

Illustrating Grief: An Analysis of Visual Storytelling in Children's Picture Books on Loss

Picture books offer a uniquely powerful outlet for artists, authors and author artists to address a variety of themes whether they be lighthearted life lessons or hard hitting difficult to discuss issues such as themes of loss, sadness, and mortality. Wolf Erlbruch's 'Duck, Death and The Tulip' (2007) and Oliver Jeffers' 'The Heart And the bottle' stand out as important examples in this field of work. Both of these artists tackle the complexity that is addressing the concept of death, with Erlbruch's story orients around a unique friendship between a duck and a characterised personification of Death, and Jeffers' story navigating loss and the journey of emotional closure through a young girl who locks her heart away after a tragic experience. These works have stood out to the world for their success in understanding how to build up an authentic story that need not rely on just the text but the design work of colour, composition, characters all done in a way that conveys the correct message appropriately to a younger audience. In analysing both books, this essay will explore how Erlbruch and Jeffers use character design, colour schemes and illustrations to portray empathy and understanding in a way that allows children to deeply feel and process their trauma.

The nature of the story in "Duck, Death and the Tulip" offers multitudes of layers to the concept of death with the crucial element to this being the personification of Death, which the character itself is designed to act as a visual totem for the information to be passed from page to viewer. The key element to this being that the way the character is designed is evidently caters to a younger audience, as

shown, the character design in the book "Duck, Death

and the Tulip" is given a very muted yet warm

neutral colour palette, very different to

depictions of death seen in other media's such

as Marianne Stokes rendition of "Death and

the Maiden". The visual differences in these

two depictions are very apparent in the sense



that Erlbruch's character uses colour language to offer a more inviting character, one that is not to be feared as the depiction from Stokes which overall the whole painting is dark and sinister in design, these dark shades are commonly known to convey depressing and sad emotions, as one analysis notes: "Dark colours, such as deep blues, grays, and blacks tend to have a more somber and serious connotation. While they can convey sophistication and elegance in design and fashion, they can also evoke a sense of melancholy and sadness" (Klarissa Castro, 2024)

With this understanding, it's apparent that Erlbruch's representation softens to this ideology making it accessible to a younger audience. While discussing the approach to design and it's appropriateness to younger audiences, the act of designing toward said audience is an interesting component to analyse as using a character, especially in the narrative of this book offers a direct link to death being an action done by someone rather than the realistic explanation that death is simply just a name to describe the body no longer functioning. Bruce Bettelheim discusses similar ideologies, saying:

"For these same reasons a child, as long as he is not sure his immediate human environment will protect him, needs to believe that superior powers, such as a guardian angel, watch over him, and that the world and his place within it are of paramount importance" (Bruce Bettelheim, 1976)

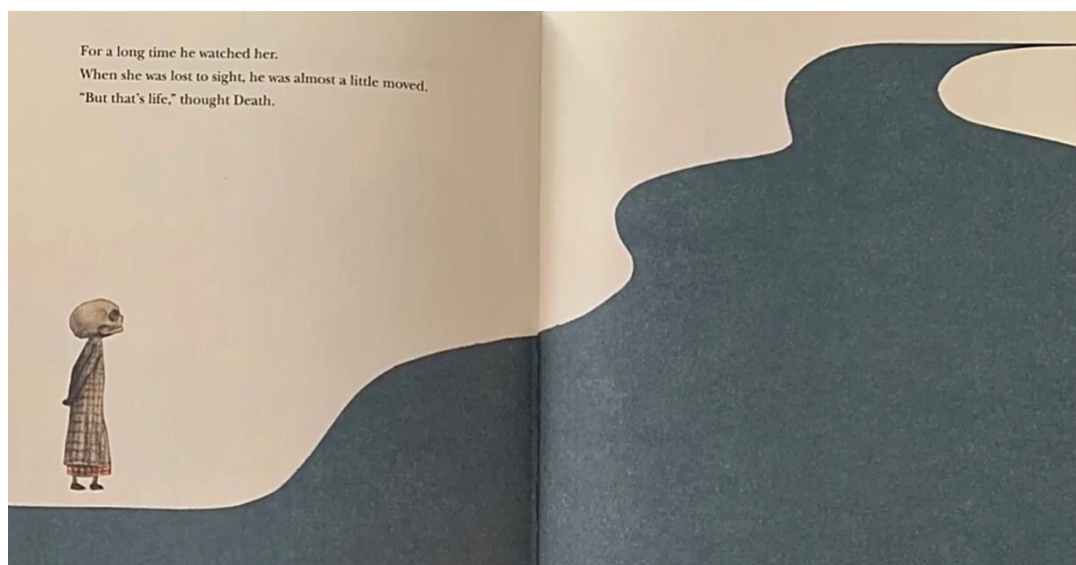
This not only explores reasoning behind this depiction of death but also explores reasoning behind other and all depictions of something higher than us, something that we cannot fully explain and especially to children, it offers an explanation to the fact that children's books, especially grief children's books, require something external to rationalise an internal feeling. Erlbruch and his visual rationalisation of death come with a very direct and mature method with the dialogue of this book and that itself compliments the character design of death as

