

## ***Tuck Everlasting*: Not all Novels are Created Equal**

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The complexity of a novel is often dependent on the way in which it is interpreted. While some novels may appear to be complex, they may just be written in a verbose manner and their points may be unclear. Other novels appear to be quite simple on the surface level. These are often the novels that, when interpreted with a more critical lens, have deeper themes and explore more complicated questions. The novels that appear simpler are often the ones deemed appropriate for younger audiences. While simplicity is important for younger audiences, this could potentially allow for audiences to overlook the thematic complexity of the novel. The novel *Tuck Everlasting*, by Natalie Babbitt, is classified as a children's novel, despite the complexity of themes within the text. Through the use of a pragmatic linguistic study, focused on morphological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features, and a semiotic study, focused on the referent, synchrony, and binary opposition, books designated as children's novels could be classified as more mature literature.

*Tuck Everlasting* is a children's fantasy novel and was published in 1975. The story takes place in a town called Treegap in New Hampshire. The story is presented through a narrator from the perspective of Winnie Foster, a ten-year-old girl. When Winnie runs away, she accidentally discovers the Tuck family and their secret: the Tuck family is immortal, and they have gained this "power" by drinking from a mysterious spring in the woods. Throughout the course of the novel, the family tries to explain to Winnie that immortality is not truly a blessing. Life quickly becomes complicated for Winnie and the Tucks as a mysterious stranger, the man in the yellow suit, begins to track them. The man in the yellow suit had heard of the Tucks' story as a child and wanted to bottle the spring water to make a fortune. The Tucks then become fugitives, and Winnie must make a choice to drink the water or live a normal life. Ultimately, the Tucks escape and leave Treegap, and Winnie chooses not to drink the "magic" water.

The novel is presented through the eyes of a child. This immediately puts the reader into the mindset of a ten-year-old. This is one of the biggest contributing factors as to why this novel is classified as a children's novel. The protagonist is a child and that makes the novel relatable for children. By giving the protagonist a specified age, the author indicates that the story could be intended for someone of a similar age. The novel also does not incorporate an extensive vocabulary or overly complex terminology. These factors, combined with the fantasy elements found within the plot, lend the story to be easily accepted by younger children. Despite the perspective of the novel, and the magical appeal of the plot, the novel itself explores themes like death and immortality. These themes do not lend themselves to be easily understood by young children. Babbitt attempts to make the themes approachable to a younger audience by using the perspective of a child and presenting the text in a simple style.

The novel is written to be approachable for children. Knowing this, Babbitt uses many monomorphemic words, or words that consist of only two to three morphemes. Morphemes are the smallest units into which words can be broken down. The morphology of the novel reflects



the child-like qualities that the book intends to depict. This is consistent throughout the novel. The words that consist of more than one morpheme are often variations of other words. For example, the word “ambled” consists of two morphemes. This word could be considered morphemically simple because when broken down, the morphemes are the word “amble” with the addition of the “-ed” suffix. This simply changes the verb to the past tense. The second morpheme is an inflectional morpheme rather than a derivational morpheme. The narrator of the story consistently uses words that are monomorphemic, like “she” and “they,” or that do not consist of many morphemes. When there is dialogue between characters, they, too, use morphemically simple words.

Morphemically simple words are typical of how a child would speak; however, even when adult characters in the novel speak, they, too, use morphemically simple words. When Angus Tuck, also referred to as Tuck, is speaking to Winnie about how the world is like a wheel, he is explaining it to her in a way in which she can understand. By doing this, he uses words that are simple and more suitable for a young child:

Everything’s a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping. The frogs is part of it, and the bugs, and the fish, and the wood thrush, too. And people. But never the same ones.

Always coming in new, always growing and changing, and always moving on. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. (Babbitt 62)

Of the fifty-one words Tuck uses in his conversation with Winnie, thirty-four of them are monomorphemic. While the character Tuck is expressing the novel’s major, complex themes—death and immortality—Babbitt chooses to express the idea in a way that is suitable for a child. The morphemic simplicity of the novel also reflects the lexical simplicity of the work.

The lexical universal of grammar focuses on the vocabulary used within a work. The lexical complexity of the work is not very high. Similar to the morphemic complexity, the lexical complexity is lowered because the novel is directed towards a younger audience. The simplicity of the word choice within the novel may be the author’s attempt at bridging the gap between the complex themes and the young audience. By choosing to write the story using such simplified vocabulary, the novel, ultimately, becomes deemed a children’s novel, despite its extremely complex and deep themes. The words used within the novel reflect the typical lexicon of a ten-year-old child. There are many monosyllabic words and simple sentences: “the rowboat slowed and began to drift gently toward the farthest end of the pond. It was so quiet that Winnie almost jumped when a bullfrog spoke again” (Babbitt 61). Most of the words that are more complex, or consist of more than one syllable, are compound words like “rowboat.” Focusing on the lexical aspect of the novel, it expresses why the work is best suited for young children. It is easy to read and the words themselves are easy to understand; however, they only enhance the severity, or dark qualities, of the themes.

