

Reading beyond Cultural Barriers:
A Study on American Adolescents' Responses to the
Korean Picture Book, *Doggy Poo*

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I. Introduction

Due to the advancement of technology and the Internet, people now have access to different nations and their cultures. Literature is also being translated into different languages, creating more availability to foreigners. However, while globalization takes place, misunderstandings between nations and regions can occur due to the cultural differences, which can be seen through the different perceptions of everyday objects and actions. For instance, birds are typically described as ‘crying’ in the Korean literature while they are depicted as ‘singing’ in Western culture. Koreans’ perception or interpretation of an object is different from the Westerners’ because they belong to different “interpretive community” (Fish, 1980 referred from Rosenblatt, 1985). Such a difference can be the cause of misunderstanding when somebody in one culture interprets a text in another language. Thus culture, as a social construct, is invisible but not negligible in literacy instruction (Boutte & DeFlorimonte, 1998).

Literature can be a useful tool for teaching other languages and cultures. Korean literature translated into other languages can be used for teaching the Korean language and culture to foreigners in the current global world. When educators teach students cross-cultural

literature, they need to consider how readers' cultural factors influence their responses to literature. Culture plays a key role in human cognitive development and learning of new knowledge (Cole, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987). Culture, as experiential reservoirs, can also function as background knowledge which may facilitate or hinder learning the new texts (Rosenblatt, 1985). In fact, this research focuses on the question of how readers' cultural backgrounds affect understanding literary texts with different cultural contexts.

This research attempts to explore how American adolescents perceive, interpret and understand Doggy Poo, which is a Korean children's picture book. This research reflects a current trend which explores the larger sociocultural contexts surrounding reading and responding (Galda & Beach, 2001). Traditionally, texts and readers were regarded as separate things. From the traditional views, texts are "out there", apart from the reader and waiting for readers' discovery. Readers are also regarded as individuals separated from social contexts who are pursuing individual interests and motives. However, our everyday experience negates "the notion of language as a self-contained, undergrounded system", which stresses the "dyadic formulation" between the signifier and the signified (Rosenblatt, 1985). As illustrated in an example of birds' sounds, texts are differently perceived by readers in different sociocultural contexts. Thus, our theoretical frame regarding literacy should be extended into "triadic formulation" (Rosenblatt, 1985) including texts, readers and contexts (Galda & Beach, 2001).

This research focuses on how American adolescents read the story of Doggy Poo in different contexts. Doggy Poo is a Korean story that is very popular in Korea. The author of Doggy Poo, Kwon Jung-Seang (September 10, 1937 – May 17, 2007), was a Korean who was born in Japan before World War II. His father was a conscripted laborer during

the Japanese Colonial Rule period. After World War II and the Independence of Korea, Kwon and his family moved to Korea. He wrote a lot of children's books while he worked as a bell ringer for a church in a small town named Andong in South Korea. He received the Christian Children's Literature Award in 1969 because of his most famous novel, *Doggy Poo*. Which was originally written as a chapter book, later made into a picture book, and then an animated film. It has been translated into different languages. The English version of the picture book and its DVD was published in 2004. They have been sold in Amazon. For this research, the English version published in 2004 was used.

Doggy Poo was chosen for this research due to the great message of the story. Its message, sacrificial love for others, has been very well received by Korean readers. *Doggy Poo* contains transformative messages in terms of self-reflection (Hwang, 2009; Kim, 2011; Park & Shin, 2005; Sung, 2007) and a very attractive story (Rew, 2009). The story is short and simple enough for most people to read easily. American readers who have no Korean cultural heritages may interpret the story differently. Their interpretation could be different according to their reading contexts and reading the book independently or collectively.

Regarding reader's responses, Rosenblatt (1985; 2004) theorized "a theory of transaction." Her reading theory of transaction is regarded as a "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1970) in the sense that she totally changed dualistic views on relations between text and reader in reading events. From the traditional paradigm, the texts and the readers exist separately. Text was the "object" and readers were passive "subjects." Text was out there as "a set of meanings." The readers' abilities were determined by how they read the texts accurately. However, according

to Rosenblatt's (1985; 2004) transaction theory, readers are not separate entities apart from the texts. Reader as "interpretant" (Rosenblatt, 1985) actively participates in reading the texts and interpreting meanings of the texts. Reading is a transaction of signs and meanings between readers and texts.

Rosenblatt (1985) distinguishes reading events into two: "efferent reading" and "aesthetic reading." The former refers to reading which focuses "attention on public meaning to be recalled or analyzed." The latter refers to reading which focuses on "what is personally lived through, cognitively and affectively." She borrowed these terms from Britton (1984 referred from Rosenblatt, 1985) regarding readers' attitude: "spectator" and "participant." Readers are positioned on a continuum between the two stances; "spectator" and "participant" in different contexts. Individual readers bring their capital from their "linguistic experiential reservoirs" (Rosenblatt, 2004) in natural and social contexts. All linguistic events are regarded as interpretation or "making sense" through transaction of signs from our personal linguistic reservoirs. Below is a quote from Rosenblatt (2004).

