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Research In Context

Question 1: Choose three picture books you consider to be postmodern. Examine what defines them as such.

Children's picture books have always been a brilliant learning tool for children; from assisting in the development of fundamental language abilities to teaching simple activities, such as how to communicate, children's picture books are an invaluable tool in a child's development (Strouse, Nyhout and Ganea, 2018). Bader (1976) describes children's picture books as *"artefacts of the culture reflecting societal, moral, emotional and cognitive tenets"*, highlighting their importance. Semiotics take a crucial role in helping to convey information and through giving subtle nods in the illustrations, which leads to an engaging story (Crawford and Hade, 2000). Postmodern picture books can convey many forms of information using different illustrative styles alongside use of metafiction, allowing the book to interact directly with the reader through breaking the fourth wall. In this essay, I will be examining three different picture books, and highlighting the characteristics that make them postmodern.

The first picture book I will be looking at is *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne. *Gorilla* follows the life of a little girl named Hannah who wants nothing more than to spend time with her father and to go to the zoo. In the middle of the night on her birthday, Hannah wakes to a gorilla toy on her bed. After throwing the toy in disappointment, Hannah dreams of the gorilla coming to life and taking her to the zoo; and when she wakes the following morning she is surprised by her father with a trip to the zoo.

A characteristic that can be found in Postmodern picture books is symbolic representations, such as having subtle illustrations dotted throughout the story relating to the narrative (Lohfink, 2006). Creating these subtle illustrations forces the reader to be more engaged with the story, spending more time per page analysing the book as opposed to skipping through and missing important context; this can be seen in *Gorilla*, where Hannah's love of gorillas is depicted through recurring illustrations of the animal. The book's first panel opens to show Hannah on the floor reading a book about her favourite animal. Her obsession is made clear straight away due to a drawing of a gorilla she had made hanging directly behind her on the wall. This obsession is then made clearer in the next panel, where Hannah is depicted eating cereal with the mascot on the box being her favourite animal, the gorilla.



Figure 1. Page 6 of Gorilla.

When it comes to postmodern picture books there are never unintended details within their stories, and these details can be found in the form of semiotics. One of the ways semiotics are used in this picture book is through the use of colour. Wu (2014) explains that postmodern books express emotion “through shape and colour”; which is a way that “words are incapable of directly doing”. Colour theory is a common story telling device in postmodern picture books, as colour can be used in many ways to convey emotions and atmosphere, and can be associated with characters to further its meaning, creating metaphors within the story. This characteristic can be seen in *Gorilla*, where the colour of Hannah's character connotes that she is a bright, positive and outgoing person, this contrasts with her father who is portrayed using cold and desaturated colours. Hannah's colour scheme may portray how she maintains her positivity

and light, despite the rejection from her father which leads to an unsaturated and cold colour scheme for the environment. However, Hannah's Father wears a dark blue jumper with a blue tie, white and blue pin striped shirt, grey trousers and brown shoes. Most of the fathers' outfit is composed of the colour blue. In colour theory, these colours typically portray a feeling of emptiness, lack of emotion and disassociation, this reflects his behaviour, where he can be seen being distant and dismissive of Hannah's requests to spend time with him. Following the resolution between Hannah and her father at the end of the story, her saturation is matched by her father and the surroundings.

Gorillas' ending seems straightforward, Hannah's father needed to spend more time with her and the two are happier together in the end, but this leaves Hannah's dream up to speculation. There is clearly a deeper meaning behind her dream and the events that took place with the gorilla. Edge-Partington (2010) states that postmodern picture books *"are very purposeful in their execution of a story that creates opportunities for interaction with the text and illustration"*. This is another characteristic that can be found in postmodern picture books, called indeterminacy, where the author purposefully stays vague so that readers must *"construct some of the text and meaning"* from the story (Anstey, 2002). This allows for conversation and engagement for the reader, creating opportunity for thinking and in doing so, deeper involvement with the book itself.

Next, I will discuss *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, a postmodern picture book revolving around a character, named Shaun, and a strange object he met. After naming the object 'the lost thing', Shaun sets out to find where this object belongs. Shaun almost gives up trying to find the lost object community, when he received a card from a mysterious janitor, branded with a symbol. The card leads them to the lost objects community, where many other strange objects live.

The first postmodern characteristic can be seen at the very beginning of the book, where the characters talk directly to the reader, in words and gestures. This is a metafictional device, and

its role is to enhance a text's fictional status and self-conscious nature (Pantaleo, 2014). Shaun opens up the story by asking the reader if they want to hear a story, creating a direct interaction between the reader and the story which causes more engagement with the reader and a more unique form of storytelling. This is different from the previous book *Gorilla* where we do not see any characters attempting to interact with the reader.

Another metafictional postmodern characteristic that can be seen within *The Lost Thing*, is the various forms of design layouts. Varied design layouts can be utilised to emphasise the importance of certain panels to further storytelling in picture books (Pantaleo and Sipe, 2010). Small panels are typically used when standard conversation is taking place and help move the story forward, whilst big panels are used for big reveals in stories or to emphasise the scale portrayed in the illustration across a double page spread. *The Lost Thing* uses these varied design layouts effectively within the story, which can be seen through the use of double page spread revealing a community of strange objects. When comparing the use of varied design layouts between *The Lost Thing* and *Gorilla*, we can see that *The Lost Thing* is more explorative with its page layouts and use of different designs. However, the complete opposite can be seen in *Gorilla*, as the book makes no effort to include any variety in its page layouts.



Figure 2. The 'Utopia', Page 25 and 26 of The Lost Thing.

