

Questioning the Roles and Relationship between Visual and Textual Narratives in Picture Books

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P147425

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Word Count: 5309

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of BA (Hons) University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea

12th December 2018

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Summary of Topic

This dissertation is an investigation into how text correlates with visual imagery in two well-known children's picture books, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak and *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler.

I will investigate the way text and imagery are used in these books, how their use affects the narrative of a book, and how word and image are used together to create an effective picture book.

Introduction

This dissertation is an investigation into two well-known children's picture books: *Where the Wild Things Are* (WTWTA), written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak; and *The Gruffalo*, written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, and questions the relationship between visual and textual narratives in the two books. Before investigating these picture books, I will first clarify what is the definition of a picture book is, and how it differs from a children's book as the two are often confused with one another. I shall be using the definition by Nodelman from their book *Words about pictures: the narrative art of children's picture books*, in which picture books are defined as:

[Books] intended for young children which communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all (Nodelman, 1988, p. 7)

This states that for a book to be a picture book the words must be partnered with the illustrations to form a functioning storyline rather than purely for decorative measure, whereas a children's book does not necessarily need images to tell a story and illustrations can be used in a more decorative way. If the illustrations were removed from a 'children's book' the narrative would still be conveyed accurately and remain the same, unlike a picture book where the images enhance the text and contribute substantially to the narratives.

I have chosen to study children's picture books rather than children's books because I want to explore how visual illustrations work with a text and whether they affect the narrative storyline and information conveyed to the reader. I will also briefly investigate whether or not the narrative of these books would still work if one element were taken away from the story, for example the narrative without imagery and just text.

This dissertation is separated into three sections of investigation and reflection. Chapter One will analyse the relationship between the illustrations and the text by looking at how they work separately and together and why they are co-dependent in producing a structured narrative.

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Chapter Two will look closely at the artwork and illustration mechanics of the two books, the symbolism present, and how the illustrations are structured throughout the narrative.

Finally, Chapter Three will look at the visual and textual style of the two books and compare them on their differences and similarities and whether there is evidence for the influence of *WTWTA* on *The Gruffalo* and whether they are comparable.

In writing this dissertation, my goal is to uncover the foundations of children's picture books, gain an understanding of how illustration and text is used in these books, what literal and illustrative techniques are used to achieve narrative effects, and how word and image are coordinated to stimulate the readers imagination and fill in the gaps left by the characteristically short texts in picture books. What is it about these illustrations that allow a reader to understand a book with so little textual information, even though this is the way that is most conventionally used to extract information from a book as we read information on everything.

Chapter One: Exploring the transformative relationship of word and image: interdependence, juxtaposition and words as substitute for tone

In this chapter, I analyse how words and pictures correlate in each book and discuss each book's individual structure, starting with *WTWTA*. I also touch upon how they compare to each other in this respect.

Where The Wild Things Are

'The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind'. This is the opening sentence of *WTWTA* that you are greeted with in Figure 1, however reading this sentence alone does not give you a lot of detail about the opening

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind



Figure 1 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 8, 9

scene of the story. Despite this text, we know very little about what is happening in the story, where it is set or whom it is about other than a character called Max. We know Max is wearing a wolf suit and is causing mischief, but this could mean anything to the audience. We need more information to begin indulging in the storyline properly. Luckily, you are met with an illustration of a young boy dressed in the wolf suit clambering on a pile of books, building himself a den of blankets and hammering a nail into the wall on the joining page which could be perceived as "making mischief".

This is a clear example of word and image being used co-dependently to convey the author's meaning in the opening of the book. As Nodelman says, the texts in

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picture books are characteristically succinct and lacking in detail and are often dependent upon the accompanying picture in order to convey their specific meaning (Nodelman, 1988, p. 8). This states that one is no use without the other and that they need to be partnered together to create impact in a picture book. This is shown again on the following page in Figure 2 where the sentence from Figure 1 is continued 'The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind' 'and another'. The same principle is applied here, needing the image of Max chasing a dog down the stairs to understand the storyline in more depth.

and another



Figure 2 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 10, 11

This book is cleverly designed in such a way that gives the reader just enough words to build a storyline, but few enough words to compliment the images in a way that gives the illustrations more depth and helps the reader focus (read) and understand the visual information.

