

## “She’s Awake! He’s Awake! It’s Awake!”: Gender Nonconformity in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

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The troubles of the Baudelaire orphans in Lemony Snicket’s (pen name of Daniel Handler) children’s series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, begin on a cloudy morning on Briny Beach, where they are given the news that a fire has destroyed their home and killed their parents (*The Bad Beginning*, 8). The children are sent to live with the nefarious actor Count Olaf, setting into motion a convoluted series of plots in which Olaf attempts to steal the Baudelaire fortune. Count Olaf does not work alone; he has a theatre troupe of loyal associates who assist him in his plans.

There was a bald man with a very long nose... There were two women who had bright white powder all over their faces, making them look like ghosts. Behind the women was a man with very long and skinny arms, at the end of which were two hooks instead of hands. There was a person who was extremely fat, and who looked like neither a man nor a woman. (*The Bad Beginning*, 47-8)

The books are popular with children, and offer cynical, dark humor and a bleak outlook not often found in children’s literature (Bady).

In 2017, Netflix picked up the series, dedicating two episodes per book to creating a faithful adaptation of the series. Count Olaf and his associates all appear to make the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire miserable. Several notable changes occur in the adaptation to streaming television, including a closer look at the mysterious organization V.F.D. One particularly interesting change is to the “extremely fat” person, “who looked like neither a man nor a woman.” This analysis uses feminist rhetorical and visual rhetorical approaches to examine how this character is portrayed in the book series compared to the Netflix series. The analysis examines the character’s description, the character’s role in the plot, other characters’ reactions and other context that clarifies how gender-nonconformity is

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handled in the Baudelaires' world between the book series and its adaptation. Adaptations offer a significant area for research because they provide a lens into what cultural changes happen over time and allow a story a chance to adapt itself for a different audience with different understandings. Netflix's adaptation of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* adapts gender nonconformity for the expectations of a modern audience by making a previously nefarious character sympathetic and giving the character a happy ending.

## Literature Review

*Media Effects and Children's Media.* Much research has been done on media effects in children's entertainment. Susan Villani conducted an analysis of the previous twenty years of research, finding that media was shown to have effects on children's behavior (392). Children pick up gender roles from what they see in media, particularly in television (Signorielli 52). Children's literature is another arena for learning. Research suggests that children's books leave much to be desired with regards to gender roles; Carole Kortenhuis and Jack Demarest find that although there are increasingly more female characters in children's media, they are still portrayed in dependent roles (230). Frank Taylor demonstrates that many children's tales, such as those by Dr. Seuss, feature male characters acting, problem-solving and being heroic, while female characters play secondary roles in the narrative (308). In recent years, progress has been made towards varying gender portrayals in children's books; for instance, according to Elsworth Rockefeller, transgender representation has increased in frequency and complexity in young adult fiction (519).

For its part, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* allows its protagonists, and by extension its readers, to break out of traditional gender roles. Tison Pugh notes that "Snicket hypothetically describes a fair exchange: 'If you were bored with playing with your chemistry set and you gave it to your brother in exchange for his dollhouse, that would be a fair deal'" (163). This exchange is one of several instances in the books where Pugh indicates that either the narrator subverts gender expectations or the protagonists do through their broad proclivities and preferences: "For example, Violet hates the color pink and rejects feminine toys such as dolls" (163). Despite subverting gender roles, this reading of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* still reflects the dominant paradigm of gender as a binary system of men and women, with typical actions, likes, dislikes and skills.

If *A Series of Unfortunate Events* allows its protagonists to move freely and express interests outside of traditional gender roles, why study the series at all? Why study a minor character like the person who looks like neither a man nor a woman?