We "make sense" of a new situation or transaction and make new meanings by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending public and private elements selected from our personal linguistic-experiential reservoirs. (p. 1366)

From this theoretical perspective, this research started with an assumption that American adolescent readers who live in a suburban area in the U.S. read the story of Doggy Poo differently from Korean readers. Our biggest interests were how they understand and appreciate the theme and message of the story. Based on the assumption, this research has three questions to be resolved. 1) How do American adolescent readers appreciate Doggy Poo? 2) How do cultural backgrounds affect

American adolescents' responses on *Doggy Poo*? 3) How do American adolescents transform their prior knowledge and thoughts in order to accommodate new thoughts and knowledge that *Doggy Poo* implies? These questions will be dealt with through out the research.

II. Literature Review

Before examining existing research on *Doggy Poo*, we need to first distinguish the forms of the book that the research used to analyze. This is because the directions of the research vary according to the form of the story. There are two forms of the story of *Doggy Poo*. Originally, the story was written as a children's chapter book in 1969. Later, it was rewritten as a picture book in 1996. The rewritten picture book has more popularity than the chapter book because it was included in elementary school textbooks. Children's books that were rewritten by a different author or illustrator often become distorted or entirely different books. However, the picture book, *Doggy Poo*, was rewritten by the original author, Kwon Jung-Seang, to fit with a younger audience. It was made with a close collaboration with the illustrator, Jang Seung-Kag. The story and the pictures were well-matched, which created a good picture book. Some critics criticize that the picture book does not reach the depth of the original chapter book (Noh, 2012; Lee, 2007). However, the picture book, *Doggy Poo*, has received more popularity and attention than the original chapter book. Children as well as parents appreciated the story book more because the picture book made the main character cuter and more loveable (Park, 2012).

The more important question is why the story is attractive to people, regardless of the forms of the story (Rew, 2009). By understanding this,

we would be able to contribute to the development of Korean children's literature by using the research for educational endeavors. For the research on the original chapter book of *Doggy Poo*, a lot of researchers focused on the life of the author, Kwon Jung-Seang (Kim, 2013; Noh, 1998; Yang, S.R.N. 2010; Yang, Y. J., 2010; Lee, 2015; Lee, 2006; Cho, 2014; Hong, 2008). These studies describe the life of the author, Kwon Jung-Seang, as full of suffering, sacrifice, religion, sublimation, etc. and they conclude that the stories of his book are reflections of his life. They project the author's life and timeline into the story of *Doggy Poo*, and they provide us an allegorical interpretation: they interpret that the main character of *Doggy Poo*, believed to be 'a dirty and useless being', corresponds with the author and the Korean nation as well. However, these attempts limit various meanings and multiple interpretations that the story of *Doggy Poo* could imply (Cho, 2007).

For the research on the picture book, scholars have focused on the aspects of the story itself, including the characters, values or philosophies, educational and therapeutic purposes, etc. instead of focusing the author. It is the main character, Doggy Poo, itself that is the most interesting character in the picture book, *Doggy Poo*. However, other characters are also important because the main character, Doggy Poo, could not have matured without its relationships with the other characters. Park & Shin (2005) studied identity formation process of the main character based on Berne's transactional analysis theory. They claimed that the main character got to acquire its positive self-image through its transactions with other characters and thus the book, *Doggy Poo*, would be helpful for little children to form their self-image positively. Kim (2011) analyzed the main character's relationships with others and its transformation process. He concluded that the book would be useful for children to reflect themselves in terms of self-realization

and relationships with others. Nonetheless, the main character, Doggy Poo, is also regarded as “healthy narcissi” (Sung, 2007) and a “successful character” (Hwang, 2009) who uses self-energy effectively by controlling fear and conflict.

Research on values and philosophies of *Doggy Poo* are much related to the object, *poop*. According to Cho (2007), *Doggy Poo* shows us a paradigmatic shift in terms of usage of unprecedented character of poop and the envisioning of transformative paradigm. It should be appreciated as it changed the previous trends of children’s literature (Cho, 2007: 94). Moreover, it can belong to an ecological fairy tale that contains ecological thoughts and philosophy in terms of theme, plot, characters, background and etc. (Song et al., 2009). It also describes co-existential philosophy and Christianity including love and caring (Lee & Son, 2013).

Research on the picture book, *Doggy Poo*, has been done very actively ever since the story was included in school text books. Therapeutic researches also have continued so far. The picture book form of *Doggy Poo* is being used for essay writing (Chung, 2008), poetry writing (Hong, 2010), and infants’ math education (Hwang, 2001). It is also being used as an educational tool for various fields like reading and writing integrated education (Lee, 2010), Korean language education for foreigners (Jang, 2012), etc. It has been used and has demonstrated positive effects in the realms of reading therapy (Kyung, 2006; Kim, 2002; Kim, 2010) and music therapy (Kim, 2008; Im, 2006). Aside from the researchers who focus on the usages of the picture book for readers, some researchers analyze the literature styles and provide some criteria for children’s literature (Yoon, 2011).

Existing research on *Doggy Poo* has focused on the text itself: What great messages does the story have? What philosophy or thoughts does the story carry? What influence does the story have on to the readers?

What values does the story have? How can the story be used for other purposes? It is acknowledged that the story has tremendous educational and therapeutic values. However, there is hardly any currently done research that examines how readers' cultural backgrounds affect reading the story. Looking closely into how American adolescent readers interpret the story of *Doggy Poo* as a very source of transformative power is very important. Especially, in the current globalized world, it is very meaningful to examine whether the *Doggy Poo* as a Korean story would read well enough for readers in other countries to appreciate the messages and meanings of *Doggy Poo*. This study can contribute to calling us to rethink relations between readers, texts, cultures, and contexts in literacy activity under multicultural or cross-cultural settings.