such direct morbid words are coming from a character that is successfully portrayed as being warm and friendly, this acts as a visual cushion for the hard words to fall upon.



Aside from choices in character design, another part to this picture book that is worth analysis is that of the way this world exists on the page, in the sense that the illustration style is very minimal and very symbolic. “Effective use of negative space requires deliberate placement to enhance the artwork’s intended message and impact. Each component, including the surrounding space, should contribute meaningfully to the overall vision.” (Adrian Reynolds, 2024)

This perfectly encapsulates the intent behind Erlbruch’s work, as given that throughout the book, the interactions between death and the duck are the main focus of the entire page showing them two as the sole illustrations on the page, only when they interact with something is that then shown, this is a highly effective tool used to isolate their dialogue from any distractions, amplifying the nature of the words, almost as if Erlbruch is limiting the space to allow the reader to feel included in the conversation between Duck and Death.



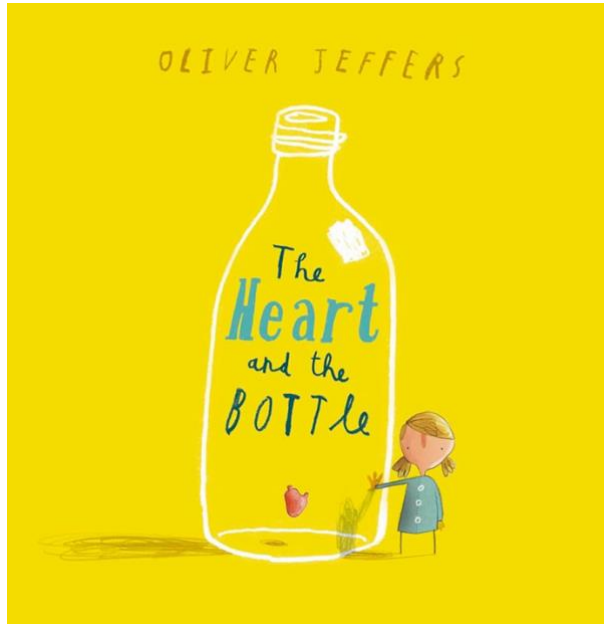
Furthermore, how Erlbruch curates the scene at the end where Duck dies and is laid to rest is a very strategic and powerful double page image, the visual of death being the character to send the duck on its way is in itself the entire point of the book but done in such a way that children can relate real life information to. The scene depicts Death laying Duck on her back, sending her corpse down the stream, visually this says many things, the essence of this explained through Shaun Tans statement:

“The main thing I learned from studying all of these books was the importance of intimate detail—particularly ordinary domestic details like making a cup of tea or putting a hand on a doorknob—and changes in perception of time, moving from slow seconds to years flashing by, all by the careful arrangement of sequences. I also learned that you don’t need to show everything; you try to boil it down to key moments. That is, you can show a person boarding a train just by having a shoe resting on a metal step; you don’t need to draw the whole train” (Shaun Tan, no date)

Using this statement to deduct information from the simplicity of the illustration, it’s clear that the message of this image is to give the reader that Death was in complete control and Duck just had to accept the concept, the control came to show when it was Death itself that laid Duck in the river, patting her along down the river, accompanied by the text shown in the example of this, it’s a clear subconscious message that after death has come and in turn “deals” with you, you’re gone. This is cleverly shown by taking the knowledge that once you go down a river far enough, you’re out of sight, by using the nature of the book, text and illustration, Erlbruch has successfully reimagined this to translate the concept of passing on, being no more.

