

Use of Critical Discourse Analysis to Explore the Representation of Parents as Disciplinarians in Jeff Kinney's *The Last Straw*: An Interdisciplinary Teaching-Oriented Approach

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Abstract

*This article is principally teaching-oriented, aimed at demonstrating the use of Norman Fairclough's (1999) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the classroom. It is intended for an introductory course in American Studies with a focus on the teaching of literature. To support the interdisciplinary nature of the method, a sociological framework has been selected. The paper highlights the relevance and applicability of CDA in teaching literature by using Jeff Kinney's *The Last Straw* as a sample text. The rationale behind the choice of this text is the popularity and the availability of the book. The article demonstrates the step-by-step approach of CDA, i.e., thematic selection, coding, and interpretation based on close reading to argue that such an analysis enables students to unveil textual themes which are not explicitly discussed by the author. Using teacher-oriented approach as the main lens, the article provides sample assignments as well as methodological recommendations for the application of CDA in teaching textual analysis in literary studies.*

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, interdisciplinary teaching,

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1. Introduction

This paper is intended for an introductory course in American Studies. Its purpose is to demonstrate the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research method for a sample text, *The Last Straw*, from the widely popular children's series *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney. In what follows, we provide the rationale both for selecting CDA as a research method and *The Last Straw* as a sample text for analysis; a review of research on the representation of parents in children's literature; a demonstration of the application of CDA on *The Last Straw*; samples of assignments for using CDA; and conclusion and methodological recommendations.

We selected CDA as the focus of this paper because it is currently one of the most popular methods of textual analysis. Therefore, students of linguistics and literature need to know how to use it. CDA is an interdisciplinary analytical method which uses a variety of approaches such as historical, feminist, sociological etc., to study a variety of texts that are seen as social discourses displaying hidden hierarchies and power relations. We use Norman Fairclough's (1999) model of CDA, specifically the interrelated dimensions of textual analysis and sociological analysis. This combination allows us to explore the selected text from multiple perspectives, e.g., textual description, literary interpretation, and sociological explanation; therefore, it is in line with the interdisciplinary nature of courses in American Studies. For demonstration purposes, the paper uses CDA to answer the following research question: How does Greg, the main character in *The Last Straw*, construct the roles of his parents as disciplinarians? CDA is applied to the text using the following

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step-by-step approach: first, we select the passages in which Greg mentions his parents as disciplinarians; next, we identify the words and phrases explicitly expressing Greg's attitudes; finally, we look for implicit assumptions behind the explicit attitudes.

To demonstrate the application of CDA, we selected the novel, *The Last Straw*, the third book in the series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, published in 2009. The choice was determined by the popularity and availability of the series. We believe that *The Last Straw* is both accessible and entertaining to engage undergraduate students. The first print installment of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* was published in 2007 followed by 16 books, with the 17th book scheduled to be released in October 2022 (Jones). The series is in the form of a diary written by a middle-school student Greg Heffley who chronicles his daily life and illustrates the writing with cartoons. The series has enjoyed a huge commercial success. As of 2021, about 250 million copies had been sold globally, which makes it one of the best-selling book-series of all time. It has been translated in 64 languages and has gone through 76 editions throughout the world (Kantor). It has generated over \$500 million in revenue (*Diary*). The *Diary* has received critical acclaim: it has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 15 years (Jones); for nine years it has either won or has been nominated for Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award; and in 2010 it received the Most Popular Book Around the World Award (*Diary*).

1.1 Delimitation

This paper did not use a visual lens—a dimension which is included in Fairclough's model and is explicitly present in *The Last Straw*. The reason for this is that this is not a research-based paper

that analyzes *The Last Straw* as a primary text; rather, it is a teaching-oriented paper that uses *The Last Straw* as a sample text to illustrate how CDA can be used as an interdisciplinary method in an American Studies classroom. The text is, therefore, used for demonstration purposes only.

2. Literature Review

A key to the popularity of a bestseller is its relatable themes. One such theme in the *Diary* is the American family; Greg's family consists of himself, his parents, and his two brothers. This paper demonstrates how we can use CDA to interpret Greg's representation of his parents in *The Last Straw*. The purpose of this literature review is to support the interdisciplinary nature of CDA as it is taught in a higher education classroom. It combines linguistic, literary, and sociological approaches to interpret Greg's representation of his parents in one of the parental roles as identified in sociological research—parents as disciplinarians.