As we progress further into the story, another key example of words correlating with imagery is presented when Max arrives at the place where the wild things are. Words are again used to enhance the images as is done throughout many picture books. However, the use here is different than it was previously.

The text reads:

and when he came to the place where the wild things are
they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth
and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws
(Sendak, 1963)

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And when he came to the place where the wild things are
they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth

and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws

Figure 3 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 24, 25

This is quite a lot of information to be given in a textual way in the context of *WTWTA* as it gives the reader an idea of what 'the wild things' might look like, but importantly the images are still there to provide a visual representation of the wild things.

This imagery is also important for another reason as it fills in a loose end from the beginning of the book. In Figure 2 where you see Max running down the stairs chasing his dog, on the wall you can see an illustration of one of the characters seen on this page in a drawing signed by Max which is shown as a means of foreshadowing using imagery about events / characters that appear later on in the story. This is a connection between parts of the narrative that could not have been made using the text alone but have instead been made with the use of imagery and thus unwritten storylines have been created.

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The Gruffalo

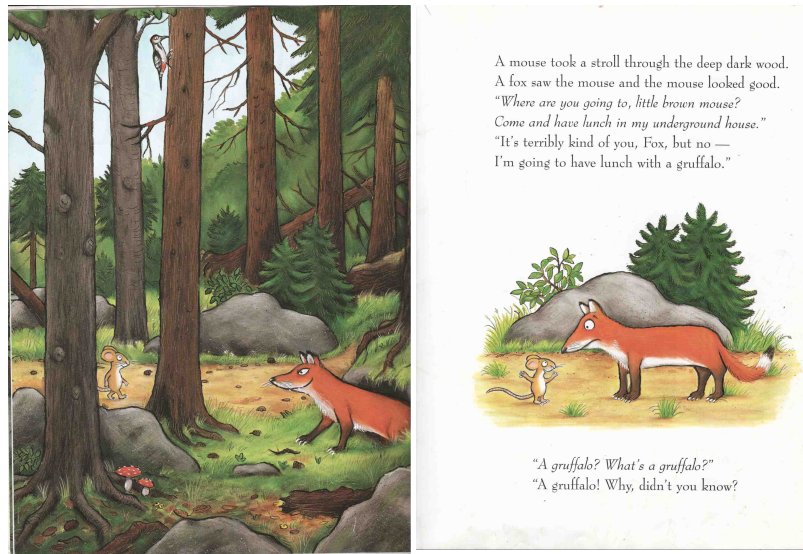


Figure 4 *The Gruffalo*, pages 1, 2

From the first page of *The Gruffalo* (Figure 4), it is immediately clear that the book contains more information and description textually in comparison to *WTWTA*. You are given basic information about the story's narrative through text such as the first character being introduced is a mouse and that the story is set in the woods. There is no obvious information conveyed in the illustration that the reader might not have already imagined from the text as it sums up the setting nicely, unlike with *WTWTA* where images were needed to place the narrative and describe characters. The illustrations here could be seen as more of an enhancement to the story rather than providing key descriptive information as it is more of a visual representation of the information already given in the text.

However, it could also be said that the illustration in Figure 4 is there to soften the story's narrative as the text just on its own could be seen as sinister to a child. The book begins 'A mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood, A fox saw the mouse and the mouse looked good'. Even though this line is written in rhythm in a jovial, soft way, the overall nature of the text may be dark and intimidating to a child as it describes a predator hunting a small animal. However, the illustrations are in complete contrast to this, instead displaying a bright open woodland scene comprised of soft colours and the fox drawn in an almost friendly, cute illustration style. Word and imagery works together here but with completely different meanings as if the words were to be read on their

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own they would come across dark and sinister, but if the illustrations were seen on their own they come across cute and inviting, but when used together here they create a diverse balance.

This shows, like *WTWTA*, one element cannot be used without the other and neither one is more powerful than the other, but it is their combination that captures the narrative in its entirety.

