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Question 2 : Analyse the work of illustrators and particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive and sometimes shocking themes

Metaphors in children's books are important and are a great example of how children's books handle sensitive topics. They can be an effective way to do this, but it may not be for the reason that you think. Metaphors are commonplace in our day to day, and are everywhere in our world (Punter, 2007). As adults, we use metaphors to help explain complex subjects to others in ways they can understand. The topics can include, but are not limited to, areas such as mental health. Mental health has also become an important area of children's literature and picture books, and rightfully so (The Children's Society, 2022). Picture books like *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2014) are a good example of this. It encourages the idea that it is normal not to be okay all the time. (Wyle, 2010, pp.130–137). However, considering recent research, adults purchasing these stories may have more use for the metaphor than young children themselves (Ferguson, 2019). This essay will examine the use of metaphor in children's books as a tool to communicate complex and difficult ideas. It will explore whether children can understand these metaphors, and if they cannot, will aim to explain why this may not matter.

It is firstly important to define what a metaphor is. "an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Understanding the way in which metaphor is commonly used is important if seeking to understand whether it is effective for children. Often, metaphor is used to link two unrelated things in a way that emphasises a point or feeling a person is trying to communicate. "With metaphor, the qualities of one thing are figuratively carried over to another. When I say, "Dude, I'm drowning in work," I'm using qualities associated with one thing—the urgency and helplessness of drowning—to convey meaning for another thing—the work I've got to do." (Jensen, 2019). A picture is already a powerful tool. It

can provide a visual representation of otherwise difficult to articulate feelings, and often draws upon our experiences. “Our feelings arise because we see pictures as extensions of our real world. Pictures that affect us strongly use structural principals based on the way we have to react in the real world in order to survive.” (Bang, 1991, p.54). If images are powerful because we draw from real life when viewing them, metaphors are a tool to further expand the reach of a particular message, using a starting point from which the viewer can easily relate and then introducing a new meaning. This is valuable information when endeavouring to understand why and how metaphors are useful for adults, and one might assume that the same principles could be applied to children, but this may not be the case.

It is also necessary to describe the use of visual metaphors. This is a complex topic, for visuals are usually in place when words cannot explain or fully describe. “To understand visual metaphor is a difficult task; to explain it is more difficult. For how can one begin to do justice verbally to that which is by nature nonverbal and visual?” (Feinstein, 1982). This essay will not delve deeply into the difference between a visual and verbal metaphor. However, it is important to discuss this briefly. The examples of metaphors in children’s books this essay will explore are both visual and verbal. A visual metaphor could be described much the same as a verbal metaphor, yet they are different in imperceivable ways. Some suggest that such a thing as a visual metaphor does not exist. “Therefore, insofar as visual images are concrete and particular, they cannot serve as vehicles for metaphors which are abstract” (Carroll, 2009, pp.347–368). It seems that metaphor and image are intrinsically linked, and there are plenty of sources that cite visual metaphors as being a very real and widely utilised phenomenon. There is, in fact, a whole category of metaphor named *perceptual metaphors*. “Metaphors reflect processes of thinking and, consequently, appear not just in language but in perception as well” (Marks, 1996). This is a somewhat broad category, but it does include images, fine art, and illustration. (Hetmański,

2020). As this essay is not meant to expand too much on the question of the legitimacy of visual metaphor, it will proceed based upon the latter arguments, stating that it is a real occurrence in illustration.

The age at which children can understand metaphor is a debated topic.

Those authors who link metaphor comprehension and production to pretence (e.g., Pouscoulous, [30]) maintain that pretence and metaphor require similar cognitive abilities, and thus, children could master metaphors around 2.5 or 3 years of age. On the contrary, other authors underlined that difficulties in metaphor comprehension rely on difficulties in accepting an unconventional label for a familiar entity (e.g., [31]), delaying this competence to around four years of age. (Carriedo et al., 2016)

The discourse appears to be around what age children can understand metaphor, and this could be an important factor to consider when deciding what age group a children's book will target. It could be considered a labour in vain to write metaphors in a book aimed at children under the age of two. Although, a factor that may come into play is the adult reading the book to the child. Children's books can often appeal to the adult as well, tackling topics that are also relevant to the older audience. "Much progressive children's literature in fact deals with how some adults as well as children are discriminated against, dispossessed, impoverished, and otherwise made minor socially if not also legally"(Kidd, 2020). After all, there are some struggles that are universal regardless of age. If, as discussed above, it is unknown whether children can truly understand metaphor until a later age, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the parent or caregiver reading to the child might enjoy the use of metaphor more or as well. After all, children are not often in control of what books they have access to at a young age, but it is the parent or caregiver who selects and purchases such items. If, as mentioned above,

metaphor relies on experience to relate two separate ideas, it could perhaps imply that lack of experience might lead to a lack of understanding regarding metaphors. Moving forward, when referring to children in this essay, the age group referred to will be below the age of eleven. "We found that the ability to understand metaphors is present by age 11" (Carriedo et al., 2016). This is the point where most sources, even those in debate about children's understanding at an earlier age, agree that children have developed an understanding of metaphors. Therefore, this essay will not be discussing whether writing or illustrating metaphor is an effective tool for children's literature aimed above or at that age. And though the age at which most people are confident children can directly understand metaphor is debated, it may not matter.