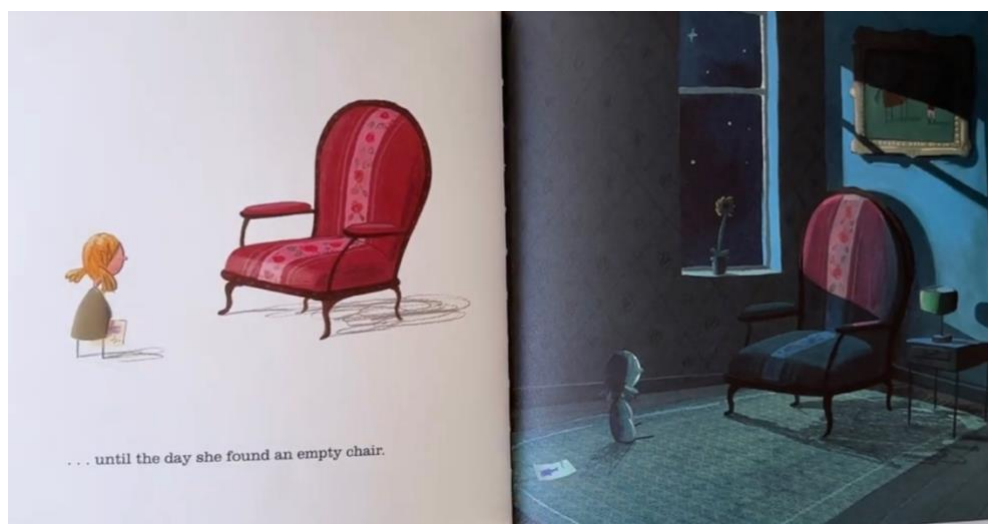
A provoking statement taken from ‘The Hidden Adult’ theorises that texts written specifically for audiences of children came into existence at a point when adults decided that children were constituted in a way that required adult interference between them and the horrors of the adult world as a-protective act (Perry Nodelman, 2008, page 121) linking this with the previously discussed points around the appropriate character design as well as story itself creates a unique perspective on children’s books as a whole as this statement gives thought to the idea that adults provide what is appropriate for children, especially through the literature they read and in turn the visuals that accompany that. This ties with the idea of the character

of death especially as it's a point to make that its through children's reception and noticing of things that adults make decisions about how to better handle situations with children.



Similarly to Erlbruch's work with 'Duck, Death and the tulip', Jeffers' illustrations in 'The Heart and The Bottle' play a crucial role in conveying the extent of the heaviness that loss brings. Jeffers' methodically narrates the protagonist withdrawal from life, offering illustrations that gradually fade in colour making her grief fathomable with these thought-out illustrations, the success of this work comes from the relationships between text and illustration with the illustration carrying the narrative of the

story in ways that words could not. This book, similarly to Erlbruch offers captivating use of negative space surrounding already meaningful illustrations, however where one difference lies is where Jeffers makes room for vastly more detailed illustrations to live and either portray a message in their own or to help build some context to earlier, more simpler illustrations.



An example of relationship between text and illustration takes hold in this double page that work harmoniously with one another, on the left shows the protagonist and the chair, that is

all the information given and needed, the negative space here isolates everything possibly acting as a visual impression of the state of shock. The right shows a much more interesting variation of the image prior by using the same content but extending the context, “This is an example of psychology, but it is also helpful for illustration, as it tells us that cooler colours make us feel calmer” (Jiaqi Li, 2023) evidently, the illustration has an eerie calmness to it as the addition of the light blue moon rays is in the only light source which disallows the image from signifying total sadness and darkness as the chair is highlighted by this light, had the room been entirely dark it would exclude everything thus removing the content, whereas this illustration includes everything in the room while highlighting the lack of presence in the chair. The use of the empty chair here holds the power in creating the mood for the image, a statement that can be interpreted to understand the effect of the empty chair taken from a thesis that discusses the work of Maurits Cornelis Escher: “The relationship between the primary object forming the secondary ones with a deliberate attempt makes one think about the equivalence of hierarchy...” (S, Madhusoodanan. 2020. Page 15) This, applied to the use of featuring an empty chair can offer a new perspective into techniques used that may have gone unnoticed, the primary object being the empty chair in turn influences the context of the secondary objects, thus being the contents of the room. If the chair had been occupied, the context understood originally would no longer serve purpose and would merely just be someone sat in a chair in the night and would imply another explanation to the sadness in the room.