Another way that word and image is used in this picture book is in the way the Gruffalo is introduced in the story. As a reader, you are not given a full description or illustration of *The Gruffalo* straight away but are instead given information incrementally throughout the story every time an animal confronts the mouse. The mouse scares the animals away by telling them three different descriptions of the Gruffalo, with each description being complemented with a soft image of that description. This method of describing three textual indications accompanied with illustrations of *The Gruffalo* is used throughout a majority of the storybook until the end where we meet the Gruffalo but by this point, the reader has already got all the puzzle pieces of what *The Gruffalo* is going to look like before we actually see the whole image. By the narrative using word and image in this way it displays the book as a puzzle, allowing the audience to start piecing together a character before it is introduced and in doing so this engages the audience's attention. This is comparable to how foreshadowing is used in the words and images of *WTWTA* to describe one of the characters before they are properly introduced. Even though the use of foreshadowing is used in a more direct way in *The Gruffalo*, it only shows the audience glimpses of scenes that are introduced later on.

Chapter Two: Exploring the mechanics of illustration

In this chapter, the illustration mechanics in each book will be explored and analysed to provide an understanding of each book's style.

Where the Wild Things Are

WTWTA employs a sophisticated gradual transition between Max's room and the forest. The transition of scenes starts off in Figure 5 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 12, 13 when Max is sent to his room without dinner as shown by a boxed-in illustration of Max in his room angrily facing his door.

his mother called him "WILD THING!"
and Max said "I'LL EAT YOU UP!"
so he was sent to bed without eating anything.



Figure 5 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 12, 13

Although Figure 6 is quite a simple illustration of Max's room, it is the beginning of a clever use of transition in illustration. The text reads 'That very night in Max's room a forest grew', the illustration partnering this text is very similar to the one seen on the previous double page spread but this image is in the process of transformation.

That very night in Max's room a forest grew



Figure 6 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 14, 15

Everything in Max's room has stayed in the same place and the illustration is still very obviously Max's room, however the beginnings of a forest are forming around objects already in place such as the bed posts and door frames having transformed into trees, the ceiling being full of leaves, and the rug on the floor having a grass-like texture. Unlike the previous boxed in illustration, this version shows the illustration leaves the cropping's of the page with the leaves of the trees, making the illustration seem more wild and free rather than boxed in. This transformation also plays tricks on your mind making the room look as if it has been made larger and stretched, although the actual size of the image has changed from the last one, the proportions of the illustrated objects have stayed the same, it is only the aspect of the trees making the room look as if it has more depth that makes the image appear larger then it is.

Not only is the composition and cropping of this illustration changing, there is also a slight movement of colour palette used. It's not instantly noticeable, but the original cool toned colours of the first illustration have been changed to slightly darker earthy tones, which are closer related to a forest setting. Max in this composition has also changed his stance and expression. He has now turned his back to the door and closed his eyes with his chin up, giving off a stubborn impression that he no longer cares he's been sent to bed without dinner.

The ensuing pages in Figure 7 are a continuation of the previous pages as the text here simply reads 'and grew'. This expresses the forest in his room is getting larger and now looks less like a room. This shows how the transformation of illustration following these pages has developed from the previous pages.

and grew—



Figure 7 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 16, 17

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As before, all of Max's furniture is still in the same place and is still there but the outline of his room and possessions are starting to become unnoticeable and are shadows of an old scene transitioning to another. His bed and door are almost completely overgrown by wildlife and his floor has now turned into that of a forest. The use of the leaves of the trees coming out of the page cropping has also grown further in this, and the image has enlarged and is consuming the white border of the page. The colour palette has also shifted again and is gradually getting closer to the pallet of an outside environment instead of a bedroom. Max looks much smugger here, he is still positioned in the same stance but his expression and had motions suggest he his happy about the transition of his room.

