

Commendations among Criticism: *Der Struwwelpeter*

Michael Lewis and Peyton Gilmore

Abstract

Der Struwwelpeter is a staple of German children's literature written by Dr. Heinrich Hoffman in the mid-19th century. The book contains ten illustrated stories written in verse meant to teach children moral lessons, often ending with them suffering for their indiscretions. In the stories, children burn to death, waste away from malnutrition, and, most infamously, have their thumbs cut off by a tailor because of bad or unacceptable behavior. Regardless of the book's enduring popularity, the question of whether it succeeds as a pedagogical narrative continues to be asked due to the graphic content described within. While *Der Struwwelpeter* itself may not be appropriate for the 21st century, its structure as a narrative can be valuable in the modern day. Despite the controversy surrounding it, *Der Struwwelpeter* served as a successful and effective educational text in its time, and it still has something to offer now.

A Brief History of Der Struwwelpeter

- Dr. Heinrich Hoffman was a German psychiatrist in the 19th century who worked parttime with children.
- After being unable to find a suitable book to give to his three-year-old son for Christmas, he decided to write and illustrate his own, creating *Der Struwwelpeter*.
- Hoffman's illustrations and stories were inspired by the work he did with children.
- *Der Struwwelpeter* was originally only meant to be a gift for Hoffman's son, but was soon published and found success around the world.
- Hoffman wrote the book in 1845, right before a series of revolutions in Germany and before the conception of Germany as an empire with many colonies.
- *Der Struwwelpeter* continues to influence culture today in film, music, literature, and more.

Criticism and Controversy

Despite *Der Struwwelpeter's* lasting fame, it has recently come under scrutiny due to its inclusion of violence and racism in several of the stories. Many criticize the inclusion of violence in *Der Struwwelpeter* because of the belief that children might be horrified or traumatized from reading stories with brutality. "Die gar traurige Geschichte mit dem Feuerzeug" (The Very Sad Story with the Lighter) features a young girl who is left alone with matches and subsequently burns to death as her anthropomorphic cats watch in terror. "Die Geschichte vom Daumenlutscher" (The Story of the Thumb Sucker) is infamous for its depiction of a young boy having his thumbs cut off with scissors by a tailor for sucking his thumb. "Die Geschichte vom Suppen-Kaspar" (The Story of Soup-Kaspar) details, with the aid of pictures, the grotesque death of Kaspar as he withers away over the course of five days after refusing to eat his soup. These are a few examples of the punishments children endure throughout *Der Struwwelpeter*. Hoffman's intent to show

nineteenth-century children the harsh repercussions of misbehaving to dissuade them from being disobedient is apparent. One criticism of this violence is that children will gain nothing but fright and mental problems from thinking that they will be harmed if disobedient.

Modern critics of *Der Struwwelpeter* have also pointed out the racist undertones in some of the stories, showing its faults as a children's book in the past and harmfulness to society in the twenty-first century. In "Die Geschichte von den schwarzen Buben" (The Story of the Black Boys), children are punished by Nikolas for mocking a black person because of his skin color. Nikolas punishes the children by making their skin color dark, which is "highly problematic", as Josefine Wagner points out, because it associates dark skin color with punishment (108). Wagner points out that German troops murdered 75,000 Herero and Nama in Africa during 1904 and 1905 (108). Some of these troops most likely read or heard *Der Struwwelpeter* as a child. She also interpreted *Der Struwwelpeter* to contain gender discrimination, abuses concerning kids' rights to privacy, and neglect of children's health (111). Wagner represents a large group of critics that see *Der Struwwelpeter* as a flawed book that offered bad pedagogy in the past and offers nothing good now.

Merits and Value of Struwwelpeter

Der Struwwelpeter was written over one hundred and fifty years ago and, as a result of its age, naturally does not adhere to modern standards for raising children. Critics tear Hoffman's stories apart without acknowledging that the story is a product of its time, which was filled with racism, gender discrimination, xenophobia, and more. The faults of *Der Struwwelpeter* and the societal vices of nineteenth century Germany do not mean that the stories inside are worthless. *Der Struwwelpeter* has something to offer as a psychological text and a pedagogy.

Interestingly, as Jonathan Davidson points out in "Struwwelpeter by Heinrich Hoffmann – Psychiatry in Literature," there are several instances in Hoffman's stories that "describe children with psychiatric conditions now recognized in contemporary diagnostic manuals" (174). The story of Zappel-



Philipp, a child who is unable to sit still at dinner, could be an archaic interpretation of a child suffering from ADHD. Suppen-Kaspar's refusal to eat over the course of several days may indicate an eating disorder. The thumb sucker's proclivity for thumb sucking is perhaps indicative of a deeper issue manifesting through physical behavior. Hoffman, who studied psychiatry, understood which behaviors in children were harmful. Pointing out these behaviors could have been useful for parents and children alike in recognizing proper behavior for children.

Der Struwwelpeter may not belong in the hands of children in the twenty-first century; however, it did have value in the past and still has some value for its pedagogical structure. The violence on display in *Der Struwwelpeter* may be one of the reasons for its popularity in past households and continued popularity now. The extremity of the punishments with which the children are subjected to for relatively minor offenses may have been an intentional comedic choice. Cutting off a child's thumbs for an act that he would surely grow out of eventually seems to be a deliberately over-the-top penalty for a temporary nuisance. Emily Petermann argues that the excessive torture endured by the children "serves not to heighten fear but to diminish it, by making it ridiculous" (24). She goes on to argue that "cautionary verses such as Hoffmann's Struwwelpeter do function as parodies of seriously meant moral tales" (28). The juxtaposition of mostly inane actions with comically severe punishments could potentially account for the admiration many had and still bear for *Der Struwwelpeter*. A light-hearted reading of *Der Struwwelpeter* can serve to remind children and others of good behavior in a comedic way.



Perhaps the violence in *Der Struwwelpeter* is not as bad as many claim it is. Viewing earlier works such as this through a skewed modern lens has led to a judgement that, similar to the punishments dealt in the book, is too harsh. Anna Kérchy asserts that "a notion of childhood rooted in Romanticism prevails in our Western cultural imagery that associates children with an idealized innocence in need of adult protection, and is used to justify the careful censorship exercised" (Kérchy 433). In other words, children are not perfectly virtuous beings that must be shielded from anything even slightly outside the bounds of what is commonly considered to be "acceptable." Kérchy also points out that it might be good for children to be exposed to some kinds of violence in texts at a young age. Kérchy notes, "Still, in a time when global warming, school shootings, and cyber bullying belong to children's daily dreads, it is perhaps more timely and intriguing than ever to look the monster under the bed in the eye and ask ourselves what we should do about it" (434). If children were to be lightly exposed to the existence of violence and wrongdoing at an early age, then they might be less shocked when they experience violence or misbehavior at a later age.

Conclusion

Whether as an instructional text, an entertaining read, a window into 19th century psychiatry, or a helpful book for children, there is no denying the obvious worth of Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter*. As with any artistic work that has managed to remain in vogue for so long, many people have had ample time to explore myriad avenues of interpretation, revealing opinions on either end of the "is this worthy of preservation" spectrum. Despite many arguments against its message or presentation, Hoffmann's work has remained in popular culture for over one hundred fifty years and will likely continue to do so. While this text lingers in the literary world, it is important to see *Der Struwwelpeter's* worth among its criticism.

References

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