

The Importance of Illustrations in the Reception of Literary Works in Primary Education. Examples from Contemporary Children's Literature

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Abstract:

This paper explores the vital role of illustrations in the reception and understanding of literary works within primary education, focusing on examples from contemporary children's literature. In early education, illustrations serve as more than decorative elements; they act as key pedagogical tools that support reading comprehension, foster imagination, and enhance emotional engagement. By offering visual representations of characters, settings, and events, illustrations help bridge the gap between textual content and young readers' cognitive development. Drawing on modern children's literature, the study highlights how illustrations aid in the interpretation of stories, facilitate the retention of information, and stimulate critical thinking skills. The analysis also emphasizes the importance of integrating visual literacy into primary education curricula to optimize the overall learning experience for young readers.

Keywords: children, literature, creativity, education, illustrations

1. The Psychological, Emotional, and Cognitive Dimensions of Illustrations in Children's Literature

Considering that both fantasy literature and children's literature have been more often associated with the domains of paraliterature/subliterature, the combination of these two categories would constitute, for some researchers, the ludicrous zone of world literature. Starting from this premise, Mihaela Cernăuți-Gorodețchi dismantles it, observing that:

as can be demonstrated through applied analysis of children's texts, their apparent simplicity can conceal: (unforeseen) depths; pessimistic dimensions of the displayed optimism; dangerously (and very pleasantly) counterproductive suggestions with regard to the apparent message, which they thus undermine. Such texts, though easily received, without effort, are not exhausted after a first reading; they continue to construct meaning even after completion/when the reading is resumed (Cernăuți-Gorodețchi, 2007: 38).

Although children's literature indeed has a suite of defining features, recognized and established by the main critics in the field (McDowell, Peter Hunt, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Perry Nodelman), among which are "the

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reduced dimensions of the texts; simple, unsophisticated language; a preference for action and dialogue (over description and introspection); the logical succession of events” (Cernăuți-Gorodețchi, 2007: 37), placing this type of literature within the sphere of light culture provokes strong reactions even in the Western space: “insisting that children’s literature is a genre characterized by recurrent traits is damaging to the field, obscuring rather than advancing our knowledge of this richly heterogeneous group of texts” (Gubar, 2011: 210). Beyond its already known benefits, children’s literature has an additional advantage over mainstream literature: impactful visual suggestion. From the cover (Figure 1), font, and color scheme, to the beautiful illustrations inside the books (Figure 2), the visual elements not only complement the reading but also offer a therapeutic role: “children’s literature should be used to teach character education because picture books attract children, communicate ideas [...] Bibliotherapy, or therapeutic reading, can help students cope with emotions and problems they are facing” (Tyra, 2012: 5).

Fig. 1. Cover of *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, Gallimard Publishing, Paris, 2001



Fig. 2. Illustration from *Onux's Rescue* by Ioana Nicolaie, Arthur Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022



By offering readers, both young and old, the opportunity to identify with the emotions of beloved characters, children’s literature “provides a concrete format through which the essence of moral conflict and the appropriateness of moral behavior can be conveyed in an emotionally compelling and cognitively assimilable fashion” (Tetenbaum, Pearson, 1989: 382). Thus, characters, regardless of the nature of the texts they belong to, become the voices of children who, due to emotional, psychological, or physical barriers, cannot express their fears, thoughts, or desires: “The child, struggling to attain meaning and to acquire the moral percepts of his/her culture, identifies with

fictional characters, thereby vicariously working through his/her own conflicts” (Tetenbaum, Pearson, 1989: 382).

If illustrations, as previously mentioned, “operate as a complex system of signifiers conveying information about who characters are and what they do” (Nodelman, 2008: 11), then the characters also play the role of synthesizing the worlds they inhabit. For them to appear credible and trustworthy, it is not necessary – although this is the public’s common perception, as noted by Cătălin Sturza – to rely solely on “wizards, dragons, and knights, thrown into an undefined medieval era, in no man’s land, on another planet, or in another reality” (Sturza, 2019: 17). Rather, they must fully adhere to the codes of the societies they represent. In other words, until they exit the stage of the text, characters must respect the conventions of their construction, not betray their own nature, and, most importantly, contribute to the enrichment of the worlds they belong to.