*Feminist Rhetorical Analysis.* A minor character can be worthy of analysis, as Jeremy Rosen writes in his description of the popularity of books based on minor characters from the literary canon, because “character narration or first-person narrative is self-justifying, distorting in the interest of self-exculpation, and thus [we ought] not simply to sympathize or identify with the... minor figures” (50). This holds true in Snicket’s novels, where the narrator regularly interjects with thoughts on everything from the villains of the novel to the Baudelaires’ parents to the use of expressions such as “meanwhile, back at the ranch” (Snicket, *The Reptile Room* 127). Rosen writes, “many writers...have indeed endeavored to reimagine socially marginal characters... commentators have consistently understood such texts to be ‘giving voice’ to previously ‘silenced’ characters and applauded them for doing so” (85-6).

The goal of giving voice to the marginalized or silenced is in line with feminist rhetorical criticism, which examines how gender has been used to privilege some voices, communication styles and goals over others. Typically, this means being “concerned with how women have been included or excluded in the study and practice of rhetoric... [and] interested in minimizing the power differences between men and women that result from rhetorical practice, theory and criticism” (Borchers 198).

Some feminist scholars theorize gender as an oppressive force, and rather than seeking to reify it by comparing women and men, they aim to deconstruct it. Celeste Condit, for example, identifies what she terms “dichotomy feminism,” which “portrays male and female activities of being as radically separate from one another and assigns rhetoric to the realm of the male” (92) based on the idea that there is an essential character each gender has, and thus “women” and “men” are unique and immutable (93). Condit critiques this approach, not least because it “it encourages us to ignore the deeply and subtly coercive dimensions of much of [private communication]” (94). Instead, she proposes a gender diversity perspective, which offers “a non-dichotomous understanding of gender” (96) based on the works of other scholars such as Judith Butler. The gender diversity perspective is sensitive to context and allows for individuality while maintaining gender identity as a useful way to examine societal differences. Instead of rhetoric being the place where

gender is displayed, Condit asserts that gender is constructed in the act of rhetoric (104).

Judith Butler posits that the discontinuities of gender can be seen in areas of both the heterosexual and queer communities where “gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender” (173). Instead of being derived from some essential quality, Butler argues gender is a repeated act of performance (173) ascribing meaning onto a given body. Gender performance, in the dominant heterosexual context, is a means of social survival and gaining social acceptance:

Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (Butler 178)

This understanding of gender is significant for this analysis for several reasons. First, it prioritizes the act of gender creation rather than the body as the basis for gender. Gender cannot be assumed from a person’s body, and a person may choose to present their body in a way that defies the strict categorization that the traditional gender binary requires. Second, it presents a lens to understand gender’s significance to a culture: gender exists because a culture has decided (typically to maintain a heteronormative culture) that it exists and is important. When applied to a narrative set in a fictional world, these ideas offer interesting ways to examine whether gender is constructed in that world in the same way it is in our culture. Does the fictional world also understand gender in a heteronormative way, or are different understandings at work in that world?

Working with the view that gender is not an essential quality but is constituted through performance and the act of rhetoric, this analysis draws on Sonja Foss’s definition of visual rhetoric. To qualify as a piece of visual rhetoric (and thus, a communicative act), an image must be symbolic on some level, imply human intervention or creation, and infer the presence of an audience (144). By this definition, Netflix’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is an excellent example of visual rhetoric and complements the books for a rhetorical study. To interpret the text, this analysis takes Alan McKee’s view of textual analysis as a post-structuralist sense-making endeavor (10): seeking to understand how both adaptations make sense of gender through the portrayal of a character who troubles

the gender binary. The analysis examines written descriptions of the character, others’ reactions to the character, any dialogue the character has, the henchperson’s role in the plot, and, in the Netflix show, costuming, facial expressions, movements, camera cuts and other visual elements unique to the medium. These instances are read for their tone and what meaning that situation presents; for example, whether they create the character as a fearsome menace or a sympathetic person. Comparing the adaptations directly offers a view into how gender’s construction in a fictional world changes over time and, by extension, what changes the creators anticipate in their audience.

