

# Exploring the “Critical” in Critical Content Analysis of Children’s Literature

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Content analysis is a flexible research method for analyzing texts and describing and interpreting the written artifacts of a society (White & Marsh, 2006). The content of text data is interpreted through a process of coding and identifying themes or patterns, with the actual approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, and interpretive analyses to systematic quantitative textual analyses (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). Since content analysis involves making inferences from texts to the contexts of their use by using analytical constructs derived from theories or research, researchers adapt content analysis to their research questions and develop a range of techniques and approaches for analyzing text (Krippendorff, 2003).

Despite the frequent use of qualitative content analysis as a research method to examine children’s literature as text, we found that the procedures for this analysis are often not described in detail in published studies and are discussed only briefly in methodology textbooks. In particular, we are interested in procedures for critical content analyses that focus on locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequality. Our struggles to define the methodology and to locate useful examples of analysis procedures brought us together to explore the “critical” in critical analysis.

After briefly addressing the context of content analysis, three researchers who engage in critical content analysis analyze the same picture book to demonstrate questions and procedures based in their varying theoretical frames. Our major focus is on describing possible approaches to analysis.

Several scholars respond to these approaches and point out additional issues to consider in ongoing discussions about critical content analysis as a research methodology.

#### THE CONTEXT FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS TEXT

The two major strands of research on children's literature as text have been literary analysis and content analysis, each with considerable variation. Galda, Ash, and Cullinan (2000) point out that although the purposes are similar, the methods differ, with literary analysis describing *what authors do* and content analysis examining *what text is about*. Literary analysis examines the actions of authors within the text, such as character development, symbolism, postmodern stylistic devices, intertextuality, and narrative patterns, from the view of children's literature as an object of literary criticism and analysis. These analyses may be historical accounts of changes in the field, focus on one or many texts within or across genres, or examine the work of individual authors by describing literary elements.

Content analysis, in contrast, is a conceptual approach to understanding what a text is about, considering content from a particular theoretical perspective, such as sociohistorical, gender, cultural, or thematic studies. Galda, Ash and Cullinan (2000) note that content analyses were initially quantitative, counting the presence and images of a particular cultural group or phenomena within children's books. Recent research is qualitative with researchers taking a theoretical position that frames the development of research criteria for text analysis based on an understanding of texts and readings of these texts in the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are considered (Short, 1995).

Content analysis includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with quantitative approaches popular in mass communication fields (Neuendorf, 2002). Qualitative content analysis covers sub-methods such as discourse analysis, social constructivist analysis, rhetorical analysis, and content analysis. Krippendorff (2003) views qualitative content analysis as the close reading of small amounts of texts that are interpreted by the analyst and then contextualized in new narratives; a definition that is a hermeneutic, reader response oriented research stance, and so can be critical as well. What makes a study "critical" is not the methodology but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text, such as critical discourse, postcolonialism, women's studies, queer studies, and childhood studies.

Given this history of content analysis as well as current trends within children's literature, researchers would expect to find detailed descriptions of procedures for critical content analysis within published studies. An extensive search revealed that the majority of published studies contain only a brief discussion of the methodology and an insufficient description of analysis procedures. We did locate critical content analyses with a focus on representational issues, power relations, and language as a postcolonial tool, particularly noting seminal studies by Bishop (1982) and Taxel (1986) as well as recent work by McGillis (2000) and Bradford (2007).

#### CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSES OF THE DAY OF AHMED'S SECRET

Three researchers who engage in critical content analysis from a specific theoretical frame analyzed the same picture book based on procedures developed from their frames. They focused on *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* (1990), written by Florence Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland and illustrated in full-color detailed watercolors by Ted Lewin. A young boy, Ahmed, guards a secret as he drives his donkey cart through the busy streets of contemporary Cairo to deliver heavy tanks of butane gas. The reader follows Ahmed throughout his long day of work, getting a tour of the streets and bazaars in Cairo. Ahmed does not divulge his secret until home with his family, finally revealing that he has learned to write his name. We chose this book because it is a well-known text that is familiar to many scholars and so could easily be called up as a reference and because it offered the potential for a range of critical interpretations. The book is widely available, considered high quality literature, and frequently used in classrooms.

*Vivian Yenika-Agbaw: A Postcolonial Reading*

Every time I pick up a picture book that depicts a culture with which I am unfamiliar, I approach it with a high degree of curiosity because I realize how challenging it can be for authors, even those who claim to be insiders, to tell authentic stories. I wonder, why this particular culture? Why did the author choose to set the story in a particular region of a country? How much does the author know about that culture?