Looking at the last pages of transition between scenes in Figure 8, Max is now in a completely different environment to the page before in Figure 5. The forest has taken over the scene and there is no reminiscence of what was once Max's room. As far as the eye can see, there are trees of green and blue surrounded by a midnight sky, which was previously only enclosed in the box of Max's window.

and grew until his ceiling hung with vines
and the walls became the world all around



Figure 8 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 18, 19

The use of illustration mechanics in this section of the narrative has allowed one scene to gradually transform into another in an elegant way with the use of colour cropping and compassion. By doing this, Sendak has allowed the two main settings of the narrative to smoothly transition from one to another and avoid juxtaposition, whilst also providing a visual metaphor for Max moving from reality into his own world of imagination.

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Analysing the book's layout as a whole, it is evident that the structure of *WTWTA* has been very thoughtfully put together in a way that the mechanics of illustration, composition and cropping have all been used to play a part in the story's narrative.

At the beginning as in Figure 1, we are met with a plain white page with a small line of text on the left, complemented by a cropped, boxed-in illustration center-middle on the page surrounded by white space alongside it on the right.

The next page has exactly the same layout as the last except the illustration on the right side has increased in size but still staying central.

This sequence of the illustration increasing in size surrounded by white space continues for another five double-page spreads culminating in Figure 8 when the illustration has absorbed all of the white space when Max reaches the forest.

The illustrations on the following pages are still expanding but are now moving in a different direction to the left and eating away at the white space on the conjoining pages, as it can no longer expand on original page of illustration used in the books layout previously.

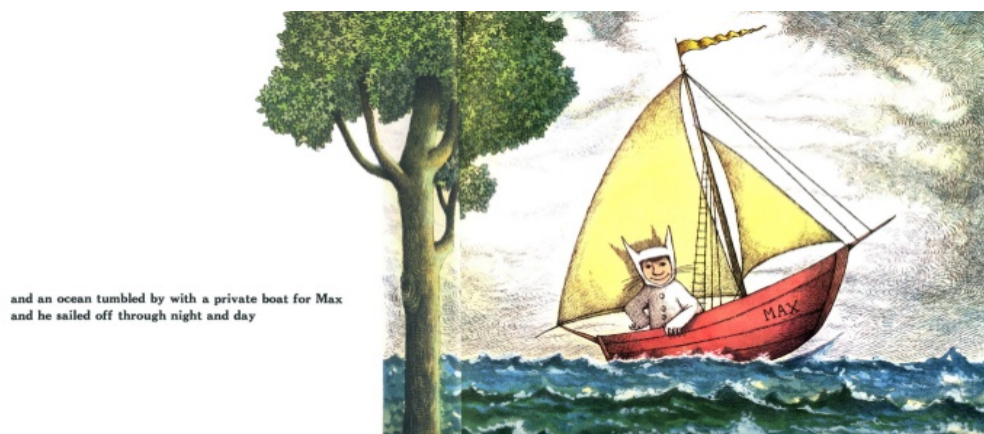


Figure 9 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 20, 21

This then continues on the next page where the illustration is now covering the entirety of the double pages spread but are not touching the bottom third of the page. Finally, we reach the "wild rumpus" where the narrative is in full action.

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Figure 10 *Where The Wild Things Are*, pages 30, 31

The illustration in this scene eats away every ounce of white space on the page so there is no longer any room for text. This “wild rumpus” continues in this style for the next two double-page spreads.

From the first part of the book, there is no obvious pattern of illustration placing as it is just the images expanding as the narrative moves further along. However, the mechanics of the next half of the book are very cleverly formatted as it is just a mirror of that has previously done. Like a reflection the next half works on exactly the same principals as before but in reverse so that from the end of the “wild rumpus” the illustrations decrease in size until the illustration only takes up a single page. This use of formatting and the increasing and decreasing of illustration size throughout the narrative could be perceived to represent the mindset of Max as he endeavors on his adventure to where the wild things are. This is because the illustrations start off small, and “the presence of white space around the pictures as he makes mischief seem to constrain him, hold him in” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 52)

This is suggesting at the beginning of the book he is held into his surroundings, that Max is grounded in reality here and is confined to the cropped illustration on the page. When he is sent to his room he allows his imagination to go wild and this not only shown with his room starts to transform into a different environment but as this happens the bigger his imagination is growing the larger the page is getting as he is releasing himself from the reality around him and this is used to show a visual representation of this process happening.