III. Research Methods

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION: CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUND THEORY

This research adopts qualitative research methods because qualitative method is more appropriate to acquire deeper and more nuanced knowledge. The ground theory method was developed by Glaser and Strauss in order to 'discover' theories through analyzing data and to provide legitimacy to qualitative methodology in terms of science. It challenges the conventional idea that only quantitative research methodology can offer a systematic social science inquiry. It is said that the ground theory made a "qualitative revolution" (Charmaz, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 509). However, Charmaz (2000) critiques the early ground theory in the sense that Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) assume "an objective external reality," aiming toward "unbiased data

collection,” proposing “a set of technical procedures,” and espousing “verification” (p. 511). According to Charmaz (2000), this stance makes the ground theorists’ positions as distant experts and keeps them more in “the objectivist, positivistic realm” (ibid). On the contrary, Charmaz (2000) proposes a little different approach from the objectivist ground theorists like Strauss and Corbin suggest researchers to us “flexible, heuristic strategies, rather than fixed procedures” (Charmaz, 2001: 346). Constructivist ground theorists honor the voice of participants but they also acknowledge the differences of perspectives between the participants and themselves.

PARTICIPANTS

Five American high school readers were selected at a suburban high school in a mid-western state of the United States. Although *Doggy Poo* is written for young children, high school students were invited for the research. High school students are more suited as they can express their thoughts more clearly. The suburban school selected for the research does not have a lot of diversity in terms of racial/ethnical/cultural backgrounds. The majority of the students are Caucasian. Asian American students are the second largest racial/cultural group in the high school. The fact that there is no African American or Hispanic participant can be a limitation of this research.¹

To get informative participants from different cultural groups, participants were selected purposefully among those who meet the study criteria (Patton, 2001). However, in reality, we needed to compromise

¹ The selected school’s racial ratio is as following:

| Caucasian | Asian | Two or more races | Hispanic | African American |
|-----------|-------|-------------------|----------|------------------|
| 78% | 17% | 3% | 1% | 1% |

(Source: Great schools.org)

some criteria and sought participants who are readily available. Students who have Korean cultural heritages were excluded. Participants' span of years living in America and ethnicity of their parents were also considered for the selection of participants to try to be inclusive to students with diverse backgrounds. Research was designed as the participants had diverse racial and cultural backgrounds (See below table 1). All of them show more advanced literacy skills than students who take regular class in that they are taking advanced classes including AP English, Honors English or IB English.

Participants' names shown in the article all are pseudonyms. *Sophia* is a Caucasian girl who has lived in the U.S. for all of her life. *Rachel* is also a Caucasian girl and has lived in the U.S. for all of her life as well. *Tanya* is a female, born in Japan and lived there for about four years before moving to the United States. Her mother is Indian and her father is Caucasian. *Jenny* is an Indian girl, but she was born in the U.S. She visited India occasionally, but most of her life was spent in the U.S. *Jordan* is a male. His mother is Filipino and his father is Japanese. He has lived in the U.S. for entire his life.

Table 1. Participants' Personal Backgrounds

| Name | Sex | Age | Race | Span of Years Living in America | Parents' Cultural Backgrounds |
|---------------|--------|-----|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>Sophia</i> | Female | 16 | Caucasian | American Born | Both Americans |
| <i>Rachel</i> | Female | 16 | Caucasian | American Born | Both Americans |
| <i>Tanya</i> | Female | 16 | Mixed of Caucasian and Asian | Born and lived 4 years in Japan, Grown in America | American & Indian |

| | | | | | |
|--------|--------|----|-------|---------------|---------------------|
| Jenny | Female | 16 | Asian | American Born | Both Indians |
| Jordan | Male | 16 | Asian | American Born | Filipino & Japanese |

DATA SOURCES AND PROCEDURES

The research process had two parts: the individual phase and the discussion phase in order to give participants chances to read and interpret the story of *Doggy Poo* in different social contexts. In the individual phase, all of the participants read the book independently *Doggy Poo* along with instructions that told them to read the story and then write their opinions with at least 150 words. Participants had time to read the story independently and respond by themselves. They were allowed one week to send their written short essays before the discussion time. In the individual phase, participants rather might have become “spectators” as a reader to analyze the messages and themes of the story (Rosenblatt, 1985). All participants’ short review essays were collected at July 16th through 17th, 2015 (EST) before discussion started. Discussion took place on Friday July, 31st, 2015 at 8:30 p.m. (EST). The discussion phase began with all of the participants in a Google Hangout chat. Instead of a Hangout video chat, the discussion was held in the messaging chat on the purpose of getting written record for the discussion. Discussion was planned in order for the participants to read the story more “esthetically” and to become more active “participants” as a reader (Rosenblatt, 1985). After everyone was connected through online chatting, participants had discussion according to prepared questions about their opinions and they discussed their answers together. One of the authors, who is a bilingual in Korean and English, facilitated the discussion but tried not to impose any ideas to

them. The whole discussion took about 1 1/2 hours to finish. The questions for discussion include:

