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ENG 213 Children's Literature

Critical Paper

Analyzing *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Smoky Night*

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Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Eve Bunting and David Diaz's *Smoky Night* both provide readers with insight into some of the difficult emotions that young children grapple with. These two picture books do this in very different ways, yet both books are effective in helping young readers learn about being placed in challenging circumstances and dealing with difficult, big emotions. Sendak and Diaz use different techniques for their illustrations, each enhancing their respective stories in a unique way and each bringing focus to the stories' main characters' emotions. When reading and looking at these two stories, one question we can ask is "In what specific ways do *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Smoky Night* help readers explore difficult emotions such as anger or fear?"

*Where the Wild Things Are* was both written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak. In this book, Sendak tells the story of a mischievous young boy named Max, who gets into trouble with his mother, is called a "Wild Thing," and is sent to his room with no dinner. Feeling extremely frustrated and angry with his mother, Max imagines taking a trip to a world full of scary "Wild Things." In his imaginary world, Max learned that he could take control over the "Wild Things," which I believe could be seen as a metaphor for his big, scary, wild emotions. Towards the end of the book, we see Max realize that he would rather be surrounded by people who love him (his

mother for example) and we see him step out of his imaginary world and go back to his room, where he finds his dinner ready for him to eat, “and it was still hot” (Sendak). This story invites readers along on Max’s journey to his imaginary world and provides them with a relatable example of how they may deal with feeling frustrated, angry, or scared by using their imaginations.

*Smoky Night* was written by Eve Bunting and illustrated by David Diaz. Like Sendak, Eve Bunting tells the story of a young boy (named Daniel) who is dealing with challenging emotions. In Bunting’s book however, the scary places the main character finds himself in are real, not imaginary. In this story, the main character is first a witness of a riot on the street he lives on and then has to deal with a fire in his apartment building as a result of the riot (along with losing his cat in the process). Readers watch as Daniel learns about people who are different from him and wrestles with learning about both his own emotions and the emotions and actions of other people. This story allows readers to watch as Daniel processes his emotions out loud and learns about the world around him.

While both books have a focus on emotions, the two books approach the issue of their main character’s emotions quite differently. While Maurice Sendak uses metaphorical language, along with relying heavily on his illustrations (for example, the “Wild Things” as his emotions) in *Where the Wild Things Are* to express his character’s difficult emotions, Eve Bunting broaches the issue differently in her story. Bunting directly acknowledges her character’s emotions in the text of *Smoky Night*, having her character use descriptive feeling words to tell about how he is feeling about the situations he is in. An example of this occurs when Daniel states, “I’m crying because I’m not sure Jasmine [his cat] is all that smart.” In this moment, readers can tell from the text that Daniel is upset, and they can also understand exactly why he is upset. We see other

examples of this when Daniel mentions that he is hiding behind his mother during the riot, or hiding under the blanket when he is overwhelmed by all of the commotion at the shelter after the fire.

As is mentioned above, another way in which these two books help children to explore difficult emotions and learn how to cope with them is that both books express the idea that children can turn to the trusted adults in their lives (in these books, the character's mothers) when in distress. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, we see Max desire to leave his imaginary world in order to return home to be comforted by his mother. In *Smoky Night*, we see Daniel use his mother to help him feel less scared and to help him regulate his emotions in multiple places throughout the story. This idea that trusted adults can help young children deal with difficult emotions is an important one that is demonstrated in both Sendak and Bunting and Diaz's works.

In his book, *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction*, David Russell provides an in-depth description of the picture book genre, stating, "The modern-day picture book represents a collaboration of both storytelling and visual art, in which the text and illustrations share equally in the reading experience" (141). Both *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Smoky Night* exist within this genre of picture books. Russell also states in his text, ". . . a gifted illustrator can convey both meaning and emotion with just a few lines and a splash of color" (119). Sendak and Diaz both fit this description of gifted illustrators, whose works elicit powerful emotional responses from readers. However, the ways in which they do this are very different. For example, the relationship between the text and the illustrations vary greatly between the two books and the two books also differ greatly in the styles of illustrations that are used.

Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* demonstrates to its readers a complementary relationship between the text and the illustrations. The illustrations serve to bring the readers

deeper into the story, to provide them with details that the text purposefully evades. A well-known example of this is in the beginning of the book when Sendak writes, “The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another,” but uses the illustrations to depict the actual mischief Max caused, instead of referring to it in the text. I believe that this complementary relationship between the text and the illustrations also serves to help young children explore the emotions that Max goes through, which helps them to explore and understand their own emotions. Typically, very young children are not looking at the text in a story when they are being read to, but instead they are looking intently at the illustrations as they hear the story, taking the pictures in and analyzing them. As I previously mentioned, Sendak uses metaphors to describe Max’s emotions in the text, but in the illustrations they are plain to see. Readers (or listeners) can tell when Max is feeling angry, happy, mischievous, frightened, sad, and content. Sendak does a powerful job of making the emotions of Max accessible for readers through his illustrations.

In addition to creating a powerful relationship between his text and his illustrations, Sendak also uses other aspects of illustrations to allow his readers to see Max’s emotions and in turn explore their own emotions. He plays with the design of his book, using different amounts of blank space to convey Max’s emotions. (Russell 128-129) This is exemplified in the beginning of the story when the pictures are only on one page and are small, perhaps suggesting Max’s loneliness in the beginning of the story, and then as his feelings and imagination grow, so do the illustrations. At the end of the story we see the pictures gradually take up less space again, perhaps suggesting to readers that Max is gaining control of his emotions. Sendak also makes use of texture to bring his characters to life, making them seem real and relatable to his readers. Sendak’s illustrations in this book are of the surrealist style. Russel states, “A surrealist draws

with realistic details - sometimes almost photographically realistic - but the subject matter is entirely unrealistic” (135). Sendak definitely embodies that definition in his illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are*, allowing readers to truly envision the “Wild Things.”

Eve Bunting and David Diaz’s *Smoky Night* also allows for readers to explore their emotions, but in a very different way. First of all, the relationship between the text and the illustrations in *Smoky Night* is a consistent one, meaning that the text describes the illustrations, and the illustrations provide readers with a visual depiction of the words they are reading. In this story, readers hear Daniel (the main character) explain what is going on around him and they can look at the illustrations for visual confirmation of these. While Sendak’s story allows readers to infer how Max is feeling and compare their inferences to the illustrations for clarification, Bunting and Diaz’s story provides readers with feeling words and visual representations of those feelings. By doing this, Bunting and Diaz have created a story that allows readers to understand what it looks like to go through emotions such as anger or fear.

Diaz’s illustrations in *Smoky Night* help readers to explore difficult emotions in other ways as well. To start, his illustrations are extremely unique, as he uses a combination of collage art and acrylic paintings to illustrate the story. Diaz’s paintings are done in an expressionist style, which uses, “distorted, misshapen figures, unusual perspectives, and colors that establish mood rather than depict reality” (Russell 135). The depictions of the people in Diaz’s illustrations follow this pattern of being distorted or misshapen, and he uses bright colors that go along with the mood and intensity of the story. One example of how Diaz uses shapes and colors in the collage portion of the illustration to support the theme of the painting is when Daniel is asking the firefighter about his missing cat. The collage art on this spread utilizes red triangles, yellow paint, and a smoky haze to represent the fire. Russell states about collage art, “The trick is to

combine the various parts into a harmonious whole” (133). Diaz has done this beautifully in *Smoky Night*, creating illustrations that truly allow young readers to learn about difficult emotions and see them and relate to them.

One of the most important ideas that has been presented to us all semester that is present in both the work of Maurice Sendak and the work of Eve Bunting and David Diaz is the idea that children need to be able to see themselves, their circumstances, and their emotions represented in the books they hear and read. Nina Bawden gave us this idea in her article entitled “Emotional Realism in Books for Young People” when she stated, “If a children’s writer presents his characters honestly and is truthful about their thoughts and their feelings, he is giving his readers ‘a means to gain a hold on fate’ by showing them that they can trust their thoughts and their feelings, that they can have faith in themselves” (33). Neither Sendak nor Bunting and Diaz shy away from presenting characters that have realistic thoughts and feelings. By doing this, these authors and illustrators have created stories that can assist young children in exploring their difficult emotions, such as anger or fear, as they will have seen not only the emotions, but also coping mechanisms to deal with these emotions modeled in the stories that are available to them.

Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and Eve Bunting and David Diaz’s *Smoky Night* are both wonderful examples of children’s picture books that can be used to help children explore difficult emotions such as anger or fear. Sendak’s story uses surrealistic illustrations and a complementary relationship between his text and his illustrations to help children see how Max uses his imagination to deal with his big, wild emotions. Bunting and Diaz’s story uses expressionist illustrations and a consistent relationship between the text and illustrations to present a story of big emotions that provides children with an example of a child recognizing and

naming their big emotions. Both books utilize specific word choices, situations, and illustrations that help young children explore difficult emotions such as anger or fear.

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