By using simple words, Babbitt expresses much larger and darker themes to a younger audience. While this may seem appropriate in some ways, there are not many children’s novels that explore the themes of death and immortality on such a deep level. Babbitt attempts to make these themes more accessible for younger audience members by using a simple lexical approach.

The theme of death is universal. Most individuals will experience death in their lifetime. The question of immortality may not be as common, but it is often a topic of discussion in many fictional works. Approaching the major themes of the novel through the eyes of a child leaves a memorable impression: “But a book such as *Tuck Everlasting*, so conventional in form, so gentle in diction, is a reminder that some of the most unsettling, lastingly radical books that are those that sneak up on you” (Sutton 136). The simple vocabulary emphasizes the point of view of the novel. It allows for individuals to either relate to the characters and the choices they must make or reminisce to when they were young and what choice they would have made. Encouraging the audience to think about the character’s choices from their point of view enhances the deeper elements associated with the themes of the novel. The simple lexicon of the novel is also heavily reflected in the syntactic structure of the work.

The syntactic grammar universal focuses on the rules of sentence formation and how they are applied to a work. In the case of *Tuck Everlasting*, the syntax of the work is also quite simple. The narrative sentences throughout the novel consist mostly of a subject, a verb, and an object. There are, at times, sentences with interjections, but, often, the sentences are direct. The narrative sentences all seem to be written from the prescriptive grammar lens. They are presented in a more formal tone and seem to follow the structure provided by Standard American English: “Then the moon rose. The man came to himself and sighed. His expression was one of intense satisfaction. He put on his hat, and in the moonlight his long fingers were graceful and very white” (Babbitt 21). The narrative sentences that may appear to be more complicated are elongated with adjectives and propositional phrases. While this does make them slightly more complex, these are all additives that can be taken out and the content of the sentence would still remain. In contrast, the sentences spoken by the characters are written in prescriptive grammar: “We got to take you home with us. That's the plan. Tuck- he'll want to talk it out, make sure you see why you can't tell no one” (Babbitt 43). Especially seen when members of the Tuck family are speaking, the dialogue reflects the properties of descriptive grammar. When the characters are speaking, they use double negatives and leave out different parts of speech. This imitates the way that a certain individual may actually speak in real life. Writing the character’s dialogue with descriptive grammar allows for audience members to connect with them on a deeper level.

Babbitt uses both of these grammatical approaches to appeal to her audience. The consistent change between the formality of prescriptive grammar and the lax approach of descriptive grammar allows for the story to progress naturally. While switching between the two grammatical approaches adds a level of complexity to the syntax of the novel, the overall syntax of the individual sentences are still simplistic. The sentences are all based around very simple sentence structures and reflect the way a child may write or speak. The intertwining of the two approaches reflects the creative and critical thinking that is apparent and necessary in this novel: “Fairweather and Crammond argue that while creativity generates the ideas and critical thinking evaluates the ideas, they are both intertwined in the big picture of learning” (Johnson 37). The novel itself surrounds many creative ideas, like eternal life; however, the main conflict in the

story requires the audience to think critically about their choices. This reflects the creativity of descriptive grammar and the critical, rule-based approach of prescriptive grammar.

The application of descriptive grammar in the novel explores the language universal of pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of how individuals participate in conversations. The way the protagonist, Winnie, participates in conversation throughout the novel is similar to that of a child:

“Do you live nearby?” She managed at last, letting go of his hand reluctantly. “I never saw you before. Do you come here a lot? No one supposed to. It's our wood.” Then she added quickly, “It's alright, though, if *you* come here. I mean, it's alright with *me*.” The boy grinned. “No, I don't live nearby, and no, I don't come here often. Just passing through. And thanks, I'm glad it's alright with you.” “That's good,” said Winnie irrelevantly. (Babbitt 27)

Winnie is extremely inquisitive much like most children. She consistently asks questions throughout the novel. Her inclination to ask questions plays an important part in the specific features of her character. The author is seeking for individuals to answer a question which is reflected in how the protagonist consistently asks questions. When Winnie is participating in a conversation, she is usually asking questions or pondering a response. Using a child as the protagonist of the story allows for Babbitt to encourage her audience to consider her questions regarding death and immortality without directly asking the questions themselves. The characters in the book all provide different perspectives on the themes in question and Winnie has to find ways to understand them all.