### Comparative Analysis

Readers first meet the person who looks like neither a man nor a woman shortly after the Baudelaires are put into the care of Count Olaf. In *The Bad Beginning*, the siblings prepare pasta puttanesca for Olaf and his troupe. Olaf becomes angry that they did not prepare roast beef instead, and is about to drop the infant, Sunny, on the floor from a great height in retaliation when his troupe calls for him. A litany of people marches into the kitchen, including “a person who was extremely fat, and who looked like neither a man nor a woman” (Snicket, *The Bad Beginning* 47-8). The role of villains as actors is an interesting choice, as it implies a certain amount of trickery and deceit, as the troupe is used to shifting from role to role. This is in stark comparison to the Baudelaires who, although they sometimes assume disguises in later books, are often not able to hide their identities and are quickly discovered by Olaf and his associates.

The troupe continues the debauchery throughout dinner — served by the Baudelaires — even applauding when Olaf hits Klaus on the face (Snicket, *The Bad Beginning* 55). Later in the book, when Violet tries to bring some blankets to Sunny, who is trapped in a cage at the top of a tower in Olaf’s house, she encounters the henchperson again:

When night approached, Violet gathered the curtains that had been Sunny’s bed and brought them to the door to the tower stairs, where the enormous assistant of Count Olaf’s, the one who looked like neither a man nor a woman, was standing guard. Violet asked whether she could bring the blankets to her sister, to make her more comfortable during the night. The enormous creature merely looked at Violet with its blank white eyes and

shook its head, then dismissed her with a silent gesture. (Snicket, *The Bad Beginning* 114)

This interaction demonstrates a total lack of human empathy for Violet or Sunny on the part of the person who looked like neither a man nor a woman. This inhumanity is a continuing theme throughout the books, and is emphasized through the narrator's use of the word "it" to express the indeterminacy of gender, rather than the more commonly accepted "they" or even "he or she," as Pugh also points out (104). From the get-go, the henchperson has very little personal agency, appearing only to act under the orders of Olaf, and is mainly mentioned as part of the collective of villains.

The Netflix series introduces the troupe of villainous henchpersons at a similar point in the narrative: the Baudelaires have just returned from shopping for ingredients for pasta puttanesca; however, they are greeted by an over-the-top musical number, where the character can be seen playing the drum and laying on the floor with other henchpersons to spell out letters with their bodies. The henchperson of indeterminate gender, as the character is called in the credits of the Netflix series, has roughly chin-length hair, is wearing a dirty red shirt with a butterfly print and ruffled cuffs (a signature style of shirt for this character), pinstriped black pants, a grey vest and brown, heeled ankle boots. Unlike in the books, where the character says nothing, in the series, the character greets the Baudelaires, and, when Olaf asks, "What are we supposed to do until [dinner is ready]?" offers, "We could wait patiently," suggesting manners and a non-confrontational style of interaction (Sonnenfeld, "The Bad Beginning: Part 1" 00:38:09-00:38:14).

Any ambiguity of gender is not addressed in the introduction to the character in the Netflix series, and the other characters do not seem to notice or respond to it. The character's voice is low and masculine, and their movements are stiff, rather than dainty or feminine. Although intended to be a character whose gender is impossible to determine, on screen the character still reads as masculine. This may be because the actor, Matty Cardarople, presents as a cisgender male, meaning both his gender identity and sex are male, when interviewed about the role (Tietjen) and in his personal Instagram posts (Cardarople), and thus performs the male gender even in subtle ways. In addition, unlike in the books, where the henchperson is invariably described as enormous, the Netflix henchperson is not particularly fat, but rather a normal weight for a person of their height.

