Wise Men and Whispers

A Study of Education in Trenton Lee Stewart's *Mysterious Benedict Society* Series

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MA Thesis Media Studies: Comparative Literature and Literary Theory

10 August 2019

Chapter Selection

Introduction

> " GROW THE LAWN AND MOW THE LAWN.
>
> ALWAYS LEAVE THE TV ON.
>
> BRUSH YOUR TEETH AND KILL THE GERMS.
>
> POISON APPLES, POISON WORMS." (Stewart, 98)

Education encompasses many things. There are the skills we acquire through experience, the morals emphasized by mentors or peers, the drills and other knowledge we are meant to repeat at schools.

The *Mysterious Benedict Society* middle grade book series by Trenton Lee Stewart features many forms of education. *The Mysterious Benedict Society* was published in 2007 and reached reasonable popularity, being on the New York Times Best Seller List for over a year. It was followed by *The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey* (2008) and *The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Prisoner's Dilemma* (2009), which made the Best Seller List as well. More recent additions to the trilogy are the puzzle book *The Mysterious Benedict Society: Mr. Benedict's Book of Perplexing Puzzles, Elusive Enigmas and Curious Conundrums* (2011) and the prequel *The Extraordinary Education of Nicholas Benedict* (2012). A new sequel, taking place years after the original trilogy, is expected in September 2019.

In the first book, four children are put through a series of tests to measure their intelligence and other desirable traits. After passing the tests, they are recruited as spies by an old man named Nicholas Benedict to pose as students in a corrupt school: the *Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened*.[1]

[1] Officially abbreviated as "L.I.V.E.", but usually referred to as "the Institute".

This school is run by Ledroptha Curtain, the story's villain and Benedict's long-lost twin, who uses it for large-scale brainwashing. The children must figure out details of Curtain's plans and help Benedict prevent them from coming true. The four children each possess their own unique talents that prove essential for their success as a team.

Both Curtain and Benedict are actively engaged in teaching. Curtain's Institute teaches ideas to his students that we may interpret as an "evil" ideology, and his Whisperer (a chair-like machine) allows him to transmit these ideas across the globe, using his students' voices to brainwash the world. Benedict tests the children, guides them on their mission through riddles and moral support, and in the later books, homeschools them with creative, challenging assignments. Both of these identical-looking old men perform an educational function in the story, and at the same time these twins are opposites. This combination of similarities and big differences makes their opposing types of education interesting to analyze.

Equally interesting are the didactic functions of the book towards its readers. The narrator uses various tactics to portray Mr. Benedict's ideology as "good" and Mr. Curtain's as "evil", teaching the reader to favor the one over the other. But the series has more educational functions than ideology only. The reader is encouraged to practice skills, including vocabulary, puzzle-solving and critical thinking. However, the focus on high intelligence and the extensive vocabulary used may throw some readers off: is the book inclusive enough to teach inclusiveness?

I will commence my thesis by laying out a framework presenting various ideas and debates about children's literature and its educational functions, complemented by additional theoretical insights on education and

the role of teachers. Then, in chapters two and three, I will present Curtain and Benedict's opposing ideologies and methods of education. I will compare and contrast them within the context of the fiction, explaining what goals they pursue as educators and what the key aspects of their ideologies and teaching methods are. In the same chapters, I will also discuss the blind spots and inconsistencies in both ideologies, making the concepts of "good" and "evil" less absolute, and I will reflect on the implications of Benedict and Curtain's status as twins, particularly concerning education and ideology. Additionally, I will include a study of each educator's relationship with their pupils, including those which they "failed" to educate.

Afterwards, in chapter 4, I will continue by analyzing the educational role of the text. In what ways do the narrator's choices in focalization bring his preference for Benedict's ideology and his distaste towards Curtain's across to the reader? How does focalization affect the reader's empathy towards the characters? And what educational functions does the writing style have? Finally, I will compare the series' educational methods towards the reader with those of Benedict and Curtain towards the children in the intradiegetic world. Can these children's novels be a form of brainwashing, or do they encourage their readers to think for themselves?

In the remaining chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the role of the reader. The series seems to assume a specific type of reader: a gifted child. How is this ideal reader defined? How do real readers, including adults, respond to the books? And in what ways does the series encourage both real and potential readers to develop certain skills?

Being a writer of children's books myself, I am curious about the many roles education can play within children's literature. Although I write with

the goal of bringing characters to life and telling an interesting, enjoyable story, not specifically to "teach", learning about ideology and education in children's literature has affected my writing. Rewriting one of my children's books, I have paid more attention to its implications about right and wrong, not because I wanted the story to emphasize my own ideology, but because I wanted to prevent it from accidentally reinforcing ideals I disagree with. This has not only helped me write the book in a way that is more nuanced and open to different perspectives, but it has also strengthened my character development.[2] This shows that I am not only interested in the relationship between education and literature for academic purposes, but also in a more practical, personal way as a writer.

With this study, I hope to offer new insights about education in children's literature and the unusual role education plays in the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series specifically.

[2] Through understanding ideologies, I was able to analyze those of my characters. One character in particular goes through an ideological shift, and I enjoyed following him through a psychological process where he starts to question his ideals and empathize with people who are different.

1. Framing my Study

The idea of children's literature has frequently been tied to education. Traditionally, children's stories functioned as moral "lessons"; in the eighteenth century, authors such as John Newbery added a second purpose to the didactic one: amusement (Upton). Nowadays, this is often considered children's literature's primary purpose. Nevertheless, the relationship between children's books and education remains: schools encourage children to read fiction, early reader books are made to teach children reading, and the didactic functions of children's literature are still widely discussed, now encompassing more than only "lessons". At the same time, "children's literature" is hard to define. Is it a genre, a difficulty level, or is it only defined by its intended young audience? Are there restrictions to what children's literature can and cannot (or should and shouldn't) encompass?

In this chapter, I will introduce various theoretical texts discussing children's literature and its educational functions. I intend to engage with a broad range of perspectives on children's literature, because I believe there are many different ways children can learn from fiction, some of which seem to be underrepresented in literary theory. I will also present a text by Jacques Rancière on education, which I will use to better define types of educational methods in my thesis.

1.1. Children's Literature as a "Lesson"

Many theoretical texts about children's literature occupy themselves with its ideological content and the "lessons" children can learn from fictional stories[3]. These texts frequently have a moral undertone, posing the question whether certain ideologies or types of story content are "helpful" or "harmful" to

[3] This is true both in literary criticism and in amateur articles.

children. What should children be allowed to read, and what sorts of topics or messages could harm them? Where do the boundaries of "appropriate content" lie?

Jonathon Culley's 1991 essay "Roald Dahl—'It's about children, and it's for children'—But is it suitable?" contributes to this discussion by exploring various perspectives towards appropriateness. Although Culley's text focuses on Roald Dahl's work specifically, it gives us an idea of what critics may or may not consider appropriate for children to read. Culley covers several potential problems critics have found in Roald Dahl's work, such as the enforcement of negative stereotypes by intertwining vivid descriptions of outward "ugliness" with bad personality traits (60-62), the presence of possible racism (64-65), and the usage of vulgar words (65-66). Culley explains why these potential problems may be a concern, but also provides counterarguments and positive potential effects of Dahl's work: in particular, he mentions the positive impact that Dahl's creative use of language may have on children (67-68). This gives us a bigger picture of how literature may be harmful or helpful for children in more ways than just learning "lessons". By giving a voice to critics with opposing opinions, and supplementing them with his own findings, Culley provides a broad perspective that is useful to my study.

This discussion rests on the idea that children's literature may have an educational effect on children. Negative stereotypical characters can cause or strengthen prejudices, vulgar language may invite kids to speak rudely themselves, and creative language can spark children's own creativity. Children's literature, then, is seen as a teaching device which educates children and should be monitored by adults deciding what books are

appropriate for children to read.[4] This monitoring is also discussed in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (edited by Peter Hunt, 1996), which contains essays covering a broad range of topics related to children's literature, each explaining various perspectives on its topic. In Karín Lesnik-Oberstein's essay "Defining Children's Literature and Childhood", she contrasts Barbara Wall's opinion with that of Gillian Avery. Wall believes "writers for children" must keep their content child-appropriate in order not to be "harmful" to children, while Avery believes children have their own "defense" against content they dislike, and they "extract what they want from a book and no more." (21) Mark I. West's essay "Censorship" discusses Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief that "books contributed to the corruption of children" and thus children should be "sheltered from books that could [...] have a corrupting influence." (499)

1.2. Psychological Functions

The educational functions of literature, however, stretch much broader than its ideological content. Literature can affect children in many ways. We have seen that creative language can stimulate children's imagination; similarly, difficult words can increase their vocabulary, and simple language can keep them immersed in the story. Moralizing stories can teach children morals, but can also bore them (if a story's moral feels meaningless or they've grown tired of hearing it repeatedly), or on the contrary, upset children who are overly anxious to follow the rules.[5] Children may idolize vulgar language and bad behavior from literature and imitate it in real life, or they may see it as a

[4] This model also assumes that children apply the content of what they read directly to reality or to their own creative works (writing, drawings, pretend play).
[5] Such was the case when I read *Tootle*.

source of humor. And violent or dangerous topics, which could be frowned upon as "inappropriate" for children, may be useful as a means of dealing effectively with psychological developments.

Psychoanalytical interpretations of children's stories are relatively common, especially concerning fairy tales. Many focus primarily on symbolic meaning rather than educational effects, expressing characters and themes within the story in psychoanalytical (often Freudian) terms.[6] Nevertheless, we can infer implications about children's literature's educational functions from certain details. Bruno Bettelheim, in his well-known study *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), sees "the child's libido" as a "threat"[7] and believes that children need the "moral education" of fairy tales to reinstall (inner) order, which they do by showing "ways to satisfy [the id pressures] that are in line with ego and superego." (Bosmajian 91) In other words, fairy tales "teach" children "appropriate" ways to satisfy their instinctive urges. According to Bettelheim, the best fairy tales have many layers of meaning rather than one obvious moral, not only because implicit "lessons" are more effective, but also so that the child may choose "which meanings are of significance to him at the moment" (Bettelheim 169). While Bettelheim still implies children's stories teach "lessons" (although psychological guidelines rather than specific moral rules), Alan Dundes in his 1989 analysis "Interpreting 'Little Red Riding Hood' Psychoanalytically" takes another approach, claiming that "'Little Red Riding Hood' is full of infantile fantasy" (225) and that folklore "articulates social sanctions at the very same time that it permits, through wishful

[6] In Freudian criticism, this symbolic meaning is interpreted as an expression of the author's psyche, who obtained "therapeutic release" through writing. (Bosmajian 90) This implies that literature educationally affects its author, rather than its readers.

[7] To both themselves and the social order. (Bosmajian 91)

thinking, escape from those very same social sanctions" (214), implying that the frequent violations of rules in folk tales do not merely "reflect" these rules or "teach" them to children, but enable children to live (through the fiction) their fantasy of breaking such rules.[8]

Barbara Basbanes Richter's 2015 article "Roald Dahl and Danger in Children's Literature" brings a different type of psychological advantage to light. While danger and violence in children's fiction are often seen as controversial, Richter argues that they can be advantageous, helping children "work through the challenges in their own lives" (329). Rather than applying violence they have read about to real life (what some of the voiced opinions in Culley's text are concerned about), Richter, like Dundes and Bettelheim, believes children learn from literature in a psychological way. Rather than using their Freudian symbolism, her argument is more general and more straightforward. Reading about danger, according to her, is a way for children to process their own fears more easily, and because of this, "dangerous" themes in children's books should not be regarded as harmful or inappropriate, but are, indeed, beneficial for children's development. This theory offers a new perspective on children's fiction's education of its readers, which will be of use to my study, especially when contrasted with the many voices *against* "dangerous" content.

1.3. Genre Analysis

The essays discussed in the previous sections address potential (educational) effects of children's literature on children, and also what adults wish children

[8] Explicit content, for Dundes, may then be seen in a positive light (which we will also see with Richter), because it is appropriate to children's urges and fantasies. Dundes believes the child should be central in fairy tales, and that symbolism disguises "infantile" content from adults rather than from children (226).

to read (whether to teach them "lessons", shield them from exposure to "dangerous" content, or help them in their psychological development by exposing them to such content). Another question we may ask is what defines children's literature: what sets it apart from other (adult) literature? Are there certain formal or thematic traits that children's books typically possess?

In her 1998 article "The Case of Peter Pan", Jacqueline Rose claims there is no such thing as children's literature.[9] What we call "children's fiction" is a category invented by adults, claiming "that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book, much as the book (so the claim runs) exists for them" (58). But in fact, Rose argues, children's literature feeds into the desires of adults to "reach" and preserve the child, to offer us the child "for ever" (58). In other words, adults have a certain idea of what children and childhood are, and they use children's literature to sustain this fantasy.[10]

Ten years after Rose's article came out, Perry Nodelman published *The Hidden Adult*, where he takes a more narratological and analytical approach.[11] Nodelman presents children's literature as a distinct genre, definable by specific traits. These traits include simple language, a straightforward narrative style (but with a second, hidden "shadow text" implying that the story is more complex than the literal text on its own, 8-9), child protagonists

[9] Rose is not arguing that children's literature only differs from adult literature because adults label and market it as such, but rather that the idea of children's literature is completely impossible, and that the failed attempts to "reach" children are precisely what defines the genre.
[10] This "fantasy" or "desire" for the child could encompass various things: a longing for one's own childhood, a wish to keep children "childlike", or even a sexual attraction.
[11] Through this book, Nodelman became one of the most prominent voices in recent children's literature theory.

(or "childlike" adults) who are usually the focalizor (18-19), and several recurring themes.

Surprisingly, Nodelman does not explicitly mention much about children's literature's various didactic functions. His discussion of common themes in children's literature, however, contains implications about common ideologies in children's books. Central to these implications are the assumptions children's literature appears to make about childhood.

First of all, there are assumptions lurking inside the most common perspective found in children's books. Regarding focalization and main characters, Nodelman describes the way adults both assume and encourage children to identify with the central character(s), who are often also the focalizor, and who tend to be children (or childlike) themselves (18-19). However, the majority of these stories are told in the third person, which leads Nodelman to believe that "there is a second point of view, that of the narrator", who sees and knows more than the child focalizor (20). This "adult" point of view already suggests an opposition in children's literature between child and adult.