From a psychological standpoint, illustrations can enhance comprehension and memory retention. According to Nikolajeva and Scott (2006), visual elements in picture books provide a “dual narrative” that operates on both cognitive and emotional levels, helping children to construct meaning by relating textual content to visual representations. This duality facilitates what Jerome Bruner calls “scaffolding”, where illustrations act as cognitive aids, supporting the child’s transition from concrete to abstract thinking, which is essential during the early stages of development.

Furthermore, illustrations can also provide emotional support, acting as conduits for empathy and emotional resonance. As scholars like Maria Nikolajeva have suggested images in children’s books allow for an “emotional immersion” into the narrative, helping children process complex emotions by visually identifying with the experiences of characters (Nikolajeva, 2013). This visual empathy is crucial in fostering emotional intelligence and moral development, as children vicariously experience the trials and triumphs of the illustrated characters. Additionally, the role of illustrations in reducing anxiety and facilitating emotional regulation cannot be understated. Judith Graham (1990) notes that the combination of visual and textual elements can help children confront difficult emotions or experiences in a safe, manageable way. Picture books often use illustrations to mediate and soften challenging themes, providing children with a sense of security and control over the narrative world, which, in turn, helps them navigate their real-world emotions.

In terms of aesthetic appreciation and imagination, illustrations in primary education offer children the opportunity to visualize alternative realities, fantastical worlds, or historical settings, thus expanding their creative horizons. Judith Graham (1990) notes that pictures stimulate the imagination by providing rich, visualized contexts that complement and enhance the written narrative. This interaction between text and image fosters a more immersive reading experience, as children use illustrations

to construct mental images and understand abstract concepts that may not be immediately clear from the words alone.

The connection between cognitive development in primary school children and the visual support provided by illustrations in children's books is crucial for both the learning process and the formation of reading comprehension skills. At this developmental stage, children are building foundational cognitive abilities, and illustrations play a vital role in enhancing understanding and information retention.

According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children in primary school are in the concrete operational stage, during which their thinking is less abstract and more grounded in direct, tangible experiences. Illustrations offer a visual scaffold that helps children construct meaning by linking images to the significance of the words. This association allows children to process and integrate new information more effectively and in a more accessible and concrete manner (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006).

Furthermore, illustrations foster inferential thinking and predictive skills, encouraging children to discover key details from the images and anticipate plot developments or explain character behaviors. This visual support enhances deductive reasoning and problem-solving skills. Illustrations also contribute to vocabulary development and literacy skills, especially for students who struggle with reading or are in the early stages of learning to read. By providing visual contexts, illustrations help decode words and understand their meaning, reducing the cognitive load of reading solely through text.

On an emotional level, illustrations support the development of empathy and social understanding by vividly portraying characters' emotional expressions and the situations they face. As Perry Nodelman (1988) points out, images in children's literature often carry a significant portion of the narrative, and interpreting these images helps children grasp and relate to the emotional and social dynamics of the story.

2. An Analytical Perspective on Illustrations in Contemporary Children's Literature

In a previous study¹, I discussed the importance of integrating children's literature into teaching activities, highlighting several possibilities for activating the teaching scenario in *Romanian Language and Literature* classes. Contemporary children's literature is rich in

¹ Smărăndița-Elena Costin, *Epistolary Inserts in Children's Literature. Suggestions of (Extra)Curricular Practices for the Three Cycles Of Pre-University Study*, in Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (ed.), *New Perspectives on Multiculturalism: Literature and Dialogue*, Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu-Mureș, 2023, ISBN: 978-606-93590-3-7, <https://asociatia-alpha.ro/ldmd/11-2023/LDMD-11%20Comm%20b.pdf>.

thematic content, offering young readers numerous alternatives in terms of characters, contexts, and themes, depending on their preferences. In the following sections, we will analyze some illustrations from texts in this category, which we consider relevant and suitable for the age group corresponding to the primary cycle.

We will consider three of Ioana Nicolaie's books – *Vertijia*, *Ferbonia*, and *The Rescue of Onux* – alongside two of Grace Lin's works, *The Old Man in the Moon* and *When the Sea Turned to Silver*.