Despite the initial campy but sympathetic introduction to the henchperson of indeterminate gender, they are still on the villains’ team. For example, in the dinner scene, the character does nothing to assist the Baudelaires in serving, and, although initially appearing to enjoy the pasta, lets their food fall out of their mouth after Olaf expresses disgust about it. When Olaf rants about the Baudelaires being ungrateful, after becoming angry at being reminded that the children are unable to access their enormous fortune until Violet, the eldest, comes of age, the henchperson of indeterminate gender offers, “That’s what happens with wealthy kids. Money is really a corrupting influence” (Sonnenfeld, “The Bad Beginning: Part 1” 00:42:38-00:42:44). The character’s costume is dingy and dirty, a visual contrast to the bright colors and clean fabrics the Baudelaires and the agents of V.F.D. wear, but in line with the rest of Count Olaf’s troupe. A continual tension is created in how the character reacts to the crueler events of the plot; for instance, when Olaf hits Klaus, the henchperson looks shocked, though they remain silent. This pull between good and bad leaves the audience with the lingering question of how to interpret this character: will they ultimately turn out to be good and help the Baudelaires? Or do they fully support Count Olaf?

Another element of the Netflix series that differs from the book series is the more omniscient perspective. This adds depth to the V.F.D. storyline that is always playing out against the background of the Baudelaires’ woes and lends more of an insight into the dynamics of Olaf’s theatre troupe. These moments add to the complexity of the characters, particularly the henchperson of indeterminate gender. In *The Bad Beginning*, Olaf’s plan to steal the Baudelaire fortune involves marrying Violet in a sham play, and we see the henchpersons come up one by one to report to Olaf on wedding planning, from flower arrangements to cake sampling to the design of the wedding dress. The henchperson of indeterminate gender voices discomfort with the scheme, saying, “I just think, even in a changing context, that marriage is inherently a patriarchal construction that is likely to further the hegemonic juggernaut that is problematizing a lot of genders” (Sonnenfeld, “The Bad Beginning: Part 2” 00:21:36-00:22:00). Olaf seems to ignore this statement, rolling his eyes and leafing through a dictionary to find the definition of “nuptial” before leaving through a trapdoor to the surprise of the henchperson, who asks, “Are you leaving?” (Sonnenfeld, “The Bad Beginning: Part 2” 00:22:00-00:22:08). Other instances exist where the henchperson of indeterminate gender voices discomfort with Olaf’s plots, in *The Wide Window*, *The Austere Academy*, *The Vile Village*, *The Hostile Hospital*, and *The Carnivorous Carnival*.

Though the Netflix series is largely faithful to the plot of the original books, some departures require examining. Notably, the role of the hook-handed man in *The Reptile Room* is swapped out for the role of the person who looked like neither a man nor a woman in *The Wide Window*. This is a key change because one of the most dehumanizing moments for the person who looked like neither a man nor a woman occurs in *The Wide Window*.

In *The Wide Window*, to defeat Olaf's most recent villainous scheme, the Baudelaires have to steal a boat from Damocles Dock to find their Aunt Josephine. When they approach the boat rental shack, they see: "A person so massive that it looked like an enormous blob was in the shack, snoring away with a bottle of beer in one hand and a ring of keys in the other... What frightened Violet was that you couldn't tell if this person was a man or a woman" (134). The character of ambiguous gender is portrayed as frightening not only because of their affiliation with Count Olaf, but also specifically because of their gender ambiguity. This fear is not unique to Violet, either:

"One of Count Olaf's comrades is in the shack," Violet said. "Which one?"

Klaus asked.

"The one who looks like neither a man nor a woman," Violet replied.

Klaus shuddered. "That's the scariest one." (Snicket, *The Wide Window* 135-6)

During interactions where the Baudelaires are contemplating how to steal the boat, they are careful to discuss the person who looked like neither a man or a woman using the phrase "he or she", but once a thunderclap awakens the person, who discovers that the key has been stolen, Violet panics. "'She's awake!' Violet shrieked. 'He's awake! It's awake! Hurry, Klaus, open the gate and I'll try to distract it'" (139). Even the protagonists, who are portrayed as intelligent, polite, resourceful and kind — qualities the child reader is supposed to look up to — are still on some level put off and even frightened by gender nonconformity (Pugh 104).