Of the most prominent themes, death and immortality play the biggest roles in the novel. These themes are very complex and hard for children to grasp and understand. Winnie is no exception to that. She does not have a firm grasp on the themes of death and immortality and what they really mean. The character Tuck does his best to explain it to her:

But dying's part of the wheel, right there next to being born. You can't pick out the pieces you like and leave the rest. Being part of the whole thing, that's the blessing. But it's passing us by, us Tucks. Living's heavy work, but off to one side, the way *we* are, it's useless, too. It don't make sense. If I knowed how to climb back on the wheel, I'd do it in a minute. You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we got.

We just *are*, we just *be*, like rocks beside the road (Babbitt 63-4).

Babbitt uses pragmatics to help explain the themes in the novel. She uses her characters to provide simplified answers to the overarching thematic questions. The author uses the way adults would interact with a child in an attempt to help convey her complex themes to a younger audience. The way she has characters participate in conversations throughout the novel reflects the overall simple, child-like tone. The simplicity of the infrastructure of the novel is an attempt to convey deep, complex themes to an audience who may not understand such concepts yet.

In conjunction with a pragmatic linguistic study, a semiotics study of the novel's cover art can also convey the complexity of the themes within the novel. Looking at the original cover of the novel (see appendix A1), the themes of the novel are apparent after specifically analyzing

different aspects of the cover art. On the cover, the most apparent referent, which is an object itself in its physical form, is the girl standing in the middle of the page. She is depicted from her shoulders down, her head and neck are not featured in the artwork, and is standing alone, holding a frog. Children can symbolize many different things; however, they often do not symbolize death or immortality. Children often are used in literature “as a representation of all those things a culture associates with childhood: innocence, savagery, emptiness, vulnerability, freedom, and potentiality” (Flegel). Without further context, the referent alone does not reflect any of the prominent themes within the novel. The words included in the cover art are the title of the novel, the author’s name, and a review from the *New York Times*. Focusing on the title of the novel, *Tuck Everlasting*, synchrony may be more useful in portraying a major theme within the novel.

Synchrony is viewing one word in a particular time and place as if it were frozen. Using synchrony to look at the title of the novel, the word “Tuck” is referring to the family that is prominent within the story. The word “Everlasting” is in reference to the eternal life this family has found. By combining these two words, and the synchrony of them, the theme of immortality becomes evident. These two words provoke the theme of immortality by highlighting the everlasting life the Tuck family happened to stumble upon. The clarification of the words helps to convey a major theme within the novel. This makes the theme of immortality become more apparent but does not provide a solidified explanation for the referent. The synchrony, combined with the referent, may lead an audience to believe that the child is a member of the Tuck family.

Focusing on the cover art as a whole and the environment it depicts does not make any apparent connections to themes within the novel. The cover is solely centered around the girl in the middle of the page. Aside from the pebbles by her shoes, there is not a definitive environment around her. Using binary opposition, which is how the surrounding environment affects the overall message of the work, the coloring of the cover has an impact on the portrayal of the novel. The colors on the cover of the novel are “muddy” and darker in tone. This correlates to the prominent themes in the novel. If the coloring were to be changed to brighter, bolder colors it would not correlate to the themes. The themes of death and immortality are not often associated with feelings of joy and jubilation; they are usually correlated to feelings of sadness and grief. A prominent color in the cover is black, which is used to shade and create depth in the image. Black can be regarded as “[a] mysterious color associated with fear and the unknown” (“The Psychology of Colors & Their Meanings”). The use of black corresponds with the uncertainty associated with the themes of death and immortality. Darker emotions are better conveyed by darker, deeper colors. By changing the coloring of the cover, the themes are no longer conveyed effectively. The combination of coloring and the synchrony of the title enhance the novel’s complex themes.

Changing the cover art in its entirety may be more effective in supporting the themes of the novel. In an artistic adaptation of the cover (see appendix A2), changing the referent affects the overall cover art. The referent was changed from a young girl to a tree. Often in literature trees are “considered representative of life, wisdom, power and prosperity” (“The Symbolism Behind Trees: What Do They Mean to You?”). By making this change to the referent, the

correlation between life and the themes of the novel become more apparent. The themes of death and immortality both directly relate to the concept of life. This strong correlation makes the image of the tree a more effective referent than the young girl. Using a tree also helps to represent a specific, important aspect of the setting within the novel. The “magic” spring is located at the base of a tree which gives the Tucks eternal life. The adapted cover art has a more effective referent than the original cover of the novel.

The words on the adapted cover art include the title of the novel, *Tuck Everlasting*, the author’s name, and the phrase: “[i]f you could live forever would you?” The synchrony of the words “Tuck” and “Everlasting” have not changed; however, looking at the synchrony of the word “forever” enhances their meaning. In this case, the word “forever” implies “[f]or all future time, for eternity, in perpetuity” (OED). Knowing the word “[e]verlasting” implies for a long time and that “Tuck” is the name of a family, the synchrony of the word “forever” emphasizes the theme of immortality. This connection to the theme within the novel is only strengthened when the referent is combined with the synchrony of the words found on the cover art. While these two aspects of semiology strengthen the themes within the novel, the binary opposition of the adapted cover art does not.