I approach literary texts in this manner in order to engage in the experience emotionally, intellectually, and politically, recognizing that authentic and inauthentic elements are present in any book that portrays a specific culture, regardless of whether the author lived or researched the experience. This strategy enables me to read critically as well as for pleasure. The theoretical frame that guided my reading of *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* is postcolonial theory. This lens enabled me to carefully examine Ahmed's actions—what he does/thinks—to understand how Heide, Gilliland, and Lewin construct him as an Arab boy growing up in a postcolonial city. I examined what the authors' use of language reveals about character, setting, and culture. Postcolonial theory is an appropriate lens because the story takes place in modern Cairo in Egypt, a city considered part of what Europeans used to refer to as the Orient (Said, 2006). Because literacy is one of the key themes in this story, it is important to understand how the authors have interpreted this concept within the cultural context.

Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin (2006) note that postcolonialism is based on the "historical fact" of European colonialism and the effects of colonial contact—a relationship that results in an imbalance of power. Said (2006) examines this power relation as it exists between the Occident and the Orient, while Japtok (2003) focuses on the strategies colonized people use to negotiate, resist, and subvert colonial domination from the west. Postcolonialism, therefore, has issues of power struggles at its core—issues prevalent in this book set in modern Cairo, a city in the Orient.

Heide must be aware of some of these issues for she claims in an interview that the story was written to "counteract the awful stereotypes of Arabs that children are presented with" (Duckett & Knox, 2001, p. 32). Despite this awareness the authors inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes of exoticism, images that are reinforced by Lewin's illustrations. For example, Ahmed is riding a donkey cart in an otherwise modern city crowded with vendors selling wares from carts.

Rather than recommend that children from Arab descent not read this book because of cultural misrepresentations, I use a counter discourse embedded within postcolonial criticism to interrogate the story and visual texts. To demonstrate how children can accomplish this interrogation, I decided to examine Ahmed's sense of agency in order to encourage children from his cultural background to recognize that, despite the blatant stereotypes in the book, they do not have to accept this negative image of themselves and their culture. Rather, they can use a critical lens to negotiate alternative images of their culture.

The key question that informs my analysis is *How does Ahmed negotiate space, cultural identity, and personal identity?* as opposed to *How are Arabs portrayed in Heide and Gilliland's picture book?* To answer this question, it is necessary to ask about the postcolonial significance of how language is used in the text (especially since Ahmed is the first-person narrator), how Ahmed interacts with his family and other members of the community, and how Ahmed guards his "secret." Reading this picture book repeatedly and reflecting on the postcolonial significance of Ahmed's character, language use, and the day's events revealed a pattern of construction that enabled me to create three analytical categories.

*Ahmed Claims the City as "My City" (Ownership of Space).* This sense of ownership comes forcefully in the opening sentence: "Tonight I will tell it to my family, but now I have work to do in my city." Ahmed belongs to the city, and no one is going to tell him otherwise—not even his parents! And in this city everyone has something important to do; however, unlike him, they make "all kinds of sounds," however, "the loudest sound" of all remains the "silent sound" of Ahmed's secret. Ahmed has an intimate knowledge of "his city" including its ancient and modern history. Only after this declaration of ownership does the space become "the city" and "our city." He completely claims this space while acknowledging its old and modern histories as well as the diversity of people, experiences, and expectations. From a postcolonial stance, he has as much right to the space as adults and his identity grows out of his family's historical connections to the city that remains their home. No one can take that away from him regardless of its new reality as a postcolonial space with competing cultures. Ahmed belongs to the city like everyone else; it is his personal and cultural space as an Egyptian boy.

*Ahmed Claims his Work Experience as a Butane Delivery Boy (Ownership of Work).* Although delivering butane bottles is hard work, Ahmed knows that his family appreciates his contribution, especially his father whose face has "a tired look" from years of struggle. He feels a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment, for unlike the boy who delivers bread, "no one lowers a rope to me for my heavy loads." Heavy loads could stand for several things. On a surface level it could represent the butane gas bottles; however, on a metaphorical level it could imply his cultural realities as an Arab living in a colonized city who must keep defending himself against colonial domination, a child who needs to grow up fast, and an impoverished person who struggles to survive. Not only is he proud of his physical strength, he also is proud of who he is and his self-discipline as he meditates daily as advised by his dad. "I am proud that I can carry the heavy bottles all the way up the steps... that I can do this work to help my family." Although many in the West may regard this as child labor, from a critical stance it can be looked upon as a worthy service by an impoverished child to supplement the family's income. Ahmed is part of this family tradition and only feels ashamed

when he believes he is not strong enough to carry the butane gas bottles, and thus not as useful to the family as he would like to be.