2.1 CDA, Interdisciplinarity, and Pedagogy

This study is interested in exploring interdisciplinary pedagogical practices for teaching of literature in an American studies classroom. To achieve this aim, Critical Discourse analysis, which is an interdisciplinary approach by its nature, has been chosen as a method. Chouliaraki and Fairclough consider CDA as an integration of various theories, especially bringing into dialogue linguistic theories, on the one hand, and social theories, on the other. Such fusion paves the path for some new insights into the study of the relationship between discourse and society. This methodology is explained as “the concept of ‘operationalisation’ [which] entails working in a transdisciplinary way where the logic of one discipline (for example, sociology) can be ‘put to work’ in

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the development of another (for example, linguistics)”. The “intercession of the linguistic and the social”, as cited above, is very much relevant for the theoretical foundation in CDA (16). The major issue of ‘operationalization’ from the perspective of research is usually associated with this mediation problem. CDA practitioners note that the multifaceted relationship between language and society cannot be studied effectively if linguistic and sociological approaches are not integrated (Wodak, 12).

Many studies use the CDA approach to address various issues related to pedagogy. Benesch, in the context of EFL, opines that after 1990s, many teachers became interested in teaching literature critically. Freire's approach of teaching, as discussed in Benesch, provided an opportunity for foreign language learners to be aware of the socially ingrained power politics which are in play in various texts. Concepts like identity, religion, ethnicity, and power politics are introduced to sensitize students to the role of language and different social practices (81-85). Cots also introduced the CDA approach in a foreign language class where learners were required to develop three types of competences simultaneously: user, analyst, and teacher. Additionally, based on Fairclough’s analytical framework, they were asked to perform three types of activities. The researcher aims to show that selection of teachers or choice of material developers can also be critically analyzed. The major goal in conducting this study was to recommend CDA as a complementary model for studying linguistic use and for planning language related activities (336-345).

With the use of the tools provided by critical discourse analysis, Roger and Mosley define, interpret, and illustrate how members of the teacher education book club exploit a variety of discursive and material resources for racial literacy; predominantly, to resolve

anti-racist issues presented in the book. In other words, how the members maneuver the club's discourse. It is an established fact that racial literacy is developed out of critical analysis of the use of language and semiotic analysis. Through such practices, students can be educated about issues related to racism (107-131). The issue related to gender and inequality has also been raised by Esmaeili and Arabmofrad whose work uses the CDA approach to examine the representation of gender in *Family and Friends level 4, 5 and 6*. Van Leeuwen's representational framework and Halliday and Matthiessen's Transitivity Models are employed to explore hidden ideology as constructed. The results demonstrate a "sexist attitude" in favor of male social actors in which they are described more frequently than females and also have more activity. Furthermore, it is discovered that there is a deliberate effort to elude predominant female stereotypes in substantial parts of the textbooks. Besides, while the housewife roles are generally not attributed to females, they are nevertheless less visible as compared to their male counterparts. The study may be considered instrumental in bringing awareness among policy makers, teachers, and textbook developers regarding a reconsideration of equality/inequality and gender representation issues in teaching material for better prospects of learning (55-61).

The above cited studies provide a deeper understanding of critical discourse analysis and its link to pedagogy and sociology. The current study is interested in using the same critical approach in teaching of literature as part of an interdisciplinary American studies course by integrating linguistic orientation with sociological practices. The study highlights the linguistic choices made in the text to represent parental roles.

2.2 Research on the Representation of Parental Roles in Children's Literature

As the study has a sociological consideration, therefore, this section of literature review will provide a basic understanding of the American family system and parental representation in American literature. In current sociological research, there exist two major views on the American family. According to the first view, the American family is rapidly declining. It has moved away from the position that places children at the center. Instead, parents are more willing to invest time, energy, and money in their own education and jobs. As a result, the situation for children “has ... grown progressively worse” (Popenoe 528). They receive less care and companionship from their parents; their socialization has increasingly become the function of primary and secondary childcare, peer groups, and social media; and children more often suffer from family-induced trauma as a result of parental divorce, neglect, and abuse (Haskins and Sawhill 8-34).