Theme-wise, this child-adult opposition is even stronger. This can be seen in an overt contrast between the behavior of adult and child characters, but the opposition doesn't end there. Nodelman links other common oppositions he observes to this "main opposition [...] between the childlike and the adult" (62). In the section "Desire Confronts Knowledge" (33), he reflects on the common theme of a conflict between desire and knowledge, where desire is associated with childlike impulses and knowledge with

adults.[12] In "Home and Away: Essential Doubleness", he mentions "a favorite pattern in children's stories as beginning with their protagonists at home, taking them on a journey, and returning them home again at the end" (61). Home, according to Nodelman, is "a controlled and limited space provided for a child by a more knowing and more capable adult in order to protect the child from the less limited but more dangerous world outside" (63). This connects the theme of "home and away" with that of childhood: "home" is a place where a child is safe, though it can be restrictive and boring, and "away" enables the child to encounter freedom and adventure, but also "adult" danger. Many children's stories, says Nodelman, present children as "discontented with the restrictions of home", but at the same time, "focus frequently on justifying the need for home and the desirability of staying there." (63)

From the ideological and educational implications of Nodelman's observations, it appears that children's books frequently concern themselves with "teaching" children what it means to be a child. While Culley sees children's fiction as teaching (good or bad) moralities and encouraging creativity, and Richter sees it as an educational environment for children to process their emotions and experiences[13], Nodelman sees children's literature as educating specifically in the field of childhood.

Peter Hunt addresses the child-adult opposition as well, reflecting on "elephant" questions about the meaning of the "children's book", but instead of generalizing about the common features of children's literature, his "Fundamentals of Children's Literature Criticism: *Alice in Wonderland* and

[12] Nodelman does, however, offer exceptions to this generalization when he speaks of "childlike forms of knowledge" in *Dr. Dolittle* (43).
[13] As do Dundes and Bettelheim to a smaller degree.

Through the Looking Glass" (2011) emphasizes the plurality of readers. In particular, he examines the contrast between child and adult readers, while problematizing hierarchy between the two groups and understanding that even within each group, readers read and interpret in many different ways.

1.4. Education, Intelligence and Teachers

In order to talk about education and teachers in children's literature, I will not only engage in discussions surrounding children's literature, but I will also use Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) as an extra framework through which I can analyze teachers and teaching methods.

I see a similarity between Nodelman's child-adult opposition and the way Rancière presents the student-teacher relationship. Rancière describes three different teaching models: the "old method", the "modern method", and the model he advocates for, referred to as "universal teaching". In the "old method", students must fully submit to authority and are punished if they make mistakes, whereas in the "modern method", there is a strong focus on "understanding" and the teacher must "explain" his knowledge to the students. However, Rancière argues that *both* of these methods create a hierarchical distance between the schoolmaster and the students (8). While in the old method, hierarchy is an obvious goal, the modern method retains a similar "stultifying" hierarchy in a stealthier way: "to explain something to someone", says Rancière, "is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself." (6) This suggests a division between "knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid." (6) In other words, this form of education implies that the students are inferior to the "enlightened" master and can only learn by listening to him.

Using the example of a teaching experiment by Jactotot, who was able to teach students French with the help of one work of French fiction and without knowing the language himself, Rancière argues that the best way for students to learn is from experience, and by themselves, the same way they learned their mother tongue (10). When the student is assumed to need the teacher in order to learn, this will limit the student, who will think himself less intelligent and possibly even prevent himself from learning properly through experience.

Rancière's text will be of use to my study in two different ways. First of all, the division between the three teaching methods provides me with a framework in which to analyze the "teacher" characters in the *Mysterious Benedict Society*: Nicholas Benedict and Ledroptha Curtain. I will argue that Curtain's teaching methods belong to Rancière's "old" method, while Benedict's are closer to "universal teaching". Nevertheless, there remain implications of some contrast between children (students) and adults (teachers).

Furthermore, the method of "universal teaching" provides me with more ideas on the ways literature can "teach". Culley, Wall, Rose and Nodelman assume a large (perhaps hierarchical) distance between the "adult" narrator and the child reader: the book functions similar to a "superior" teacher. In contrast, Rancière sees the book as a tool, which students can use to develop their skills more independently than they would from a "superior" figure. And where Richter and psychoanalyst critics describe "learning" from fiction as an experience grounded in psychological processes, Rancière focuses mainly on the practical skills one can learn from fiction, such as language and creativity.

2. Curtain's Brainwashing

In some ways, Ledroptha Curtain resembles many other villains in children's stories. He is corrupt, power-hungry and cares little about other people's needs and wishes. However, he is not typically vengeful or sadistic: although he has endured suffering in his youth (being orphaned and bullied as a child) (Stewart 240-241), he does not seek revenge for this pain or desire to inflict it upon others. The "evil"[14] in Mr. Curtain lies not in a wish to make others suffer, but in his hunger for control or power, as well as his attempts to erase free will. I will start this chapter by explaining Curtain's values, after which I will analyze his educational methods, the ambiguities in his ideology, his relationship with his pupils, and the effects of his educational system on its students (or victims). Finally, I will close read a passage describing Curtain's office, building bridges with chapters 3 and 4.

Since I am analyzing the theme of education on various levels, starting inside the story and working my way out towards the book's relationship with its readers, I will not delve deeper into the narrative situation and focalization until Chapter 4. Nevertheless, it is important that I briefly address the situation here, since it influences the story's content. The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series makes consistent use of an external narrator with varying focalization. Character-bound focalization shifts between various characters (even side characters), but as is usually the case in fiction, there is "not a doubt in our minds which character should receive most attention and sympathy" (Bal 152): this character is Reynie Muldoon, who focalizes most frequently and during crucial parts of the story. External focalization occurs

[14] "Good" and "evil", of course, are very subjective terms. I describe Curtain as "evil" because he is portrayed as such in the story through narration and focalization. I will expand upon this in Chapter 4.

regularly as well, which is clear in passages where the narrator reveals information that the characters cannot know or see. Additionally, there are passages where the focalization is ambiguous or more deeply layered[15]. The prequel's focalization differs from the rest of the series in that although it still switches between an external and a character-bound focalizor, there is only one focalizing character: Nicholas Benedict. I will discuss Benedict in Chapter 3: it is now time to focus on his brother.

2.1. Values

2.1.1. Control

Ledroptha Curtain is a control freak. This is reflected in almost everything he does, from his personal choices to his treatment of others, and especially in his end goal of world domination.

Curtain wants to dominate the world and control the thoughts of its inhabitants. This shows his hunger for power, but why does he want this power? It appears that Curtain has a love for power as such, since he is narcissistic and clearly wishes to be admired[16]. And yet I would argue that Curtain's biggest preoccupation and primary goal is control. In book 1, he insists over and over that "control is key", being obsessed with control to the point of using the word as his password. He also admires Holland (his birth country) for its "admirable tradition" (240) of conquering the sea: "Nothing in

[15] By "layered", I mean that we see a character's focalization through another character's focalization. This is the case during dialogue and diary-reading (the primary focalizing character listens to or reads thoughts narrated – and on a deeper level focalized, since it regards thoughts and feelings – by another character), and also when the primary focalizing character (usually Reynie) assumes other characters' thoughts or feelings through their behavior or physical expression.

[16] It is worth noting that S.Q., the one person Curtain legitimately cares about, is the person who admires him most, nearly worshiping him as a god.

the world less controllable than the sea, and yet the Dutch found a way to control it."[17] (262) And in *Prisoner's Dilemma*, he tries to commit suicide: rather than accepting failure and losing control over his life by living under other people's power, he prefers to retain control by attempting his own demise. He feels that in this way he is controlling his loss of control: "I suppose it's time I relinquish control – at least I can control the relinquishing" (360).

2.1.2. Individualism versus obedience

The large focus Curtain lays on himself does not only show his hunger for power and control, but also his individualism. He is a narcissist who admires his own "genius", and he looks down upon children, which he sees as weak-minded because their brains are not fully developed. He has at least some respect for Reynie, though, because he reminds him of himself when he was younger, and he explains his individualism to him in the following manner:

> "One problem with being a leader [...] is that even among your friends you are alone, for it is you – and you alone – to whom the others look for final guidance. [...] you may wish to choose carefully with whom you associate. No point in being a regular sort of person, Reynard. You have a greater calling, a duty to yourself, and you must pursue it with all your heart and mind." (Stewart, 241-242)

It is clear that Mr. Curtain admires intelligence and leadership qualities, especially his own, and believes he and other "geniuses" and "natural leaders" stand alone and must operate alone. But his individualism

[17] He is proud to follow in this tradition himself with his own tidal turbines, which energize his machinery.

doesn't merely show in his personal beliefs: he uses individualism as a weapon to stop other people from going against him. Due to individualistic messages in Curtain's brainwashing, such as "The missing aren't missing, they're only departed"[18], the (brainwashed) people are much less likely to rise against him, or even notice suspicious happenings such as the disappearances caused by Curtain's kidnappings (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 104).

However, he does not encourage most people to be a leader like himself or Reynie. Instead, he encourages them to be obedient. His brainwashing allows people to think alike and trust in his leadership, and his Institute uses drills, strict rules, and hierarchies[19]. Combined with brainwashing, these tools are used to propagate the idea of inferiority: all others must answer to him.

2.1.3. Intelligence

As we can see by examining his relationship with Reynie, his opinions on leadership, and his obsession with his own brain[20], Curtain admires intelligence, but only certain types, namely his own. His high regard for intelligence is therefore tied to his individualism and narcissism. Types of intelligence that he possesses, such as leadership qualities[21], a high IQ or a strong stomach, are admirable qualities to him, whereas forms of intelligence

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[18] Although this message may not seem individualistic at first glance, its effects and implications in the story make it such. It encourages people not to preoccupy themselves with other people's disappearances, assuming they have left of their own accord and will not return anyway.

[19] Messengers are more important than ordinary students, and Executives have authority even to the point of students having to answer to them as they must to Mr. Curtain. Executives and Ten Men function as Curtain's henchmen, mediating between "inferiors" and their "master" (from Curtain's perspective).

[20] Curtain's Whisperer is built to respond to his brain, and his diary contains a handmade drawing of it.

[21] Whether Curtain possesses these can be disputed, but he believes he does, which in his mind amounts to the same thing.

that he lacks, usually involving creativity or teamwork, he does not recognize as valid. For this reason, he fails to understand the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society (and Constance Contraire in particular), which contributes to the failure of his plans in book 1.[22]

2.2. Methods of Education

Curtain's primary method of education is through brainwashing: the forceful transmission of ideas into people's minds. To be able to broadcast these ideas across the globe, they must be summarized into key phrases. When his Executives teach the children lessons, they will include a short sentence that is easy to remember and summarizes the lesson in question. When the child seated in the Whisperer hears and repeats this key phrase, it provokes the thoughts of the entire lesson that the child has attended, "like the magic words that coax a genie from a bottle" (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 321). These thoughts are then transmitted to people around the world through TV and radio.

The lessons that introduce these key phrases, as well as the organization of his Institute in general, are evidence of Curtain's strictly hierarchical way of teaching. The teachers (Executives and Curtain himself[23]) are considered superior to the students, who must listen and obey. The submission of students to the teacher and the way they are encouraged against learning anything independently are signs of what Rancière calls "stultification", which is present in both the "old" and the "modern" method that Rancière argues against. It is evident that the Institute's attitude towards knowledge and authority corresponds best with the "old" method. Although

[22] I will further examine Curtain's relationship with his pupils in section 2.4.
[23] Although he doesn't teach classes, Curtain is occupied with teaching through brainwashing the world and running the Institute.

Curtain presents the Institute as a path to enlightenment and himself as a benefactor, which reminds me of the "modern" method, this is merely a façade. The "modern" method places emphasis on students truly "understanding" what they are learning (which can supposedly only be achieved by listening to the benefactor teacher). Curtain's Institute, on the contrary, makes an effort to achieve the opposite: students are expected to take lessons' content for granted without asking critical questions, even when the lessons appear to be full of contradictions, such as in the case of the "free market drill":

> The free market must always be completely free.
> The free market must be controlled in certain cases.
> The free market must be free enough to control its freedom in certain cases.
> The free market must have enough control to free itself in certain cases. (*The Mysterious Benedict Society*, 170)

We may wonder why the Institute teaches contradictory messages in the first place. There may be no particular reason for it within the story: perhaps the narrator wishes to present this obvious contradiction to the reader as evidence of the Institute's corruption and hypocrisy. However, the contradictions may serve a function even on the level of the story. A meaningless drill could tire victims' brains, keeping them from thinking meaningful thoughts. Alternatively, the contradictory messages may be designed to cover every possible case, so that any degree of freedom or

control of the free market will appear legitimized (the inclusion of every option making it impossible for "reality" ever to contradict these statements).

Whatever Curtain's intentions, the children do not fall for them. Constance, upon hearing the drill, immediately remarks that this "Sounds like nonsense" (170) and the Executive Jillson avoids explaining its meaning by generalizing that all language may sound nonsensical. By ignoring what Constance actually meant, she implies that the students are not meant to question anything they learn.

Another clear indication that the Institute follows the "old" method is its use of punishment. Rewards and punishments, but especially the latter, serve as a driving force. When students succeed (in other words, achieve good grades and behave obediently), they can be promoted to Messengers or even Executives. When they break the rules, they will face punishment, such as the infamous Waiting Room whose victims dare not speak of it.

While the rewards can encourage students to be more ambitious, the punishments are used as a stronger force than simple discouragement. With the hushed-up mystery surrounding the Waiting Room, and the use of threats, these punishments work primarily through fear. The students are afraid of enduring torture, so they behave. It is not surprising that Curtain uses this method, since fear, according to him, is the driving force of humanity (267).

While in book 1, Curtain is less inclined to resort to violence, his use of pain and torture increases in books two and three due to the larger role his sadistic Recruiters play, who are renamed Ten Men because of their ten ways to hurt people. Curtain pays these men to do his dirty work, and he uses their violence (and threats of violence) to instill fear and obtain information.

