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Illustration (BA)

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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**From the research strand of lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.**

## **What ways do visual aspects help contribute to the portrayal of meaning and emotion within a picture book?**

Throughout this essay I aim to explore how the visual elements of a picture book work alongside words to portray the story's main theme to its audience, aiming to understand how emotion and message is conveyed visually to the reader. I will investigate a range of aspects that are taken into consideration by picture book illustrators, for example, shape, colour, the overall layout of the imagery and how this intertwines with text. Alongside analysing picture books, research into theories surrounding my topic such as Bruner or Piaget will aid in a better discovery to support my findings. Looking into picture books not only aimed at children but at adults too will help gain a clearer insight into if each target audience uses different techniques to portray certain themes. By exploring a range of meaning and emotion portrayed through illustration, as well as relevant theories supporting my findings should benefit to a better understanding overall. Analysing and interpreting these topics will assist in establishing how the underlying themes of picture books have been portrayed through their depictions of a written story and their relevance.

When attempting to portray a message to a child using a picture book, they can visually connect the words they're hearing or reading to the images they're seeing for a better understanding, Balcazar states children will "check pictures on the page for background knowledge or contextual clues" (Balcazar, 2019) thus suggesting the imagery conveys meaning. To better connect with the children, drawing in a childlike style they're most familiar with gives them a better insight into the story being told, it can often be helpful to understand how children's thoughts are processed, so illustrators may work alongside

children in some cases. Children's book Author Petr Horacek works closely with children reflecting on picture books and conversers deeper meanings, by doing so, he gets an accurate perception of how the child's mind processes his imagery. He states in an interview with Book Trust that "A good picture book doesn't just teach a child to read and love books. It also develops imagination and teaches them to understand", implying picture books are more than just pretty pictures but also convey deeper meaning ("Why picture books are crucial to child development and education", 2023). He also mentions the characteristics a "good illustrator" takes into consideration when aiming to convey mood and atmosphere in the book, stating that "facial expressions" and "body language" come into play, however these feelings can be communicated "sometimes just by the colour" ("Why picture books are crucial to child development and education", 2023). Similarly, Sonia Landes states that, "One role of pictures in a picture book is to enhance the meaning of a story by illustrating the words" (Landes, 2019, p51), in that, she implies imagery is used as a symbol to represent deeper meanings or aspects in the story. Theorist Jerome Bruner expressed, "the corresponding principle of economy in art produces the compact image or symbol that, by its genius, travels great distances to connect ostensible disparity" (Bruner, 1997, p.65), suggesting that within art there is symbols aiming to communicate deeper meanings to the audience, thus supporting previous findings.



Figure 1: *Little Red Hood*, Leray, (2011), p.25

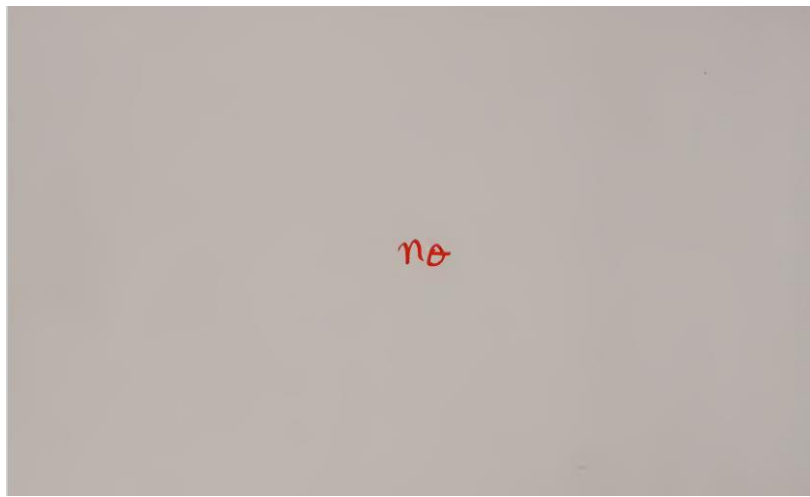


Figure 2: Little Red Hood, Leray, (2011), p.26

The book “Little Red Hood” (Leray, 2011) by Marjolaine Leray works upon the classic tale of Little Red Riding Hood with a twist, in which the young girl stands up for herself, its said to be “a role reversal make for an eye-opening take on the traditional story” (Kirkus Reviews, 2013). She shows she isn’t intimidated by the wolf character and sends a message of bravery and power to the audience; this is presented well on page 26 in figure 2 which simply states “no”, the lowercase text suggests Red Riding Hood isn’t angry and implies a calm atmosphere after a juxtaposing scene on previous page 25 seen in figure 1, suggesting her fearlessness against the implied frightening wolf character.