1. *What are your lasting feelings of Doggy Poo? (i.e. It was good, bad, touching , strange, bizarre etc.) Why do you feel that way about the book?*
2. *What do you think the messages and themes of the book?*
3. *What were your original thoughts and beliefs about these characters: dog poop, dandelions, sparrows, chicks, dirt, etc.?*
4. *Did your original thoughts about the objects differ with how the objects were portrayed in the book?*
5. *Is there a story from American culture that you believe is similar to this book? If so, what is the story?*
6. *Would you suggest this book to other American children? Why or why not?*

DATA ANALYSIS AND TECHNIQUES

Data were collected throughout the individual phase and the discussion phase. We gathered all the written essays into an electronical file and aligned them with line-up process. For the transcription of discussion note, we copied all the content from Google Hangout program and then erased pictorial images of participants and put their names instead. Transcription of the discussion note was also aligned with line-up process and made into an electronic copy. We relied on a digitally-managed system in order to both organize and protect the generated data. It also helped us to reduce time for data selection and analysis.

After generating all the data from each participant's short review essays and discussion notes from Google Hangout chat, we started to analyze the data with three questions which were raised in the introduction: 1) how do American adolescent readers appreciate the themes and messages of *Doggy Poo*? 2) How do cultural backgrounds

affect American adolescents' responses on *Doggy Poo*? 3) How do American adolescents transform their prior knowledge and thoughts in order to accommodate new thoughts and knowledge that *Doggy Poo* implies?

Firstly, to make meanings from the data regarding the first question how American adolescent readers appreciate the themes and messages of *Doggy Poo*, we organized the answers into three categories: Positive Response (PR), neutral response (nr) and Negative Response (NR). By this categorization, we could figure out participants' attitudes toward the story. After that, we made subcategories in terms of the reasons of their attitudes. The reasons why some participants have positive responses or negative responses were summarized into several categories: Positive opinions due to Great messages (PGM), Positive opinions due to good moral lessons (PGL), Negative opinions due to weird characters (NWC), Negative opinions due to Religious messages (RM) and so on.

Next, we focused on the second question on how participants' backgrounds affect American adolescents' responses on *Doggy Poo*. Here we could make two categories: Individual Background (IB) and Cultural Background (CB). For the second question, we made a sub-question: How are their responses related to their cultural backgrounds. For the responses to the question, we made three categories: American Culture (AC), Indian Culture (IC), Korean Culture (KC) and etc. At last, we focused on the third question how their attitudes and knowledge and thoughts changed. We made three categories for its responses including Changeable attitudes (CA), Changeable knowledge (CK), and Changeable thoughts (CT). See below table 2 for coding and categorization process.

Table 2. Categories of Data and Code Abbreviation

| Question | Categories (responses to the questions were sorted into:) |
|--|--|
| 1) How do American adolescent readers appreciate the themes and messages of <i>Doggy Poo</i> ? | Positive Response (PR), neutral response (nr) Negative Response (NR) |
| 1-1) why some participants have positive responses or negative responses | Positive opinions due to Great messages (PGM), Positive opinions due to good moral lessons (PGL), Negative opinions due to weird characters (NWC), Negative opinions due to Religious messages (RM) |
| 2) How do participants' backgrounds affect American adolescents' responses on <i>Doggy Poo</i> ? | Individual Background (IB), Cultural Background (CB) |
| 2-1) How are their responses related to their cultural backgrounds. | American Culture (AC), Indian Culture (IC), Korean Culture (KC) |
| 3) How do American adolescents transform their prior knowledge and thoughts in order to accommodate new thoughts and knowledge that <i>Doggy Poo</i> implies | Changeable attitudes (CA), Changeable knowledge (CK), Changeable thoughts (CT) |

TRIANGULATION OF DATA SOURCES

Compared to the traditional ground theory, the constructivist ground theory can deal with the “subjective experiences” of participants. The constructivist ground theorists can implement diverse ways for “giving voice to their respondents, representing them as accurately as possible, discovering and acknowledging how respondents’ views of reality conflicts with their own, and recognizing art as well as science in the analytic product and process” (Charmaz, 2000: 510). After writing first

draft of our research article, some reviewers raised a question about credibility on our claim that Indian cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds of two participants have affected their reading of the story, especially related to their negative attitudes to Christian connotation of the story. They asked why we claimed it and what evidence supported the claim. Especially, they expressed skepticism when we say, Indian cultural backgrounds, they think that it means too many things related to their ethnic, racial, and social origins and influences.

To secure credibility of this research, at December 4th, 2015 (EST), we had additional interviews with the two participants who had Indian cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. From the interviews, one of participants (*Jenny*) who has Indian parents and an “authentic” Indian participant in terms of racial/cultural/ethnical background did not remember that the story of *Doggy Poo* had connection with Christianity. She did not remember she shared negative feelings about it during discussion phase. However, the other participant (*Tanya*) who has partially Indian racial/cultural/ethnical background from her mother affirmed that “it's unrelated and thus distracting.” From these responses, we could figure out that negative attitudes toward Christian connotation of *Doggy Poo* are not necessarily related to Indian cultural background. After this triangulation, we corrected previous interpretation regarding Indian cultural background.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. A great story made with weird characters

The participants responded in a variety of opinions: most of them

believed that *Doggy Poo* was a great story, but they also acknowledged that there were strange aspects of the story. From the most of the reviews, participants said that they enjoyed the book. Three of five participants, *Sophia*, *Jenny* and *Jordan* expressed very positive impressions on the book in their written reviews. *Rachel* expressed both positive thoughts and negative feeling as well. However, *Tanya* was quite negative. They all understood the lessons that the book was trying to share. Below are quotes from reviews of *Sophia*, *Jenny* and *Jordan*.