There are many wonderful examples of the use of metaphor in children's books, some more complex than others. A great example of metaphor use in children's books is *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan. This book attempts to handle the subject of mental health with the help of an abundance of metaphors. The most obvious metaphor calls back to the title of the book. The red tree (see figure 1 below) in the narrative appears to be a metaphor for hope in times of struggle. There is a red leaf present in most of the illustrations following the character. At the end of the book, the image (pictured below) this can be seen as a full-grown tree. Tan has said that even though this may represent hope, it is still meant to be uncertain, as is always the case with life. The tree could be standing tall one day and be dead the next (Tan, n.d.) This faithfulness to reality is an aspect of Shaun Tan's work that makes it an important example within the category of children's books which depict struggles with mental health. "*The Red Tree* is important precisely because it does not gloss over existential dread or uncertainty" (Wyile, 2010, pp.130–137). This book is a strong example of how using metaphor can teach lessons about real-life struggles for children. The artwork itself is breathtaking and pulls one's attention in, but the intricate use of metaphor is what makes this book a strong stand-out. On Amazon this book is

marketed as being for the six to eleven age range. The lower end of this book's recommended age group is partly in question in regards to ability to understand complex or abstract metaphors. However, this book is highly praised by adults for its handling of the topic of depression in its reviews on Amazon and Goodreads. This suggests that they, at least, are finding use for this book.



Figure 1. Illustration from *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2014)

The use of metaphors in *The Worrysaurus* is much simpler. These metaphors rely on the use of colour theory. Anytime the main character is having a moment of anxiety, all their worries about possible outcomes are depicted in blue (see figure 2 below). The colour in *The Worrysaurus* serves as a metaphor for anxiety and sadness. This use of colour aids the text in conveying

these feelings. The use of cool colours conveys this well. In fact, the colour being cool in tone might be more important than the hue being blue. Although we tend to associate blue with sadness as adults, this is what *Bleicher* might call a learned response to colour (Bleicher, 2012). This may be a useful metaphor for the adult reading the book to the child but might suggest that the fact that these scenes depicting anxiety being blue could mean little to the child. The colour being cool in tone, however, could be what the child might understand within the use of this colour metaphor. These colours can conjure up feelings of sadness (Bleicher, 2012). These illustrations could also be utilising physiognomic perception. An example of this is the fact that dark colours can be perceived as depressing, while bright ones are seen as opposite (Marks, 1996). This would not disqualify it as a metaphor, as using physiognomic perception can be categorised as a type of perceptual metaphor. Although this metaphor seems more simplistic than the last, the question of whether children would understand them may still remain.



Figure 2. Illustration from *The Worrysaurus* (Rachel/Chatterton Chris Bright, 2019)

Conclusion

Metaphors can be a useful tool when it comes to broaching difficult topics. Although the age at which children can understand metaphor is debated, there is undoubtedly use for metaphor in children's books, if even only to help the adult approach the difficult subject with the child. It is also not unreasonable to introduce metaphors to children at a young age to aid in their development of understanding. Even if a small child may not be able to understand the direct meaning of a metaphor, if the adult connects with it, and subsequently can discuss these feelings with the child, it is undoubtedly still a valuable tool in children's books. "Children learn by observing the significant others in their lives. Adults who honestly express their feelings in constructive ways foster children's emotional growth" (Davies, 2020). Adding to this point, if an adult can connect with these subjects in children's books because they are in much simpler terms than any aimed directly at adults, and this aids in processing such emotions, this can only be beneficial for any children in the household. It would be strange indeed if anyone were to suggest that having a more emotionally intelligent adult in a household would not be beneficial for a child's development. Children often learn by looking at the adults in their life, and this is a key factor in why including metaphors in children's books, even for ages which might not understand, is not a moot point. It can be especially important to consider when discussing how this might affect children in regard to mental health. "According to social learning theory, children observe and model the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional responses of others (Bandura, 1977). With respect to the development of fears and anxiety specifically, investigators (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Barlow, 1988; 2000) have proposed that children may adopt the anxious behaviors and cognitions of their caregivers via modeling, vicarious learning, and information transmission" (Burstein and Ginsburg, 2010). In addition to these points, the mental health of young children is a growing concern. "Now, five children in a classroom of 30 are likely to have a mental health problem." (The Children's Society, 2022). Hardship and difficult circumstances

do not discriminate based on age. This is why children's books, especially those that deal with such topics, are so important. "The narrative of a story gives children a voice for their own experiences. At a young age one might not have the correct words to explain complex feelings or difficult circumstances" (Dr Linda Karges-Bone, 2015). It is important for there to be books which give children a voice for matters that they may not be able to put into words themselves. There might be question surrounding whether metaphor might be useful by directly being interpreted by the child when reading books about matters such as mental health. Even if the child cannot make direct sense of the use of metaphor, it does not mean there is no point in that metaphor being present. It is undoubtedly useful for the adults purchasing and reading these books to the younger audience. "Making sense of the world cannot take place without metaphor" (Kövecses, 2010).

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