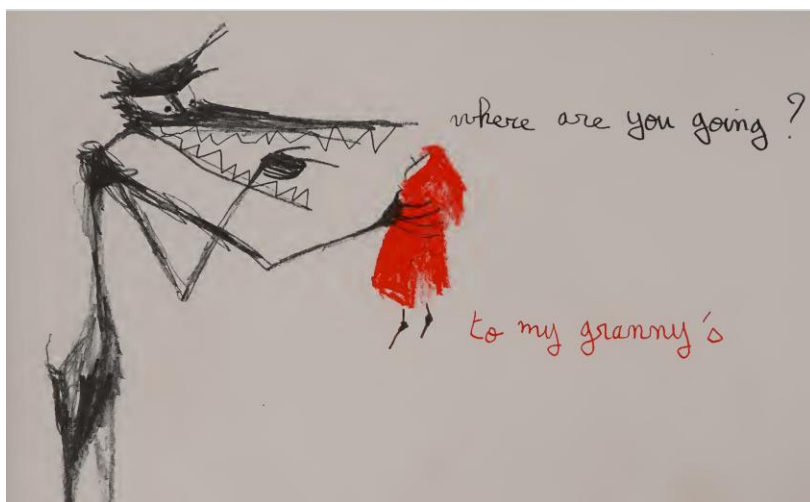


Figure 3: Little Red Hood, Leray, (2011), p.6

Figure 3 shows that within Little Red Hood colour plays a vital role alongside text for this book, as both characters lines are formed using their primary displayed colours. Just two colours separate the wolf, the antagonist who is represented in black, and Red Riding Hood

the protagonist in Red. This is a simple yet effective way for a child to link and separate what each character is saying with minimal words and explanation, without overcomplicating the language within the book and overall, possibly making this book not accessible to a younger audience. A similar technique is used by teachers to improve children's communication and speech skills, in 1997 Alison Bryan developed the practise of Colourful Semantics, "a theory that explains how people understand language" ("Colourful Semantics: A teacher's guide", 2021). The theory in practice is the process of linking words to specific colours so children can establish connections between words and meanings and overtime becoming more confident and familiar with these links ("Colourful Semantics: A teacher's guide", 2021). Likewise, a more simplified approach has been used within Little Red Hood linking the colourful characters to the matching, coloured sentences. It can be assumed that this is an effective method used within the book as most children at this age have already been taught using Colourful Semantics and can make connections with their already existing knowledge when reading the book.

The overall style of the characters within Little Red Hood (Leray, 2021) are very childlike, they resemble somewhat of stick figures which is how most young children tend to interpret the human form. Marilyn Goodman refers to the stickmen type figure as "tadpole people" usually made up of a circular head with lines for arms and legs (Goodman, 2018, p. 89). McIlroy (2023) helps to elucidate this concept, declaring by two years old toddlers would have developed to a stage called "controlled scribbling" where shapes start to appear amongst their drawings, this is the age they start making connections. It's possible they can sense these familiarities between their representations of objects and the similarities within the book, resulting in them being more engaged in the story. Jean Piaget's work on schema theory gives a great insight into understanding how children perceive the world around

them, he based his research on the question “What conceptions of the world does the child naturally form at the different stages of its development” (Piaget, 1969, p.1), he explains the ongoing development of children as they grow older, expressing how children observe, simplify, and represent forms. In the case of “tadpole people” it can be inferred that a child may simplify the human form to shapes and lines due to their cognitive schemas. Smith (2022) states that Piaget’s Cognitive Development theory is said to be “the most complete and influential theories describing how the human mind shapes and develops through the process of learning.” Gandhi and Mukherji (2023) make links to Piaget’s theory and explain constructivism amongst children, stating that it is “based on the premise that individuals learn by constructing new ideas, and an understanding of the world is based on prior knowledge and experiences.” Using these theories, it can be assumed that when picture books are illustrated in a childlike style they can relate to, meaning can be understood clearly and a learning opportunity is created. With constructivism, the children should be able to connect word and image to their prior existing knowledge, their schemas aid in a better understanding of both the drawings and plot.