*Ahmed Claims his Arabic Literacy "Secret" (Ownership of Personal & Cultural Identity).* Throughout the picture book, Ahmed's face reveals that there is something he is keeping from the reader. The authors' text indicates that he has a secret. Although the authors do not show where and how Ahmed learned to write in Arabic, or who taught him to do so, it becomes a powerful indicator of the secretive nature of childhood culture and begs the question of how much we really know about children and their wealth of knowledge. Since there is no evidence that Ahmed receives formal literacy instruction, the reader's definition of literacy is challenged. What is literacy and what/where is the appropriate way to learn to read and write—in the public, in private? Regardless of colonial dominance, there will always be aspects of the colonized culture that elude children. Ahmed learning to write his name in Arabic without the benefit of formal schooling is a good example. The secret is "like a friend" and it makes the "loudest sound" to him. It makes him happy and he is careful with whom he shares.

Secrets have a way of empowering their owners and making them feel special and Ahmed is no different. The question is: Why should Ahmed's ability to write his name in Arabic be a secret? And a secret from whom? Knowing the colonial history of Egypt, it may be a secret because of the postcolonial reality of Cairo where colonial values may inadvertently confuse Egyptian youths making it hard for them to understand, respect and practice their cultural traditions. It also is significant that Ahmed reveals the secret to his family in the dark of their house, an extremely 'personal' space. "Look, I can write my name.' I write my name over and over as they watch, and I think of my name now lasting longer than the sound of it, maybe even lasting, like the old buildings in the city, a thousand years."

*The Day of Ahmed's Secret* lends itself to a postcolonial reading of agency, despite the stereotypes and inaccuracies pointed out by critics. Postcolonial analyses of texts acknowledge other forms of critical readings of texts as long as they expose the ways in which dominant cultures distort or represent other cultures in literature. Within the book, a child negotiates space, personal, and cultural identities amidst conflicting experiences brought about by a postcolonial reality. Yet the boy thrives under this circumstance and his secret sustains him and gives him a sense of purpose. Postcolonialism as a critical lens enables readers, both children and adults, to understand the power dynamics embedded in literary texts, providing them with the necessary tools to read signs of domination, resistance, and possible subversion as characters embark on the process of self-liberation.

#### *Christine Jenkins: An Inquiry-Based Interpretive Reading*

Each of three disciplinary homes of children's literature—Education, English, and Library and Information Science (LIS)—study texts from a somewhat different standpoint. In practice, these differences may be negligible, so that a discussion of *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* may have the same look and feel and share the same pedagogical goals in a library or classroom, but each discipline's approach to children's literature is informed by the specific focus of that field. One difference is in the components of the reading transaction: the text, the reader, and the potentially transformational connection that develops between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1938). These could be represented as a Venn diagram of two overlapping circles—the text and the reader—with the overlap

between the two as a space that includes both text and reader. Although each discipline's work and scholarship encompasses this entire universe, each discipline also brings a distinctive perspective to the study of this literature: English centers on the text, Education centers on the reader, and Library and Information Science (LIS) centers on the overlap between these two.

My perspective on critical analysis grows out of this simultaneous focus on reader *and* text that is foundational to the study of literature within LIS. Facilitating connections between texts and young readers plays a central role in the work of school and public youth services librarians evaluating books and working directly with young people. The critical content analysis I will focus on is based on the ways in which librarians help young readers engage critically with texts, in particular the use of group discussion to encourage children to trust themselves as readers to delve deeper into the text. Meaningful collaborative explorations of texts involve questions that encourage readers to step inside the world of a book on a collaborative inquiry into the multiple meanings of a text.

Many models can provide a road map for this journey; mine originates in the Great Books Method, an approach with a history in library-sponsored book discussions that focuses on three types of questions. *Informational questions* can be answered by the text; they focus on facts or comprehension and usually have a singular correct answer. *Evaluative questions* can be answered by the reader with the text as a springboard for the reader's thoughts, feelings, and memories. The answers are individual to each reader. And then there are the elusive *interpretive questions*, the questions whose answers are found in the synergy between reader and text. Such questions ask readers to make inferences and draw conclusions based on their interpretations of the text (Great Books Foundation, 1999). The goal of this type of book discussion is to provide young readers with multiple opportunities for entry into and exploration of the text. Such discussion encourages readers to articulate and ask their own questions of the text. And it is *these* questions—those generated by the participants themselves—and the discussions that such questions may generate that can facilitate a group's exploration of a text that is shared inquiry.

