

## Where the Wild Things Are: Sendak's picture book and the monsters personified, sanctified and glorified.

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Maurice Sendak's picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and discusses the dream creation of monsters in the text not by the words that are used, but through the subtext created by use of unconscious visual literacy elements. The authors of this paper take the view that as discussed by Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbill, an author draws on their social capital, their cultural capital and their funds of knowledge in creating text but in this instance an example of 'sublimation' or the "redirection of energy arising from personal conflict or underlying anxiety into a more constructive outlet such as work"<sup>1</sup> is clearly evident. Sendak admits that he drew the monsters in this text based on his own relatives. By analysing the pictures through the precepts of visual literacy, that is the illustrators use of "vectors, line, shape, gaze, and distance"<sup>2</sup> it becomes clearly evident that the monsters represent not a nightmare or fear but a "healthy release of impulse"<sup>3</sup> (. Thus the authors argue that monsters in children's picture books are elements that should be revered not feared.

Key Words: Visual literacy, monsters, sublimation

### 1 Introduction

#### A A Beginning Point of Reflection

Before reading on, for just a few brief reading seconds, we would ask you, the reader, to reflect on a central portion of text below, taken from the children's picture book that is the focus of this chapter. We ask you to take on a "suspended equivalence of repertoire"<sup>4</sup>. That is to do naturally what most readers of narrative do and imagine what the following words mean drawing on your past experiences.

'And the wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws'.
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Out of context, and without the pictures, this sounds like a rather fierce text, in fact "... too grotesque for young children"<sup>5</sup>, one that could indeed be extremely frightening for children. Our own experiences suggest that our tertiary students when exposed to the text without the images also conjure up frightening images of the 'Wild Things'. Yet when the text is accompanied by the pictures it is widely seen to be a

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more child-friendly text. Why is this? Why do numerous commentators and researchers take the view that the monsters in this text represent the archetypal all devouring Behemoth?

#### B Finding design in dissonance

This chapter had its origins in the academic maelstrom of writing to deadlines, editorial demands and the personal compromises that surround the co-authoring of a book. We recently revisited this experience as we pulled together the threads of our own thinking and disparate research foci that underpinned our book on writing for preservice teachers. We soon realised that because of the factors mentioned in the opening sentence we had to leave out some of the nuances or peripheral elements that we each held ideologically dear in regard to how authors actually make meaning, and began to identify afresh other aspects.

However, through the closeness that further cooperative writing and co-planning tertiary teaching brings we soon realised that our deletions of compromise perhaps could conceivably have more merit and relevance to our understanding of writing than we had first realised. And so this paper focuses on the first of our realisations of 'peripheral vision'<sup>6</sup>, the relationship between text and illustrations in children's books and the underlying psychology of experience that authors naturally bring to their writing.

Indeed, the term peripheral visions is more than apt as in the ensuing discussion we detail how we applied our own understanding of visual literacy to our favourite children's text, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. In the simple act of overlaying the elements of visual literacy onto this book, the template we used immediately challenged our view of what we had traditionally seen this book representing as well as challenging the long term view held of the central focus of this text, the nature of the monstrous 'wild things'.

#### **2 Monster in the Text: Is the norm nominal?**

Ever since its publication in 1963, Maurice Sendak's picture book has created intense discussion, division and dichotomy. Now recognised as "one of the most famous dream journeys in picture book form"<sup>7</sup> this text was originally pilloried by parent and librarians and Sendak cast as 'one of 'Peck's bad boy' of children's books"<sup>8</sup>. This initial debate centred on the monsters or 'Wild Things'; vividly pictured but eventually tamed by the central character Max. The initial adult view was that these 'Wild Things' were interpreted to be monsters. These were seen to symbolise fear and anxiety and would be frightening for children to view. Sendak's own comments contained these very words in

regard to the monsters in this book and only served to add fuel to the critical fire.