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The sizes of the illustrations keep on increasing as he delves further into this land and he becomes more absorbed in the new world around him.

According to William Moebius, “[framed], the illustration provides a limited glimpse ‘into’ a world. Unframed, the illustration constitutes a total experience, the view from ‘within’” (Moebius, 1986, pp. 141–158); and this is what is happening at this point of the narrative, the illustrations are losing the structure of the cropped boxes they were once confined to and are not taking over the page, representing a glimpse into Max’s head as he falls into his imagination.

As we reach the ‘wild rumpus’ the text is no longer needed as Max’s imagination is at the height of the narrative, the illustration takes up every aspect of the page before it starts to then descend back into reality as Max journeys home to his room. When he is home from his adventure, his excitement dies down as he returns to reality, which is shown by the illustrations once again growing smaller. Overall, the use of mechanics in illustration in the way of which the illustrations have the structure in a pattern are partnered in so much sync with the textual narrative that it was not done by accident and is therefore, giving more depth about that is happening in the narrative to the reader.

The Gruffalo

Hierarchy is a theme that runs throughout *The Gruffalo*. There is a pattern in the way illustrations are presented, starting from Figure 4, that exposes and then inverts this hierarchy. First, a new character is introduced to the narrative with the intention of intimidating the main character, the mouse. Then, the mouse informs the frightening animal of *The Gruffalo*, and in doing so, flips the role of power so that the mouse has the power to intimidate and the once-threatening animal is now vulnerable.

This pattern extends to the way the illustrations are presented in that every page that has the aforementioned pattern is a full page spread of the predatory animal in its surroundings. Take Figure 4 for instance, the fox is placed in a very open scene where he is seen emerging from an underground den through open trees with a menacing smirk on his face. As these illustrations cover the whole spread of the left side page, it suggests the fox owning a sense of power and confidence over the mouse as it is very open, with the mouse in reverse being seen as very

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small and feeling claustrophobic as he is placed between two trees narrowing his placement in the page down. In her book *Picture This*, Bang demonstrates how the positioning of a character in a similar setting to the mouse in *The Gruffalo* has an impact on the reader and shows vulnerability. A simple line drawing of little red riding hood in the forest is shown in Figure 11, with Bang describing her as 'visually trapped underneath a pointed arch made by two trees [and] her vertical escape is blocked by the arch, [which] makes her situation feel scarier' (Bang, 2000, pp. 22–23).

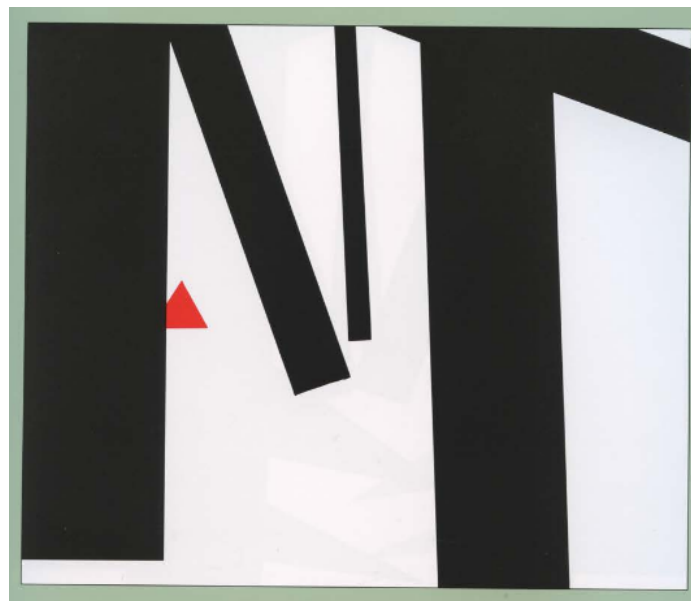


Figure 11 *Picture This*, page 23

This is shown at the beginning of the encounter between the fox and the mouse and conveys the fox's hierarchy over the mouse. The fox then invites the mouse to have lunch with him; indicating that the mouse is his pray and the fox is holding power over him. The 'pray' says no and begins to explain to the hunter that he is having lunch with a Gruffalo.