Doggy Poo, while not an overly complex book, is a cute story that I would show to other teenagers, as well as pre-teens, adults and young children ... This is also a great book (From *Sophia*'s review)

At first glance, Doggy Poo seems like a lighthearted children's book, but it really has a deeper meaning. (From *Jenny*'s review)

Doggy Poo, by Jung-Seang Kwon, is a positive message to young readers delivered in an abnormal context. The message was very positive and pious. (From *Jordan*'s review)

Sophia appreciated that *Doggy Poo* is “a cute story” and “a great book” that people from all ages including teenagers, pre-teens, adults and young children could read because it is not an “overly complex book.” She responded with mostly positive reviews and shared mostly praises for *Doggy Poo*. *Sophia*’s racial and cultural background is not very diverse. She was American-born and has both Caucasian parents. *Jenny* also discovered *Doggy Poo* has “a deeper meaning” though it “seems like a lighthearted children’s book.” *Jordan* wrote that *Doggy Poo* provided young readers a positive message and even he praised “the message was very positive and pious.”

However, *Rachel* and *Tanya*, two of participants perceived the book

as being very different from the children's books that they were used to. They found it different from their expectations because main character is a dog poop. *Rachel* expressed a little negative impression and thought with the words like "a little surprised," "a weird," "a little different," and "a weird but interesting perspective." She tried to express it politely but she iterated the negative meanings slightly differently. Below is a quote from her review.

I was at first a little surprised I thought it was kind of a weird book, and a little different, but I thought it ... taught them from a weird, but interesting perspective. (From Rachel's review)

However, *Rachel* acknowledged that the story had good moral messages. She summarized them into three lessons by three different characteristics in *Doggy Poo*: 1) not to make fun of others even if they are different, 2) even if you're different, you can still have a purpose in life, 3) everyone will find their purpose in life someday, no matter how bad they think things are in the beginning. Below is also a quote from her review.

I thought that the story had a good moral lesson. First, with the encounter of the mud, it showed kids that they should not make fun of others, even if they're different. Next, with the leaf, it showed that even if you're different, you can still have a purpose in life: it also showed that even though Doggy Poo thought he was worthless, the leaf was envious of him that he could stay in one spot. Finally, the last lesson with the dandelion showed that everyone will find their purpose in life someday, no matter how bad they think things are in the beginning. (From Rachel's review)

Tanya thought that *Doggy Poo* was "interesting" and "a little strange." Furthermore, she anticipated that it would not sell very well in the U.S.

or India. She was also critical to the religious aspect of *Doggy Poo* even though she acknowledged that “it was only mildly so.” She said that she did not expect *Doggy Poo* to be a Catholic or Christian-oriented book.” She strongly insisted that religious books should be avoided in American children’s stores. Below is the quote from *Tanya’s* short review.

I thought the book was interesting if [but] a little strange...probably something that wouldn't sell very well in the US ... I also didn't expect it to be Catholic or Christian [sic] oriented, even though it was only mildly so, since that's avoided in the majority of American children stories unless they're meant to be religious children's books. (From *Tanya’s* review)

Also from our examination of participants’ discussion notes, we can see participants think that the use of poop as a character is rare in the U.S. as *Tanya* and *Rachel* commented that they can’t think of any books that involve the use as a character. *Rachel* mentions that she knew of books that involved poop as the main topic and *Jordan* says, “I’m 100% there are several other books involving poop as a main topic for kids.” However, none of them could think of poop being used as a character and were bewildered by it.

Overall, all of the participants agreed that the *Doggy Poo* have great messages and lessons. However, they contended that there are some aspects that were strange or weird to American adolescents. We found that the strangeness or weirdness felt by the participants was largely due to the main character who is a literally dog’s poop, even though the participants recognized its greatness and messages.

2. Criticism of using poo as the main character and Christian connotations

After figuring out the participants' overall impressions and their appreciation on *Doggy Poo*, we focused on the relationships between American adolescents' responses and their cultural/racial/ethnical backgrounds to figure out how their backgrounds affect their understanding of the book. In the written review, *Rachel* found *Doggy Poo* as "weird", "a little different", and "interesting" because the book personified objects like dog poo, leaves, dirt, etc. *Rachel* said that she was shocked that someone would write about dog poo and found the story weird because main character is doggy poo. *Rachel*, similar to *Sophia*, does not have diverse cultural backgrounds in the sense that she was born in the U.S. and has both Caucasian parents. She might have been surprised at the "unprecedented character of *Doggy Poo*" (Cho, 2007). We can also see the reason why *Rachel* found it "weird", "a little different" or "interesting" is because dog poop was used in children's book and also was being personified. *Rachel* recalled some of American children's books which deal with poop stories. However, those books that *Rachel* recalled are all about the mechanism of poop in our body. In that sense, *Rachel* felt surprised at *Doggy Poo* as the unprecedented nature of story. Below is the quote from *Rachel*'s short review.