The dehumanization of the character continues as Violet tries to talk her way out of the situation:

Her heart in her throat, Violet stood in front of the creature and gave it a fake smile. "Good afternoon," she said, not knowing whether to add "sir" or "madam." [...] Without a word the mountainous person grabbed Violet by the hair, and with one swing of its arm lifted her up over its smelly shoulder...the person scooped up Sunny with its other hand and held her

up... Violet was kicking the creature from behind, and Sunny was biting its wrist, but the person was so Brobdingnagian...that the children were causing it minimal pain... Count Olaf’s comrade lumbered towards Klaus... He felt something grab the back of his shirt and he was lifted up in the air. Something slimy began running down his back, and Klaus realized with horror that the person was holding him in his or her mouth (Snicket, *The Wide Window* 140).

The character is not only described as a “creature” as a means of handling gender nonconformity, but the character also literally acts like a creature, using their mouth to carry Klaus, and “lumbering” around the dock (142).

This interaction does not occur in the Netflix adaptation of *The Wide Window*, where the person guarding the shack is the hook-handed man (Sonnenfeld “The Wide Window: Part 2”). Instead, there are deliberately humanizing moments, such as in The Anxious Clown restaurant, where the henchperson of indeterminate gender is seen talking to V.F.D. member, Larry-Your-Waiter, giving the recipe for pasta puttanesca (Sonnenfeld “The Wide Window: Part 2”). In the same episode, the hook-handed man says to Larry-Your-Waiter, “We don’t care what your name is!” and the henchperson of indeterminate gender adds “Or what gender you are!” (00:11:50-00:11:55). This not only removes a very unflattering episode from the henchperson of indeterminate gender’s characterization (no comparable situation is shown with the hook-handed man in the boat shack), but also acts as another example of how the character’s gender identity is constructed. The character is shown to be aware of the ambiguity of their own gender and continues to dress and express themselves as they see fit. In *The Wide Window*, for example, they wear a feminine, long paisley button-down dress, a sleeveless fur coat and pinstripe pants at The Anxious Clown, but a masculine, Gorton Fisherman-style outfit when the troupe is sailing on Lake Lachrymose (Sonnenfeld, “The Wide Window: Part 1”).

Due to the switch in roles for the hook-handed man and the henchperson of indeterminate gender in the Netflix series, one big source of characterization for the henchperson of indeterminate gender occurs in *The Reptile Room* after the Baudelaires’ uncle, famed herpetologist Montgomery Montgomery, is found dead amongst his collection of reptiles. The henchperson of indeterminate gender poses as Nurse O. Lucafont, which astute readers will notice is an anagram for Count Olaf, the coroner.

The character arrives almost instantly after the disguised Olaf claims to have put in a call for help. The henchperson is dressed in a blue nurse’s dress with a

white apron, mask and hat, reminiscent of Nurse Ratchet from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, buttons that say “nurse” and “totally a nurse” and one with a peace sign; blue stockings’ white Keds; red, upside-down glasses; and pink dish gloves. The character’s hair is long, feminine and curled. When Mr. Poe, the banker in charge of the Baudelaire’s affairs, answers the door, the character is holding a red leather bag in one hand and adjusting their fake breast with the other. Mr. Poe seems uncertain of the character’s gender, asking, “May I help you ma’am? Sir?” (Sonnenfeld, “The Reptile Room: Part 2” 00:09:11-00:09:18). This example of gender ambiguity is interesting because it signifies that presentation is not the end of gender in the Baudelaires’ universe.