According to the alternative view, the American family is changing rather than declining. These changes are manifested in the following. First, parents' child rearing strategies have changed from being child-centered to being mutually inclusive. For example, parents are increasingly involving their children in their own leisure activities (Bianchi et al., 2006). Second, fathers are ever more engaged in child rearing; “married fathers' time with children is higher than it has ever been and increased substantially after 1985” (Bianchi et al. 3). Lastly, both parents engage in multitasking to enable themselves to spend enough time with their children.

The portrayal of the family in children's literature is crucially important because it is a major source of information about family

and gender roles. However, the images distributed by children's literature are not necessarily accurate: "a culture lag may prevail between society's material conditions and its cultural representation" (Levy187). DeWitt et al., investigated the portrayal of parental roles in children's picture books published in the United States between 1902-2001. The study asserts that children's literature endorses the stereotypical representation of parental roles; however, it explores whether such portrayal has undergone a certain evolution over the period of the last hundred years. The study finds that over time, contrary to expectation, no significant progress and evolution can be observed in the depiction of the roles of fathers and mothers. The father has been represented as being predominantly involved in the activities outside the home as the breadwinner while the mother has been represented as the homemaker. The study concludes that children's literature reinforces the traditional representation of parents, and hence no significant change has been observed in the roles assigned to each parent in these texts (89-106).

Byerly notes that in literature various types of relationships are depicted but one that stands out is the parent-child relationship. A child is greatly affected by the caring or abusive behavior of the parents and, consequently, his identity is shaped based on those pleasant or negative childhood experiences. The study closely examines various writing styles and representations of parent-child interaction in *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides, "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden, *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. The study concludes that the traditional ways of expressing love led the children to grow more confident as demonstrated in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Parental love depicted in *Girl* and "Those Winter Sundays" is untraditional and hence is never acknowledged by the children. The abusive parent-child

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relationship as demonstrated in *The Bluest Eye* and *In Bastard out of Carolina* causes psychological and emotional trauma for the children, who can never overcome those childhood maltreatments for the rest of their lives (2-41).

Tanjim (2016) discusses the depiction of motherhood in American literature by women writers. The study demonstrates that there can be observed a shift in the representation of mothers in fiction as the birth of a new woman can be witnessed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Evelyn Scott's *The Narrow House*. The study considers shared motherhood as an opportunity for these new women to flourish. It also shows that motherhood does not take away the sexuality of a woman (5-40). O'Leary (2008) divides the role of mother in five distinct categories as depicted in American literature. These categories are the self-martyred mother, the self-absorbed mother, the self-sacrificing mother, the child-sacrificing mother, and the substitute mother (4-7).

The current study is interested in exploring parental roles as depicted in *The Last Straw* by employing the multidisciplinary approach of CDA. The study is a valuable contribution to the pedagogical practices of literature in general and in case of an American studies classroom in particular. Many studies have employed CDA as a model for analyzing literary texts; however, this study adds to this body of work by including the practical application of CDA with a specific focus on its implications and recommendations for teaching. The literature on the topic discussed above, provides a brief overview of the American family system and the parenting roles as depicted in literature but how these roles are constructed and realized by the use of language, is a gap which this study addresses.

We base our CDA analysis of *The Last Straw* on the parental

categories proposed by Doherty et.al., and Ihinger-Tallman, et.al. They divide parental roles into five distinct categories, that is, parents as disciplinarians, parents as companions, parents as nurturers, parent as providers, and parents as caregivers (Doherty, et.al., 277-292; Ihinger-Tallman, et.al., 169-192; DeWitt 18-19). It has been argued that the role of the nurturer is always assigned to the mother while the father is considered a companion and a playmate of the children (Marsiglio 986). Father takes children out for recreational purposes and encourages the children to take part in physical games. To demonstrate the use of CDA in exploring the representation of parental roles in *The Last Straw*, we have selected the parental role of disciplinarians.

