."

and goes on telling about dozens and dozens of other things that most of us didn't realize were contained in a typical speck of dust.

"The Big Brag" (*Yertle The Turtle*, 1958) starts out with hyperbole. The rabbit heard a fly cough on a mountain 90 miles away. The bear smelled two hummingbird eggs 690 miles away, and could determine that the egg on the left was a little bit stale. But when the worm comes along, the hyperbole becomes so exaggerated it turns to sarcasm:

I'd looked 'round the world and right back to this hill. And I saw on this hill, since my eyesight's so keen, The two biggest fools that have ever been seen.

Dr. Seuss's logic is not the typical run-the-mill kind that's encountered every day:

"Then I went for some Ziffs. They're exactly like Zuffs. But the Ziffs live on cliffs and the Zuffs live on bluffs. And seeing how bluffs are exactly like cliffs, it's mighty hard telling the Zuffs from the Ziffs. But I know that the egg that I got from the bluffs, if it wasn't a Ziff's from the cliffs, was a Zuff's." (*Scrambled Eggs Super*, 1953)

Now how does that logic strike you? In *I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today* (1969), he excused all the tigers with curly hair from fighting. Then he excused all of those in the front row, then those whose fingernails were dirty, then those who were underweight, then those who were sleepy, and those who were hot, and finally, when only one was left, he decided to fight "after lunch." In *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958), a cat leaves a pink ring in the bathtub. He

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(She?) then wipes the pink on a dress, slaps the pink onto a wall, transfers it to dad's \$10 shoes, wipes it onto a rug, then onto a bed. S/he then decides s/he needs help, so Cat A uses a broom to transfer it to the TV, Cat B gets it into a pan; Cat C blows it outside with a fan, but now the snow has spots. Cats D through V try to "kill" the snow spots with pop guns, bats, brooms, spray guns, tweezers, lawn mowers, fly swatters, bows and arrows and so forth, but merely make more spots. Then Cat Z comes along and destroys the pink with a new figment of his/her (or of Dr. Seuss's) imagination, called "Voom."—shades of 007.

Dr. Seuss loves to use irony in his writings. Bartholomew Cubbins was unable to remove his hat in the presence of the king (*The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins, 1938*), for when he did a new one took its place. He was taken to executed, and the executioner remarks, "...but first you've got to take off your hat." Later, when Bartholomew is no longer in danger of being executed, he takes off the 500th hat, and the last picture shows Bartholomew without a hat, and the king with his hat instead of a crown...irony again. Even more irony is built into the ending of *The King's Stilts (1939)*. Earlier in the book, Droon had sent Bartholomew to live in an old deserted house with a sign that said "MEASLES." So in the end of the book, after Bartholomew had saved the kingdom and exposed Droon, it reads,

Then the king punished Droon in a most fitting way. He sent him to live by himself, with a guard of Patrol Cats, in that old deserted house with the sign that said "MEASLES." And he made him eat Nizzards three times every day. Stewed Nizzards for breakfast, cold Nizzards for lunch. Fried Nizzards for supper. And every other Thursday they served him Nizzard hash.

Dr. Seuss's books contain many tautologies, hyperboles, understatements, ironies, and illogicalities of other sorts, but what he is really the master of is the logical absurdity. In *Ten Apples up on Top (1961)*, a dog, a tiger, and a lion balance ten apples on their heads while hopping, skipping, drinking, skating, walking a high wire, skipping rope, and being chased by a bear, a bunch of birds, and finally the entire town. When they become cornered they run into a wagonload of apples, and in typical Seuss absurdity, everyone in town ends up with ten apples balanced on their heads.

Dr. Seuss's absurdities are fun to contemplate. There is a walrus that can stand on one whisker on five balls (*If I Ran the Circus 1956*), a juggler that juggles 22 question marks, 44 commas and a dot (*If I Ran the Circus*), a bird named Pelf that "lays eggs that are three times as big as herself." (*Scrambled Eggs Super*). There's Poor Mr. Potter, who is the t-crosser and i-dotter at the I and T factory (*Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? 1973*), and the long-legged Kwong bird, whose legs are so long that when it lays an egg you have to catch it or it will break (*Scrambled Eggs Super*). There's the Once-ler, who sounds as if he has

smallish bees up his nose (*The Lorax, 1971*), and the Chippendale Mupp which has a very long tail used for a good purpose. It bites the end of its tail when it goes to sleep, and wakes up eight hours later when it hurts (*Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book, 1962*). In *On Beyond Zebra (1955)*, he tells us about a bunch of letters, and gives examples of animal names that use these special letters. Then he says that the reason we don't normally see these animals is because we normally stop at Z.

Dr. Seuss is especially preoccupied with infinity. Every time that Bartholomew Cubbins takes off a hat there's another in its place, and we don't know until the end of the book that this process has an end. He also tells about the Brothers Ba-zoo. The hair of each brother is the beard of the brother behind him (*Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*). And he has horn-jumping deer, each one jumping through the horns of the one below it (*If I Ran the Circus, 1956*).

Though Dr. Seuss may not have the ability that his worm has to see forever, he is nevertheless, very far-sighted, and his books will be read for a very long time.

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