Nurse Lucafont has a very feminine presentation, and most of their face is not visible due to the mask, yet Mr. Poe still senses ambiguity and is unable to decide how to address the person. Lucafont speaks using a falsetto, which heightens the gender play at work. This is a curious choice in terms of gender display for the audience, as the falsetto voice implies that this character is not truly of ambiguous gender, but rather is a man masquerading as a woman. In *The Miserable Mill*, we see Olaf do just that as the receptionist, Shirley, in Dr. Orwell’s optical office (Sonnenfeld, “The Miserable Mill: Part 1”). The main rhetorical move done to distinguish drag performance from gender identity is through the henchperson of indeterminate gender’s voicing complex thoughts about gender and social institutions. Rather than a persona that the henchperson takes on and off as it suits them, as with Olaf’s disguises, the henchperson’s gender is constant even as it is expressed in different ways. The implication is that gender nonconformity forces this henchperson’s engagement with a myriad of social issues that cisgender people do not have to confront.

In *The Ersatz Elevator*, the Baudelaires are trying to bid on a mysterious item labeled V.F.D. that they believe contains their kidnapped friends, the Quagmire triplets. Count Olaf, disguised as a foreign auctioneer, talking towards backstage where he believes the women with the powdered white faces are, says, “Ladies, please turn the box around so that everybody can see with their eyes all of the angles.” V.F.D. agent Larry-Your-Waiter walks out from backstage instead, saying, “Actually, I identify as a man.” After this statement, the camera cuts to the henchperson of indeterminate gender who looks incredulous but impressed (Sonnenfeld, “The Ersatz Elevator: Part 2” 00:27:15-00:27:29). This interaction shows that heroes are tuned in to sensitivity and respecting identities, and the

henchperson of indeterminate gender once again is shown existing in tension between the good guys and bad guys.

The henchperson of indeterminate gender also works to undermine other normative gender moments. Whenever Olaf’s henchpersons make comments about his girlfriend, Esmé’s attractive appearance, the henchperson of indeterminate gender brings up some other aspect of her personality, whether that be that she is terrifying (as in *The Hostile Hospital*) or “admir[ing] her for her capabilities,” like in *The Vile Village* (Sonnenfeld “The Hostile Hospital: Part 1”; Sonnenfeld “The Vile Village: Part 1” 00:14:46-00:14:50). When the theatre troupe are vying to have their fortunes read by the mystical Madame Lulu in *The Carnivorous Carnival*, the henchperson of indeterminate gender posits that “the concept of first seems to problematically be centered around patriarchy” (Sonnenfeld “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part 1” 00:08:46-00:08:52). By way of reaction, while reading everyone’s fortunes, Madame Lulu notes, “There’s a lot going on here” to which the henchperson of indeterminate gender responds, “That’s fair” (00:09:07-00:09:12). There is also a friendship that plays out between the henchperson of indeterminate gender and the hook-handed man. This is another way where sensitivity to gender is demonstrated, such as in *The Carnivorous Carnival* when the hook-handed man greets carnival guests with “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, adolescents of every gender!” (Sonnenfeld, “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part 1” 00:28:55-00:28:59).

The person who looks like neither a man nor a woman is not offered any such opportunities for humanization in the books. The Baudelaires never see the person speak, although it is implied that the person is capable of speech, as in *The Wide Window* when Count Olaf says, “my associate told me you had stolen a boat and run away” (Snicket, *The Wide Window* 183). The pattern of the books usually pairs Count Olaf with one main henchperson (or henchpersons in the case of the white-faced ladies) who assists him in his villainy. The only book where the henchperson of indeterminate gender fills this role is in *The Wide Window*. In the rest of the books, the henchperson is indicated as a part of the collective theatre troupe. Gender ambiguity is presented as monstrous and villainous, and the character goes on to meet a grim end.