Fear is a tool that Curtain uses frequently. In fact, it forms the starting point of his brainwashing. First, he creates the illusion that everything is "hopeless and out of control" (267), a state of panic called "the Emergency". Next, he plans to present himself as the solution for this problem, with slogans such as "Feel certain with Curtain" (272).

When brainwashing and punishments are unsuccessful, Curtain resorts to something he calls brainsweeping, which is the erasing of a person's memory, or rather, "hiding", since "To completely erase memories is impossible" (377). Depending on what is practical for him, Curtain either hides a person's entire memory (causing chronic glumness as a side effect), or else he removes specific memories that he wishes his victim to forget, which happens regularly to Curtain's Executive and personal assistant S.Q. (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 142). The empty mind usually makes a brainsweeping victim easier to manipulate: note how much more independently S.Q. is able to think in book 3 compared to book 1, after having been away from the Whisperer for so long. Brainsweeping is Curtain's "permanent" way of eliminating enemies: however, as he knows himself (377), and as we see when Milligan recovers at least part of his memory, it is not as permanent as it appears.

2.3. Moral Ambiguity: Not Completely Evil

Throughout most of the trilogy, Curtain is portrayed as a thoroughly evil person with selfish intentions, which is traditional for villains in children's stories. On a few occasions, however, these lines are blurred, and we see glimpses of what may or may not be a kinder side of this mostly nasty person.

To begin with, there are hints that he may *also* have a kinder intention with his brainwashing (in addition to, not instead of, his selfish goal of

unlimited control). He tells Reynie the following about his supposed kind intention:

> "People are capable of great wickedness, Reynard. They cause each other such misery. This is why I'm particularly proud of my work. Despite having been persecuted myself, my chief goal in life is to bring happiness to all." He smiled a tight smile, a smile that gave Reynie the feeling Mr. Curtain half-believed what he said, but also that something else, something much larger and darker, lay beneath. (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 240-241)

Mr. Curtain plans to soothe people's fears by brainwashing them with the Whisperer (378-379), and he believes (or half-believes) that this will make (almost) everybody happy, which could be seen as a good intention. S.Q. believes strongly in this cause and is delighted by the idea of "everyone happier". It is not, however, Curtain's "chief goal in life". Something "larger and darker" does, in fact, lie beneath that, and that is his hunger for power and control. Martina Crowe (another Executive) seems to understand exactly what Curtain's true goal is when she asks, referring to the people whose memories he intends to erase: "Am I right that brainsweeping will not only help them feel better, it will make them more *manageable*?" And Mr. Curtain replies: "You understand perfectly" (377). Later on the same page, we find the comment that Martina "already understood far more than S.Q. ever would". The focalization is ambiguous in this sentence. On the one hand, the entire scene appears to be focalized externally, since details are mentioned that the characters would not notice, such as Curtain's "significant look" at Martina.

On the other hand, the fact that this sentence follows the mention of the "significant look" also implies that Curtain is thinking this. This makes it even clearer that *control* is Curtain's chief goal, whereas his other goals, such as "happiness", only come second.[24]

A stronger, because less ambiguous, piece of evidence that Curtain is not completely evil is his love for S.Q. Although this love is partially connected to Curtain's narcissism (since he feeds off S.Q.'s worship), this does not take away the fact that Curtain is able to experience love towards another person to the degree that it affects his behavior: decisions such as keeping S.Q. as his assistant are based solely on this love.

2.4. Relationship with his Pupils

Although Curtain wants to control and "educate" the entire world, his education is focused more specifically on his students at the Institute (who transmit it to the rest of the world), and if we zoom in further, we see that he pays particular attention to the Executives. There are two Executives whose relationships with Curtain are illustrated in the story, as does Curtain's relationship with Reynie, who, although not an Executive, is a likely candidate to become one (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 242). S.Q. receives the most, and most personal, attention from Curtain, not only because he requires it[25], but also because he is Curtain's personal favorite, and in a way, his ideal pupil. In contrast to S.Q., Martina and Reynie get special attention from Curtain because he sees potential in them for different reasons, and because

[24] Additionally, his claim of bringing happiness to *everyone* is a blatant lie. People who resist his brainwashing will be brainswept (making them sadder) and his punishments frequently involve pain and fear.

[25] S.Q. is very forgetful, so Curtain needs to repeat things to him over and over again, and he has occasional doubts which Curtain erases through brainsweeping. It is highly probable that the frequent brainsweeping contributes to S.Q.'s forgetfulness as well.

certain traits they share with Curtain allow him to take more of a liking towards them, since he admires himself so strongly. After examining Curtain's relationship with these three pupils, I will also take a look at his failure to "educate" the four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society (including Reynie), with a special focus on Constance Contraire, since his lack of understanding towards her turns out to be a crucial weakness.

2.4.1. Ideal pupils

It is common in children's fiction (especially in film[26]) for the leading villain to have an unintelligent sidekick, exaggerated to the point of ridicule so that the reader/viewer will likely be entertained (and even laughing) when this character fails. Although S.Q. fits this trope by being ignorant and providing comic relief, he is a much more humanized character than most villain sidekicks. While the typical villain sidekick is often portrayed as optimistic and selfish (with materialistic goals of his own), S.Q. has many insecurities and frequently demonstrates kindness: towards the villain he adores, but also towards the children, who are his opponents, but which he is fond of nonetheless.

This kindness, along with his clumsiness and unintelligence, is a major nuisance to Mr. Curtain. In fact, it regularly contributes to the children's victory, particularly in the later books: he is manipulated into releasing Mr. Benedict in *Perilous Journey*, and the children convince him to take their side in *Prisoner's Dilemma*. Nevertheless, Curtain never considers dropping S.Q. from his team, even refusing to acknowledge that S.Q. is an unfortunate

[26] Look at animated children's movies such as Warner Bros.' *The King and I* (Master Little), Pixar's *A Bug's Life* (Molt), and Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (Horace and Jasper), *The Lion King* (the hyenas) and *Beauty and the Beast* (LeFou).

choice of assistant and might help the children (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 287). In *Prisoner's Dilemma*, Mr. Benedict implies through a riddle that Curtain holds on to S.Q. out of love (74, 84, 90). Although the reason for this love remains unmentioned and thus open for speculation, the way Curtain clings "tightly to S.Q." after he saves him from suicide (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 361) and the way S.Q. keeps visiting Curtain in jail after the Whisperer has been destroyed (372) suggest that Mr. Curtain and S.Q.'s friendship is authentic. Nevertheless, they are on unequal terms, since both parties consider Curtain to be superior to S.Q. Note that Curtain calls the four children "[Benedict's] little club of admirers" and explains, "Without [the children], no doubt, he feels he is nothing, for that is the sort of weak person he is." (*Prisoner's Dilemma*, 290). This assumption about Benedict may be a projection of Curtain's own craving for admiration: notice his upset reaction when Constance asks, "Why not just take everything over? Why do you have to be *thanked* for it, too?" (291)

From the information above, we can conclude that S.Q., in a way, is Curtain's ideal pupil. Curtain loves an "open mind" (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 243)[27], which perfectly describes S.Q.'s eagerness to absorb everything Curtain tells him. Even though S.Q.'s forgetfulness is a nuisance, Curtain may enjoy repeating the same information to him over and over again, since he loves to hear himself talk, and S.Q.'s reaction of amazement and admiration is sure to feed Curtain's ego.

An "ideal pupil" for Curtain in a different way is Martina Crowe. Like Curtain, Martina is selfish, condescending, and above all, ambitious. She is driven to climb as high as she can in the hierarchy and because she is cleverer

[27] "Open mind" refers to Curtain's inside joke: he is thinking of a mind that provides little resistance to his brainwashing, rather than a figuratively open-minded person, but he does not tell the children that.

than S.Q., she understands Curtain's darker intentions and need for control, which do not form a problem for her (as they would for S.Q.); in fact, she strongly approves of them. When Curtain explains to S.Q. how his brainwashing (and occasional memory-erasing) will make everybody happy, Martina understands that Curtain's true goal is control. This becomes clear through the passage I mentioned in section 2.3, where she notices the usefulness of "brainsweeping" to make Curtain's opponents more "manageable", and he applauds and confirms this remark. This shows that Curtain approves of Martina: not only does he admire her ambition[28], but also her understanding and approval of his evil motivations. In other words, Martina is a like-minded villain: someone he can share his true thoughts with, yet will respect his authority.

It is interesting to note, however, that while he genuinely cares about S.Q.[29], he is indifferent to Martina. When Kate is about to throw an exploding calculator at Curtain and his Ten Men in *Perilous Journey*[30], Curtain commands them to drive away at once and leave Martina behind (423). This ends Martina's loyalty to Curtain (439).

2.4.2. Reynie, a reminder of his childhood self

Aside from S.Q. and Martina, Mr. Curtain also takes a special liking to Reynie. He enjoys talking to him privately, where he frequently emphasizes

[28] He rewards her with the position of Executive after it appears like she has cheated on her tests (307), and although he claims it is to keep his enemies close, he also mentions her being "useful" and an "excellent candidate". This is probably related to her ambition.
[29] This is not to say that Curtain treats S.Q. with kindness. He is regularly nasty towards him, such as not thanking him when he has an actually helpful suggestion (*Perilous Journey* 395) or planning to leave him (temporarily) alone on a deserted island (385).
[30] Kate soon takes back this decision, since she is "not like Mr. Curtain and his nasty associates" (424) and cannot kill another human being.

his own genius, but also applauds Reynie's. He flatters Reynie, calling him the cleverest student that his institute has ever had and "a natural leader" (241), but at the same time causes him to doubt himself and feel alone. On the one hand, Curtain seems to genuinely like Reynie[31], probably because he reminds him of himself when he was younger (241). On the other hand, Curtain is also deliberately manipulative, using phrases like "even among your friends you are alone" to isolate Reynie from his friends, who Curtain believes might have a bad influence on him. This becomes apparent in sentences such as "in your future you may wish to choose carefully with whom you associate" (242).

These conversations may be a reason why Reynie is much more influenced by Curtain than the other three children. Although they all struggle to contain their fear, disagreement and grumpiness[32], and are therefore influenced to a certain degree, none of the others ever seem to question their alliance. Reynie, on the other hand, is afraid Curtain's ideology might persuade him to betray his friends. This thought haunts him, both in the daytime (366, 440) and in nightmares (363), and the Whisperer confirms near the end of the book that betraying his friends has become his biggest fear (442), which used to be being "alone" (323).

Nevertheless, Curtain's influence on Reynie never grows big enough for him to actually wish to switch sides: thus, Curtain's education of Reynie results in failure from Curtain's perspective. Furthermore, his private conversations with Reynie eventually backfire: although he manages to have a small amount of influence over Reynie, Reynie obtains certain influence

[31] Until the end of book 1, where he discovers Reynie is working against him.
[32] Curtain's punishments cause Sticky fear; his Whisperer makes all the children, but especially Constance, tired and grumpy.

over Curtain as well through their feigned alliance. Not only does he gain more personal knowledge of Curtain, which makes it easier to anger him (*Mysterious Benedict Society*, 450-451)[33] and to guess his password (461), but he even gains a part of Curtain's trust to the point that he follows Reynie's false advice to keep people he doesn't trust, and in particular, Constance Contraire, close (237).

2.4.3. Curtain's failure with Constance

With the exception of Reynie, Curtain looks down upon the children, and because of this, underestimates their abilities in the first book. He suspects Sticky of having an "underlying weakness" because of his frequent fidgeting (243), and doesn't express an opinion on Kate[34], but his biggest failure is with Constance Contraire. This failure is largely caused by Reynie's advice to keep her close, but also by his own underestimation of her intelligence. This combination causes him to neglect her as a potential threat, which eventually leads to his downfall.

Constance possesses various qualities, such as creativity and rebelliousness, which Curtain does not recognize as useful traits.[35] She is also the most childlike (and the youngest) of the four children, and Curtain sees children as "pathetic" and "not a threat" (450) and children's minds as inferior to those of adults (calling them "unsophisticated minds", 319). At the

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[33] This is useful because Reynie figures out that Curtain's narcolepsy is triggered by anger. Knowing exactly what will make him mad is a great help in their time of need.

[34] Curtain hardly comes in contact with Kate in book 1. Even during the final confrontation, where the other three children are in the flag tower with Curtain and his Whisperer, Kate is outside battling Executives.

[35] At the end of book 2, on the other hand, he calls her a "useful little girl" (378), likely fantasizing about how he could use her mind-reading abilities as a tool for his own ends. As a person, however, he still cannot comprehend her.

same time, she has an incredibly stubborn willpower, which is actually quite similar to Curtain and helps her beat him at his own game. Curtain's Whisperer enables him to force thoughts into people's heads and manipulate their feelings. Constance, however, refuses to submit to force: her unbendable will, her creative out-of-the-box thinking, and her rebellious disregard for the rules enable her to block the thoughts Curtain tries to push into her mind. She has the "gift of stubborn independence" (459), or in Reynie's words: "*no* one can resist like Constance!" (458).

2.5. The Institute's Educational Effects

Curtain's Institute has a double-sided educational role. Its intention is to brainwash students into conforming to Curtain's ideology, passing this ideology on to others, and obeying his will. However, it unintentionally serves other educational functions as well.

In *Keywords for Children's Literature*, Elisabeth Rose Gruner reflects on the purpose of education in her essay "Education". Quoting Richard Shaull and adding her own opinion, she writes:

> education either helps the younger generation conform to the logic of the present system, or it helps them "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." We might, more radically, suggest that education has always done both things: integration and transformation. (Gruner, 72)

The Institute's purpose is clearly that of integration: the students (and the brainwashed masses) must conform completely to Mr. Curtain's will and

rules. This causes them to be obedient and uncaring, throwing away their free will in order to feel comfortable and keep their fears hidden from themselves.

The four main characters, however, learn something entirely different from the Institute, resulting in transformation rather than integration. Through resisting the Institute's goal, the children learn to "deal critically and creatively" with Curtain's oppressive system. Instead of participating in Curtain's intended "Improvement", they improve the world by stopping him. This mission also transforms their personal world. They learn not only critical and creative thinking, but also the value of friendship, teamwork, facing their fears, and free will.