3. Application of CDA to the Representation of Parents as Disciplinarians

In order to answer the research question about how Greg constructs the roles of his parents as disciplinarians in his life, we selected the relevant passages that refer to his parents as disciplinarians; identified words and phrases that reflect Greg's explicit attitude; and tried to uncover implicit assumptions behind the explicit attitude. Table 1 shows that Greg's view on his mother as a disciplinarian is different from his view on his father; he knows that while his mother would "teach him lessons" to correct his unwanted behavior, his father would impose direct bans and punishments. Greg is also aware that if his fault is serious enough for immediate correction, his mother would not inflict the punishment herself but wait for his father to do so.

Table 1. Mother as a Disciplinarian

Textual Evidence	Signal Words	Interpretation
“I’m sure Mom thinks I’m the one stealing the snacks, but believe me, I already learned my lesson about doing THAT. Last year I took treats out of the bin, but I totally paid the price for it.” (62)	“learned my lesson,” “totally paid the price”	Greg knows that his mother will teach him a lesson for his unwanted behavior. The lesson was that she substituted a package of croutons for the snack he liked.
“I told Mom it wasn’t fair someone else was eating the treats and I was having to suffer. But she said she wasn’t going to go grocery shopping until the end of the week, and that I’d just have to ‘make do’ until then.” (63)	“have to” “make do”	Greg knows that his mother will teach him a lesson for his unwanted behavior. The lesson is that she will not provide him with the snacks he wants (although she will give him the less desired snacks).

<p>“Today, when I got home from school, Mom was waiting for me, and she didn’t look too happy. It turns out the school sent home mid-quarter reports cards, and she got the mail before I could intercept it. Mom showed me the report card, and it wasn’t pretty. Then she said we were gonna wait for Dad to get home to see what HE thought.” (69-70)</p>	<p>“she didn’t look too happy,” “we were gonna wait for Dad,” “to see what HE thought”</p>	<p>Greg is aware that if his fault is serious and needs immediate correction, his mother will not inflict the punishment herself but will wait for his father to decide what to do.</p>
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Father as a Disciplinarian

Textual evidence	Signal Words	Interpretation
<p>“The other day, after Dad woke me up and told me to get ready for school, I accidentally fell back asleep. Believe me, that’s the last time I’ll make THAT mistake.” (5).</p>	<p>“THAT mistake”</p>	<p>Greg is afraid of making his father mad at him and tries to avoid it.</p>
<p>“Yesterday I came up with a pretty good way to get some extra sleep time without making Dad mad.” (6)</p>	<p>“without making Dad mad”</p>	<p>Greg is afraid of making his father angry at him and tries to avoid it.</p>

<p>“I don’t think he’ll [Dad] be satisfied until every teenager on the planet gets sent off to juvenile hall of Alcatraz or something. And that includes Rodrick.” (16)</p>	<p>“juvenile hall” “Alcatraz”</p>	<p>Greg knows his father’s punishment can be severe.</p>
<p>“...when I was a kid there wasn’t any of the ‘getting out of bed’ stuff. I did it once or twice, but Dad put a stop to it real quick.” (17)</p>	<p>“put a stop to it real quick”</p>	<p>Greg is aware of his father’s immediate retribution for unwanted behavior.</p>
<p>“The thing I am worried about is that Dad is going to ban our after-school naps. I’m starting to get the feeling he’s sick of waking the two of us up for dinner every night.” (48)</p>	<p>“ban” “sick of waking the two of us up”</p>	<p>Greg is aware of his father’s immediate retribution for unwanted behavior. He can sense his father’s negative attitude.</p>
<p>“Dad wasn’t any help, either. When I complained to him, he just made up a penalty for anyone caught stealing snacks, which was ‘no drums and no video games for a week.’” (64)</p>	<p>“penalty”</p>	<p>Greg is aware of his father’s immediate payback for unwanted behavior.</p>
<p>“Man, waiting for Dad to get home when you’re in trouble is the worst.” (70)</p>	<p>“the worst”</p>	<p>Greg knows his father’s punishment can be severe.</p>

Greg's perception of his parents as disciplinarians presented in Table 1 is in tune with the traditional view: while mothers teach lessons, fathers inflict punishments. As endorsed in *The Last Straw*, this view is stereotypical and has not changed for some time. In their study, DeWitt, Cready, & Seward investigated the portrayal of parental roles in children's picture books published in the U.S. between 1902 and 2001. The study aims to explore whether stereotypical portrayals of parental roles has undergone a certain evolution over the past hundred years. The study concludes that contrary to expectation, no significant evolution can be observed in the depiction of father and mother roles (89-106).

