

Research in Practice. Dissertation
Proposal.

Illustration, narrative, tradition.

Student number : 1650412

Abbey Joyce

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Tutors : Louise Burston, Matthew Victor

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Introduction.

This proposal shall explore the relationship between children's picture books and mythology and the parallels between them through the keywords: illustration, Narrative and Tradition. Using key thinkers, artists and images, each keyword shall further investigate the psychological, historical, and societal context in which we tell myths and how it relates back to children's books today. Mythology, folklore, and legends have always been a big inspiration for my own illustrative work and as such I have chosen to look closely at how and why we use them or more specifically how we still use them. Understanding what influences our traditions and narrative feeds into the practice of illustration.

Illustration.

'Illustration serves as a reservoir of our social and cultural history' (Zeegan, 2005 ,p.12)

In the book titled fundamentals of illustration Zeegan breaks down components of what makes an illustration as a well guided 'how-to', backed by having an understanding of what built up to the term of illustration and how we view 'contemporary' illustration today. This relates to helping inform a question based on research and knowledge of the subject of illustration. Through this, questions like 'What is illustration ?' and 'Why do we use illustrations?' begin to take shape. Exploring the link between illustration and our social and cultural history will develop the ties to the other keywords chosen for this piece of writing.

Illustration can be used for many things and as such is not limited to certain concepts and is being continually pushed into new categories. Illustration like many art forms can be used as

a tool to communicate or express ideas. An illustration is a visual representation usually used in publishing media such as children's books. It tends to be heavily linked towards a depiction of a visual narrative or creating one by itself. Taking a closer look at children's book illustrations as it's related to my own practice gives a better insight for the themes pushed by my selected keywords.

'Throughout history, humankind has used narrative images to tell stories' Norman Rockwell Museum(2020)

After researching into the history behind my key word, lots of texts refer to the beginning of illustration being used in our society close to cave paintings followed by a boon into society's consciousness with the invention of the printing press. This concept of illustration being linked to a narrative is seen from our very first depictions of illustration. Attacking it from this viewpoint makes it clear to explore the use of illustration as it ties in with the concept of narrative and tradition. Being a visual representation of a specific time or place, it can often change how we perceive the world. Our ever-evolving evolution of the style and use of illustration shapes how we choose to visually communicate to one another. It forms how we like to express ideas by giving meaning to a few simple lines, colour, and shape.



1.

Focusing on the use of illustration for children's picture books and how they became known for depictions of stories (myths, fairy tales and folklore), explores how we use them in society and their importance towards visual communication. For example the first image I've chosen to relate to my keyword is an illustration of a well-known fairy tale, the pied piper of Hamelin, looking into the visual narrative conveyed makes you wonder why it is depicted as it is. Originally passed on as a legend, the tale was allegedly first illustrated in a stained-glass window for the church of Hamelin. Most narrative illustrations began to be popular through use of religious texts and art. It eventually was illustrated for picture books

and has many modern illustrations from contemporary illustrators.

Illustrations of the pied piper (even modern ones) tend to have a character design based to reflect a medieval time period in the way he dresses and looks. This re-affirms the use of illustration as being a peek/visual representation into our social and cultural history and it's link towards the narrative it represents.

It's through this that we applied it to narrate other aspects of our lives such as political comics and advertising/ other publishing media. This in turn shows how we use illustration within our society. Which also begs the question of 'What do we want to express through visual representation as a society?'

The relationship between illustration and its historical/societal context should prove a positive outlook towards the use of illustration in children's picture books to further examine specific issues within society for a younger generation to learn, grow and tackle in the early stages of development. Proving it as a necessary example of visual communication to each other. It should encourage us not to limit what we perceive illustration and children's illustration to mean or write it off as simply a portrayal of a child's insight to the world.

Narrative.

A narrative is a story or tale told by regaling past or imaginary events. The link between illustration and narrative is strong because each benefits from the other, but also because even when an illustration is by itself it still conveys a narrative.