This means that in the case of the four Society members, the Institute fails to educate them in the way it intends to. This failure comes partially from the children's intelligence (they are smart enough to think for themselves and distinguish truth from lies) and stubborn resistance (the four children, and especially Constance, refuse to let the Whisperer's messages take over their minds). These traits enable the children to think critically and use their experiences with the corrupt system to learn how to fight it, how to be the opposite of what the system wants. But there is another reason why Curtain fails to educate these children, namely that they already have another teacher, who is teaching them the opposite values: Curtain's twin and counterpart, Mr. Benedict.

2.6. Close Reading Curtain's Office

Curtain is frequently brought into comparison with Benedict. I will go into more detail about their similarities and differences as well as their status as twins in Chapter 3, but I would like to bring aspects of comparison to light already in a close reading of page 239 of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, where

we find a description of Ledroptha Curtain's office. This passage is interesting to analyze because of how much the description reveals about Curtain's character as a person, as a teacher, and especially in relation to Benedict. My close reading will connect this chapter to chapters 3 and 4, comparing Curtain and Benedict and showing how the text works to portray the former in a negative light.

The description begins with the shape and atmosphere of the office room:

> Mr. Curtain's office was an oblong, white-stoned room with no windows. It seemed bony and cold, like an empty skull. The bare stone floor had not even a rug, and there was a drain in it, perhaps for the sake of cleaning.

The bareness and whiteness of the room, as well as the drain, illustrate Curtain's obsession with control, in this case in the form of cleanliness.

Moreover, a feeling of threat and uncanniness is evoked in the description. Not only is the room peculiar (as it turns out, it used to be a butchery), but the use of language strengthens the uncanny feeling, emphasizing the bareness and associating it with coldness and death. Even the literal description may carry a symbolic meaning: the lack of windows could symbolize lack of freedom, and the drain (which in a butchery would serve to wash away the blood) could represent Curtain's figurative "washing away" of his evil acts (or his literal "washing away" of memories). This is in line with his educational methods, which oppress freedom and brainwash

away the truth. The uncanny language contributes to the portrayal of Curtain as "evil", and thus indirectly to the discouragement of his ideology.

The rest of the description deals with the objects inside the office, starting with his maps and sketches and then suggesting a comparison with his twin through the following passage:

> Beneath the sketches stood a row of locked cabinets – bookshelves, Reynie realized, but locked so no one could get at the books. Mr. Curtain's desk, a dull-polished, Spartan metal affair, was carefully organized with file boxes and short stacks of paper.

Mr. Benedict is a great lover of books, and leaves them crammed on tall bookshelves and stacked all over the place (70-71). Seeing Curtain's office after knowing what Benedict's is like shows a similarity between the two men (both keep a large amount of books), and yet the way they store them forms a great contrast. Mr. Benedict's books are open for everyone to see and enjoy, reflecting the way he shares his knowledge with his students and allows them to "emancipate" themselves through experience and exploration. Mr. Curtain, on the contrary, keeps his books locked out of sight, just like he conceals his true intentions and does not wish to help "inferior" students reach his level of knowledge and intelligence. And while Benedict's desk is precariously piled with more books (71), giving it a homely feel, Curtain's desk is neatly organized, contrasting chaos with control.

The description closes off with a crucial detail:

> On one corner of the desk sat an artificial violet in a pot. The flower looked perfectly real, was in excellent condition, and unlike Mr. Benedict's live violet, required no care. How strangely similar the two men were, Reynie thought, and yet how utterly different.

The comparison between Benedict and Curtain becomes explicit here. By pure coincidence, both men keep a violet in their office, but while Mr. Benedict cares for a living violet (which is in "need for water" (71) but very much alive), Mr. Curtain's violet is an imitation. This shows that Curtain either cannot or chooses not to care for a living thing, and also how Curtain enjoys the profit of conveniences and despises "wasting time". At the same time, it symbolically demonstrates the contrast between Benedict's "love for truth" and Curtain's "illusion of control". Curtain prefers the fake to the real, because it is easier to control and can appear more "perfect"; Benedict prefers the real because he values content over outward appearance and is more open to different outcomes of care and education (rather than aiming for "perfection").

2.7. Conclusion

Ledroptha Curtain is an authoritarian teacher, similar to the "old method" in Rancière. Control is his foremost goal, fear plays a crucial role in his teaching, and his educational structure contains a strict hierarchy. Curtain's ideology contains various contradictions, such as that between individualism (some people possess "natural genius" and are more likely to rise in the hierarchy) and conformist obedience (in the end, everyone is expected to act the same and obey Curtain, so the individual is not valued after all). There is also hypocrisy involved ("happiness for all", with some exceptions; "virtually no

rules", when in fact, there are rules). Curtain's Institute intends to brainwash the world with drills and key phrases, but it underestimates the power of teamwork, creativity, "love", the cleverness of (some?) children, and the stubborn and honest "love for truth" some people may possess. Through these powers, the children manage to resist Curtain's intended education and instead learn a different lesson: how to think critically and creatively to deconstruct a corrupt system. Mr. Benedict is their guiding hand in this task, their "true" teacher, and Curtain stands for everything he is not.

3. Benedict's Guidance

Wise old Nicholas Benedict is the four children's most important educational figure. He puts them through tests, brings them together, and teaches them the virtues of his "good" ideology. I will analyze Benedict's values and educational methods in comparison to Curtain's, followed by an examination of the ambiguities in his ideology and his relationship with his pupils, as I did with Curtain. As a final point, I will explore the way Curtain and Benedict's status as twins affects the series' implications on "good" and "evil" and how this relates to my main question of education.

3.1. Values

In the story, Mr. Benedict is presented as a wise mentor figure representing "good", and Mr. Curtain as a false educator representing "evil". Although their similarities are evident, their values are opposites. Since some of their values are frequently repeated ("control" for Curtain; "truth" for Benedict), it appears the narrator is implying that evil lies not only in the methods used, but in the values themselves.

Mr. Curtain's values, as mentioned in Chapter 2, go against almost everything Mr. Benedict believes in. Where Curtain strives to control others, Benedict places emphasis on each individual's free will. Where Curtain craves admiration, Benedict feels humbled when he is praised. And where Curtain is an individualist, Benedict believes in teamwork: every member of the team is crucial to its success.[36]

[36] Interestingly, Benedict doesn't always engage in teamwork himself. He relies on other people when he believes it absolutely necessary (such as assembling the team to stop Curtain, or letting his assistants catch him when he falls asleep), but in general, his teamwork is asymmetrical: he goes out of his way to help whomever he can, but is reluctant to rely on others for help. He wishes the children hadn't come to rescue him in book 2 (372) and rejects

One way to analyze characters is through semantic axes: "pairs of contrary meanings" selected for their relevance, which categorize characters into binaries (Bal 127). Although binary opposition can be limiting and problematic (129), these categories have useful functions in narratological analysis, because they point at "ideological stances represented in the story" (128) and allow us to compare the way (groups of) characters are represented (130). I have constructed the following semantic chart to compare Benedict and Curtain's values with each other:

	Nicholas Benedict	Ledroptha Curtain
Intelligence	+	+
Empathy/Understanding	+	–
Teamwork	+	–
Honesty/"Truth"	+	–
Pride	–	+
Respect of free will	+	–
Awareness of mistakes	+	–
Sense of humor	+	–
Trust	+	–
Power	–	+
Order/Cleanliness	–	+
Loving others before self	+	–

Looking at this chart, the one thing both twins value highly is intelligence. Even in that, however, they differ largely from each other, since Curtain's idea of intelligence is very limited, whereas Benedict accepts a large variety of different talents. In regards to other ideals, Benedict and Curtain are completely opposed.

The narrator's choices in phrasing and focalization encourage the reader to see Benedict as "good" and Curtain as "evil". This means we can infer part of the series' definition of good and evil out of their opposing values and personalities. "Goodness" involves paying attention to people's

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his much wished-for offers of adoption in the prequel (379, 426-427) for the sake of helping others.

needs while allowing them freedom of choice over their own situation and opinions, and allowing oneself to understand and trust them as far as one can. It is also the treatment of others as equals, accepting their differences as unique abilities in a team. In addition, a "good" person is honest, striving to protect "truth" and aware of their own shortcomings, though eager to learn new things. "Evil" is the opposite of all this: restriction of others' freedoms; striving for wealth, power or admiration; individualism and hierarchy.[37]

Curtain and Benedict's opposing values are not only of importance in regards to "good" and "evil": they also define their personalities as teachers. Curtain's focus on order is present in his teaching, and Benedict's focus on teamwork and equality manifests itself in his. Their beliefs manifest in their teaching as well: Curtain, who believes in leaders and followers, makes use of a hierarchy, which is absent in Benedict's team-oriented teaching.

3.2. Methods of Education

Mr. Benedict teaches in many different ways. He challenges the children with a wide variety of tests and riddles, and provides advice and support, but at the same time allows his students to learn through experience.

3.2.1. Tests

The first and perhaps most obvious way in which Mr. Benedict "educates" is his series of tests that the children must pass in order to be selected for his mission.

These tests serve many functions, the primary being a measurement of the children's intelligence: only the smartest children can pass, while the majority is rejected. Nevertheless, these tests are more open-minded than only

[37] I will further elaborate on the narrator's role in defining "good" and "evil" in Chapter 4.

accepting one correct answer. Benedict allows for different kinds of intelligence and different solutions to the same problem, and because of this, he is able to put together a dynamic team in which each child has their own unique qualities. Taking the second test as an example, we see that Reynie and Sticky are both able to answer the forty extremely difficult questions, but each for a different reason: Reynie figures out (through cleverness and attentiveness) that the test is a puzzle, whereas Sticky actually knows the answers (due to his photographic memory and interest in facts). Kate and Constance do not solve the second test, but are awarded a pass anyway after demonstrating their own talent: Kate proves her dexterity by helping Number Two escape from angry parents, and Constance uses her creativity and stubborn willpower to write complaints in poetry form.[38] This becomes a recurring pattern in the other tests, where each child uses their unique talents to figure out their own solution. Mr. Benedict approves of all these different approaches, which shows that he admires different sorts of intelligence and talent in people.

But Benedict's tests measure more than just intelligence. The first test asks, "Do you like to watch television?" and "Do you like to listen to the radio?" (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 10), to check whether the children have a strong enough love of the truth[39] to resist Mr. Curtain's brainwashing. Their love of truth is tested again when Benedict's assistant Rhonda Kazembe offers to help them cheat on the second test, which they all refuse. She also tests their willingness to help others by dropping her pencil into a drain.

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[38] Simultaneously, she is proving herself exceptionally smart for her age by being able to read and write and using a (for her age) advanced vocabulary.
[39] "Truth", here, is related to honesty and fairness (hence the exercise with Rhonda), but it also implies staying true to oneself. Someone with a strong "love of truth" will resist brainwashing rather than blindly accepting thoughts forced into their mind.

We can conclude that Benedict's tests test various forms of intelligence – knowledge, memory, logic, observational skills, dexterity and creativity (where it is not necessary to possess all of the aforementioned) – as well as aspects of morality, in particular kindness and honesty.

3.2.2. Learning through experience

After the children are sent to the Institute, Mr. Benedict remains in contact through Morse code messages in the form of riddles, in which he provides moral support and advice on how to proceed, but leaves the children to make their own decisions. Both the tests and the riddles allow the children to learn semi-independently, since they solve these challenges without many (if any) hints from an educational figure. But their education isn't limited to preconceived exercises: their experiences at the Institute help them "emancipate" themselves. As I explained before, this happens through their resistance and critical thinking in regards to the oppressive Institute, in combination with teamwork, self-reflection and aid from Benedict. Reynie learns to doubt himself less, Sticky learns to be braver, Kate learns to rely more on friends, and even Constance (although she remains obstinate) matures throughout the series, from her very first apology in book 1 to her developing a conscience in book 3. They learn these things through the dangers they face and the mistakes they make, but especially through their joint experience of friendship.

This experience-based learning brings Benedict closer to Rancière's ideal teacher: instead of assuming the children are ignorant and Benedict is the only one who can teach them the necessary knowledge, he assumes the children are clever and able to improve themselves and obtain knowledge

independently.[40] In addition, when he does test the children, he leaves room for multiple interpretations instead of forcing a specific solution or learning method onto the children. I do, however, think that Rancière had an even less interfering teacher in mind than Mr. Benedict, and that Benedict's teaching still assumes a small degree of hierarchy: Benedict, as the responsible adult, must supervise them and step in at times, and also provides them with advice and ideological beliefs that he presents as inherently "good". Rancière mentions the method of Socrates, who asks questions that deliberately lead the student towards a specific answer, and criticizes this method because although it encourages the student to find knowledge within himself, it still assumes a hierarchy in which the teacher knows best, unlike the ignorant schoolmaster who emancipates students "in order to be instructed, not to instruct" (29). When it comes to ideological education, Benedict reminds me of Socrates in that he guides the children in the specific direction of his own ideology rather than letting them think of their own. In cases of problem solving, however, Benedict allows for a variety of answers (especially in the tests) and applauds the children when they come up with answers he hadn't thought of, as we see in his reaction to Constance's test answers and to the children's "prison escape" in book 3 (21).

The experience-based aspect of Benedict's education grows throughout the series, although not entirely through a preconceived plan, since this extra freedom is partly caused by Mr. Benedict (in *Perilous Journey*) and the children themselves (in *Prisoner's Dilemma*) subsequently being kidnapped. Having little to no contact with Mr. Benedict means the children are left to craft their

[40] The children's mission is another piece of evidence that Benedict sees them as equals, since he believes they are capable of functioning in difficult and dangerous situations.

own plans. The prequel, which was published last, is probably the most extreme case of experience-based learning. Young Nicholas learns pretty much everything through experience. He becomes self-sufficient by necessity in his unpleasant orphanage, learns about friendship by having friends, and decides to focus on helping others after having witnessed an adult going out of his way to help him. Even this adult does not actively engage in teaching: all learning happens naturally through Nicholas's own experiences and is never provided by another character in the form of lessons, rules, or wise advice. In this way, we could claim that Nicholas's mentor figure, the lawyer Sam Harinton, matches Rancière's description of the ideal "ignorant schoolmaster" better than any other character in the series, even though he only makes a brief appearance and even though (or perhaps because!) he is not intentionally engaged in "teaching". Then again, Rancière's text focuses on learning *skills*, whereas all Nicholas learns from Harinton are ideological values such as trust and selflessness: when it comes to skills, Nicholas remains his own teacher.