*While reading the book Doggy Poo, I was at first a little surprised that the character Doggy Poo, and that there would be a children's book written about that (although, I remember reading some books as a child Everyone Poops and The Gas We Pass, also children's books) I also thought it was kind of weird that the poo was alive, but I guess the mud and leaf were alive as well. (From *Rachel*'s review)*

Tanya thought that overall *Doggy Poo* “interesting” and “a little strange.” She has cultural backgrounds of Indian culture due to her mother’s cultural heritages. She also felt bothered because of its Catholic or Christian connotations. *Tanya* interpreted *Doggy Poo* negatively. The reason may be related to her unique cultural backgrounds which share Indian background as well as American background. (Here, we can raise a question: what is the American cultural background? But it is not main question in the current research.) Different from *Rachel*, *Tanya*’s perspectives are value-laden interpretations based on her cultural backgrounds that she has “such negativity” toward some idea related to poo. She said “In India, poo is seen as dirty and dirty things as normally “bad”. See the below quote from *Tanya*’s review.

The fact that the main character was poo is probably something … we have such a negativity to the idea, it’s something adults want to think about as little as possible … poo is seen as dirty and dirty things as normally “bad”.
(From *Tanya*’s review)

During discussion phase, we also can see that using dog poop as a character seems to negatively affect participants’ appreciation of the book as *Jenny* commented, “I actually kind felt bad for [Doggy Poo] at one point … and then [I] remembered it was literally poop.” Instead of considering the poop as a character and like a real person, *Jenny* is offset by the poop to the extent that she doesn’t feel a lot of empathy for the character *Doggy Poo*. Even *Jordan*, who expressed a very positive impression, commented that the idea of the book was “initially off-putting” and contended that “the delivery through the characters being animals, dirt and poop were unorthodox.” As same as *Rachel*, the reason why *Jordan* thought the story of *Doggy Poo* “weird” or

“off-putting” is because of personification of objects like dog poo, dirt, etc. and the use of such objects as characters. This strangeness does not come from participants’ cultural differences that *Tanya* felt based on her culturally value-laden interpretation.

During discussion, the two students, *Tanya* and *Jenny*, who have Indian cultural backgrounds, were bothered by the use of doggy poo as the main character and its Christian orientation. Especially, in *Jenny*’s case, she really appreciated the book mostly in her written review. *Tanya*’s case is different from *Jenny*. She consistently expressed negative feelings due to Christian connotation with *Doggy Poo*. She also tried to defend herself and furthermore made a justification that religious children’s books should be avoided in American children’s stories for the sake of equality for cultural minority groups. At first, we interpreted their negative attitude due to Indian cultural aspects. However, we changed our interpretation after additional interviews with the two participants for triangulation. Their value-laden interpretation could be affected from their past experiences, her belief system, or something else.

In a conclusion, some participants showed their critical perspectives because of the use of poo as a main character and religious message connoting Christianity. We could figure out the reasons why some participants showed negative feelings toward the story of *Doggy Poo*. Weirdness due to personified non-living character comes from their individual literacy backgrounds. Some Koreans also feel that same way when they read the story of *Doggy Poo* for the first time. However, negative feelings toward poo and Christian connotations may come from past experiences, participants’ cultural /social backgrounds or belief system consisting of “linguistic experiential reservoirs” (Rosenblatt, 1984; 2004). It doesn’t matter if they are from American culture or

Indian culture.

3. Reading beyond cultural barriers

Tanya was a participant who showed most negative perspectives toward the story of *Doggy Poo*. From her written review, we can see that *Tanya* does not like *Doggy Poo* because of its Catholic or Christian-orientation. In her written review, *Tanya* said most American children stories avoid religion, unless they are specifically targeted toward being religious children stories. According to her, American culture avoids religion as America advocates for equality and freedom of religion and that causes fear of offending others due to the possible religious aspects in stories. Also, parents may avoid the books due to the religious content it expresses due to their own different religion or viewpoint. See the below quote from *Tanya*'s written note.

I also didn't expect it to be Catholic or Christian [sic] oriented, even though it was only mildly so, since that's avoided in the majority of American children stories unless they're meant to be religious children's books since that's avoided in the majority of American children stories unless they're meant to be religious children's books. (From *Tanya*'s review)

From participants' discussion notes, we could figure out that two of participants who have Indian cultural back grounds, *Jenny* and *Tanya*, expressed that they were bothered by the religious aspects of the story. Before the discussion, *Jenny* wrote her impression of the book very positively and did not mention negative responses related to Christian connotations. However, during discussion, she seemed to be intrigued by *Tanya*'s opinion

Jenny: I mean lasting impression, nice ending. [But] the religious aspect felt weird to me.

Tanya: Yeah, obviously not everything but religion is everywhere which is annoying when you aren't religious. Like it was poo and and [sic] Christianity/Catholicism.

Most of all, *Tanya*, who has partly Indian cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds due to her Indian mother, extremely disliked how religion, especially Christianity/Catholicism, was part of the book. During discussion, *Jenny* who has Indian parents, agreed with *Tanya* that religion could have been avoided. In the discussion, *Tanya* told that she had been disturbed and irritated to see the word "God" in the book. When *Jordan* pointed out that the book had only said "God" not implying God who Christians believe in, *Tanya* argued that the word "God" left out Buddhism and Hinduism as they either lacked one or did not have a specific higher power. See below conversation.

Jordan: well it just said God. Never [sic] actually referenced anything specifically abrahamic [sic]. so[sic] I suppose that makes it less annoying

Sophia: Even if you aren't religious, the theme(s) still stand to not judge people

Jordan: since it's just the idea of a high being or power

Tanya: Yeah but Buddhism doesn't have a God and Hinduism would reference a specific god.