As Sendak's creation was gradually recognised to be both a dream journey and a journey within the psyche, to this day it contains a set of tensions and themes centring on the ideal of fear and childhood that have sufficient depth to provide scholars with a wealth of research material. The main tensions that provide a constant springboard for discussion include:

- The polemic between parent and child created between the text and pictures
- The apparent highly ambiguous manipulation of the reader by Sendak
- The relationship between Max dressed as a 'wild thing' in the first few pages and the monsters themselves.

Typically the view taken by commentators is that, as detailed by Bruner one of the primary links to understanding a narrative picture book is that they represent at least some form of autobiographical account of the author's life. Sendak confirms this view stating that the book contains early childhood memories and was a product of boredom and the subsequent desire to create fantasy.

There weren't sufficient things I could do as a child. You were stranded on a block, unless you were lucky enough to get your mother's permission to cross the street by yourself, which wasn't very often. For me that was a dull way to get through a day, so I had to fantasize.<sup>9</sup>

In respect to the Wild Things, Sendak originally wanted them to be horses, but because he could not draw these he instead cast them as monsters. In discussing this point of Sendak's realisation, Hastings believes that once the initial draft was completed Sendak acknowledges that they reminded him instantly of his aunts.

While Sendak remembers these aunts as annoyances, it would appear that "they represented an epitome of intertwined fear, disruptive emotions, and frustration"<sup>10</sup>. Sheer boredom is another emotional element that repeats itself in Sendak's comments about his childhood. Even the most cursory review of Sendak's interviews and the brief quotes in this chapter indicate that Sendak may have had an inclination to 'arbitrary influence' or the "tendency of an individual to emphasise negative rather than positive aspect of a situation"<sup>11</sup>.

However, there could be another reason this text has been seen to be a purveyor of negative content, which lies at the very heart of the general view of psychology. Weiten believes that the overall negativity

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produced by any psychological analysis is attributed to the epistemological-methodological link within this field in that it tends to only focus on the abnormal and is reductionist in nature. Similarly, Geekie, Cambourne and Fitzsimmons view psychological reading theories as having a tendency to be asocial

Whether this is the case or not, certainly most commentators take the typical psychological stance and view Sendak's portrayal of the 'Wild Things' as the "typical representation of the authors deepest repressed feelings, fears and failures"<sup>12</sup>.

While to some degree we hold this to be true, in the case of 'Where the Wild Things Are' we also believe that such a view is conceptually problematic. While many researchers quote Sendak extensively, and on the surface his enormous amount of comment on this text would support the view that the monsters represent the "fears, anxiety and vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves 'King of All Wild Things'"<sup>13</sup> we would argue that there is another dimension.

Similar to the position advocated by Lanes, we want to argue that the view that monsters represent fears and anxiety is an adult perspective and risks alienation of the child's perspective. While recognising that this book resonates with children's inner experiences and provides important insights for and about children, there is an alternative explanation that views wild things not as 'monsters' *per se*, but rather as sublimation of the author'/illustrator's emotions, such as boredom, frustration, anger and need to be in control. As we have come to see it, this relates to Sendak's own comments but the pictures also reveal a subsequent release of pent up frustration into what Harris believes reveals a more positive mind set. This furthers illuminates a more positive aspect of the human condition of being able to deal with negative experiences.

The following section delves into another aspect of this book and while focusing on emotions such as fear, shows another aspect of how 'Where the Wild Things Are' chronicles, what Harris believes overall reveals an inner journey of self-actualisation, and ultimately realises the harmonious integration of an individual's inner experiences with their outer circumstances by journey's end.

### **3 Sailing Out But Looking In: Sendak's Journey**

While acknowledging the typical view taken by commentators such as Hastings that "Where the Wild things Are" explores intense emotions of children, a key facet that has not been fully explored is the information provided by the secondary visual messages provided by the monsters themselves.. Despite some ambiguities, on the surface there is some degree of congruence between text and pictures as Max is sent to

his room for disobedience in which he falls into a dream and sails to the an island where he tames the monsters. The pictures in this book become larger and larger and larger as Max gains control of the situation through his fantasy dream.. The double pages where he tames these monsters are without text and form the chiasmus of text, after which Max subsequently sails back home to find his dinner waiting. We wish to argue that Sendak has either consciously or unconsciously embedded a series of clues that suggest that the meeting and confrontation of monsters was more than a dream but an example of this 'control' over the 'uncontrollable'

The following table is a summary of the visual literacy tools we used as the means of further understanding this text as discussed by Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill; Callow; Giorgis, Johnson, Bonomo & Colbert and Anstey and Bull.