In examining the illustrations within Ioana Nicolaie's literary works – specifically *Vertijia*, *Ferbonia* and *The Rescue of Onux* (Nicolaie, 2015, 2018, 2022) – one can discern their integral role in enhancing narrative engagement for fourth-grade readers. These illustrations serve not merely as embellishments; they are pivotal in conveying complex emotions and themes that resonate with young audiences.

In *Vertijia*, the vibrant color palette and dynamic swirling shapes are meticulously crafted to reflect the protagonist's emotional landscape. The spirals and circles visually articulate the protagonist's internal struggles, symbolizing the multifaceted nature of personal growth amidst adversity. The expressive features of the character, particularly her wide-eyed wonder, facilitate a deeper empathetic connection, enabling readers to grasp her emotional journey more profoundly.

Conversely, *Ferbonia* showcases softer illustrations that evoke enchanting landscapes and whimsical creatures, thereby fostering an atmosphere of curiosity and exploration. This visual representation underscores the narrative's ecological themes, illustrating the significance of environmental stewardship and collaborative efforts. The synergy between the visual elements and textual content invites readers to immerse themselves fully in the storyline, enhancing their imaginative engagement and comprehension of underlying moral lessons. Additionally, the illustrations can serve as discussion prompts, allowing teachers to engage students in conversations about the themes presented in the book. By analyzing the visuals, students can express their interpretations and thoughts, deepening their understanding of both the text and the moral lessons it conveys. This interactive approach helps cultivate critical thinking skills as students learn to draw connections between the illustrations and the underlying messages of the narrative.

In *The Rescue of Onux*, the illustrations adopt a more dynamic approach, utilizing bold hues and energetic poses to emphasize the protagonist's courage and adventurous spirit. The action-oriented depictions create a palpable sense of urgency and excitement, which not only captivates the attention of young readers but also immerses them in the protagonist's challenges and triumphs. Moreover, the illustrations are rich with details that enhance the storytelling. Background elements, such as swirling clouds, towering mountains, or rushing waters, create a

sense of place and context, situating the reader within the world of Onux. These elements can symbolize the obstacles the protagonist faces, adding layers of meaning to the visual narrative. For instance, a turbulent sea in the background might represent the tumultuous challenges Onux must overcome, while serene landscapes might signal moments of reflection and peace.

Although minimalist in style, the illustrations in Grace Lin's books encapsulate the essence of the narratives, transforming reading experiences into opportunities for connecting the texts with their visual references. These illustrations, while simple, possess a depth that resonates with the story's themes and emotions, inviting young readers to engage more fully with the content. By establishing a visual dialogue between the text and the imagery, Lin's artwork enriches comprehension and enhances the overall impact of the narratives, encouraging readers to explore the layers of meaning embedded within the stories. In the two books under consideration, *The Old Man in the Moon* (Lin, 2023) and *When the Sea Turned to Silver* (Lin, 2023), children can discover elements of illustration with Asian influences that are noble in their delicacy yet strikingly evocative. These illustrations not only enhance the visual experience but also resonate with the core messages of the texts. The intricate designs and cultural motifs reflect the narratives' themes, inviting young readers to delve deeper into the emotional and cultural contexts presented in the stories. Through this artistic representation, the illustrations serve as a bridge, fostering a richer understanding of the underlying messages and encouraging children to appreciate the beauty and significance of the stories they encounter.

Conclusions

Thus, particularly in children's literature, illustrations play a crucial role in enriching young readers' experience by providing an intuitive framework that guides and supports their process of absorbing the values and messages conveyed by the text. Additionally, the images serve to immerse young readers into the fantastical world of the stories, creating a secure environment where they can encounter and interact with their favorite characters. As I mentioned in a previous study², didactic communication itself can be understood and crafted in accordance with both the written and unwritten rules of storytelling. By creating an environment conducive to those about to be initiated into the world of

² Smărăndița-Elena Costin, *Communication as Storytelling in the Educational Process: Didactic Perspectives*, in: Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (coord.), *The Power of Dialogue in a Globalized World*, Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu Mureș, 2024, ISBN: 978-606-93691-3-5, <https://asociatia.alpha.ro/gidni/11-2024/GIDNI-11-Comm-a.pdf>.

literature, the educator can facilitate the transition into the literary universe, bringing students closer to the artistic atmosphere.

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