The Great Books Program was developed by scholars in English at the University of Chicago during the 1930s as framework for examining "the canon of Western thought." Despite the problematic and narrow focus on a Western canon, their method of constructing discussion questions remains a tool for analyzing a broad range of texts. The construction of interpretive questions requires reading and re-reading. The first reading is lost-in-a-book aesthetic reading. I start reading with a pad of small sticky notes, reading in an immersive manner while using the notes to mark the places in the text when I think, Huh? Or Huh! or Oh! as I surface from the text, however briefly. After that first reading, I go back to the marked places and consider the aspect of the text that made me pause. These points in the narrative are the genesis of inquiry and interpretive discussion. Thus, my task as a researcher is to locate places within the text that might encourage collaborative meaning-making among readers.

True to my librarian roots, I began my consideration of *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* by reading several reviews as well as reader comments on Amazon.com. These reviews focused on the book as an informational text and pedagogical tool. Although the book has had a positive reception, readers' comments include little evaluative language. They focus instead on the book as instructional text for the study of multicultural issues and as a springboard for classroom activities. The book is used

efferently as a rich source for exploring informational questions and for encouraging readers to make personal connections with Ahmed, "a child like all other Western and American children." As such, his story can also support evaluative questions.

In reading the book as a source for interpretive questions to help readers articulate their views of the text, there were several places where I paused. In the opening words of the story, Ahmed says, "Today I have a secret, and all day long my secret will be like a friend to me. Tonight I will tell it to my family, but now I have work to do in my city." I wondered what Ahmed might mean when he says that his secret is like a friend. My genuine puzzlement over this simile makes it possible that other readers will also find it puzzling. These are the textual gaps that offer space for collaborative meaning-making.

On the next page, Ahmed describes what he hears on the streets of Cairo as his donkey pulls a cart of heavy propane canisters through many streets. "All kinds of sounds, maybe every sound in the world, are tangled together...loudest of all to me today is the silent sound of my secret, which I have not yet spoken." Later, Ahmed eats his lunch of beans and rice while sitting in the shade of the old wall and closes his eyes to have "my quiet time." Ahmed's father tells him, "If there are no quiet spaces in your head, it fills with noise." The streets are full of noise, but the most intense human connection Ahmed makes is a silent one with the man selling rosewater: "I give him my smile. He does not give me his, but our eyes meet and we know we are connected to the same day and to the city." When Ahmed returns home, it is *finally* time to tell his secret: "Look," he tells his family, "I can write my name" and he writes it over and over as they watch, presumably in silence. So what is the significance of this pair of opposites: noise and silence? Is noise bad and silence better? Is writing his name a skill that is all the better for being noiseless? Why is it important for Ahmed to actively cultivate his own silence?

Then there are the cryptic words of Ahmed's father as he teaches his son the skills and strength needed to deliver propane gas to homes: "Hurry to grow strong, but do not hurry to grow old." Does his father mean old, as in mature? Or old, as in elderly? Is his father telling him to enjoy his childhood—that strength grows with age, but adulthood is no bed of roses? Or is he saying that life is short, so it's best to savor it slowly, that there's no need to rush? Is this connected with his father's demand that Ahmed spend part of each day being quiet? Is this part of not hurrying? Or perhaps it's just that children tend to be noisy and this is a way for Egyptian parents to have some peace and quiet.

Another question arises from a curious description of the city's location. Ahmed's father tells him that "the great desert presses against their city on one side while the great river pushes against it on the other. We live between them, between our two friends, the river and the desert." He names the city, Cairo, and the river, the Nile. When Ahmed asks about the name of the desert (which appears to be the Sahara), his father shrugs, saying "The hot winds call our desert home." Why does the desert go nameless? Is this a cultural prohibition? An acknowledgment of the desert's vastness? His father's whimsical, and possibly poetic, geography lesson?

The illustrations also suggest questions. The story is told as Ahmed's first-person narrative but the streets and people are rarely seen through his eyes. Instead, we observe him at an intermediate distance as he goes about the city. What does this do to us as readers? Are we spying on Ahmed? Or does it emphasize that this is as close as we can get to him? That despite the fact that he's addressing

us directly, there is actually—and perhaps ironically—an unalterable distance between Ahmed and the reader?

And finally, the title tells us that this is *the* day of Ahmed's secret. It appears that Ahmed is describing a typical work day, which begins early in the morning and ends when he returns home to have dinner with his family. Presumably he sees his family every day. So why is *this* day the day of his secret? Did Ahmed not have this secret yesterday? If not, when did he learn to write his name? In the morning before work? And if this is a secret he's had for a while, why did he choose *this* day to tell and show his family his new skill?