Figures 1 and 3 show the two characters presented to the audience in the book. Analysing the characters next to each other a clear juxtaposing feature can be observed between the two, thus being the shapes used to build their form. It is apparent the wolf is “very pointed” and Red Riding Hood is “softer” (Disney, 2022), these are key elements children can use to visually differentiate the two characters from one another by means of their previous knowledge, proven by Piaget’s Cognitive Development theory formerly discussed. Disney (2022) declares the common rules taken into consideration in character design, is that the antagonist is made up of triangles, by exaggerating the shape in different ways fear can be heightened and evoke a more menacing perception. On the contrary, Disney (2022) also

states the protagonist juxtaposes by being created with more circle like shapes, so expressing more friendly feelings within the character design, Naghdi (no date) explains this theory is known as shape psychology. Asch (1946) explains how shape plays a key part in expressing the emotions and traits of a particular character, and how this is portrayed to the audience,

“Body shape has a tremendous impact on the overall impression of the character. If you ever looked at a cartoon character and thought they seemed confident but didn’t know why, you probably were not aware of the character’s shape language!”

(as cited in Naghdi, no date)

When we look at how shape psychology is applied to character design in picture books, the audience may be oblivious to the connection we are subconsciously making with the shape forms we are looking at. In a sense automatically connecting the silhouette we see to the emotion being expressed, Piaget’s cognitive development theory again taking effect.

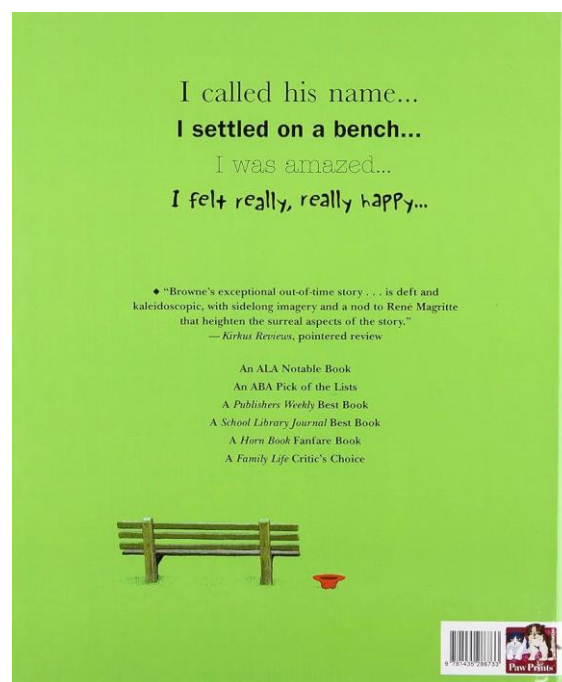


Figure 4: *Voices in the Park*, Browne (1999) p. 35

Antony Browne's book *Voices in the park* (1999) is a postmodern remake of his original book *Through the Magic Mirror* (1976). The blurb states "Four different voices tell the story of a walk in the park" (Browne, 1999), research proves deeper themes are explored within the book such as "alienation, friendship and bizarre amid the mundane." (Goodreads, no date). As clearly stated by the author, the book narrates itself from the perspective of the four characters featured in the book, each different character's sentences are differentiated by a carefully selected font which can be seen in figure 4, representing the individuals feelings themselves and how Browne wanted their character to come across. The bottom font in figure 4 stating "I felt really, really happy" is drawn in a childlike way relating closely to the characters innocent mood within the book.