3.3. Flaws and Contradictions: Not Completely Good

In general, the series presents Benedict's ideology as "truth". Nevertheless, I see a few flaws and contradictions in his beliefs and actions, some of which the text acknowledges, whereas others remain ignored.

One of the latter is Benedict's attitude towards equality. On the one hand, he is very inclusive, allowing for various creative solutions to his tests, and frequently insisting that every member of the team (even seemingly useless Constance) be included, but on the other hand, he is still using tests to eliminate the unworthy. If the people who failed the test are unworthy, then this includes selfish, cowardly, dishonest, easily manipulated, and less

intelligent children (whether unintelligent or simply not quite smart enough to pass), and even those who *are* intelligent, but cannot prove themselves for other reasons, for example because they are too slow to finish the test or make mistakes under pressure. Moreover, children who do not read newspapers, cannot speak English, or cannot read are excluded from seeing Benedict's advertisement.

Of course, we can debunk a large part of this argument by saying that Mr. Benedict does, in fact, care for the selfish, cowardly, etcetera, but that he had good reasons not to send these types of people on his dangerous mission, as this would lead the mission to fail. Also, we can point out that occasional exceptions are made to help those who are "too slow": Sticky doesn't finish the second test, but is awarded a pass anyway because it is evident that he possesses an excellent memory (34). Still, it seems clear to me that Benedict favors smart people (whether book-smart, creative or clever) over others, and that some of his expectations of smart children are not necessarily realistic (such as having the opportunity and wish to look at a newspaper). This focus on "genius" reminds me of Mr. Curtain, although Benedict's idea of intelligence is much more inclusive than Curtain's.

Another contradiction relates to Benedict's approach towards danger. It is evident that Mr. Benedict finds free will very important and is reluctant to send children on a dangerous mission. He doesn't allow them to go until it is obvious they are willingly choosing to help, and when their situation gets too dangerous, he sends Milligan to the island to bring the children home (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 358-359). Only after they refuse do they receive a message from Mr. Benedict, intended for them exclusively in the case that they decide to continue their mission (361). By that time, however, they don't

have much of a choice. Even if they abort their mission, they are no longer safe: Constance, for example, is hearing the Whisperer's voice in her head, and her condition may become critical once Curtain boots its power to the maximum (360). In addition, notice how Mr. Benedict sends Milligan to pick up the children only after their mission to uncover Curtain's plans has been completed. This means Benedict waits until they have been of use to him, and doesn't change his plans when the children are made to suffer in earlier chapters.[41]

Connected to this is the way Benedict chooses to send orphan children into danger to begin with. Even though the children agree to do this, there doesn't appear to be an alternative, and they are likely to "fall into greater danger" if they don't go, asking young children to put themselves into a dangerous, possibly traumatizing situation can still be seen as a morally grey decision, especially if we examine the reasons why Benedict specifically chooses orphans[42] for this mission. He considers it necessary for the children on his team to be "alone", because "children without guardians" are in greater danger under Curtain's system, but also because "parents are disinclined to send their children into danger, as well they should be" (82). His point is that guardians would not let their children be endangered, whereas orphans will not be missed. He may also have in mind that orphans have no one to miss and will therefore be more willing to go on this mission. Although these are not unreasonable thoughts, they have somewhat disturbing implications, the first implying that it is more okay to send orphans into danger than other children because they will be missed less by

[41] Such as Sticky's experience in the infamous "Waiting Room".
[42] Kate and Sticky are not orphans, but this is beside the point. Kate doesn't know where her father is, and Sticky believes his parents do not care about him, so this puts them in a similar situation to an orphan.

society, and the second implying that Benedict is manipulating lonely children (including a two-year-old) who have no other place to belong and therefore have little other choice but to accept this task.[43]

There are a few other occasions in the series where Nicholas Benedict's actions are morally questionable. Is it acceptable for Benedict to use the Whisperer on Constance to retrieve her possibly traumatic memories of her family? Although Constance agrees to this herself and benefits from this knowledge in the context of the story, the possible trauma or mental overload it could cause is a large risk to take. Is it acceptable for him to allow Constance to use her mental abilities to cure his narcolepsy? Should he have denied this kind gesture (since it would make her ill afterwards) or perhaps extended it to allow other people's similar conditions to be cured? And in his childhood, why did young Nicholas need to stay in the orphanage to keep the bullies under control?[44] This reasoning implies that Nicholas believes he is the only person who can do this due to his superior intelligence. Is his control truly needed to keep the bullies in check and the orphanage happy and peaceful? These implications lie dangerously close to Curtain's egotism. There is one morally questionable act that Mr. Benedict himself regrets: his manipulative conduct towards S.Q., which I will talk about at the end of the next section.

[43] Fictional characters, however, are not the same as real people, and in chapter 5, I will explore a more positive approach to these situations of danger, explaining how they can positively affect the reader.

[44] Nicholas decides against being adopted, because he wants to protect the other children in his orphanage from a group of orphan bullies. With a mix of bribes, bravery and cleverness, he is confident that he can control them.

3.4. Relationship with his Pupils

Because of Mr. Benedict's experience- and equality-based teaching methods, the children are able to be on familiar terms with him, rather than looking up to him as an authority figure. And because this equality is not as strong as in the case of Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster, Benedict remains on a slightly higher level than the children, making him their mentor figure as well as their friend. Both before and after the children acquire legal guardians, they see Benedict as a member of the family, and they live together for part of the series due to being in potential danger from the government. Aside from his lessons, Benedict engages in more familial activities with the children as well. Lessons and play often merge in the challenging games he invents to keep the children entertained and develop their skills at the same time.

Mr. Benedict has a special relationship with Reynie. Reynie is often seen by his friends as the leader of the group and (at least for Sticky and Kate) the person they turn to for advice. However, he is also someone who frequently doubts himself and needs someone to turn to for advice and support. Although the other children give him this support as well, he benefits from Mr. Benedict as an advising mentor. Benedict reassures him in the first book when he is doubting himself, using a chess metaphor (368-369), and reminds him to trust in people's kindness at the end of *Perilous Journey* (440). In *Prisoner's Dilemma*, Benedict plays significantly less of an advisory role to Reynie, not only because Reynie doubts himself less, but also because the children have matured enough to console each other better.

Mr. Benedict's personal relationships with the other children are left unexplored, with the exception of Constance. Benedict is very fond of Constance, even adopting her as his own daughter. An important aspect of

their relationship is laughter. Instead of finding Constance annoying (as the other children initially do), Benedict thinks she is hilarious. He admires her creativity and humorous out-of-the-box thinking, and even her obstinate attitude towards rules is funny to him. Although Constance isn't seen laughing much herself, it is clear in the later books that she enjoys making Mr. Benedict laugh. Also noteworthy is the fact that Mr. Benedict always allows Constance to be herself. Since Constance is frequently misunderstood by people and does not connect well with institutions, Mr. Benedict's openness is likely important in her development. He is flexible in relation to Constance's demands, trying his best to think of exercises she will enjoy rather than reject as "work".

While Benedict is a positive influence on Reynie and Constance's educational development, his behavior towards S.Q. in *Perilous Journey* is more harmful and reminiscent of Curtain's manipulation and trickery. In a situation of emergency, Benedict resorts to manipulating S.Q. to his advantage. A series of events leaves S.Q. feeling offended (391) and underappreciated (395) by Curtain and his Ten Men, which makes him more willing than usual to trust Mr. Benedict. Using these circumstances and S.Q.'s trusting instinct in combination with a form of hypnosis (398) (a method one would sooner expect from Curtain), Benedict persuades S.Q. to loosen his handcuffs and try them on (396). Although he hasn't told any lies (397), Benedict has "dealt a terrible blow to the best part of S.Q. Pedalian", because he has broken S.Q.'s trust, a crucial aspect to his kindness. Benedict (and with him, the text) acknowledges this and it grieves him that he had to resort to such tactics in order to help them escape (398). This shows the morally grey area of Benedict's actions and ideology, but also his kindness and self-

reflection, since he is able to point out his own mistakes and feel remorse for them.

Where Benedict, in a way, fails to "educate" S.Q., the children eventually do succeed in doing so in *Prisoner's Dilemma*. After S.Q. makes it clear that he harbors "no hard feelings" towards the children for tricking him in *Perilous Journey* (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 270), Reynie shocks him by asking whether he "really, truly believes" that "it will all work out fine if [the children] just do as [Curtain] says" (272-273), and he hurries away, afraid to confront the truth. Near the end of the book, however, the children tell S.Q. that he knows Curtain wants to hurt them, and that "What he tells you never *feels* right, does it?" (353) They also express empathy and understanding towards him ("Not wanting to be alone, wanting to have a family"), and encourage him to trust his instincts (353). Finally, they expose the truth he has been so afraid to confront: the fact that Curtain has been regularly removing S.Q.'s memories (353). For the first time, S.Q. refuses to obey Curtain's orders: "No, I won't do it, Mr. Curtain. I won't do what you say. [...] I'll help you get away, Mr. Curtain. I don't want anything to happen to you [...] but I'm not touching these children." (354) It is clear that S.Q.'s love for Curtain is unchangeable, but his ideology is unstable. Due to brainwashing and brainsweeping, he believes Curtain is right throughout most of the series, but he is naturally inclined towards kindness, and when manipulated to do so, is even able to put this before Curtain's orders.

3.5. The Implications of Twins

One of the most memorable things in the series, according to my sister, is Curtain's exact resemblance to Benedict. Curtain's status as a "double" may have an uncanny effect on readers, strengthening the feeling of threat around

him that the book already evokes through description. Symbolically, Curtain could be seen as an "alter ego" of Benedict. But their status as twins carries more associations than only symbolic and atmospheric ones: it invites comparison between them and their educational methods and influences the series' implications about good and evil.

3.5.1. Twins in comparison

On the one hand, Curtain and Benedict's "identical" status brings them closer together, underlining their similarities. Instead of being entirely "other", the "villain" Curtain appears similar to the "good guy" Benedict: both are exceptionally smart, both offer guiding advice to Reynie, both have been orphaned and bullied in the past, and of course, they look identical. These similarities discourage a fear of the "other" as radically different, and instead might remind the reader that evil may have a familiar face or guise, and that good and evil may be closer together than they seem, as two sides of the same coin.

On the other hand, it is precisely this similarity that makes their differences stand out clearer. Like a mirror image, Curtain may bear a resemblance to Mr. Benedict, but as characters they are polar opposites.

The twin status invites readers to compare their traits and ideologies. When I did so on the semantic charts I showed earlier, it became clear that Benedict and Curtain's personalities and beliefs, although they overlap in certain areas, are much more opposite than similar.

On the level of the story, Benedict and Curtain's reactions to their twin status interest me. Both brothers feel hurt at the thought of being twins, though in very different ways. Curtain cannot bear the idea of it, for a moment even refusing to accept that Benedict is his brother (*Perilous Journey*

372) and then calling him "the very worst kind of traitor" (373). This gives us a peek into Curtain's deeper feelings that usually remain hidden in the series. One might expect such a narcissistic character to think of Benedict as an inferior version of himself that he takes personal offense to (how could this despicable man share his genes?), or possibly as a mere nuisance standing in his way, but Curtain's distress and usage of the word "traitor" imply that he sees Benedict as someone he could have loved, who hurt his feelings by opposing him. That leaves me wondering what kind of relationship (if any) he would have wanted to have with Benedict. Since he values himself above everybody else and is obsessed with control, I don't believe Curtain would have wanted to share leadership with him.

Nevertheless, the story suggests that Mr. Curtain is lonely. He almost admits to it in book 1, where he associates leadership with being "alone". Perhaps he derives this association from his conviction that leaders possess more "genius" than other people, and believes, just like the teacher of the "modern" method in Rancière[45], that he is teaching in vain to students whose inferior minds will never fully understand the lesson's content, nor are they capable of verifying his intelligence, making him unable to prove his superiority (39-40). So maybe part of Curtain wishes for a companion of (near) equal intelligence to himself, and this is what Benedict could have been to him. Nevertheless, Curtain's primary emotion when thinking of Benedict is anger: he feels insulted that Benedict "betrayed" him, rather than sad.[46]

[45] Curtain uses the "old" method, but Rancière's idea of the misunderstood "genius" teacher is rooted in stultifying hierarchy, which is present in both the "old" and the "modern" method, so it could apply to Curtain as well.
[46] Curtain is almost never depicted as "sad": most likely, he conceals this seemingly "weak" emotion.

Benedict, on the other hand, does not feel insulted, but deeply sad about Curtain's fate. Here again, the contrast between the twins is apparent: Curtain resents Benedict, while Benedict only pities Curtain.

3.5.2. Ethical implications

As twins, Benedict and Curtain can be seen as different "outcomes" of the same "person". This influences the relation between "good" and "evil" in the series, especially regarding the implications of their underlying causes, which we can connect to education.

In many children's stories that feature an evil antagonist, this villain is either simply "evil" (and appears to have always been this way), or else the villain has "become" bad through a tragic event in their past. In the case of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, however, both Benedict and Curtain have experienced similar tragic events: losing their parents as infants, enduring bad treatment (especially bullying) at an orphanage, and suffering from narcolepsy. Since they are identical twins, it seems unlikely for one of them to be "good" and the other "evil" by nature. But as they have suffered similar tragic childhoods, it appears that evil is not a necessary consequence of tragedy either.