Critical content analysis is not simply the province of adult scholars, but can and should inform young people's reading experience. Identifying inquiry questions points the way to shared interpretive content analysis. This collaborative meaning-making provides opportunities to explore the unanticipated insights that arise when readers come together around a common text. Such analyses do not require readers to pick apart or shred the text, but rather to delve and burrow into, to examine and explore whatever aspect of the text engages them. The expression and discussion of responses provide readers with multiple opportunities to become critical readers on their own terms.

In this inquiry-based analysis, pedagogy and research are inextricably intertwined. Bruner (2005) noted in a speech that "pedagogical instruction should take as a central task not only passing on knowledge, but making students aware of the possibilities inherent in or opened up by what they are learning." His concern is preparing students for an uncertain world of expanding possibilities. The intention of critical content analysis is not to arrive at a final destination with definitive answers, but rather to provide signposts—some clear and some almost illegible—that point to further inquiry. The cultivation of ourselves and our students as current and future researchers depends upon expansive and deliberately open-ended pedagogy.

*Rebecca Rogers: Uncovering Themes of Neoliberalism with Critical Discourse Analysis*

The overarching theme of child labor and exploitation struck me when I read this book. Ahmed, a young boy of school age, is not in school but takes his father's place in the market, earning money for the family delivering butane gas, one of the main sources of heating and fuel for houses in Egypt. Butane gas canisters can be extremely dangerous, particularly because in 1990, when the book was published, more than 80% of the butane canisters were decades older than they should have been and had become "moving bombs" (Al-Ahram, 2007). The summary on the back of the book (1990) describes Ahmed as "wandering the streets of Cairo" rather than literally situated in the economic market, a market that was experiencing severe restructuring during this time period. I used the theories and methods of critical discourse analysis to describe, interpret and explain relations of labor and the economy as represented in this book.

The political-economic backdrop of Egypt during the early 1990s is important in analyzing the content. Egypt entered into a deal with the IMF (International Monetary Fund), a Western run institution responsible for neoliberal policies over several decades. Neoliberal policies enable a handful of private interests to gain control over much of public and social life to maximize profit margins (Giroux, 2004). The IMF often uses "structural adjustment programs" whereby a country asking for a loan has to agree to a series of restructuring programs in exchange for the loan. The country agrees to deregulate their markets and cut back on state subsidies and government programs

(e.g., education and health care). Public sector enterprises such as gas, water, utilities are turned over to the market, to make a profit.

In Egypt's case, the IMF forced a decrease in government funds in 1990 for the public sector service of butane gas which, as a result, doubled the costs of gas, hurting the poorest people—both the people who provide the gas (Ahmed) and the people who buy the gas. Structural adjustment programs generally include an increase in "labor flexibility," which means caps on minimum wages and policies to weaken unions. Often, countries are driven into further economic crisis from high interest rates on the loans. Money that would have been used for social programs is used to pay off mounting debt. Other impacts include standardization and uniformity that result from "free trade"—what Barber (1995) calls "McWorld." The neoliberal policy that characterized Egypt in 1990 restructures relations in society—not just between people and the market but away from the "common good" to an emphasis on competition, personal responsibility and the primacy of profit over people (Chomsky, 1999).

The narratives of global literature are localized in foreign countries, engaging readers in an international scene, providing a window into global politics. Given these frames, I asked, "How can the intersections of economics, gender and literacy in *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* be understood in relation to the global market?" My analysis points to the ways in which Ahmed is positioned to both recognize and naturalize his 'rightful' place in the social and economic order. At the same time the text calls into question our roles as readers watching Ahmed work.

I turned to a methodological framework that merges textual and visual analysis through systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics (Rogers, 2003). I refer to this framework as the "grammar of design" because following van Leeuwen (2008), Kress (2004) and Halliday (1985), I stress that the design of the text is orchestrated through the patterning of modes, both verbal and visual (Norris, 2004). This framework rests on Kress's (2004) idea of the "motivated" sign which means that signs—gestures, language, use of space—are never neutral but rather reflect "the interests of its designer as much as the designer's imagined sense of those who will see and 'read' the sign" (p. 2).

My methodological procedures included creating a multimodal transcript, carrying out descriptive analysis, examining the grammar of design, and considering the book in context. The multimodal transcript provided a means to look at the book as a cultural text and to subject the text to the same sort of analysis that I would carry out on an interview or a classroom discussion. The transcript becomes the basis of my analysis. Next, I engaged in a descriptive analysis to gain a base line description of the book through doing a word count on each page, a thick description of the images, and a lexical count of key words (e.g., time, work, secret, Ahmed, home, and city). Using the framework of the grammar of design, I examined the gestural, spatial, linguistic, and visual designs of the text. This analysis allowed me to look more closely at what modes exist and how they are patterned together in ways that privilege some meanings or readings over others.