*Figure 5: Voices in the Park, Browne (1999) p. 18*



*Figure 6: Voices in the Park, Browne (1999) p.10*

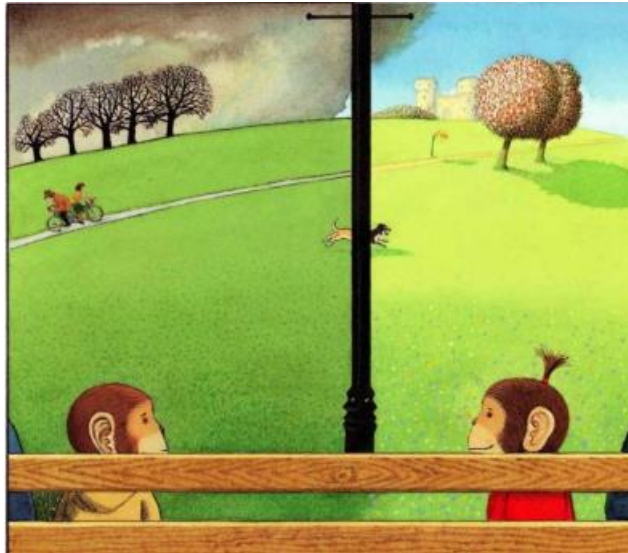


Figure 7: *Voices in the Park*, Browne (1999) p.19

In an interview with ‘Teaching Books’ Anthony brown says that he includes surrealist like compositions within his work as this style of art affected him as a child and its “mysterious and new”,

“One of the things the surrealists were trying to do was to put disparate objects together in a common context. They thought it helped us see objects we usually take for granted — as if we're seeing them for the first time.” (Browne, 2004)

Another way of putting this is defamiliarization, first discovered by Shklovsky (1917) he begins to treat perception as an origin. Again, Browne takes on the technique as described by Tolstoy, “not calling it by its name, but describing it as if seen for the first time; an event, as if it were happening for the first time” (as cited in Crawford, 1984), its implied that by captivating this surrealistic style within the book, the audience can get a whole new perspective on the story being told. Figure 5 shows Browne’s use of defamiliarization in the illustration on this page, we see a hat reoccurring throughout the page in the clouds, the trees and the lampposts which is an example of a surrealistic element in his work. Again, we can observe the hats depiction also in the shadow on the floor, the hat is depicted as the

same one mother is wearing seen in figure 6, so it can be implied while she is not in sight on the page, she is stood next to the boy. We are led to question why the hat is being drawn to the reader's attention? According to fashion blogger Coleman (2022), Hats are said to symbolise "authority and power" which is true to the mother's characteristics in the book. In figure 7 we see the bowler hats starting to disappear as the young, joyfully presented girl is present in this illustration, its suggested that she is taking the young boys worries away.

Figure 7 is a clear representation of colour being used to represent the emotions of the different characters. In this illustration Browne has used the lamppost to separate the page in two. The audience gets an insight into both the young girl and boys worlds, their feelings and emotions are represented above them particularly in the sky and with the colour pallet which is a technique Browne has used throughout the book. The boys side appears dull and depressing whereas on the contrary the young girls is bright and joyful. Looking further at the book it can be inferred Browne has designated each of the four characters a season which overall emulates their emotional state, thus further reiterating deeper symbolism within "voices in the Park" and again expressing meaning.

To conclude, after analysing the many different elements illustrators and authors use within picture books to express different meanings, themes and emotions, thorough analysis, and research into theorists such as Bryan and Piaget have both proficiently supported my findings throughout. Its clear with the many visual aspects I've explored in both "little Red Hood" and "Voices in the park", from colour to design, symbolism and more, they all individually play a crucial role within these books. Illustrators of picture Books will take into consideration its target audience and make decisive choices and choose confident methods of which will best express key themes of a given story. While sometimes a combination of

visual and textual elements work well together to evoke meaning, sometimes symbolism within the imagery is enough for the audience to make connections and understand the given theme. The illustrators can often portray a better example of meaning and emotion, imagery that can't be conveyed in books with text alone. In summary, by paying close attention to the visual aspects within a picture book, the readers can gain a much greater understanding of the story and the emotions it is conveying.

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## Figure list

Fig. 1-3

Leray, M. (2011) *Little Red Hood*

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Fig. 4-6

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