‘Research by cognitive psychologists on the intuitive rules by means of which stories are assembled, called story grammars, identifies the same set of essential narrative elements’ (Sugiyama, M p.235)

In this paper, Sugiyama explores how folklore and myths use similar elements for narrative structure across the world and how it is suggested as an evolutionary trait to create narratives. Sugiyama focuses on research to go towards explaining the theory and function narrative has and its evolutionary focused background as justification to why.

‘It would appear, then, that storytelling has played an important role in our development as a species and, conversely, that ancestral environmental conditions have played an important role in the development of narrative’ (Sugiyama, M p.235)

Surely when looking at what narratives we try to tell through myths, fairy tales and folklore it’s evident that most are used as a way of making sense of the world around us or making sense of who we are and came to be. Sugiyama goes over the way we tailor each narrative to fit a certain purpose or convey specific information. Learning through imagined narratives hold true to our real-life experiences and so fairy tales often hold symbolism or hidden meanings to reflect that. Yet cultural influences effect how and why we choose the narratives we share. Cinderella in its many re telling’s may hold similar narrative structures however the punishment for the stepsisters or even the way she is discovered again by the prince varies based on the cultural influences of where it was told. From this we can begin

to question 'What does a narrative mean to our culture?', 'Why do we tell stories?', 'What does telling a narrative serve as a purpose?' 'Why do we still tell myths ?' and 'Are myths just stories?'.

In the book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell uses The hero's journey as a breakdown to highlight narrative plot points all stories seem to share. This concept is explored again as to why the setup of a narrative is the way it is and for what purpose it serves to society i.e Why we make up narratives to tell.

'It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse'
(Campbell,2004,p.362)

If I take an example from the series 'Myths and monsters' on Netflix, one of the studies gone over in the show is the narrative of King Arthur and exploring it's relation to Campbells hero's journey. The narrative of Arthur and the round table is still being told today. Arthur as a character in the narrative can be seen as to portray the values of what a 'good king' ideally was in the medieval period. Because the narrative finishes with a sense of his return, fitting into the context of our own society today shifts it's perspective from the original. Seen as a leader type character it's easy to still project society's context in a modern setting to the narrative. In this we can see the link towards the creative hero guiding the society. Arthur encompasses what we perceive/ want the ideal leader to be and through this becomes an example of what we should be in our own modern context and how to act in our own society.

Case in point is the addition of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere in the narrative.

Around the 12th century Lancelot as a character is created to have the ideals of the court goers of the period. As is Guinevere as she becomes to take on a more driven role to appeal to the women of the society. This poses questions like ‘Do narratives hold a reflection of the self?’, ‘What type of narratives do we like to tell?’ and ‘Why do we feel the need to create a narrative?’

Campbell also tries to understand how we use a narrative to make sense around us through creation stories and myth. The idea of psychoanalysis for certain narratives gives these stories meaning and purpose in our own cultural history. The concept of a narrative has been with us for a long time and it’s interesting to follow how this change in format from oral to illustrative children’s books has maybe forgotten their intended meanings or changed it for the better to fit in today’s societal context.

2.



The little prince can be seen as an example of how psychoanalysis is used to give the narrative meaning. Although the original is in French many of the most popular translations have a more poetic approach to the narrative being told. It shows clear themes of retaining childhood qualities to have a happy life and is influenced by Saint-Exupery's own life. However one can argue that it is just simply a narrative that follows the little prince on his journey and is nothing more than a children's story.

Tradition.

Exploring how storytelling has been a tradition for humankind is key to understanding the importance of how it effects the way we use narrative and illustration today. Tradition can also be closely related to the theme of culture explored in the research of the other keywords used for this piece of wiring.