Next, I looked at each aspect of the systemic functional linguistic framework—genre, discourse and style. Genre refers to "ways of interacting," or the ways in which the genre of the book is constituted. That is, what textual and visual elements constitute this particular genre? On the first page, readers learn that the setting of the book is the work day and the entire book takes place over the course of day. Bringing together the grammar of visual analysis alongside the textual analysis, I

asked questions such as: What modes (verbal and visual) make the text cohesive? What examples of intertextuality exist? Are there instances of parallel structure? The patterning of temporal markers “today” and “tonight” are present as a form of parallel structure. I was interested not just in what exists on any one page but across the book. For example, the word “work” is represented five times in the book.

“Discourse” refers to “ways of representing” and involves asking questions about how themes are signified through verbal and visual modes. What relationships exist? What is foregrounded? Backgrounded? What kinds of statements are made? How are pronouns used? What is the formality of vocabulary? This analysis revealed discourses of childhood, globalization and traditional values, gender and work, and oral/written literacies.

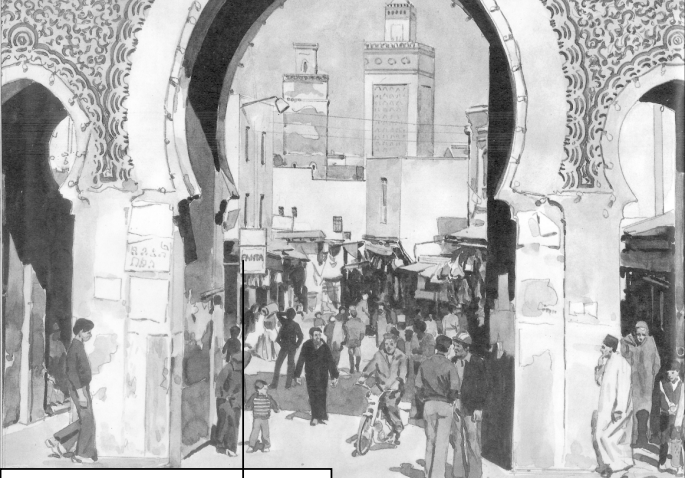
I looked across the book to take stock of the discourses and how they are chained together through genre and style. Style refers to “ways of being” and includes the elements of visual and textual design that indicate stance, perspective, and affinity. Where are we positioned as the viewers vis-à-vis Ahmed in the illustration where he carries the heavy butane canister up the steps? What does this signal about our relationship with Ahmed? Perspective and stance can be signaled through either the visual or verbal modes such as a passive or active stance signaled through gaze, body language, or syntactic construction. Affinity is represented through modal verbs which express degree of commitment or through the use of space on the page. Temporal markers might be signaled through color or through verb tenses.

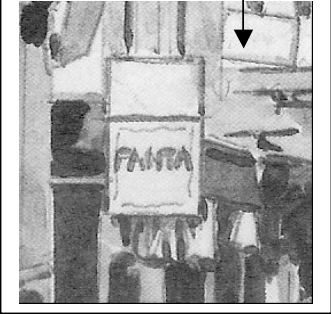
Finally, I asked: How are genre, discourse and style patterned together to make meanings? In the middle of the book, the illustration shows Ahmed sitting against the wall, outside the gate into Old Cairo. He talks in the text about being hungry and the history of the wall, recalling his father's words that he needs to have a quiet time each day. “If there are no quiet spaces in your head, it fills with noise, he has told me.” This page provides a demonstration of how the three levels of analysis come together through my coding to construct Ahmed through the discourses of economics, gender and literacy. His childhood is squarely part of the social and economic agenda—in the market where his work is essential for the family's survival. These discourses are woven together through the cohesive device of time and temporal markers and highlight the struggle between globalization/market-based values and traditional values. Globalization involves the mixing of history and contemporary life and the influx of multinational corporations as reflected in the illustration where a sign for the multinational corporation Fanta is set against the traditional backdrop of a Muslim city.

What I found particularly fascinating is how the struggle over old and new is represented both in the illustration *and* in the text through the repetition of time and the shift in verb tenses. I coded references to time—either tense markers or lexical items associated with time (day, now, tonight, first) in bold and underlines to capture the overlapping designs of genre and style. The page starts off in the present tense with Ahmed narrating his work day and his constant hunger, “I make more stops, and now I am hungry again.” The discourse of individualism, hard work and yet the fiction of never being “full” or satisfied are brought to the surface. This theme is carried through in the illustrations—Ahmed is represented as a sole individual on the right hand page juxtaposed against the modally dense illustration of the Cairo street. The temporal marker “now” is repeated twice on this page. Important to note, both uses of “now” are combined with descriptions of his work

Figure 1. Three levels of critical discourse analysis.

