Picture Books and Illustrations in the Anglo-Saxon Literature for the Young

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"And what is the use of a book, thought Alice,
without pictures or conversations in it?"

(*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll)

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1. Picture books

Picture books are commonly assumed to be the province of the very young or pre-literate child – a simple form, below the radar of any serious critical notice. However, they can be seen as children literature's one genuinely original contribution to literature in general; they are a polyphonic form that embodies many codes, styles, textual devices and intertextual references, and which frequently push the boundaries of convention, states Peter Hunt, an authoritative voice in the field of children books and editor of an *Anthology of children literature*, of a *Companion to children literature* and of several other volumes in the field of children's literature (Hunt 2000: 11).

The aim of this article is to exploit an interpretation of the graphic form in the children's literature, of the relation between the text and the pictures from a semiotic, multimodal perspective. Multimodality is the combination of semiotic modes that may include spoken and written language, static or moving images and even music. Each of them helps the construction of meaning. This article tries to underline how the verbal and visual modalities present in children's literature contribute to each other's meaning and make the potential of combining verbal and non-verbal language in picture books manifest.

Picture books play an important role in children's literature and in children's development. As early as the seventeenth century, John Locke, unlike the Cartesian philosophers, declared that knowledge must be procured through experience. He referred to this in his works regarding children's education – the entire point of educating a child was, in his perspective, to use children's natural curiosity in order to encourage an exemplary behaviour. He recommended in his *Essays* the out loud

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reading of books to children, particularly of books with pictures. Locke even created some pictures of his own for the *Aesop's Fables*, which he found especially suitable for the young minds. "Contrivances might be made to teach children to read; whilst they thought they were only playing" (Locke 1996: 4).

The general understanding is that picture books are only for the children, since this has been the case for a long time. In Perry Nodelman's words, the pictures are most straightforward and easiest to understand by the young. The young readers need this experience of the "picture book" – basically a combination of short texts and visual imagery. Nodelman, however, questions this "assumption that pictures communicate more naturally and more directly than words, and thus help young readers make sense of the texts they accompany" (Nodelman 1999: 130). "Are pictures so readily understood? And are picture books really so straightforward?" (Nodelman 1999: 131). In his essay on picture books, he discusses them in semiotic terms, using semiotics as a most valuable tool in understanding such publications and their relevance for the young readership. Nodelman argues that, in fact, we may take for granted the fact that children readily make sense of picture books and he goes on to analyze the nature of linguistic representations, the symbolism of the words, the arbitrary sounds or written marks

> which stand for something they do not resemble…if I didn't know that what I'm actually looking at – marks on a page – represented something else, I would see nothing in the picture but meaningless patches of colour (Nodelman 1999: 130).

2. The demands of the illustration

This analysis may be undergone for any picture book available and Nodelman's study is valuable in this respect as it points out what adults take for granted and consider obvious regarding the wondrous world of the childhood. In fact, children must have a pre-existing knowledge of actual objects to understand what features of representation are being shown in an illustration, be it a color or a represented object. These pictorial conventions are learnt by children in time – definitely a newly born will not understand the image as a six-year old. Visualizing a picture in a book also implies having a perspective, a thing taught in the Arts Schools, for instance, but also acquired in time by the young as a natural process. Understanding that the two-dimension illustration refers to a three dimensional reality or that the size of the picture is a representation of the actual, larger size, is another fact to be taken into consideration. In fact, there are a number of prejudices to be internalized by children in order to make sense of pictures, even those designed for them especially.

> In order to make sense of this apparently straightforward picture, then, I must have knowledge of differing styles and their differing purposes, and perform the complex operation of interpreting different parts of the pictures in different ways (Nodelman 1999: 130).

One must not forget, however, the debate regarding the enjoyment a picture might produce to the viewer and that this involves an emotional pleasure, not a cerebral one, an admiration of the colour, lines or surface quality of a picture. Ruskin, for example, stated as far as 1857 that for adults to be able to discover the

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beauty of a picture the way a child does, they need to regain an "innocence of the eye" he described as "childish" (Herbert 1964: 2).

What Ruskin means, explains Nodelman, is that children, not possessing the "supposedly counterproductive sophistication that leads adults to view pictures only in terms of their potential to convey information" see pictures with candid eyes and enjoy at a maximum the beauty of the illustration as such (Nodelman 1999: 130). For a person that habitually gets in touch with children, like an educator or a care-giver, this is a fact that soon becomes evident when using images: the unspoiled, unaltered joy of admiring the respective illustration in the case of children.