The trilogy provides next to no other clues as to how Benedict and Curtain became the way they did. However, the prequel, *The Extraordinary Education of Nicholas Benedict*, presents Nicholas Benedict's youth, including the decisive moment that helps him become the kind person he is in the trilogy. This moment is his first encounter with a truly kind adult, a lawyer named Sam Harinton. Observing young Nicholas on a train, this stranger senses that something is wrong and provides him with money for food (366). They notice each other's cleverness (367), but Nicholas, afraid after being

caught lying, and suspecting that this adult wants something from him, does not yet trust this man (367-368). Only when Nicholas sees a resemblance between Mr. Harinton and his friend John, does he begin to wonder if he can actually trust him, and after an incident where his narcolepsy makes him vulnerable, Nicholas decides that he can (370-372). Mr. Harinton lets Nicholas come along with him and finds him a long-term place to stay with one of his relatives (375). However, after the man gives him time to overthink this decision, young Nicholas makes the choice to return to the orphanage (379). He does this because the man's kindness has inspired him and "made him want to be exactly like Mr. Harinton" (377), in other words, to do things for other people instead of only looking out for himself. He wants to return to the orphanage in order to protect the other children from the bullies, which he knows he is clever enough to outsmart, and he also makes plans to help various people in his vicinity with bigger and smaller struggles: he is even willing to help the bullies (with their schoolwork, for example) if they are interested (438-439). Even when his friend Violet wants to sacrifice her dream of art school so her parents can afford to adopt Nicholas, he chooses his new ethical convictions over his personal desires and rejects the offer (427).

I can draw two conclusions from Nicholas's ideological change that have crucial implications for my discussion of children's education. The first is that "goodness" is presented as a decision, similar to R. J. Palacio's "choose kind" (*Wonder*, 2012). Nicholas makes a conscious decision to be a better person and help those around him. Before this decision, he was not evil, but like many children, made choices based on his personal wishes without considering other people's struggles. This is similar to Curtain's mindset, except that young Nicholas doesn't go as far as Curtain to get his way and

would never deliberately harm innocent people. After Nicholas becomes aware of the possibility of helping others and is inspired to alter his mindset, he bases his choices on what would help the people around him (and as an adult, people all over the world) instead of choosing what would benefit him personally. Nicholas's change implies that *empathy* is a key ingredient to goodness, and also that one can consciously decide to be good.

Could we say, then, that Benedict chooses to help others, while Curtain chooses to be selfish and gather power for himself? Although Curtain does claim that "I *choose* for it to be this way" (*Perilous Journey* 376), I have my doubts with this conclusion, because Curtain does not see the advantages of helping others over himself, making his decision to be "evil" less conscious than Benedict's decision to be "good". Can one consciously choose to be "evil"? The story's stance on this question remains unclear.

Moreover, young Nicholas's choice to be "good" is not a fully independent choice either, because it is the result of a specific educational process he undergoes through his relationship with his mentor, who inspires him to follow his example. Without their chance meeting, he would not have become the same adult he is in the trilogy. This suggests that the presence of a kind person in one's life, especially an adult who can serve as an example to follow, may be a key factor in determining one's alignment. Being good or evil, then, depends on an "educational experience" provided by an inspirational model-figure. Perhaps Curtain had the bad luck of never meeting any such example of kindness in his youth.

So on the one hand, "goodness" is implied to be a choice, while on the other hand, it is also implied to depend on one's circumstances and the

presence of a kind mentor-figure who can unconsciously[47] "educate" their student through a demonstration of kindness and mutual trust. The conscious decision, then, is provoked by the mentor-figure. Interestingly enough, neither of these two options interprets morality as something that is purposefully *taught*, even though both Curtain and Benedict are actively engaged in attempting to teach others their ideals.

3.6. Conclusion

Nicholas Benedict stands in opposition to his twin. Instead of control and self-worship, he puts love and honesty first. Though he believes, similarly to Curtain, that some people are more "intelligent" than others, he defines this term much more broadly, recognizing that each person possesses unique qualities, which, put together, can make a strong team. Compared to the three teaching styles laid out in Rancière, Benedict's lies somewhere between the "modern" method and "universal education". Although he still "guides" the children knowing where he wants them to end (similar to the Socratic method, which Rancière deems conceited), he also allows them to learn independently through experience and experiment. Instead of giving them exact instructions, he lets them develop their own plan, while providing moral support as well as challenging exercises to further develop their skills. These exercises are always voluntary, never under force. Benedict is much closer to his students than Curtain, seeing them as family members and adjusting his exercises to their talents and needs. Unlike Curtain's education, Benedict's is successful on the four children, and although he initially fails to educate S.Q., he is able to pass his education on to him indirectly through his

[47] Or consciously, if Benedict could be considered a similar mentor-figure to the children of the Mysterious Benedict Society.

students. Benedict and Curtain's status as twins highlights their similarities and differences and carries moral implications which influence the series' stance on education. Through Benedict's youth, the prequel shows us how a person can decide to become "good" inspired by a mentor-figure. We can speculate how a similar person (Curtain) could become "evil".

4. The Text as Educator

I have mentioned that the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series makes use of an external narrator. This narrator controls the information the reader sees through a mix of character-bound and external focalization. Although Reynie is the most common focalizor, we find passages focalized by an external focalizor, the other three children, and occasional side characters, as well as instances of double or ambiguous focalization. I will analyze the way the narrator's choices in focalization influence the story's ideology and the reader's empathy towards the characters. Afterwards, I will examine how the writing style engages and interacts with the reader. Finally, I will compare the series' methods of education with those of Benedict and Curtain. Is the all-knowing and manipulating narrator engaged in brainwashing its readers, or does he encourage them to learn independently?

4.1. Focalization and Ideology

Focalization is a tool that has a large influence on a story: the same events (fabula) seen through a different character make an entirely different story. Each character experiences events differently, and the reader partakes in this experience through their focalization. It is interesting to examine the relation between focalization and ideology: how does the narrator use focalization to manipulate ideology and privilege "good" over "evil"?

In comparing the focalization of "good" characters with that of "evil" ones, two things stand out to me. Firstly, the villains hardly focalize at all (aside from dialogue, which one may or may not consider focalization). There are a few passages focalized by villains – including Martina Crowe (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 427-428) and Ten Man Crawlings (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 300-302) – but these are devices to increase suspense, rather than

show these villains' thoughts and feelings. Crawlings' focalization makes the children's plan a surprise to the reader, who knows less than the children. Martina's passage does the opposite with similar effects: the reader knows more than the main characters and is left in suspense whether Kate and Constance will be caught. Curtain has no focalization except for the passages from his diary, which are imbedded in various layers of focalization: the narrator focalizes along with the children (primarily Reynie, with occasional focalization from Sticky or all four together) as Sticky recites passages from Curtain's diary that he has recently memorized. In other words, the narrator sees Reynie's mind, listening to Sticky recall words *he* has seen, which in their turn reflect Curtain's thoughts. The narrator seems to place a deliberate distance between the reader and Curtain's focalization (as well as limiting the latter's quantity). And although Benedict has an equally small amount of focalization to Curtain in the trilogy, he is the main and focalizing character in the prequel. The fact that Benedict gets a prequel backstory, whereas Curtain's childhood remains vague, makes Curtain a more obscure character whom the reader cannot perhaps completely understand.

This obscurity is even larger if we compare the content of the sporadic villain focalization to that of "good" characters' focalization, for on the rare occasions that villains focalize, the narrator reveals very little of their emotions, especially when it concerns their struggles and insecurities. Curtain's diary showcases his evil plans rather than his personal feelings, for the sake of explaining plot details and hinting at unrevealed ones. The few emotions in these diary passages are directly related to these plans: "disappointment" about the impossibility of "perfect control" (267), "great satisfaction" when the Whisperer gains a new ability (271). Identification with

this character is nearly impossible. The other villain-focalized passages work in a similar way, and on the occasions that some level of emotion is shown, it usually concerns irritation or suspicion, not more "relatable" feelings such as insecurity or care for others.

So why does the series (like many children's books) not allow the reader to fully understand the villains and empathize with them? Perhaps children's books are afraid to run the risk of them sympathizing to the point of agreeing with the villain. Take an adult series like *Death Note* where the villain's ideology is deeply explored (in this case, the main character is the villain), and there will be people on the internet who agree with him. One may consider it problematic for young children to take over ideologies from villains. On the flipside, one could also argue that it is important to understand where "bad" people are coming from, instead of believing they do bad things just for the sake of being bad.

But the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series doesn't shrug Curtain off as "evil for the sake of evil", nor does it shy away completely from showing his feelings and ideas. Monologues and passages such as the one on pages 260-261, where the primary focalizor (Reynie) can guess Curtain's thoughts and feelings by his expression, allow Curtain to focalize indirectly.

As for Curtain's diary, although it barely contains personal feelings, it reveals his belief that fear is the driving force of the world from which everything else stems (267). His plans and ideology seem to grow from this belief. One can speculate about its origins: is Curtain himself "a big scaredy-cat" like Constance hypothesizes, and thus thinks everyone else is too? This is plausible, since Curtain is egocentric and has more often assumed other people resemble him. However, he seems too clever to base an assumption

about humanity solely on himself, and also too arrogant, since he considers himself special and "different". This makes it likely that he has also observed human behavior that appeared to be driven by fear: people follow laws to avoid punishment, acquire jobs to avoid financial insecurity, and go to great lengths to avoid death. From this cynical worldview, even social interaction and love are nothing more than a fear of being alone.

We have seen in the previous chapter that empathy is a key aspect of "goodness" in the series, along with other qualities such as "love of truth". So is fear, then, a key aspect of evil? This is certainly not true, since fearful characters in the series are not necessarily portrayed as evil. Perhaps fear can *cause* evil by blocking empathy, and thus indirectly blocking "goodness". If we fear for our well-being, we are less inclined to pay attention to that of others (hence why "bravery" is important in the series), and if we experience others as threatening, we are less inclined to empathize with them (hence why "trust" is important). This is probably why the series appears to warn readers against a fear-based worldview, even though it is not "evil" of itself.[48]

Focalization does not only influence the series' ideology when it comes to the villains' perspective. The "good" characters' thoughts and feelings frequently invite the reader to empathize with their side, and their remorse after doing or thinking something selfish strengthens this. Focalization helps the reader understand these feelings, either by describing them (focalized by the character in question) or by showing them through Reynie's empathizing perspective. Both Reynie and Kate feel terrible after thinking selfish thoughts,

[48] Additionally, Curtain's reaction to his belief about fear is "evil". Instead of accepting the way (he believes) the world works, or trying to change it (by conquering his own fears or purposefully making decisions that aren't rooted in fear), he decides to use other people's fear to his advantage. This selfish, dishonest conduct stands opposed to empathy and "love of truth", making it evil by the standards of the series.

and Constance feels physically ill whenever she manipulates other people's minds, implying this is a wrong thing to do (unless absolutely necessary). Instead of encouraging the reader to be "good" in order to be rewarded or avoid punishment, the series implies that doing "good" will cause one to *feel* good. This connects "goodness" to nature, which at first sight might seem contradictory to the prequel, where "goodness" is *educated*. Yet even in the prequel, Nicholas notices that Harinton's kind actions "felt *right*" (377). This suggests that people unconsciously *want* to be good, but don't necessarily know how until they are "educated".

These examples involve a mixture of focalization and linguistic choices to convey ideology or morals in a largely implicit way. In the prequel, however, the morals seem to be more overtly stated, with Nicholas deciding to become "kind" like Harinton, and with his assertion that the orphanage's library "*is* a treasure" (413). I agree with Bettelheim that stories with a more obvious moral tend to come across as more contrived, and that the lack of a definite moral adds more layers to the story, allowing the reader to choose a relevant meaning for themselves. I enjoyed the prequel somewhat less than the original series, partially for this reason. Nevertheless, it appealed to me that the prequel showed how everyone is a little bit selfish and can work on improving this: realizing this can help people think in a more nuanced way.

4.2. Focalization and Empathy

Privileging Benedict's ideology is only one of the functions focalization has in the series. I believe reading fiction can strengthen one's empathy, and focalization can manipulate this skill. I consider it important for children (and humans in general) to learn to empathize with many different sorts of people, not only those who resemble themselves. From this angle, Reynie may seem

like a weaker choice of main character, since he is portrayed as very ordinary and functions as a highly "relatable" character. His personality and behavior are subtler than those of the other three children, whose personality types[49] are more exaggerated. His excellent logic and puzzle-solving skills are of a level people may possess in real life, whereas the talents the other children possess are unbelievably rare, and in some cases physically impossible. His appearance, too, is described as unusually average and unnoticeable (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 7), with the other three standing out more in size (Kate is tall; Constance very short[50]), attributes (Sticky's glasses; Kate's bucket) and color (Sticky has "tea-colored skin"; Constance wears a bright red raincoat). Reynie's "average"-ness in many fields makes him relatable to a broad audience of children. This type of main character is common in children's fiction, and I believe relatability is one of the reasons for this convention. Personally speaking, this type of protagonist can bore me, because I enjoy the experience of understanding perspectives different from my own, and I think this is an important experience for people to have. However, I don't think Reynie's status as the main character inhibits readers from empathizing with the other children, and I believe it has several advantages.

First of all, Reynie goes through a complicated mental struggle and character growth. He frequently doubts himself and sometimes even his alignment. This means he is more relatable through his insecurities (self-

[49] I write "personality types" as a milder alternative for "stereotypes". Sticky, Kate and Constance each behave in a manner that is "typical" for them, perhaps stereotypical. However, I wouldn't call them "stereotypes", since all three of them undergo character development. Also, Constance in particular is someone I wouldn't call a "stereotype", since she is unlike most characters I find in fiction.

[50] Due to her age, as the end of book 1 reveals.

doubt is something many people understand), which can make the reader care more deeply about the outcome of the story. His inner conflicts also cause his focalization to show a wider variety of perspectives than those of the other children might. Reynie is a firm believer in Benedict, but at the same time tempted by Curtain. He is afraid and insecure, but has enough hope and responsibility to engage with situations in a way that furthers the plot.

Furthermore, Reynie's focalization may actually strengthen the reader's empathy towards the other characters, since the reader will gradually understand them along with Reynie. Together with Reynie, the reader sees an outsider's perspective on Constance, and may experience the same prejudices against her that Reynie, Kate and Sticky do. Then, as Reynie gets to know and appreciate Constance better, so may the reader. Once the reader is more familiar with the other three children, they begin to focalize as well, which may further strengthen the reader's empathy and understanding towards them.

