CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The use of dark humor in Western media, especially in animated series has been spreading around globally. One of the most controversial parts of dark humor is its frequent depiction of sensitive subjects that include violence toward children. Research has shown that the reception of dark humor is deeply tied to psychological and social factors. For instance, Willinger et al. (2017) argue that people with higher cognitive ability and emotional stability tend to appreciate black humor more, as it requires sophisticated processing to understand the incongruity and irony behind the joke. Meanwhile, March et al. (2024) reveal that individuals who enjoy dark humor are sometimes linked with darker personality traits such as narcissism and psychopathy which suggests that appreciation for such humor isn't just about intelligence, but also emotional orientation.

However, not all uses of dark humor are necessarily problematic. Warren et al. (2024) examine U.S. military veterans and find that dark humor can also serve as a coping mechanism for trauma and psychological distress. In this light, dark humor may offer relief in difficult emotional contexts, allowing individuals to face harsh realities indirectly. This is particularly relevant for *Family Guy*, which often blends trauma-related themes (like parental neglect or school violence) with satire.

In digital spaces, dark humor is also thriving. Hasjim (2023) studied dark humor across Twitter and found that it is commonly used to address social criticism

in unconventional ways, targeting institutions, family, religion, and even sensitive topics like death or child abuse. This supports the idea that dark humor is not simply "edgy comedy," but a communicative practice shaped by cultural norms, emotional needs, and audience context.

Family Guy pushes the limits of satire by incorporating dark humor into its representation of taboo topics, including violence against children. Semiotic analysis, pioneered by Roland Barthes, is highly relevant to this thesis as it allows us to unpack the complex layers of meaning behind seemingly absurd or controversial imagery. Barthes introduced the concepts of denotation (literal sign) and connotation (cultural or ideological meaning), culminating in the notion of myth, the naturalization of values through repetition in media, Wahyuningsih (2024).

In the context of *Family Guy*, cartoon violence against children registers as ludicrous or slapstick (denotation), but on a deeper level, it evokes ideological tensions around authority, innocence, and familial power dynamics (connotation). Repeated portrayal across episodes transforms these scenes into a mythic norm, teaching audiences to see child violence as trivial, absurd, or even acceptable within comedic boundaries.

The study of dark humor can be found everywhere on the internet by countless authors worldwide. According to Hobbes (1950), humor is a form of aggression. This was then supported by Byrne (1956) that people seem to find aggressive cartoons funnier than non-aggressive ones. McCauley & Colleagues (2018) then tries to find evidence regarding this aggressiveness by rating it with

some participants whether they like aggressive cartoons or the non one, regardless of their personal identity as in (children, adults, native/foreign born and socio-economic status). At the time the outcome was that people found aggressive cartoons funnier than non-aggressive cartoons. But one time they found some inconsistency on the outcome of the rating as sometimes the results were the opposite. Therefore, they decided to look after another study to finalize their result and have found out that different individuals may play a part in this matter. Women judged sexist cartoons to be less funny, regardless how aggressive the cartoons were, boys and girls who rated violent cartoons as funny are deemed to have psychoticism. But then again, more research studies show that the effect of aggressiveness on humor in cartoons may rely on individual background differences.

The use of dark humor in media has been the subject of scholarly analysis. For instance, Gournelos and Greene (2011) in their work *A Decade of Dark Humor* discuss how post-9/11 American media utilized dark humor to process trauma and critique political realities. They argue that such humor functions as a means of confronting and making sense of societal anxieties. Similarly, Kuipers (2006) in *Good Humor, Bad Taste* explores the sociological aspects of humor, noting that what is considered humorous or offensive is deeply embedded in cultural contexts. These studies underscore the complex role of dark humor as both a coping mechanism and a form of social commentary.

Another study has discussed the motives of children violence used as dark humor by Nickolay & Lyudmila (2019). The study took references on some old rhymes and folklore that took place in Russia and US back in the 60s where mostly the common characters were dead children, children with disabilities, children as a victim of pedophilia, children with deadly diseases such as cancer, and so on. The study then suggests that the usage of children as the main character of dark humor was based on the adults' paranoia over children's death and the abuse they got. As it is a way for them to spread awareness and present criticism of those things that are dreadful to children such as to keep an eye on your children, control their movements to not touch anything that could be harmless for adults, but deadly for babies and childrens. There were countless wars during that time and everyone might be so focused on the battlefield and what could be used to attack or defend, completely forgetting about their infants' innocence upon the world. In the end, the study concludes that the role of social-cultural background also plays a part in the usage of children as the main focus in dark humor was because of the rising problem of children in the world at the moment. There was no such thing as child violence used as a joke in the medieval era because there were no such things that concerned the most about children back then. The study found that after the era of dark humor arises, adults' attitude towards children has significantly changed. They have been more aware of their children and they become over-protective.