3. Perception of the illustrations

However, Mitchell argues that the "pure" visual perception, unconstrained by preoccupations with function, use and labels is not at all the perquisite of children, nor the natural way to see things, but it rather belongs to the trained eye. The "innocent eye" is a metaphor for a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision (Mitchell 1986: 118). These conventions of perception go as far as the reading itself of the books: the front of the book represents the covers and the back of it represent the end, the bound is on the left and the pages go in a precise order while the letters go from left to the right. The fact this is a mere convention lays in the fact that Arabic or Japanese or Israeli books do not abide by the same rules at all, as Nodelman notes (Nodelman 1999: 128–139). In his own words, picture books for children convey the apparently simple pleasure by a surprising array of complex means, and

> communicate only within a network of conventions and assumptions, about visual and verbal representations and about the real objects they represent. Picture books in general, and all their various components, are what semioticians call 'signs' – in Umberto Eco's words, something [which] stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity (Nodelman 1999: 128–139).

Regarding picture books, Johnson, Sickels and Sayers discuss the importance of colour and lines in children's picture books. The mystery of colour is one to which children respond clearer than an adult, due to their sensitivity and candor, as mentioned above. The eyes of the children perceive things in a fresh way, as they have been less exposed to various things than adults; this is a fact of evidence. However, argue the authors, colour is not enough at all (Johnson, Sickels and Sayers 1959: 67–71). Not everything colourful is appropriate for children, nor do children like whatever is full of colour. In fact, the art of the picture book implies many other things, equally important. These are, obviously, the text itself in the case of the picture books with text but also the harmonious connection between the pictures and the text, the lines, the spatial and colour balance and last but not least, the originality of the illustrator and his or her own style.

The children's picture book is a volume largely dependent on its pictorial quality as the medium for its message on the whole. As children can understand pictures and their meaning long before they can read, the picture book represents perhaps the earliest experience of books available, a voyage into the realm of the imaginary and "a beginning awareness of drama, characterization and moods of joy

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or sorrow" (Johnson, Sickels and Sayers 1959: 67–71). In other words, the picture book is not an introduction to literature, but a type of literature in its own right. It is a medium to be perceived in terms of pictorial art and in terms of the art of writing.

4. The relationship between the text and its illustration

As Nodelman also observed, the relationship between the pictures and the text may be a very subtle one. Ideally, the words of the story are extended and enhanced by the pictures; the pictures, on the other hand, may carry their own meaning in relation with the story or they may even explain or enhance it. The child reader should be able to get the gist of a picture-book only from the pictures themselves. In fact, in education, for example, such books are perhaps the most useful ones, because meaning can be built from the visual representation or the other way around. The art of story-telling can also make use of such a book by eliciting the story from the children themselves, merely based on the picture pages, thus turning the young audience into performers.

This "happy marriage" of text and pictures is often encountered in the classic picture books – so much so that one is hardly aware of the transition of the eye from the picture to the text. This interplay between the written word and the artist's image may be quite subtle and close-knit. Perhaps in this resides the art of the illustrator: to clearly understand and represent, sometimes embellish even, the meaning carried by the text. A true harmony between the minds of the writer and the illustrator. Sometimes an author will work with the same illustrator for many years, if not for the entirety of his or her books. Other times, the writer will be an illustrator as well, such as in the case of the famous Dr. Seuss, whose zany verses are only matched by his unconventional drawings. In fact, in the case of the very young learners, picture books will contain very little, if any text at all. In this case, it resides entirely with the illustrator to convey the meaning and the picture book may become an object in itself. The same goes for books in a foreign language, for example. A child should be able to understand a well-made picture book in a foreign language only by using its imagery. Books by foreign artists, argue Johnson, Sickels and Sayers,

> should be given equal consideration by those who choose books for children, for a child's first introduction to other climes, customs, costumes and landscapes may well come from familiarity with foreign picture books. The imagination stretches and grows by association with the concepts, style and vision of artists bred in an atmosphere different than that of the child (Johnson, Sickels and Sayers 1959: 67–71).

Another aspect mentioned by Johnson, Sickels and Sayers is that of the line: "the gift of line" which "echoes and reaffirms every turn" of the artist's mind, "a line that can be clear, nervous…exact and delicate or robust and vigorous" as they call it (Johnson, Sickels and Sayers 1959: 67–71).

5. Influential illustrators

Perhaps the genius of the famous British illustrator Randolph Caldecott who lived and worked in the nineteenth century was what that established the importance of this lineal quality in picture books. Line is basically the outline of forms but sometimes it can only be indicated. In the case of painters, for example, line is not

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something drawn beforehand and then filled with color, but it can emerge from the play of light and nuances. Beatrix Potter, for example, yet another celebrated British children's author and illustrator, used this pictorial technique, creating beautiful pictures precisely by this play of colour and light.