In *The Hostile Hospital*, Count Olaf and his associates set fire to Heimlich Hospital to destroy a library of records that contains incriminating evidence against them. The person who looks like neither a man nor a woman attempts to catch the Baudelaires as they race through the hospital, trying to evade capture by a public

that believes the children to be murderers and arsonists. The children lock themselves in a supply closet with a window and, while Violet invents something to lower them safely to the ground outside, the henchperson roars outside and attempts to get in (Snicket, *The Hostile Hospital* 238). Luckily for the Baudelaires, Violet invents a bungee cord to help them safely escape the closet as “the children could see a tiny orange light shining in the hallway and realized that the fire and the associate must have reached the door at the same time” (Snicket, *The Hostile Hospital* 245). The Baudelaires escape the supply closet; the person who looked like neither a man nor a woman does not. Olaf’s assistants voice protests as they climb into the getaway car:

“But your largest assistant is still in the Rash Ward, looking for the brats!” the bald man said... The hook-handed man spoke up... “The Ward for People with Nasty Rashes is entirely destroyed,” he said. “I hope the big one got out O.K.”

“We’re not going to wait around to find out if that fool lived or died,” Olaf snarled. “As soon as the ladies can put the costumes in the trunk, we’ll get out of here.” (Snicket, *The Hostile Hospital* 250-1)

The character’s grisly end fits into the “bury your gays” trope, which notes that fictional characters who do not fit into the heterosexual matrix, especially gay characters, are highly likely to be killed, such as in *The 100*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and even *The Bell Jar* (Waggoner). This is another noteworthy point where the Netflix show differs from the original books. The same scene occurs in *The Hostile Hospital*; however, the henchperson of indeterminate gender emerges from the hospital clutching an ice pack to their face, and they continue to have a role in the plot into the next book.

The henchperson’s story arc is ultimately played out in the two episodes of *The Slippery Slope*. Throughout the episodes, the character begins serious self-examination after a carnival freak that the troupe picked up at the Caligari Carnival says, “I’m beginning to question my life choices, and frankly, so should you!” (Sonnenfeld, “The Slippery Slope: Part 1” 00:11:54-00:12:01). Later in the same episode, the henchperson of indeterminate gender poses the question “Is a personal philosophy of moral relativism the only way to survive in an ethically complex world, or is it an excuse we use to justify doing bad things?” (00:14:55-00:15:03). The other henchpersons do not want to engage the question, but this fundamental discomfort seems to linger and grow during the episode. The next morning, Count Olaf forces the captured Sunny Baudelaire, who has shown a proclivity for cooking

throughout the series, to cook breakfast. The white faced ladies express enjoyment of the food, despite it being made by a baby, to which the henchperson says “It’s a shame we’re constantly exploiting and threatening her when we could be nurturing her talents for the common good” (00:32:52-00:32:58). The henchperson shows regret for how Sunny is being treated and a sensitivity to the social demands of group living that Count Olaf and his other associates do not always seem to grasp.

This discomfort and tension comes to a head in part two of *The Slippery Slope*. The henchperson, standing and speculating with the other henchpersons, says, “I joined Count Olaf because I thought he could teach me things like how to harness my natural charisma into a career in the performing arts. But I’m beginning to question my life choices” (Sonnenfeld, “The Slippery Slope: Part 2” 00:15:00-00:15:11). The character also looks distressed at Olaf’s latest scheme to gain the riches of many families in the city by orphaning the children and raising them as his accomplices.

The breaking point for the henchperson is when Olaf demands they throw Sunny Baudelaire off a cliff. “It’s a slippery slope,” the henchperson says. “No, it’s a frozen waterfall. Now throw the baby off it,” Olaf replies, annoyed. The henchperson says, “I meant that figuratively. I need some space. I’m definitely questioning my life choices” (Sonnenfeld “The Slippery Slope: Part 2” 00:33:20-00:33:32). This statement is significant because it repeats the idea of self-reflection, and because it shows that the henchperson recognizes the difference between literal and figurative speech — an understanding associated with the educated heroes, and which Olaf and other villainous people in the series are shown to lack. After this final assertion, the henchperson of indeterminate gender leaves along with the white-faced ladies and the tall bald man.