Researching the handed down tradition of sharing stories and how folklore and such lives through to the modern day generates questions like 'why do we still tell myths?', 'Are myths still relevant?', 'What is the importance of children's picture books?' and 'Why do we read children's picture books at bedtime?'. The start of sharing stories can be dated way back and can be used traditionally as a source of teaching lessons and learning. The Kelpie myth has been suggested to have been used as a warning not to go near water or wild horses (contributing factors for death during the period). Myths being used as warnings and the tradition of passing them down is similar to the use of old wives tales. As a society we still retain our myths, legends, fairy tales and folklore of old, albeit refined versions, but what

makes them so re-tellable and a cornerstone in the way we live ? The importance of the reasoning behind this greatly influences my own practice of illustration as it's change of oral tradition to children's books. Most have some sort of historical context for issues within the society at the time yet per tradition we still re tell them. As myths evolve through time, we soon end up creating new ones and these new stories will reflect in societal issues of today. As an illustrator, knowing the link between the need for myths and this historical context will help understanding the influence and meaning of my own work in the future.

'Our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales, and through them is communicated to the child's mind' (Bettelheim. 1991.p.12)

In the book titled *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* , Bettelheim considers the psychology behind fairy tales and how it effects child development. The background behind the quote singled out, talks about in context when these tales were passed down in a time where religious symbolism were ever present and told to children. This explores the keyword of tradition and links it to themes picked up earlier of historical and societal context. However it could also be looked as a meaning behind why we use fairy tales as a tradition of storytelling. We use them as a way of teaching and growth for children. Traditions influence the structure of how we live and seeing what we choose to pass on to the next generation through these narratives tells us something about what we as a society aim to be.

‘there are major plot points that hold deeper meanings that work to teach children important lessons’ (Gafford, A.2021)

In this piece of writing, *Why Children Need Fairy Tales: A Psychological Breakdown*, Gafford explores the meaning behind fairy tales for children and takes reference from sources similar to my own research. From this concept of understanding and learning lessons through fairy tales and myths makes a clear link to what purpose the tradition of passing down stories oral or written serves for child development.



3.

Within this tradition of storytelling and bedtime stories for children, revisiting children's picture books suddenly pose the question of if they are just modern versions of myths.

Although Kerr has always denied the tiger being a symbolism of Nazi's it's hard to overlook the context of it effecting how she chose to narrate her own stories to pass down to her children. The tiger who came to tea surely has a war time ethic of carrying on as to the conclusion of the tale at the end. After the printing press was invented it became tradition to read bedtime stories to children. Suddenly children's picture books became popular and a norm of the society at the time, which has been passed down to today. Knowing what influences the psychology behind these tales puts a greater importance towards the types of meanings conveyed in today's picture books.

Conclusion.

Through the exploration of the chosen three keywords, it has led to a myriad of different questions to build upon and use as the proposed question. Using relative key thinkers and artists to inform the research taken has built an understanding towards themes and concepts for this proposal. The psychological, child development, historical and societal themes have been influenced from looking at the works of Zeegan, Sugiyama, Campbell, Bettelheim and Gafford. Inspired by the researched artists that include Greenaway, Saint-Exupery, and Kerr. Using this as a base to develop further into a study of the link between narrative, tradition, and illustration for children's picture books, it acknowledges the psychoanalysis approach of myths and fairy tales towards the development for children. By taking a deeper look at each of my keywords through the uses of myth it has led me to conclude that from our oral tradition of telling children stories to children's picture books today that we pertain a similar narrative structure, illustrating particular messages and themes for our children to learn. In this way I find picture books to be the next natural

step/form for myths and stories like fairy tales to have evolved into. Through exploring myth and similar story telling like fairy tales, we can see how we've used them to either explain the world around us or ourselves which can show why and how we still use them today. Because tradition, narrative and illustration link together like this from a visual perspective it questions the meaning behind children's picture books and their illustrations.

All the research done for this piece of writing has led me to the question of 'Are children's picture books modern myths?' to explore and write about next year.

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