The illustration underneath this is dramatically smaller than the last. It is still very open as the illustration is not confined to any harsh borders blocking it in, but it shows a close up of just the fox and the mouse. However, the fox here has a very different expression on his face and one that resembles confusion more than menace like its previous expression. This is because the fox does not know what a Gruffalo is yet and does not know whether to be afraid of it or not. Whereas the mouse, although smaller than the fox, is placed very confidently with a smile directly next to the animal who *should* be a threat to him. This

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would explain why the illustration on this page is still open, but smaller, as a border acting as something closing a character in as explained by Bang indicates fear, whereas open illustrations show power and confidence as they hold no confinement (Bang, 2000, p. 22). This positioning of illustration indicates that this point in the encounter is a point of transition and confusion between the animals as the mouse is transitioning to have hierarchy and power over the fox, yet the fox is not fully aware of this yet, leaving this point as a state of level ground between the two creatures.

This changes on the next page when the mouse starts to describe threatening aspects of *The Gruffalo* to the fox.



Figure 12 *The Gruffalo*, pages 3, 4

The illustration of the mouse on the left page of Figure 12 is presented similarly to the one on the previous page (Figure 4) but here he is on his own, presented as though mocking the fox by closing his eyes to describe the Gruffalo and ignoring the fox's fearful presence.

In the final illustration of Figure 12, the fox is positioned in a very claustrophobic way as the fox covers up most of the illustration and is jumping into his den with a frightened look on his face with the mouse smiling behind him. The positioning in the illustration shows the hierarchy of the mouse here as he is bordered up

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and placed in the middle of the page, which is in contrast to the setting that was given to the fox when he was first introduced which looks much smaller and closed in by comparison.

This pattern of cropping, positioning, and composition repeats itself throughout the book every time the mouse meets a creature who has not heard of the Gruffalo and repeatedly establishes and then topples hierarchy between the creatures by displaying the mouse as pray with a majority of the page, then a page without boundaries flipping to the opposite of confinement, to a boxed-in illustration where the predator has become intimidated by the mouse's words.

Chapter Three: Style and influence

This final chapter makes comparisons between the two books with an emphasis on character design, narrative theme and the way the books were created.

From analysing *WTWTA* and *The Gruffalo* it is clear that visually the two books hold some similarities in the way the books are written and in the main characters in the narratives. It is widely thought that *The Gruffalo*, published 35 years after *WTWTA*, was directly inspired by Sendak's book (*"Children's Book Review,"* 1999; Thomson, 2012), sometimes even being referred to as "the Sendak for the early years" (Thomson, 2012).

The most noticeable similarity is in the character design, as the 'monster' in *The Gruffalo* seems to resemble several of the monsters in *WTWTA*.

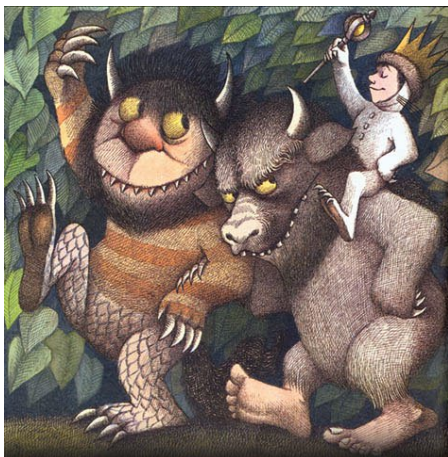


Figure 14 *Where The Wild Things Are*, page 34



Figure 13 *The Gruffalo*

When placing the Gruffalo side by side with characters from *WTWTA*, the comparisons are immediately obvious. In Figure 14, the character on the right with Max on his shoulders is particularly comparable. There are so many comparisons to be made here; from the choices of colouring in the yellow eyes and cool-toned bodies, to the horns on their heads and the hunch on their shoulders, all of which ultimately suggest *The Gruffalo* could have been inspired by the characters in *WTWTA*. There are also visual similarities between *The Gruffalo* and the second character on the left in *WTWTA*. This is shown more in the softness of the smile and again similar horns and yellow eyes.