Playfulness is another postmodern characteristic within *The Lost Thing*, it is the playfulness within the text which creates the book into a “game affording both author and reader the possibility of endless meanings and relationships” (Mistacco, 1980). Playfulness is achieved in the form of vagueness within the story. This can be found all over the story, but is most apparent with the identity of the lost objects themselves. A variety of sizes and shapes can be seen within the designs of all the other lost objects, creating excitement for the reader. Their designs are unique and invite questions about how they work and what these objects can do.

Details are what keep stories interesting, and they are an important characteristic in postmodern picture books. Using details can provide explanations for events taking place within the stories, as well as add further meaning and expose hidden messages. Additionally, having details in an illustration can interest the reader more, and encourage them to stay engaged on panels longer, in hopes of finding hidden details which provide a more rewarding reading experience. Every page found in *The Lost Thing* is filled with details from the beginning where we see Shaun’s bottle cap collection to the very back of the book where we

can find a postcard addressed to his friend Pete. Having details within the story is something The Lost Thing and Gorilla both have in common.

Postmodern picture books will often have some aspect of their narrative be mysterious in order to provoke the reader into reading between the lines. Often this will lead to multiple visits back to the story and will encourage discussion in order to understand the meaning behind the mysteries. Provided by the story are two main mysteries, where did The Lost Thing come from and who is the janitor Shaun encounters that provided him with the card. To further the importance of this mystery the end panel is reserved solely for the janitor where we see the janitor facing away from the reader. The lost thing keeps the ending vague which contrasts again with Gorilla where we see a clear linear narrative and conclusion take place with no vagueness taking place.

The final postmodern picture book I will discuss will be Battle bunny, by Jon Scieszka, Mark Barnett, and Mathew Myers. Battle bunny is a unique postmodern picture book where two stories play out at the same time. Battle bunny follows a boy named Alex who has been assigned a mission to stop the evil bunny from taking over the world. Alex's story had been written and illustrated over a previous story, giving the illusion that a child has chosen a random picture book and scribbled throughout its contents. Originally, the narrative focused on a rabbit celebrating its birthday and finding out their friends had thrown a surprise birthday party for them. We know this because the way Alex crossed out the original lines was done so they did not cover the words. One thing that the two stories of battle bunny have in common is that both protagonists have their birthdays mentioned and occur in their stories.

The first postmodern characteristic I will be discussing is typographic experimentation, which is a special arrangement, style, or appearance of text in picture books. Multiple forms of typography can be found within Battle Bunny, due to two separate stories playing out at once.

The original text of Battle bunny has industry standard typography, keeping the text professional, whilst the typography created by Alex is the complete opposite. Nalkara (2018) states that typography is “used to create meaning and emotional impact”, this can be seen through Alex’s typography is created through what appears to be shaky inconsistent writing with a pencil, capturing the feeling of childlike innocence. One example depicts Alex’s writing falling down the page which is done to force the reader to follow the information, having to read the text in a particular way. This use of typography is unique to Battle Bunny, as the previous books have neglected to feature this characteristic.

A pastiche of illustrative styles are used within Battle Bunny, which is a classic characteristic of postmodern picture books (Nikola-Lisa, 1994). Battle Bunny not only provides different styles of illustration from sketches to full painted scenes, but also varied styles of text utilised in the story. This can be seen when the original text is crossed out and replaced with completely different text that falls down the side of the page. Although The Lost Thing utilises varied design layouts like Battle bunny, Neither Gorilla nor The Lost Thing experiment with alternating between different styles of text in the same way that can be seen with Battle Bunny.

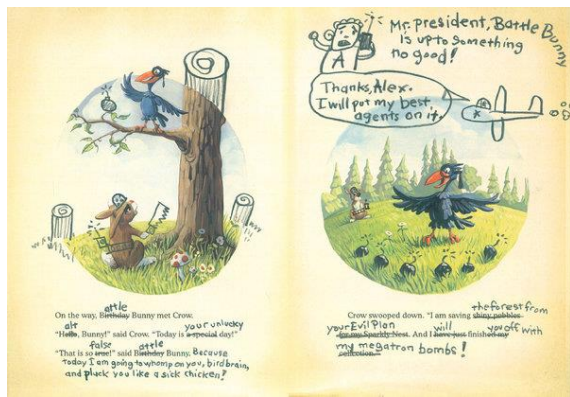


Figure 3 Page 5 and 6 of *Battle Bunny*.

Another characteristic that can be found in Postmodern picture books, is forcing the reader to experience the book in a specific way. This can allow the reader to primarily focus on the initial narrative provided, whereas a second read can lead the reader to understand the meaning behind more subtle text provided with the information obtained previously. The way the newly written text is made a priority in *Battle Bunny* is through crossing out the original text positions the reader to engage in the text in a particular way. Forcing the reader to read the text in a particular way is used in the normal sense for *Gorilla* and *The Lost Thing* but is approached uniquely by *Battle Bunny*.

The use of non-traditional plot structure is a characteristic that can be found in postmodern picture books. *Battle bunny* does not have a traditional plot structure. The reason behind this is due to the original story that had been previously illustrated had been re-written entirely. Replacing the original with Alex's self-insert and his own story revolving around putting an end to the evil bunny's plan. *Gorilla* follows traditional plot structure closely in its story, whereas *The Lost Thing* remains more vague. Whilst the three picture books follow contrasting plot structures, they all create compelling storytelling that is engaging for the reader.

In conclusion there were many identifiable postmodern picture book characteristics found throughout all three books discussed above. Postmodern picture books strive to create compelling narratives and engagement with their readers, and their characteristics are what set them apart from other genres of picture books,

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Figure 3. Myers, M. (2013). *Page 5 and 6 of Battle Bunny*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/books/battle-bunny-by-jon-scieszka-and-mac-barnett.html> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2022].