**Genre:** cohesiveness of *provenance* (culture, location) in the architecture, dress, colors  
**Discourse:** Traditions v. Globalization  
**Style:** Action, Time  
 (modally dense, frozen frame)





**Discourse:** Globalization v. Traditions and Traditional values  
 FANTA—Multi-national corporation juxtaposed against the ancient backdrop of a Muslim city

**Genre:** **Bold**  
**Discourse:** *Italics*  
**Style:** Underline

**I make more stops, and **now** I am hungry **again**.** I look for the bright red and yellow cart where I can buy my lunch, and I find it in its usual place near the *old building*. I buy my beans and rice, and sit in the shade of the *old wall*.

**My father has told me** the wall is a thousand years old, and even our great-great-grandfathers were not yet born when it was built. There are many old buildings, many old walls **like the one I lean against**, in this city.

I close my eyes and have my quiet **time**, **the time** my father **says** I must have **each day**. “If there are no quiet spaces in your head, it fills with noise,” he has **told** me.

He has shown me how to find my way in the city, and he has taken me to each place where I **now** have to bring the heavy bottles.

life. Looking across the book, the word “now” is repeated five times and could contribute to our understanding of the steady unfolding of Ahmed’s day of work as he rushes to keep up with his duties in the market.

The third stanza on this page reveals shifts in tense as Ahmed recalls the oral stories that his father told him about the history of the walls in their city. There is a shift from the present perfect tense in the opening of Ahmed’s memory, “My father has told me the wall is a thousand years old,” to the present tense of “like the one I lean against.” This pattern (repeated in the next stanza) could signal the struggle over time, a theme through out the book, at a syntactic level.

The theories and methods of critical discourse analysis can provide insight into not just *what* is written and illustrated but *how* they are written and illustrated. Writers and illustrators make choices, intentional or not, that privilege some perspectives and marginalize others. Unpacking dominant worldviews—in this book, neoliberalism—is an important task in making sure that reading global children’s literature offers multi-perspectival learning spaces.

#### RESPONSES TO CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

These three analyses are based in particular theoretical frames and definitions of “critical,” and so reflect only a few of the possibilities for critical content analysis. To examine these broader possibilities, three researchers who have taken a range of critical perspectives in their own work respond to these analyses and raise questions about further work to continue to develop methodologies for engaging in critical content analysis.

*Richard Beach: Applying Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to Critical Content Analysis*

These three critical content analyses identify the social, economic, and political systems and forces creating dialogic tensions (Bakhtin, 1981) between the rich cultural traditions of Ahmed’s family’s past and his present challenging economic realities. One approach to critical content analysis of these dialogic tensions derives from CHAT, cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 2009). A CHAT analysis focuses on how people’s engagement in systems is mediated by tools, roles, rules, and attachment to communities. These systems are driven by the need to address concerns associated with “runaway objects,” such as global warming, technology innovation, or, in this discussion, globalization (Engeström, 2009). Ahmed’s world includes the competing systems of the family, religion, business, government, schooling, and community. By identifying how these systems influence his actions, a CHAT approach is useful for explaining *reasons* for dialogic tensions due to competing agendas between different systems.

Yenika-Agbaw employs postcolonial critical analysis to deconstruct the illustrations that invite the target audience to adopt a Western “Orientalism” (Said, 2006) perspective on Cairo as an exotic, romanticized world that deviates from a Western, middle-class world, reflecting the system of the Western children’s literature industry whose object is to sell books. These romanticized illustrations conflict with the realities of Ahmed’s difficult work as necessitated by the family’s poverty within the Egyptian economy, a system driven by colonialist and neoliberal capitalism where one in five Egyptians live below the poverty line and 70% are illiterate (United Nations Development Project, 2008).

Positioning Western children to believe that “other” non-Western worlds are totally different from their own worlds reinforces a tourist stance of someone who has little obligation to assist these worlds. The child reader drops into this world, marvels at the colorful, exotic nature of the world, and then leaves, without understanding how the dialogic tensions in that world reflect competing systems.