Table 1-Visual Literacy Tools

Visual Literacy Tools	Characteristics
Tool 1 – Actions and Vectors	Within each illustration the focus is what is happening within the image itself. Usually there is some type of ACTION going on. Within the image there are lines that lead the eye towards this action. These lines are known as VECTORS and can be thick or thin, light or dark and serve to lead the eye towards this action. Lines are used to suggest direction, show movement, create energy or establish a mood.
Tool 2 - Concept	Iconic in nature, images are created to indicate a holistic CONCEPT rather than an action.
Tool 3 - Angles	Also linked with height, angles enable the reader to gain a sense of power, position, vulnerability, movement, direction and emotion
Tool 4 – Framing or Cropping	Framing limits the amount of information available to the viewer as well as signalling some type of social relationship with reader. Long Shots: Are those that show the subject in full figure and at a distance from the viewer, these type of shots give the perception of a more public type of distance. Medium Shots: These are shots that frame the upper half of the body. These type of shots show a more social type of distance. Close Up Shots: These type of shots are usually head and shoulders and suggest a much more intimate and personal relationship to the viewer.
Tool 5 – Demands and Offers	The composition of an image affects the viewer in several ways. Images that appear to be making eye contact with the viewer are said to be making a demand for your attention. When the eyes in the image look elsewhere, or when there are no creatures or people in the image this is termed an offer. Here the viewer feels free to look at a range of other elements first

Tool 6 - Colour	Used to convey emotional elements and induce notions and ideals of reality
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Time and space do not permit an in-depth frame by frame analysis of this book and so the following table reveals what we consider to be the developmental visual aspects and their meaning leading up the central double page frames of the monsters. We encourage you the reader to use our understanding as the entrée for your own comparison while you view this text for yourself. Obviously, our connections are but one of many possibilities.

Table 2-Visual Literacy Meanings

<b>Visual Elements</b>	<b>Our Understanding</b>
Pages 17-18 - All monsters here are in a seated. - Lion, Goat, Bull are touching themselves. - -All have a downward gaze (Gaze, Vector). - Max however has that malevolent direct gaze - Blue hues	- Need to control - submissive position - often seen as a sign of reassuring or comforting yourself - holding gaze in the animal kingdom is a form of dominant behaviour, seen as a form of aggression, focus on the hand, symbol of the whole being
Pages 19-20 - Deference by animals to Max (bowing, downward gaze, eyes closed) - submissive posture (clasping of hands). Distance of the group of three from Max. - All Monsters smiling. Max has haughty/lofty gaze, wearing of crown and sceptre	- Charismatic figure earnest desire to rebuild or resuscitate self and relationships - denote authority/kingship but with a closed heart - hero worship but with a closed off mind, false freedom - 3/4 moon representing false hood and impermanence.
Pages 21-22 - All animals under 3/4 - Max has his eyes closed. Max is now a wolf...links to old tales of werewolves linked to the full moon? - Apparent false smirks	- Dislocation of the self, with the moon representing the archetypical mother - Movement outside of accustomed environment leads to need for stability of the true self, or the covering becomes the reality
Pages 23-24 - Again no eye contact by	- Difference from the powerful