We interpreted that this defensiveness toward Christianity (which is the majority in the U.S.) is perhaps due to her experiences as a cultural minority in the U.S. Hinduism and Buddhism, which she intakes from her mother' background, as well as experiences living in Japan might have influenced on her negative perspectives toward Christianity. Different from *Tanya*, *Rachel* was able to get over the parts of the

story that she found strange and was intrigued by the morals and lesson. *Sophia* mentioned that the message was universal without language barriers. Below are quotes from reviews of *Rachel* and *Sophia*.

Once I got past the fact that the story was from the perspective of a dogs [sic] poop (I guess it was a creative idea, though). I thought that the story had a good moral lesson. (From *Rachel*'s review)

No matter what language it is translated into, the message still stands. (From *Sophia*'s review)

Although *Jordan* did comment that the poop was offsetting, he ascertained that “*Doggy Poo* seems to represent a person by asking questions such as “Who am I?” and “What is my reason for existing?”. *Jordan* said that he personally “took away more of the introspective themes.” The lesson that he talked about the most is of existentialism and that everyone is different and should love themselves for being unique. *Jordan* also says

I haven't seen an American book deals with having an existential crisis and finding your purpose for living, but other than that it follows a lot of the tropes with the bullies and accepting the differences of others, etc. (From *Jordan*'s review)

He pointed out that many American children's books have similar morals and the book was rather “straightforward”, making it suitable for other American children. *Jordan* views *Doggy Poo* with more open-mindedness and transformed his prior perspective in terms of the “weirdness” of *Doggy Poo*. He reinterpreted the story in that the young “kids wouldn't have preconceived notions about books and American culture so it wouldn't automatically seem super weird.”

Overall, at first, from the discussion phase, some participants showed some negative feelings because they felt weird or strange from the first impression of the story. At first, most of the participants had a stance of “spectator” to have a little distance from the story. Two of participants who inherited Indian cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds shared more negative attitude due to the Christian connotations of the story. However, most of them started to evolve more in the story of *Doggy Poo* as they joined the discussion phase. They started to appreciate the text better while discussion time went along. Readers became more active “participants” in the reading event. They could read the story more “aesthetically” beyond cultural barriers they had.

4. Experiencing transformation in reading events

Now, let's move forward to the third question on how American adolescents transformed their prior thoughts and knowledge in order to accommodate new thoughts and knowledge that *Doggy Poo* implies after reading the story. This question is related to the transforming power of story and dialogical reading contexts. They started to transform their prior thoughts and knowledge after the reading and during participants' discussion. Even though participants thought the book was somewhat strange, they understood what messages the book convey and evaluated that the book contained good moral lessons. It means that the participants made a leap for universal messages beyond cultural barriers by a translated Korean book, *Doggy Poo*.

Moreover, throughout discussion, participants challenged each other and the discussion led them to open themselves more toward differences and discomforts that they experiences. During participants' discussion, *Sophia*, who showed the most positive responses toward

Doggy Poo, tried to dissuade other participants who found the book weird or strange. *Rachel*, who expressed weirdness because of the fact that the main character of the story is doggy poo, came to show more positive feelings toward *Doggy Poo*. Her perspectives toward the main character of *Doggy Poo* transformed from “weird”, “strange”, and “a little different” into “cuter.” Even, *Tanya* who showed most negativity toward the book praised that “Yeah, it was well done”, though reluctantly. Below is a part of the conversation during their discussion.

Sophia: Even the most odd things or people can make a difference in the world. The face was cute.

Tanya: Yeah, it was well done. Just weird

Sophia: Beautiful things can come from unwanted/ugly things or circumstances. How people/things come into this world doesn't matter, as they can make a difference. Your heritage doesn't define who you are.

Rachel: For something that was literally 'doggy poo' the drawings were a lot cuter than they could have been.

At the end of discussion, all participants shared how their thoughts, minds and emotions changed. *Jordan* admitted that he did not know how it would go when he was first reading it. *Sophia* got to know more about the importance of “dirt” or “doggy poo” for our environment and ecology system as Song et al (2009) addressed. Even *Tanya* shared that she was touched by the one empathetic character, ‘dirt’, and she reflected her negative assumptions on “meanness of everybody.” From her case, we see “transformative power” that the story of *Doggy Poo* has as many researchers contended (Hwang, 2009; Kim, 2011; Park & Shin, 2005; Sung, 2007). *Tanya* mostly had negative feelings about the

book at the first half of the discussion. See how they changed in the participants' conversation below.

Jordan: honestly I realized it was a foreign children's book and had no idea how it would go.

Sophia: Yes, I had never thought about how dirt can be important in nature/of special value.

Jordan: My original thought about dirt was that he was mean. I suppose, but then he turned out to be cool.

Tanya: I was surprised by the one empathetic character (Dirt). I thought everyone would be mean.

Sophia: also, I never considered that the doggy poo on the side on the walking path helped the flowers grow.

Sophia paid attention to the fact that the messages in the book are still understandable to people of different cultures and languages even after translated into other languages. She said that it makes the themes “universal.” Her horizon of thinking widened enough for her to see the “universal themes for all people of different cultures and ages.” Below are quotes of *Sophia*’s statement from the discussion.

The author is Asian, so the message still stands after being translated into other languages, making the themes universal for all people of different cultures and ages.