The henchperson’s storyline is given closure in the last few minutes of the final episode of the series, fittingly called *The End*. The henchperson is shown on stage, dressed in a pink and yellow dress with an up do, pale white makeup and bright red lipstick, waving and beaming alongside the bald man and the white-faced ladies. The bald man holds a skull in his hand, suggesting that the former henchpersons have just finished a performance of *Hamlet*. The characters are being met with applause and cheers, as the narrator describes them as “a troupe of actors finding personal and artistic fulfillment, at least for a night” (Sonnenfeld, “The End” 00:45:51-00:46:00).

Through this ending, the henchperson of indeterminate gender is given a chance for growth and redemption and is able to go on to find personal fulfillment after rejecting the toxic environment of being in Count Olaf's employ.

## Discussion

The person who looked like neither a man nor a woman, despite their role as a minor character in the *Series of Unfortunate Events* books, offers insights into how gender is constructed in the world of Count Olaf and the Baudelaires, especially when contrasted with the Netflix adaptation. In the books, the person's gender nonconformity is monstrous; the "good" characters are frightened of the person—not in spite of the person's gender but because of it. The narrator consistently dehumanizes that and other characters in the book through the use of the word "it" rather than the more inclusive and equally understandable "they" (GLSEN; Tobia; "Gender Pronouns"). The person behaves in animal-like ways, is described as "blank" or vacant, and is derided for their size. The character contributes to the plot as a part of the collective and on Olaf's orders, but does not have any agency of their own, in contrast to Olaf and his other associates, who regularly voice thoughts and make independent decisions. At the end of the character's arc, about three quarters of the way through the book series, the character is killed in a fire, while the character's boss who put them in such a compromising position in the first place responds with callousness.

In comparison, the Netflix henchperson of indeterminate gender has more agency. The character regularly voices complex thoughts relating to social issues, expresses and ultimately acts on a sense of morality and justice, and develops friendships with other henchpersons on screen. The character is often dressed ridiculously; however, not to a greater extreme than the other villains. The "good" characters display sensitivity towards gender and gender ambiguity, even under duress. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the character manages to escape the gruesome fate laid out for them in the books and goes on to personal fulfillment. Instead of being an unambiguously evil and disgusting character that ends up punished through dying in a fire, the character is sympathetic and human. Rather than gender acting as a site for revilement and division, gender nonconformity is portrayed with sensitivity. Gender is not invisible in the Netflix world, but is not the most important trait about the henchperson. Neither Olaf and his troupe nor the

members of V.F.D. treat the character with disgust, only occasional confusion or exasperation.

For young queer children reading the series and then watching the Netflix show, two different images of gender nonconformity emerge over time. The Netflix series, while remaining true to the source material where the gender nonconforming character is a villain, offers a softened, kinder vision of gender nonconformity that allows for friendships, happy outcomes, and redemption without denying that nonconformity. This is in line with Netflix’s socially progressive approach in its other original programming, from *Orange is the New Black*, which offers a counter-narrative to prison stereotypes (Demers 412; Shoemaker, 218); to *Glow*, which offers a diverse array of stories from women of different ages, races and backgrounds; to their *Queer Eye* reboot, which embraces a broader group of people as makeover recipients than the original.

It suggests that a modern audience is increasingly aware of feminist understandings of gender and identity, and Netflix uses its rhetorical platform to construct a new vision of gender nonconformity in a villain by allowing the character to emerge as an ethical person who goes on to find happiness. This change in the adaptation is significant as it allows the core story to be told in a way that honors the original narrative while smoothing out problematic elements, thus reaching two groups: an audience who may be more aware or maybe just more grown up than the past audience and who expect inclusivity in the shows they watch with their families, and it acts as a model for an audience who may be young, or who may not know anyone who is gender nonconforming in their own life. By presenting a narrative that does not end in the character’s misery and demise but instead giving the henchperson a redemption arc, the Netflix reboot says that it is okay to grow over time and to be unapologetically who you are.

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