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They are even described in a very similar way in the books with similar descriptive language being used to present the characters to the reader.

For instance, in *WTWTA* we have:

They roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws (Sendak, 1963)

And in *The Gruffalo* there exists:

He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws, and terrible teeth in his terrible jaws (Donaldson, 1999)

This shows that the main characters of both books are comparable in both a visual and textual way.

There are other minor points of comparison that can be observed as well, such as the overall theme of the two stories in that they both focus on there being wild characters in a forest setting, that are initially unheard of and mysterious at the beginning with more uncovered about them through narrative.

Both narratives also play on the idea of the protagonist in the books appearing small and defenseless at first, being preyed upon by threatening or powerful characters but then exercising control over the hierarchy.

Catherine Thomson supports this in her article looking at Sendak's influence:

Both the Gruffalo and the wild things are remarkably shy, unwise and inherently in need of companionship. The reader feels emotions on behalf of the beasts, which goes to contradict the whole suggestion of monsters being dangerous. (Thomson, 2012)

Finally, *WTWTA* comes across as more singular in terms of the narrative it conveys, whereas in *The Gruffalo* the style of the text and the illustrations can at times seem juxtaposed between darker text and softer images.

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This may be because *WTWTA* is written and illustrated by a single person, Maurice Sendak, which means that the overall creation is most likely the result of Sendak's singular vision. However, *The Gruffalo* was written and illustrated by separate people so communication or collaboration would have been needed between illustrator Axel Scheffler, and author Julia Donaldson to achieve the end result.

While illustrators and authors often develop good relationships in terms of mutual understanding and vision for what should come across in picture books, it is always possible that there is a miscommunication between the two parties and the final creation is a departure from what the author intended. While this is not necessarily true for *The Gruffalo*, it is interesting to think about when comparing the two books.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have studied and questioned the roles and relationships between visual and textual narratives in picture books, using Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are*, and Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *The Gruffalo* as case studies for exploration of this topic. This dissertation was split into three points of interest.

In Chapter One I analysed the relationship between illustrations and text, their structure, and how they work together to convey narrative. I investigated word and image correlation by analyzing the information given by the images and text separately and contrasting them and in doing so I was able to conclude, that word and image are very closely related in children's picture books as one had no sense of clear narrative without the other.

In Chapter Two I looked closely at the artwork and illustration mechanics of the two books and explored techniques such as composition, style and cropping. I analyzed how scenes transitioned from one to another in *WTWTA* and *The Gruffalo* by breaking down each frame in the transition and surveying what exactly had changed each time which allowed me to observe how the mechanics of illustrations can give a book's narrative direction, and how the use of cropping, style and composition techniques can provide even more depth and direction to this narrative.

Finally in Chapter Three, I compared the two books and their visual and textual styles and use of narrative and looked at the influence *WTWTA* seemed to have on *The Gruffalo* as it was apparent how similar the two books are in some respects and that they share similar qualities in regards to style, text and illustration mechanics.

From the research undertaken, and through analysis of each picture book, we can see that word and image both play important roles in conveying narrative in children's picture books, but the two components can be emphasised in different ways to achieve slightly different narrative storytelling. In *WTWTA*, it would seem that most of the narrative information in the book lies in its illustrations and that words are mostly used complementarily to add extra details and form a complete narrative. If a single element of either the text or illustrations from

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WTWTA were presented on its own, it would render the narrative illegible to the reader as the text in particular could not have formed a substantial narrative on its own as there is too little of it, and even the illustrations would not have formed an easy-to-follow narrative by themselves.

Although *The Gruffalo* places more emphasis on the text for conveying narrative and is able to present a more substantial narrative through text alone, it is similar in that its narrative would too be illegible without the complementing illustrations.

In conclusion, these two books illustrate how word and image are co-dependent in presenting narrative in children's picture books and demonstrate their relative roles, importance, and how they may complement each other to provide further detail and context to ultimately yield an effective children's picture book.

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