Jenkins raises the issue of Ahmed’s instant acquisition of literacy at the end of story when he learns to write his name in presumably one day. CHAT focuses on the tensions between Ahmed’s family/economic system and the lack of any mention of school. Interrogating this tension leads to the realization that given his family’s poverty, Ahmed must work to support his family, work that deprives him of schooling—14.7 % of Egyptian children did not attend school in 2008 (United Nations Development Project, 2008). The celebration of literacy fails to address questions as to how simply being able to write one’s name will advance Ahmed’s prospects. The “happy ending” of learning to write his name also masks the reality that, without schooling, he may never acquire a critical literacy that could be used as a tool to challenge an economic system that will mean that he may be distributing butane gas for the rest of his life.

Rogers applies analysis of how genres, discourses, and style are used to justify global, neoliberal forces perpetuating Egypt’s inequitable economy. While foreign investments are up in Egypt, those investments help a small elite, so that much of the population, including Ahmed, remains poor. Rogers identifies a basic tension between the forces of economic, multinational corporate globalization symbolized by the Fanta image in the Old Cairo streets set against the traditional Muslim cultural practices and icons represented by the 1000-year-old wall, a tension evident in violent clashes between radical fundamentalist Islamic groups against Western globalization forces. This tension derives from the competing agendas of different systems as they each attempt to address the larger issue of globalization.

*Patricia Enciso: Mediating Content Analysis and Readers’ Engagement*

As an artifact intended for enjoyment and expanded understanding of the world, a book can become a shared experience for empathic, critical engagement. In the case of *The Day of Ahmed’s Secret*, the construction of empathy and engagement may be misplaced by its authors/illustrator and, in turn, misread by its readers. Each scholar offers ways of mediating a close reading of postcolonial signs and verbal patterns alongside the implied young reader’s engagement with Ahmed. As Yenika-Agbaw points out, while it is possible to read the book through its misrepresentations of postcolonial Cairo, young readers will benefit more, perhaps, from a reading that follows Ahmed’s dignity and persistence as a laborer who belongs to a community he understands to be interdependent, spiritually alive, and historically rich. Similarly, Jenkins considers the openings for speculation this book creates for readers: How did Ahmed learn to read? What will he do with this new knowledge? And Rogers’ fine-grained critical discourse analysis creates the possibility for reading and interpreting the tracings of a global economy through the extraordinary labors of a young child.

The insights from these analyses can be used as exemplars for an approach to literary response that has been described as “critically engaged reading”—a shared experience of reading and interpretation that accounts for the text’s multiple signs and verbal patterns while recognizing readers’ identities, histories, curiosities, and resistance. The difficulty for teachers, like the challenge

for content analysts, lies in provoking and sustaining a curiosity that questions the author/illustrators' constructions of a "real world" while simultaneously imagining readers' likely points of engagement. These content analyses offer substantive, vital direction for "closing the gap" between the study of text and the study of texts in context.

*Jerome Harste: Taking a Curricular Stance*

As a language arts teacher and researcher, I am primarily interested in curriculum, which I see as a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be. As educators we first have to be philosophers, envisioning not only the kind of lives we want to live but also the kind of people we want to inhabit the place. My vision focuses on the need to develop a critically literate citizenship, one that can unpack the systems of meaning that operate in texts to position readers in particular ways as well as to endow them with ideologies they may or may not wish to take on. In thinking through instruction, this means we need to support learners in becoming consciously aware of the systems of meaning that operate in text. Learners do this by taking multiple perspectives, becoming reflexive (using themselves and others to outgrow themselves), and engaging in inquiry (not taking things at face value by always looking further and taking active responsibility for what it is they currently know). These stances have to take root as dispositions or habits of mind for readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The analytical procedures which these researchers use to critically examine *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* demonstrate that there are different pieces of information to unpack in any text and lots of ways to unpack that information. As such these analyses provide a glimpse at the tools students and teachers need in order to be considered critically literate and to support readers in becoming agents of texts rather than victims of text.

## CONCLUSION

The analyses and responses of each researcher indicate the consequences of how "critical" is defined within critical content analysis. The different critical theoretical frames that each researcher brought to analyzing this book led to different questions and different methodological tools. Their analyses reflect the significance of considering the alignment between theories and methods in critical content analysis. Rather than searching for one particular set of methods, our challenge is to continue exploring the range of methodological tools that can be used alongside different critical theories to analyze children's literature. No one critical theory can ever be considered the only way in which a text or event can be interpreted; instead our reading of texts are both filtered through the theories and help us reconsider the theories themselves. Critical theories are put into dialogue with children's literature so that we can more deeply understand the cultural, social, political, and economic contexts of children's texts and the ways in which these texts shape how children view and interact with the social world. In turn, these theories and approaches to critical content analysis also provide tools and understandings that children can use to engage as critical readers of texts.

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