4.3. Writing Style and Engagement

The text has other means of controlling the story than only focalization. Aspects such as rhythm and sequential ordering are products of the series' writing style, and so is the interactivity between the text and the reader. These contribute to the engagement between the reader and the text, and I will speak about a couple kinds of engagement.[51]

One form of engagement is suspense. Bal distinguishes three types of suspense: mystery (in which neither the reader nor the character have the

[51] Since choice of writing style is attributed to the text rather than the narrator, that means this section will overlap with Chapter 5, which focuses on the reader and their relationship with the text.

answer to a question that is raised[52]), threat (in which the reader knows the answer and the character doesn't), and secret (when the character knows and the reader does not). Both mystery and threat are frequently used in the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series. The riddles are examples of mystery, as are the details of Curtain's plans, which are slowly revealed. The passage of Martina's focalization I mentioned in section 4.1. is an example of threat, and so are the doom-predicting anticipations at the end of several chapters, such as: "Of course, Reynie could not know what would happen [tomorrow], and this was fortunate. For if he had known, he would never have slept so easily." Although the reader is told very little of what is to come, the expectation that *something* bad is going to happen creates suspense nevertheless.

Another way the text engages with the reader is through the more active role that the writing style gives to them.[53] The most obvious example of this is on the back cover of the first book ("And you, dear reader, can test your wits right alongside them"), but a more implicit version of this style, whereby the reader is addressed (in the fictional text, only indirectly), stays consistent throughout the series. The riddles and puzzles, for example, are presented in such a way that the reader can test their wits alongside the characters. Since these riddles are shown directly (rather than being vaguely described) and the answer is almost never immediately revealed, the reader has both the time and the necessary information to try to figure each riddle out for themselves.

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[52] Bal does not use "mystery" as a term of classification: I use this term to conglomerate her examples "riddle, detective story, search" (165) in one word.

[53] I use the neutral pronoun "they"/"them" for the reader. For the implied reader, I will use the default "he"/"him".

Interactivity is not only present in the writing style, but also in the extra features that the series offers. The first book comes with a word in Morse code on the back cover, and a message from Mr. Benedict on page 486 invites the reader to decipher it in order to find out his first name. The book also contains a quiz that the reader can take to see which Mysterious Benedict Society member they resemble most. Paradoxically, it is neither a personality quiz, nor does it analyze one's problem-solving approaches. Instead, it has "right" and "wrong" multiple-choice answers, and the amount of correctly answered questions determines which character you are.[54] Although the questions asked encompass a few different fields of intelligence, the focus on knowledge and "correct" answers shows a more narrow-minded view of intelligence than the novel does, and it puts the four children in a hierarchy based almost entirely on knowledge: Sticky has the most knowledge, followed by Reynie, Kate, and finally Constance. This disregards the message of the book that all four children are of equal importance to the team. Another extra feature are the games on the *Mysterious Benedict Society* website: although they don't equal the creativity and challenging riddles of the books either, they can form an enjoyable addition to the series much like the quiz does. The separate puzzle book, *Mr. Benedict's Book of Perplexing Puzzles, Elusive Enigmas, and Curious Conundrums*, is a lot more creative and versatile, offering readers more of the engaging riddles and puzzles they enjoyed in the series, and providing a list of hints rather than answers at the back, thus encouraging readers of all levels of puzzle-solving intelligence to find the

[54] This quiz is contradictory on multiple levels. Not only does it stand in contrast to the book's message, as I argue in this section, but the title "Are you Mysterious Benedict Society material?" contradicts the answers, which only tell you which character you resemble, and it is also bizarre that having a certain amount of correct answers means you possess specific, unrelated talents such as "agility".

answer (with or without help). One drawback of the puzzle book, however, is that it still assumes there to be only one correct answer.[55] This bothers me in the riddle "Moocho's Perfect Pie", where the reader is asked what the *smallest* number of cuts is that one can make in order for nine people to get a piece of pie (35). Since the riddle specifically asks for the *smallest* number of cuts, I believe that creative answers such as "zero" (ripping the pie with one's hands) are *better* answers than the "correct" answer, "four".

Lastly, the text engages with the reader in smaller, linguistic ways. Word play stimulates readers' creativity and encourages them to love language, merging education with entertainment. And the relatively advanced vocabulary teaches readers new words, especially in cases where the meaning of a "difficult" word becomes apparent through the context (and thus it is not necessary to consult a dictionary in order to comprehend its meaning). This happens explicitly when Sticky and Reynie answer Constance's question, "What does 'obfuscate' mean?" (99), but there are also instances where synonyms or other context clarify the meaning of a word.

The encouraging of Benedict's ideology, the empathy skills that the reader can cultivate through character-bound focalization, and some of the ways the language interacts with the reader (riddles, creative stimulation, advanced vocabulary) can be considered forms of education exercised by the book series towards the reader, since they can teach them certain skills and ideas.

4.4. Methods of Education Compared

Now that I have discussed some of the text's educational tactics, I will shed a new light on them by putting them in comparison with Benedict and

[55] Like Benedict's riddles rather than his tests.

Curtain's methods of education. We have already seen that as far as ideological *content* goes, the narrator leads the reader to favor Benedict's over Curtain's ideology, showing and telling in various ways that Benedict is "good" and Curtain is "evil". But what happens when we compare the *methods* the text uses to convey this ideology: do they coincide with Benedict's teaching methods, or are there perhaps resemblances with the methods of Mr. Curtain?

I have mentioned Curtain's usage of key phrases in his brainwashing. A catchy sentence summarizes a larger amount of information, and the Whisperer adds a blissful feeling to this information in order for it to be better absorbed by the people. Interestingly enough, one could argue that *The Mysterious Benedict Society* makes use of keywords and key phrases. The word "control", for example, is consistently emphasized in relation to Curtain, both through literal repetition of the word and in terms of content, since everything surrounding Curtain (from his office to his evil plans) seems to reflect the meaning of "control". In this way, the association between Curtain and "control" is "drilled" into the reader's mind, which could lead them to associate "control" with "evil". That way, the mention of such a term in real life could unconsciously provoke negative thoughts in the reader, leading them to feel like there must be something wrong with control. A similar process could give positive associations to keywords from Benedict's ideology, such as "truth". These concepts, however, relate closely to the story, making it more logical that they be repeated. "Free market" and the media (TV and radio), on the other hand (which are also associated with Curtain's ideology), are less integral to the story, which makes me wonder whether they were added into the story in order to subtly place them in a negative

light without making them the focus of the story. Unlike "control" and "truth", however, they are not mentioned enough to be compared with Curtain's "drilling". To call any of this "brainwashing" seems too extreme to me, since any text puts words in a new context, and therefore may change the readers' associations, whether accidentally or deliberately (both of which, I would guess, happen quite often).

Perhaps a more striking similarity between the novel and Curtain's brainwashing is the "feel good" aspect. Just like the Whisperer makes people feel happy by denying their fears, the novel, along with many other works of (children's) fiction, gives readers a similar escape from reality by providing them with a suspenseful story, and a happy ending. Mr. Benedict's ideology, then, *must* be correct, because it makes the reader happy![56] Even the denying of fears can be found in the novel, because the story and narrative techniques show inclusiveness towards the reader. The text implicitly invites the reader to join the Mysterious Benedict Society, thus telling the reader they are intelligent, worthwhile, and not alone. The story itself supports this idea as well, by presenting a diverse group of children who each possess their own special qualities, and by opening up the field of possibilities with the acceptance of multiple solutions to the same problem. Like the Whisperer tells Reynie, then, the novel tells its readers: "you are not alone". Although the inclusive message stands in opposition to Curtain's ideas, it soothes the reader by denying their fears the way the Whisperer does.

However, there is a clear difference between the series' impact on its readers and the Whisperer's impact on its brainwashing victims. This difference lies in the attitude towards free will. The Whisperer's messages are

[56] Literature, then, and especially children's books with happy endings, could be seen as a kind of brainwashing.

broadcasted into people's minds without their permission (*Mysterious Benedict Society* 380), and they are hard to resist (most people can't). This means that any sort of idea can be forced into people's minds without them thinking it over.

Fiction, on the other hand, cannot "force" ideas into people's heads: one story can be interpreted in many ways, and most (if not all) readers possess enough free will not to believe everything they read.[57] Furthermore, *The Mysterious Benedict Society* invites its readers to think, providing puzzles, multiple approaches, and freedom for them to learn independently in their own way. Readers are not assumed to possess the "lack of knowledge" that Perry Nodelman recognizes as a defining feature of childhood in many children's books (Nodelman 78); instead, the series implies an intelligent child who can think for himself, who can *resist* ideologies, and will therefore not thoughtlessly absorb the novel's "messages". Instead, they will give him food for thought, and although they may teach him to be more *critical* of concepts such as control, this doesn't mean he will assume them to be inherently evil.

This is in line with Benedict's methods, because the teacher assumes the student to be his equal and encourages independent thinking. In fact, it lies closer to universal teaching than Benedict's method does, since it adds the extra distance of a fictional universe and the narrator doesn't assume the reader to be his inferior.[58] Perhaps books themselves are the ideal "ignorant schoolmaster".[59]

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[57] And if a reader does just that, he may miss any figurative meaning entirely, believing the story to recount true events.

[58] Though there remain traces of a child-adult opposition as described in Nodelman, and the texts' wordy and all-knowing voice may come across as haughty to some.

[59] Some books may be better equipped for "universal teaching" than others, since highly didactic books exist as well. Alternatively, one could say that

4.5. Conclusion

The narrator plays an educational role in a variety of ways. Through choices in focalization (combined with the books' language), he encourages Benedict's ideology and discourages Curtain's. He also allows the reader to empathize with all four of the children by letting them grow to understand them along with Reynie and then extending the focalization to include the other children. The writing style of the books engages the reader through suspense, interactivity, additional games and puzzles, word play and vocabulary. Although some ideology-related narrative techniques remind me slightly of the Whisperer's brainwashing, it is apparent that the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series' manners of education are significantly closer to Mr. Benedict's than to Mr. Curtain's, teaching the reader to think critically and learn through experience.

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through the distance created by fiction, all ideological content in fiction can be resisted: Nodelman explains how "The Purple Jar", a strongly didactic story, can be interpreted in the opposite way it was intended, judging by readers' angry reactions to the story's supposed "lesson" (21). Reading broadly (a large quantity of stories, ideally differing in ideological content) makes it easier to decide one's own moral interpretation and can therefore get us even closer to Rancière's ideal experience-based learning.

5. Role of the Reader

Learning through experience cannot come from the text only: the reader plays a large role in this process, and different readers react differently to the same text. What kind of reader does the book series assume? How have real readers responded to the series? And what can readers learn from fiction in general and the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series in particular? What makes the series special as a means of educating children and worth recommending?

5.1. The Implied Reader

It is clear that this series, and the first book in particular, has a specific type of reader in mind: a gifted child, who could perhaps have made it through Benedict's tests himself. The underlying assumption of what kind of "gift" the reader may have is more ambiguous, because where does the series draw the line between a "gifted" reader and an ordinary child, unworthy of the Society?

One possible implication is that the reader may match the same criteria as the four children of the story. He is clever, but may be so in one or more of many different ways. He possesses a "love for truth" and feels uncomfortable around television and radio. And he aspires to be brave and kind. I derive this hypothesis from the tests that the children take (what kinds of children does Benedict see as "worthy"?) in combination with the interactive narrative tone, inviting the reader to test himself along with the children. However, the scope of implied readers[60] may be more limited than that, or perhaps the opposite: it may stretch farther to include *every* child.

[60] This term, referring to a reader-construction "implied" by the text, originated from Wayne C. Booth's work and was further developed by Wolfgang Iser. According to Michael Benton, it is one of the few concepts

If the latter is the case, then the book is saying *every* child is gifted in their own way and can become as brave and kind and resourceful as the four children in the story. The wide scope of talents and types of intelligence within the Society can make it feel as if everyone is included. Although Benedict's tests could be used as an argument against this hypothesis, since they explicitly exclude people, they are actually not as exclusive as they appear at first sight: not only do they approve of multiple approaches, but there is also leeway for exceptions to be made. Kate and Constance don't figure out the answers to the second quiz (and Sticky doesn't finish on time), but their display of their talents awards them a pass anyway. This leaves room for readers to fantasize about how they could show their talents, whether they could have "passed" or not. And perhaps the narrator's interactive tone is not meant to "assume" that a typically intelligent child picked up this book, but rather to assure whoever is reading this that they, too, are intelligent. Strangely enough, the results to the quiz at the end of book 1 are another sign the series may intend to include everyone: even though it appears to install a hierarchy between the four children, all four possible results are positive descriptions of each member of the Society. To top it off, underneath these results is the text: "Congratulations! You're an official member of the Mysterious Benedict Society" (506).

At the same time, one may also explore the possibility that the implied reader is a lot more limited, perhaps more so than the conditions for joining the Society. For the implied reader is not only expected to be gifted and partake in the puzzle-solving, he is also expected to identify with Reynie Muldoon (and thus ideally be more similar to him, than, for example,

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from text-oriented reader-response theory that has received some attention in relation to children's literature. (Benton 83)

Constance), and what's more, to read and enjoy the book(s). While Constance is sometimes irritated by difficult words[61] and Kate has other priorities than reading, the reader is implied to be a more bookish person with a liking for longer, more unusual words than most children use: a Reynie, perhaps, or a Sticky or a Nicholas, but probably not a Constance or a Kate. In the prequel especially, books are depicted as a rare treasure, and difficult words as something fun to learn, and it seems the reader is meant to share Nicholas's opinions.[62] The series' wordy book and chapter titles, in addition, seem purposefully marketed towards a specific audience of book- and word-loving children.

Due to these wordy titles, the emphasis on puzzle-solving, and the encouragement towards reading and learning new words, I do believe the series has a more traditionally clever and book-loving reader in mind, perhaps someone similar to Reynie. At the same time, I do not believe the series excludes other readers. On the contrary, I think the ambiguity I noticed when comparing my hypotheses functions as a tool: while some of the details imply a specific type of ideal reader, the diversity (especially in types of intelligence) among the characters leads to the series remaining inclusive towards many other sorts of readers as well.