A key element to the success of how useful a grief picture book can be is the afterward effect, whether it is any aid to the child. The protagonist of this book assists in the translation of the message to reader as Jeffers’ manages to make the journey of the character relatable, by visually depicting feelings previously only concepts made of words, from authors behind the *Journal of Paediatric Nursing*: “An essential function to these stories is that children can identify with the characters and the situation they reflect, which serves as a trigger to start a



conversation (Martínez-Caballero, M. (2023). Evidence of this relatability comes after the loss when the protagonist is seen growing up, carrying around the reminder of the loss. This simple portrayal of day-to-day life removes some sense of abstract which brings the reader back into the reality that even though they're reading an illustrative book, they are in fact being reminded that this is what is to come, this is life. The depth to meaning behind symbols is expressed from thesis writer, Katrina Albert stating: " ... the meanings attached to symbols are arbitrarily

chosen. A symbol can have a different interpretation across different cultures, and it can also have multiple layers of meaning within the same context" (Katrina F. Abert. 2022. Page 3). Considering this statement, the presence of the heart and the bottle being carried on the protagonist tells many things, one being that the obvious intent from the story that she is bottling up her emotions but also as previously mentioned it could also highlight that grief is something carried around, a feeling that can arise during simple tasks. While some children may be too young to completely relate to the aspect of chores, even something as simple as showing the protagonist sitting down to eat with the symbolism of the loss being present and described as "heavy and awkward" serves as a gentle reminder to the fact this will stay with someone who has experienced loss.

To conclude, the extent of the research conducted here brought forward many of the techniques used into children's picture books and as to why these techniques were successful in their field. Whether some techniques used be intentional or not, both Wolf Erlbruch and Oliver Jeffers used very clever methods to very similar messages of their narratives, both had clearly considered the use of how their illustrations would fit into these storybook formats successfully while still staying in the parameters of children picture books. The use of colour theory played a significant role in the design outcome with Erlbruch creating a very consistently warm colour simplistic environment for the narrative to ease through while Jeffers offers wide range of colours yet applying them when necessary and still leaving room to isolate incidences for the whole illustration to come together. Each book both had very

close similarities however highlighting the parts of which these similarities differ offers a very unique showcase to the very personal work of both of the authors discussed, their style and what they deem important to the flow of their narrative is what differed their works but while highlighting these elements can also offer points to connect their similarities. Features of both of these books carry with them many aspects that could have many theorists statements attached however the statement of adult interference made by Perry Nodelman was a useful fit as it unified many of the points regarding the appropriation of colours, characters and even the narrative when presented with a youthful audience in mind, the directness of the narratives while both being quite direct, it was clear that Erlbruch's approach to this field was more direct and while he used symbolism in his work, the narrative was what pushed the candour of this book while Jeffers book seemingly relied on more of an implication approach with his narrative flowing with the meaning of what was implied between the text and the illustration. This being said, Jeffers book conveyed a realistic relatability that Erlbruch slightly alluded to but could not achieve to that degree due to the use of his duck character.

Reference List

Albert, F. Katrina (2023) Reading Between the Lines: Symbolism and Allegory for Children's Book Illustration [Masters Thesis, Savannah College of Art and Design] Scablibararies.

Available at :

<https://scad.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/SCAD~3~3~5969~15985:Reading-Between-the-Lines--Symbolis> (Assessed: 14 November 2024)

Bettelheim, B (1967) The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales. Thames & Hudson. (Accessed 5 November 2024)

Castro, Psy.D, K. (2024) Shades of emotion: The impact of dark colors on our mood, LinkedIn. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/shades-emotion-impact-dark-colors-our-mood-klarissa-castro-c0m1c> (Accessed: 15 November 2024).

Li, Jiaqi (2023) 'The Use of Colour in Illustration'. Zhangqiu Bilingual School. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375991206_The_Use_of_Colour_in_Illustration. (Accessed 7 November 2024)

Madhusoodanan, S. (2020) The Power of Nothing: Understanding the Concept of Negative Space [B.ARCH dissertation, School of architecture and planning, Thrissur] Academia.edu.
https://www.academia.edu/72456732/The_Power_of_Nothing_Understanding_the_Concept_of_Negative_Space (Accessed 20 November 2024)

Martínez-Caballero, M. et al. (2023) 'Grief in children's story books. A systematic integrative review', Journal of Pediatric Nursing, 69. doi:10.1016/j.pedn.2022.12.012. (Accessed 25 November 2024)

Nguyen, K. (ND) An interview with Shaun Tan, F(r)iction. Available at: <https://frictionlit.org/an-interview-with-shaun-tan/> (Accessed: 13 November 2024).

Nodelman, P. (2008) The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature. Hopkins Press. Baltimore. (Accessed: 5 November 2024)

Reynolds, A. (2024) *Negative space in art: Where absence speaks volumes, Ren creative works*. Available at: <https://adrianreynolds.ie/negative-space-in-art/> (Accessed: 25 November 2024).