However, regarding the parental role as disciplinarians, several episodes in *The Last Straw* break away from the stereotypes. One such episode is when Greg catches Dad stealing snacks (82-83). He is about to "give Dad a piece of [his] mind" (82), therefore, reversing the roles of a disciplinarian and the one being disciplined, but then they hear Mom coming down the stairs into the basement. They realize that now they are both going to be disciplined and hastily retreat.

Especially interesting are the series of episodes when Greg is not certain why his father seems to be displeased with his behavior. Greg is confused because instead of inflicting a direct punishment, his father tries to discipline Greg indirectly by "teaching a lesson," therefore, reverting to the "mother's way" of disciplining. Moreover, he never tells Greg directly what he is displeased about. The first episode is when Greg comes to the kitchen table in his mom's bathrobe. He says, "Good morning!", but his Dad "seem[s] extra grumpy" (7). Next, Greg figures out a way to become even more comfortable while wearing Mom's warm and fluffy bathrobe, and we see a picture of him standing on the air vent clad

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in the bathrobe and obviously displaying delight “AAAAAAAHHHH!” (38). He doesn’t think “Dad really approved of [his] idea” (38). After that Greg never sees the bathrobe again; he suspects Dad either hid it or gave it away to Goodwill. Finally, when Greg catches his father stealthily eating junk food in the basement, his father is interested to know what Greg is doing “buried in a pile of Mom’s underwear in the middle of the night” (82). Greg interprets his father’s displeasure in these three episodes in his own naïve way, but the reader can tell that the real reason is the father’s concern about the possibility of Greg displaying gay features.

In this connection, one could observe that when translating *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* into different languages, certain restrictions are imposed so that the series aligns with the values and norms of the target language and culture. In his study, Al-Jabri explores how changes were made in the translation of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to make it more appropriate for Arab children. He demonstrates that the translators employed different strategies including substitution, omission, and cultural adaptations to cleanse the content of the original (187-202). It would be interesting to see how the “Mom’s bathrobe” episode and the “Mom’s underwear” episode are rendered, if at all, in certain translations.

Using the above demonstration of how the CDA can be used as a method of reading and teaching a literary text, the instructor in an undergraduate interdisciplinary American Studies class can develop a series of assignments. Following are some sample assignments on how to use CDA with reference to *The Last Straw*. These assignments can be used as models in an interdisciplinary American Studies course when analyzing literary or journalistic texts.

Assignment 1: The CDA analysis above goes as far as p. 70 of *The Last Straw*. Analyze the rest of the text using CDA as a lens; fill out the table and discuss whether Greg's construction of his parents' roles as disciplinarians is largely stereotypical. Discuss the episodes in which such representation is less stereotypical.

Assignment 2: Select a different parental role, for example, parents as nurturers. Using CDA, discuss how this parental role is represented in *The Last Straw*.

Assignment 3: *The Last Straw* has been translated into 64 languages. Some episodes, such as the "Mom's bathrobe" episode and "Mom's underwear" episode, may be inappropriate for certain cultures. Find other episodes in *The Last Straw* which may be culturally inappropriate in a children's book in your country. Discuss what choices the translators have when interpreting such episodes for children.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper demonstrates how Critical Discourse Analysis can be used as an interdisciplinary method of textual analysis through deploying the selected text, Jeff Kinney's *The Last Straw*, the third book in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. CDA is currently one of the most widely used methods of textual analysis; therefore, it is indispensable for students of linguistics and literature to be well-versed in this method, especially due to its interdisciplinary nature. As such, the application of CDA in this paper has followed the principle of interdisciplinarity by combining the practical application of CDA with the review of research on parental representation in children's literature. Below are several recommendations for teaching critical discourse analysis as a method of interdisciplinary analysis and research in an

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undergraduate American Studies class with a concentration on literature:

- To demonstrate the use of CDA, select an age-appropriate text which is both accessible to and interesting for students.
- Develop a research question and focus on the research question in the application of CDA.
- Conduct a literature review or create a list of sources to relate CDA to an appropriate field of study (e.g., psychology, sociology, politics, etc.).
- After the demonstration, open the class to discussion or create assignments for students to practice CDA independently or in groups.

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