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[61] This is the case, at least, in book 1. In book 3, on the other hand, she uses a difficult word that she looked up in the dictionary in one of her poems (381), so it is possible her opinions on advanced vocabulary have changed.

[62] Remarkably enough, young Nicholas prefers to read nonfiction over fiction. This is unusual to find in a fictional story: although bookish *side characters* often enjoy studying, the book-loving *main characters* almost always love reading fiction and fantasizing about other worlds (contrast Hermione from the *Harry Potter* series with Maggie from *Inkheart*).

5.2. Readers' Responses

Children's books, however, are read by a larger audience than the one they assume. Not only do children outside the primary target group read these books, but teenagers and adults do as well.

I will examine readers' responses, primarily from Amazon, with a couple additions from Goodreads and my own connections. Most of these responses are from adults or teenagers. Nevertheless, they make an interesting object of study, not only to give a scope of reactions to the series that may be similar for children, but also to highlight the ways in which adults (much more than most child readers) are concerned with the educational functions of children's literature.

A frequent concern that is typical to adults is that of "appropriateness".[63] This occasionally manifests itself in positive reviews, such as that of user J. McD on Amazon, who claims that "So many adult viewers have missed the point: this fantasy speaks vividly to the 'tween". J. McD explains that "this book speaks beautifully well to 'tweens and their hopes and fears about fitting in, being "normal", being nerdy, the possibility of being a hero, etc." and applauds the way *The Mysterious Benedict Society* speaks "masterfully" to "the 9-12 year old reader: You are smart, you have unique talents and gifts, you CAN change the world, AND family are the folks who love and stick with you (blood relations or not)". More often, however, discussions of "appropriateness" remain absent in positive reviews, while being a recurring complaint in negative ones. User Nina A. Schwartz says the book is "too disturbing to be a good read for children". Two other Amazon users, wolf-uwe ostermann and zammaz, take this claim even further, arguing that the

[63] Some even proofread books before they let their children read them, to make sure they are "appropriate".

series teaches the reader to "turn the other cheek" towards abuse. The former is referring to the role of the Ten Men in *Perilous Journey*, claiming that "in reality any healthy kid would break down with multiple traumata for the rest of his life" after enduring the Ten Men's torment, that the "good ones" win "just by suffering and enduring", and that the only message of the second book is "If someone hits you on one cheek, offer him the other." Both Schwartz and ostermann's reviews imply that reading about danger and violence may be harmful to children, either by frightening them or by teaching them "wrong" ways to react to violence. zammaz's argument comes from a different angle: this user feels that the *good guys* are using techniques that "predators use to groom their intended victims" in real life. zammaz does not want children thinking it is "acceptable or intriguing" if adults isolate them, require them to be "secretive" and tell them they are "special" and that "only that adult could help them". This implies children cannot distinguish what is acceptable behavior within fiction from what is acceptable in real life.

Although these points of critique are brought up, the majority of reactions to the series are positive: the first book rates 4.16 out of 5 stars on Goodreads and 4.7 stars on Amazon, and none of the books in the series (including the prequel and the puzzle book) are rated under 4.1 stars on either website. Several readers including my father and sister explicitly mentioned enjoying the children's inventive solutions to problems, and my sister added that it was interesting how different characters solve them differently, which I personally found eye-opening and consider one of the best parts of the series. There are readers who have developed an interest in codes and puzzles through the series, such as Amazon user Helen and her daughter, who sent "secret messages" to each other and made Morse code necklaces of their own

names "using round beads and bar beads". User Mslaura was so engaged with the puzzles and riddles in the series that she "won't read ahead unless I sit there thinking about it after awhile". These sorts of reactions show how the text's intended engagement and encouragement of skill development applies to real readers: in these cases, its education "succeeds".

5.3. Benefits of Reading *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

This brings us to the educational benefits of this series and the skills I have already touched upon in Chapter 4. Reading fiction in general, and this series in particular, can encourage the reader to learn or improve certain skills independently.

With its frequent riddles, puzzles and sticky situations, the most prominent skill one can develop specifically from this series is problem-solving. The variation in types of puzzles and difficulty level render them accessible to a wide variety of readers. The possible plurality of solutions opens accessibility and creative stimulation even further: readers are encouraged to think beyond the "obvious" and given the hope of trying again if one solution fails.

Another, perhaps related, kind of thinking that the series stimulates is critical thinking. Readers are taught to analyze their surroundings critically and pose questions without taking authority's word for granted. They are stimulated to find "truth" for themselves and separate it from dishonest "nonsense". This teaching happens through the ideological content of the story, as I explained in Chapter 4, but also through language. Letting readers notice the logical flaws in the "free market drill" (see section 2.2.), for example, may allow them to recognize such flaws in subtler contexts as well. The absoluteness of truth as such, however, is not questioned in this series:

one is expected to find "truth" through evidence or natural instinct (what feels "right").

The language used in the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series is simple enough that it can appeal to a broader child audience. Even so, it frequently sprinkles in vocabulary that most children's books avoid, using words such as "mortification" (124), "intermittently" (133) and "protuberant" (318), which works to expand the reader's vocabulary (particularly when their meanings are clarified).[64]

But fiction is more than just a scholarly exercise. Fiction tells a story, and brings characters to life. And stepping into the minds of these characters teaches readers something too: empathy. I explained in Chapter 4 how Reynie's focalization allows the reader to understand the motivations of a variety of characters. The passages focalized through other characters further strengthen this exercise in empathy: by peeking into several very different minds, the reader can explore their worries, ways of thinking, and approaches to life. For example, we see Kate's approach to crying in *Perilous Journey* 249: "Kate had always thought crying an acceptable thing for others to do, but she didn't particularly care to be seen doing it herself, so she leaned out of the office door, pretending to check on her friends." Without Kate's focalization, readers may think her to be confident at all times and perhaps not to cry at all: this way, they can see her weak spots as well as her opinion on crying, which she never voices in dialogue.

[64] In addition, young Nicholas in the prequel enjoys memorizing the dictionary and, when reading other books, looking up words he doesn't know. This is presented as a positive educational experience, which may encourage readers to practice it as well (though as someone who dislikes interrupting the flow of a book to look up a word, I found this implicit encouragement irritating and prefer the approach of the trilogy).

The dangerous situations that the Society members find themselves in can be an educational source for children as well. This ties back to Barbara Richter's essay on danger in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In the case of both books, adults have voiced concerns that the situations the characters land in may be too heavy, too violent or otherwise "inappropriate".[65] This content may disturb children, or, on the contrary, may trivialize disturbing topics for the sake of cheap entertainment. Richter, however, sees danger in children's literature as a learning experience that is advantageous to children and helps them "work through the challenges in their own lives" (329). These challenges include children's *fears*, which is particularly interesting in relation to *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, since fear and overcoming it play a large role. Unlike *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where *antagonistic* children experience danger and violence, the main characters themselves are put through frightening and violent situations. Furthermore, they manage to overcome their fears and improve both their own and other people's situations, resulting in a happy ending. I would argue that the character growth and happy ending are extra advantageous for children's development, because not only are readers able to process their own fear of danger in a cathartic way by reading about it, but the positive end result can help boost their confidence and bravery, since the frightening danger is resolved. Culley suggests something of this sort when he claims Dahl's books are "of use to children who are, or have been, caught up in similar situations" and may "satisfy a subconscious need."[66] (67) A happy end, then, is not merely "brainwashing" or "wish fulfillment": it can strengthen the reader

[65] I am speaking of the negative reviewers on Amazon, as well as the critics Culley and Richter mention.
[66] The latter being a quote Culley takes from M. R. Marshall's *Introduction to the World of Children's Books*.

psychologically. The character development in this particular series prevents the happy ending from being a blind wish fulfillment like those the Whisperer uses; instead, the series can encourage children to overcome their fears by confronting them. I am reminded of the instance in which the Whisperer accidentally serves a positive function for Reynie when it tells him: "*Don't worry, you will never betray your friends. You are brave enough.*" (442) The Whisperer is meant to instantly soothe one's fears, but with these words, it accidentally motivates Reynie to confront them instead.

5.4. A Unique Object of Study

The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series illustrates the many ways in which children can learn from reading books, and this makes it a valuable object of study, as well as a recommendation for children to read. Discussions of the educational functions of children's literature frequently concern ideological and moral content, when there is so much more that children can learn from books.

Another point of educational interest is the subtle character development throughout the series. This plays into an observation that Perry Nodelman makes about children's series, where the protagonist "learns" something or "develops" his character in each story, but never truly learns or develops, because in the next story, he will be back to the same character he was at the beginning, making similar mistakes and learning similar "lessons" from them (76).[67] On the one hand, repetition and recurring "typical" characteristics of a character help the series be memorable (and sometimes

[67] Nodelman uses six exemplary children's texts to draw conclusions about children's literature in general. Seeing that Nodelman observes this "space for a similar story to be told again" (in other words, room for circular character "development") in all five texts that have sequels, we may assume the implication that this may be true for children's series in general.

entertaining) and connect the volumes in a series to each other. On the other hand, authentic character development is more realistic as well as more interesting to me: seeing the same character make the same mistakes in every book can become boring or even frustrating. The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series compromises these two advantages into one: character development continues consistently throughout the series *without* removing iconic aspects of character. The characters remain recognizable and able to make similar mistakes, while at the same time visibly maturing. If we look at Kate Wetherall, she starts out with two big character flaws: her overconfidence, and a tough, egocentric "solo" mentality, where she expects to operate independently and places herself in the center of attention as "The Great Kate Weather Machine" with the other children as sidekicks (144). In book 3, her overconfidence remains, causing the entire group to get captured, but she also uses this optimism as a weapon to empower the other (more pessimistic) children. Moreover, she is no longer afraid to rely on her friends, and her self-centeredness has disappeared. She is able to empathize with Reynie when he feels responsible for the entire team, and she reassures him that this is not the case and motivates the team to work together (*Prisoner's Dilemma* 281). In the case of Sticky, his character development is a chain reaction with ups and downs: after he learns to be braver and have a bit more self-esteem in book 1, he struggles with his self-esteem in a different way in book 2, because his confidence boost and the realization of how talented he is cause him to show off his vast knowledge, to the annoyance of the other characters, who, in turn, make him self-conscious again, though his newfound bravery remains. The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series proves that character development and iconic "typical" characters can co-exist. While remaining memorable (or

"variational" in Nodelman's words), the series' educational content is strengthened by the fact that the "lessons learned" permanently (and therefore more convincingly) affect the characters.

5.5. Conclusion

The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series implies an ambiguously "gifted" child reader. In examining reviews, I observed adult involvement with questions of education in children's literature, in particular the potential negative effects of danger and violence. Nevertheless, readers can learn (and have learned) a variety of skills from the series, and even the "disturbing" danger may be psychologically beneficial. These benefits, along with the series' use of character development, make it a recommended read and an interesting object of study. And although slight traces of hierarchy remain, the focus on multiple kinds of intelligence makes it, in some ways, even more freeing than Rancière's "universal teaching", because while Rancière believes every person possesses the same intelligence (and implies that those who do not succeed may simply be lazy, 55)[68], the *Mysterious Benedict Society* tells readers that everyone is equally special in a *different* way.

[68] Rancière affirms that "it is the lack of will that causes intelligence to make mistakes." (55) On the same page, he specifies this "lack of will" with sentences such as "The mind's original sin is [...] distraction" and "The first vice is laziness", implying that mistakes in people's intelligence are caused by laziness, distraction and impatience.

6. Conclusion

I have analyzed a theoretical framework surrounding children's literature and education, in which to place my own study. In this study, I have examined the theme of education within the *Mysterious Benedict Society* on many levels.

On the level of the story, I compared the twin (but opposite) educational figures of Curtain and Benedict. Curtain's teaching is oppressive and stultifying, with a narrow definition of "intelligence" and a wish to control everyone. Benedict is a friendlier, more experience-based teacher: though he gives his students more of a guideline than Rancière would approve of, he also offers them the experience of learning independently with room for teamwork and creative solutions. He sees that talent and intelligence come in many forms and allows different students to learn in different ways.

Next, I examined the relationship between the text and the reader. The narrator's choices in focalization and the book's language appear to "educate" the reader, privileging Benedict's ideology over Curtain's. In addition, fiction in general and this series in particular can help readers develop various skills in an experience-based way.

My study contributes to existing studies on children's literature in several ways. It contrasts Culley's text with Richter's to broaden the perspective, shedding a light on ideas of "appropriateness" and safety as well as potential psychological benefits of reading about potentially "inappropriate" themes. It also engages with Perry Nodelman's book, affirming some of his observations (regarding focalization and identification, for example) and challenging others (compare the more advanced language used in this series to the "simple" language common in children's literature). In some cases, such as that of character development, the series even finds a

midway, defying a generic convention without removing the essence of its functions.

I also showed that my study and its object reflect on general questions about education. The *Mysterious Benedict Society* series demonstrates how one educator can be intellectually engaging and fun while another can be boring or even oppressive, and how "learning" encompasses more than just a conventional school system. Learning can be a game, or a life-changing experience. The different types of education presented in the series enable me to reflect on these methods in relation to theoretical texts on education such as Rancière's.[69] In comparing Curtain's methods to the ones Rancière mentions, I am able to pinpoint certain problems that make Curtain's teaching oppressive. And by comparing Benedict's methods to the ones in Rancière, I not only explain the advantages that Benedict's method and "universal teaching" share, but I can also use their comparison to better understand details that make me feel uncomfortable in both types of education: the moments where Benedict seems manipulative, and the moments where Rancière seems to believe that equal intelligence means every human has the exact same potential (as Rancière says himself, humans are not sheep!).

With this study, I hope to have engaged in a nuanced manner with both fictional and theoretical texts, and to have extended the discussion surrounding children's literature by covering a broad range of educational themes and functions, from Benedict's wisdom to Curtain's whispers and from ideological implications to the playground of skills that books have to offer.

[69] And in relation to my own educational preferences and experiences, although I do not discuss them in this thesis.

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