<p>Monsters with Max (who has his eyes closed). Creatures look sheepish/foolish like they are taking part in tree climbing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dancing under full moon</li> </ul>	<p>ones, play becomes the substitute for relationships and stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full moon represents a full measure of life about to fall</li> </ul>
<p>Page 25-26</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Max leads the procession waving his sceptre and riding on the back of the Bull (who doesn't look particularly happy (hand on hip gesture))</li> <li>- Gaze of all the Monsters is again showing submission and the</li> <li>- postures are all deferential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- links to the legend of the Minotaur and conquest</li> <li>- showing your palms, showing a more intimate self re the life lines</li> <li>- to someone is an 'open' non verbal gesture...shows you have no weapons up your sleeve.</li> <li>- But strength can be void of ethical entity and isolation</li> <li>- Sense of true self calls</li> </ul>
<p>Pages 27-28</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All monsters asleep (or at least relaxed) also shows submission/deference/trust to/for Max (who now has a Royal Pavilion to add to the crown and sceptre). Wild animals would not assume these positions if they felt endangered or threatened.</li> <li>- Dawn colours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activation of loneliness within the appearance of control and becoming</li> <li>- Red dawn, a warning despite serenity of the monsters</li> </ul>
<p>Pages 29-30</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Although all the roaring, gnashing and rolling is being verbalised, the gaze of the Monsters is not threatening to Max (not even seemingly directed at Max but more at the boat and beyond.</li> <li>- Max is not worried (smiling). Some of the Monsters' gestures seem to be entreating (don't go!) type gestures.</li> <li>- Shift back to blue colour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anger of the Wild Tings but false appearance</li> <li>- Return to what was lost</li> </ul>

#### **4 What Does This Mean?**

What we have demonstrated through the use of visual literacy tools is that in this text the monstrous confrontation with the 'Wild Things' represents needs of the deep psyche. Rather than being the epitome of fear, the meeting and taming of these monsters represents Max confronting himself. Thus, for us this text represents:

A A story of true empowerment and survival.

While the story-illustrations nexus in this text initially suggests boyish confrontation and taming of monsters, the visual literacy components would appear to convey a message of finding that the basic need of self is finding a sense of relationships. It is "journey away from home and safe return"<sup>14</sup>. He began the sojourn because he was scolded and threatened - to eat his mother up, but finds that when aggression would be the course he would be inclined to it only brings loneliness and alienation. In the seat of power he sees himself and realises that a vigorous selfish soul can lead to the closing off of both the heart and mind, leading to a form of psychic pain.

B A story of confronting emotions.

In their childlike portrayal, the 'wild things' are both figures to be conquered, thus enabling Max's assertion of control, and figures that are vulnerable - they become 'frightened and called [Max] the most wild thing of all' - thus Max is validated and his anger with his mother at this point is released as he calls, 'Let the wild rumpus start' - and so they party beneath the full moon for three double-page spreads without words. It would appear that Max is both the medium and the message. While he appears to be in control, anger and frustration have only the appearance of satisfaction but in reality are masks for the more substantive elements of love and trust. Anger is a natural human element but needs to be accompanied by reconciliation.

C A story of true resonance between children's understanding of life

While many adults have typically seen this text to be one containing images unsuitable for children, conversely the young have continued for several decades to resonate with the images and text. Perhaps it would be wise for the critics see this text as an appreciation of unarticulated experiences as opposed to a critical analysis based purely on adult failings.

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D A story revealing the transformation of unconscious and conscious experience into text.

This text clearly demonstrates how Sendak drew on his own experiences and transposed these into highly symbolic elements. While there are the obvious deliberate metaphorical elements the tools of writing are not always premeditated, and life has a tendency to creep in unnoticed. While this exemplifies the unconscious nature of Kristeva's ideal of intertextuality, a phenomenon which Harris & Trezise believe is common to adults and children alike, perhaps children are more attuned to this notion than they are given credit for.

In regard to the latter point, perhaps children are able to recognise in narrative the ideal of 'individuation',  
the ability to recognise the becoming of all  
that one is capable of becoming.<sup>15</sup>

#### Notes

1. Barlow and Durand, 1998,18
2. Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbill, 2003, 92
3. Monte, 1995,200
4. Iser, 1981,82
5. Huck, Helper and Hickman, 1978,35
6. Bateson, 1994, 20
7. Nikoljeva and Scott, 2001,180
8. Lanes, 1980,151
9. Sendak 1990 cited Wintle and Fisher, 1974,24
10. Ibid,151
11. Barlow and Durand, 1999,206
12. Chetwynd, 1982,265
13. Sendak, 1990,151
14. Huck, Helper and Hickman, 1978,667
15. Jung, 1954, 166

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