Cruz (2022) shifts the focus from what's the motive into the impact by the exposure of dark humor over years to society. The study is based on the reference of stand up comedy and adult cartoons like South park, and an anonymous bulletin-based website by 4chan. Where the study shares that society that has been exposed

with dark humor long enough would be insensitive, this occurs where a dark humor occurs that is in the scope of cultural shaming such as N slurs, one offended side might be attacked as if they were told it was nothing so serious/just a joke. The study suggests that most societies that have delved into dark humor for a long time could not receive any criticism, especially over the dark humor they made or the dark humor they enjoyed in the media. The study also found that people who thrive in making dark humor think of dark humor as ambivalent (as in they don't care about the matter inside/ it's nothing too serious) and often misused it, even though the real meaning was that both of the opposing side has the same beliefs over something and maintain neutrality. Dark humor varieties being a very specific genre started to gain popularity only from the mid-20th century. The development of dark humor was significantly influenced by numerous facts: general changes which occurred in the society's attitude towards laughter and humor; extra detailed mass media coverage of optional tragic events as well as a change of the attitude towards death and mainly to children's death. The death of abstract "little boys" and "little girls" is a favorite topic of dark jokes represented from folklore to stand-up comedian soliloquies.

Doward (2017) sharing a new study in the journal "Cognitive Processing" where it's found that those who enjoy and understand dark humor have higher IQ than those who don't, even deemed to be less aggressive. The study conducted a test on a group of people with 12 dark humor found from "The Black Book" cartoon as its source. The results given were that those who appreciate dark humor had the highest score of verbal and non-verbal IQ tests, even lower scores of aggression while the others, quite the opposite. The finding's conclusion then contradicts our

understanding from Freud's hypothesis (1905) where dark humor was built out of aggression and those who make or like it are grumpy and pessimistic.

Dickson (2022) stating some facts about those who make and enjoy dark humor, as some of them or the majority uses dark humor as an insult and cower behind it when confronted by simply stating "It was a joke". Elaborating an example of this misuse from an incident in 2019 where a comedian once made a dark joke about a specific person where not long ago just ended herself due to some problem she's facing. This article further shifts our view to be careful and sensitive with our surroundings when one day, we made such a joke, a reminder for those who enjoy dark humor.

Furthermore, semiotic studies in animated media underscore how visual and verbal signs carry broader social messages. In academic or scholarly context, the need for studies in animation is because animations are not only intended for entertainment alone, but also reflect and shape how society thinks. *Family Guy* reaches a large audience and repeatedly presents harmful themes in comedic packaging. Academic analysis helps uncover how humor may critique societal norms, especially around violence and childhood. For instance, research analyzing cartoons like *Tom and Jerry* revealed that negative visual-verbal signs dominated, significantly influencing viewers' emotional responses, Dweich et al (2022). Similarly, Barthes-style semiotic investigations into animated content (e.g., *Alif and Alya*) demonstrate how denotative elements (colors, gestures) and connotative layers (morality, cultural values) interact to deliver implicit messages even in content aimed at children, Iskandar et al (2022). These frameworks validate using semiotic analysis in this thesis to decode how *Family Guy* weaponizes child

violence as a form of dark humor hence revealing both its immediate comedic effect and its deeper cultural resonance.

Family Guy has been the most influential and controversial animated series in Western media since 1999, Seibold (2024). Known for its use of dark humor, frequently includes violence, racism and other sensitive issues in a comedic manner. *Family Guy* can be relevant for this research with its portrayal of children in situations that involve violence. Its Global popularity made it easy for others to access, including Indonesian. While numerous studies have analyzed dark humor in popular media and cartoons, few have focused on how child violence is represented as dark humor within *Family Guy*. Previous research has explored dark humor in relation to trauma, social criticism, or psychological relief, yet there remains a limited academic discussion on the specific semiotic codes and psychoanalytic mechanisms that underlie depictions of child-targeted violence in comedic forms. This study fills that gap by combining Barthes' semiotics with Freud's Relief Theory to analyze how *Family Guy* constructs and normalizes taboo content involving children within a humorous frame.

1.2 Research Question

- How is dark humor represented in *Family Guy*?

- What semiotic signs and codes are used to support dark humor representation?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

- To find how dark humor is represented using Freud's relief theory.

- To identify the semiotic mechanisms behind the represented children violence as dark humor in the cartoon.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research will focus on the representation of child violence as a form of dark humor in selected episodes of *Family Guy*. The research will limit its analysis to scenes and narratives where violence toward children is explicitly used as a comedic element, examining how these depictions align with semiotics aspects and to uncover the psychological traits behind the production of such humor. The scope will include episode selection, where the prominent episodes that feature children in violent situations are presented as humor. The episodes will be chosen based on the relevance to the topic. Application of Freud's humor theory and Barthes' semiotic theory to explain the depictions of children violence as dark humor in *Family Guy* through the lens of semiotics and psychology.

1.5 Significance of the Study

By scrutinizing whether societal behaviors shape the incorporation of children mortality in The *Family Guy* cartoon, this study addresses significance in both academic and cultural contexts by contributing to a deeper understanding of how humor, especially dark humor involving child violence is constructed and interpreted in contemporary media. Through the application of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the research provides insights into the psychological mechanisms behind the audience's amusement and discomfort when exposed to

violent content directed at children. Freud's theory illuminates how such humor acts as a release valve for repressed aggression or anxiety, revealing unconscious tensions that are otherwise socially unacceptable, while Barthes' semiotic theory offers a critical lens for dissecting how visual and verbal signs in *Family Guy* construct meaning beyond surface-level comedy. By identifying and interpreting signs, codes, and myths within the cartoon, the research uncovers how the show normalizes or critiques societal values—particularly those relating to childhood innocence, authority, and family dynamics. This allows the study not only to interpret how humor functions but also to critique the cultural ideologies embedded in media texts.