In a nutshell, we can conclude that the participants could recognize greatness of the story *Doggy Poo* and experience transforming power throughout dialogue with other readers. Throughout their dialogue, participants transacted meanings and ideas from their “linguistic/cultural experiential reservoirs” between themselves and the text (Rosenblatt, 1985; 2004). Throughout the discussion and reading surrounding the story, participants shared their perspectives with other participants.

They could expand or revise their existing span of knowledge and thoughts in order to accommodate themselves into the new horizon the Korean story suggested. We can say that readers could better understand or interpret texts through dialogical contexts or collaboration with other readers.

V. Implications

Before starting this research, there was an assumption that cultural differences between Korean and American cultures may prevent American readers from understanding the themes and messages of the book that the author intended to portray and that the Korean readers receive when reading the book. Contrary to the assumption, most participants understood the themes and messages of the book and appreciated its greatness as a children's book. Some students have felt some disturbances or cultural shock due to cultural differences. However, they experienced transformation of their thoughts and knowledge. They could read great messages beyond cultural barriers that *Doggy Poo* provides. This study asks us to look into our assumptions about text, culture, readers, and reading.

It is quite encouraging that Korean literature with inspiring messages like *Doggy Poo* can be understood by people in the world including Americans, who have a variety of cultural backgrounds. We could see the transforming powers that the Kwon Jung-Saeng's honorable story, *Doggy Poo* has. One of the most important things for translated Korean books is themes and messages based on the condition that translation is well done. There is little barrier of cultural backgrounds that prevent the foreign readers from understanding if the translated Korean books

have powerful messages and themes.

It is especially very interesting that some American students were bothered by words of 'God', which has the connotation of Christianity. It shows us that American culture is not monolithic but very diverse even though we regard easily America as a "Christian" country without much consideration. It is important to be very cautious so as to be inclusive while dealing with sensitive topics or messages like religion. This research suggests that educators or researchers should take into account cultural diversities of readers in other countries as well because there are many subcultural groups different from mainstreams even though they are regarded as a same group in terms of nationality, race or ethnicity.

As we examined, some of American adolescents felt confused about the book, *Doggy Poo*, due to the peculiarity of main character and other characters and religious connotation. Although the overall themes of translated Korean books are good, non-Korean readers could be offset by the books even before reading to actually commence reading the books or may stop in the middle of reading them. Also, it could prevent them from taking the books seriously, like one of the subjects initially did. Something accepted in Korea is not necessarily accepted elsewhere. To get better readers to read translated Korean books and understand well, educators and researchers should consider cultural/social/personal backgrounds of readers as "living context" (Rosenblatt, 1985) and try to provide more dialogical and collaborative contexts for reading events.

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ABSTRACT

Reading beyond Cultural Barriers:

A Study on American Adolescents' Responses to the Korean Picture Book,
Doggy Poo

Kwon, Soon Hee & Kim, Yang Ha

This qualitative research is to explore how American adolescents perceive, interpret and understand *Doggy Poo*, which is a translated Korean picture book. This research started with three questions to be resolved. 1) How American adolescent readers appreciate *Doggy Poo*? 2) How do cultural backgrounds affect American adolescents' responses on *Doggy Poo*? 3) How do American adolescents transform their prior thoughts in order to accommodate new thoughts and knowledge that *Doggy Poo* implies? These questions will be dealt with through out the research. Results found follow as below.

All of the participants had agreed that the *Doggy Poo* have great messages and lessons. However, they contended that there are some aspects of something strange or weird to American adolescents. We found that the strangeness or weirdness felt by the participants was largely due to the main character who is a literally dog's poop. Especially, some of participants who have Indian cultural backgrounds were bothered by use of doggy poo as main character and Christian orientation based on their cultural value-laden interpretation. That kind of cultural backgrounds seemed to affect their appreciation of *Doggy Poo*. Throughout the research, participants found themselves transformed by being touched by great messages of the story and their perspectives changed. They experienced 'reading beyond cultural barriers.' Before

starting this research, there was an assumption that cultural differences between Korean and American may prevent American readers from understanding the themes and messages of the book that the author intended to portray and Korean readers receive when reading the book. Contrary to the assumption, most participants understood the theme and message of the book and appreciated its greatness as a children's book. Some students have felt some disturbances or cultural shock due to cultural differences. In spite of that, they could read great messages that *Doggy Poo* provides beyond cultural barriers.

This study asks us look into our assumptions about text, culture, readers, and reading. We could see the transforming powers that the Kwon Jung-Saeng's honorable story, *Doggy Poo* has. One of the most important things for translated Korean books is themes and messages based on the condition that translation is well done. There is little barrier of cultural backgrounds that prevent the foreign readers from understanding if the translated Korean books have powerful messages and themes. This research suggests that educators or researchers should take into account cultural diversities of readers in other countries as well because there are many subcultural groups different from mainstreams even though they are regarded as a same group in terms of nationality. To get better readers to read translated Korean books and understand well, educators and researchers should consider cultural/social/personal backgrounds of readers as "linguistic experiential reservoirs" (Rosenblatt, 1985;2004) and try to provide more dialogical and collaborative contexts for the reading events.

KEYWORDS *Doggy Poo*, American Adolescents, "Linguistic Experiential Reservoirs", Reading beyond Cultural Barriers, Transforming Power of Texts