The environment presented in the adapted cover art is a woodland scene surrounding a tree. While there is some resemblance of a surrounding environment, it is still vague, much like the original cover art. Focusing on the coloring of the adapted cover, the colors are much brighter. This does not help to reinforce the severity of the themes because brighter colors often evoke emotions related to happiness. While the colors in the adapted cover still maintain “muddy” undertones, they are not as dark or shaded with black. The lightness of the colors depicts feelings of light-heartedness. Changing the colors to bolder, more severe, colors would enhance the theme that is presented by the referent and synchrony of the words on the cover.

Novels are often written with an intended audience in mind. When this happens, it is often apparent in the way it is written. That is not always the case. The novel *Tuck Everlasting* is written as if it is meant for children to read. The morphology, lexicon, syntax, and pragmatics all lend themselves to children easily. Despite this, the themes of the novel do not. Babbitt chose to write about themes that are deep and complex. They are concepts that many young children may not understand or know how to interpret. A pragmatic linguistics study shows how language universals can enhance the themes of the novel while the author attempts to make these themes relatable and understandable to children by using different linguistic properties. The themes within the novel are only enhanced by a pragmatic linguistics study and a semiology study of the original and adapted cover art.

The severity of these themes is easily appreciated by adults but may be misunderstood by children. The novel *Tuck Everlasting* appeals to many audiences: “certain ‘classic’ books that I also consider ‘crossover books,’ or books that appeal to both children and adults” (Cadden 286). *Tuck Everlasting* is enjoyable for children, but it holds deeper values and meaning for older audiences. This novel is often introduced to children because of the magical properties of the story and the style in which it is written; however, Kathi Maio states that because she had not

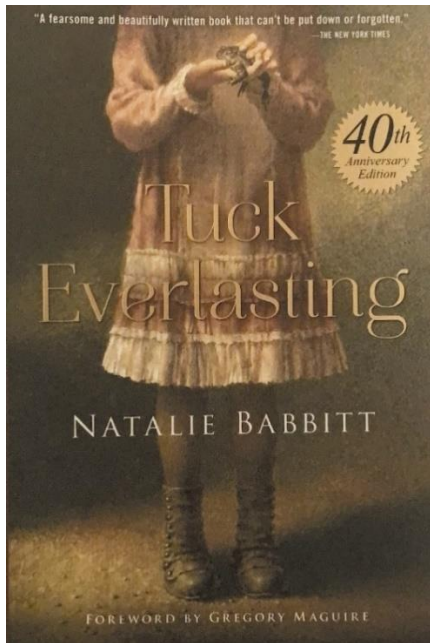
read the novel till adulthood, she only appreciated the story more (Maio 112). The themes are more impactful when the audience can understand them. They resonate easily and intensely with more mature readers. Babbitt gives an excellent attempt at making the themes approachable for children, but a deeper understanding of the themes can only come with experience. This novel is deemed a children's novel because of how the words are presented on the page and the inclusion of fantasy into the work. The thematic elements of the book, however, lend themselves to a more mature audience.

Children's novels may be more than they appear to be. While often times they are fun-filled, magical stories that are designed to interest children in reading, sometimes they can be more. The themes that are present within these novels are not always apparent to the target audience. *Tuck Everlasting* is a children's novel in how it is written, but thematically, it is better suited for more mature audiences. The simplicity of the novel on the surface level lends itself easily to children. When the novel is explored on a deeper level, the simplicity only enhances the complexity of the themes. Simplicity plays an important role in making literature approachable for different types of audiences; however, it can also sometimes lead to individuals overlooking important themes and complicated questions. Not all children's novels are solely meant for children and not all novels are created equal.

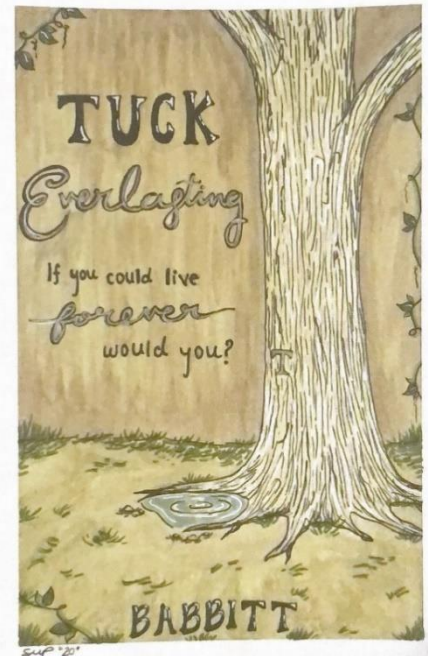
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## Appendix

A1



A2



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