Beatrix Potter is considered a genius of the nursery rhymes because she was a master dramatist as well as an artist of the illustration. Her little stories, of which perhaps the rabbit ones are the most famous, are models of structure and feeling, at the same time. She managed to create suspense, to present moral issues, to show the inevitability of a character. The endearing Peter Rabbit, for example, is greedy and selfish and he suffers sad consequences – his adventures teach children, for generations now, to be different and better than he was. Potter managed to convey this message to the youngest of the children in the most pleasant of books. This shows the extent of her talent and the reason her books are so appreciated worldwide. As the official site dedicated to her states on the front page:

> Today, more than two million Beatrix Potter books are sold across the world every year – four books every minute. The charming stories have a timeless quality, passed down from generation to generation and discovered anew by many more readers each year. Her books, her art… and her indomitable spirit are all part of her enormous legacy that continues to this day (https://beatrixpottersociety.org.uk/about-beatrix/).

Today, the picture book has greatly changed from the times of Caldecott or Potter. New methods of reproducing picture and colour have increased the artist's range, making demands on the illustrators to get familiar with the technicalities of the graphic arts and even with the use of computers in the art of the illustration. The makers of picture books today function in a rapidly changing world, with fluctuating trends in art, with new social concepts, under the vast influences of advertising and commercial art. In addition, mass production does not always favour uniqueness, but rather encourages a conforming mediocrity. Books are expected to look alike and this is not a fortunate situation. However, the young readers still benefit from the endless forms of varieties, of patterns and ultimately of authors' originality of style. There are still a few brilliant illustrators nowadays. Luckily, the children of today are versatile and respond to a great variety of illustrations, ranging from the classic simplicity of Jean Charlot to the intricate fabrication of Dr. Seuss amazing absurdities, for example.

6. Changes of modern times

Seth Lerer raises an important and complex question about the relation between the text and picture in the children's books. "Do pictures truly illustrate their texts? That is, do they present the world of the imaginative fiction or the poem genuinely, giving line and form to fantasy?" (Lerer 2005: 337). This is not a new question and critics have long been debating it, particularly with the challenge of the twentieth-century children's book illustration: does the picture illustrate the reality at all?

> Part of the wit and irony of the celebrated illustrator Maurice Sendak, for example, lies in his ability to create visual narratives that undermine the expectations of mimetic illustration. The cutouts of Eric Carle evoke the segmentation of the insect

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> world brilliantly in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, but they also evoke the segmentation of pictorial representation itself. In Lane Smith's illustrations to Jon Scieszka's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* we see something of a modern (even postmodern) Hieronymus Bosch (Lerer 2005: 338).

As Jack Zipes observes in his comprehensive *Norton Anthology of Children literature*, what we are dealing with is a collage medium that is "deliberately ironic" and "assumes intertextual skills" with characters which "try to break the bounds of the book" (Zipes 2005: 37). In the postmodern age of the children's books, the illustrations suffered changes, too. They are no longer candid and emotionally mimetic, but rather ironic and distant. This can also be noticed in the way the characters break the bounds of the book itself into the pop-up book.

The tradition of the pop-up book derives from the early art of the medieval manuscript and early printed texts which sometimes contained revolving discs or little folded papers with geometric shapes to illustrate mathematics, anatomy, and even mystical codes. In the late eighteenth century, the publisher Robert Sayer invented and sold what he called the *metamorphoses books*. Each book was in fact a single sheet, folded into four sections which, once opened, revealed hidden pictures while reading. This type of book is still available today to children and it is as enjoyable as Sayer's must have been at the time. By the early nineteenth century, flaps were appearing, and by the mid-nineteenth century, *movable books* appeared, the type of books that had their pictures pop up with each turned page, very much like the pop-up books of today. Each of these books represents a beautiful testimony to the craft that created it. The 1860s brought the invention of the pop-up book as such, which originated from and was widely produced in Germany. Pop-up books popularized children's books as toys or playthings and represented a big step forward for the children's literary market. Because *Alice in Wonderland* is in the public domain now, for example, a lot of artists, including Robert Sabuda, one the best pop-up artists in the United States today, have published different versions of it.

The history of the children's literature is a history of image as well as word. One cannot and should not be separated from another. They may be equally beautiful and appealing to children. They are also very useful in educating the young. The visual imagery of children's literature, in whatever form would come, is a great teacher in itself and everyone can only benefit from it. In fact, what would be the world of children without photographs, pictures, illustrations, drawings and their moving alternative – the video image? It would probably be a much poorer one. In conclusion, children's literature is intricately connected to children's illustrations and both benefit the young readership to a great extent. One can only hope the constantly ongoing changes in today's book and illustration market will be as valuable as they are rapid.

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https://beatrixpottersociety.org.uk/about-beatrix/

Abstract

Children's literature has always been accompanied by illustrations and there is a close relationship between the two. Furthermore, the books for the very young contain very little text and a lot of imagery, destined to help the children get in touch with the book itself. However, there are challenges that one might not always envisage and the children must also adapt to the ever-changing world of the children's literature and children's illustrations. This article aims at underlining some of these challenges and to offer valuable insight from renowned authors in the field.

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