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 ***Where the Wild Things Are: Sendak's Journey into the Heart of Darkness***

Jennifer Shaddock

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

***Where the Wild Things Are:***  
**Sendak's Journey into the Heart of Darkness**

*Jennifer Shaddock (bio)*

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May we one day find a land where there are no women, and war only, for in that land we shall grow great.

—H. Rider Haggard, *Nada the Lily* (1892)

Cultural studies has enabled literary critics to recognize the ideological influence of all texts, from classics to mail-order catalogues and tattoos. It would seem, then, that the function of children's books as the first print texts used to assimilate the modern child into literacy, and consequently into culture, should guarantee a central place in cultural studies for children's literature. But the long-established myth of the innocence and transparency of the children's book, particularly the picture book, works as powerfully today as it has in the past to designate children's literature a genre worthy of only marginal critical attention.<sup>1</sup> As Jacqueline Rose explains, "Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state" (8). Ironically, this myth of the purity of children and the consequent innocence of children's books has given the picture book an ideological scope of influence far exceeding that of any "fallen," and therefore critically scrutinized, literary domain.

Take Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which holds a treasured position on perhaps more bookshelves than any other American picture book in history. It depicts young Max's rebellion against the restraints of civilization, his consequent voyage to freedom in an exotic land, his subjugation of the Wild Things that live there, and his triumphant return home. *Wild Things* has received an unprecedented amount of critical attention since its publication in 1963. But it has been interpreted in almost exclusively psychoanalytic terms, an approach foregrounding the internal struggles of early childhood development.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, psychological explanations of the book are especially appropriate given Sendak's own concept of his art as "a dream or fantasy" (Lanes 85). Moreover, Sendak explicitly considers *Wild Things* an exploration of "my great curiosity about childhood as a state of being, and how all children manage to get through childhood from one day to

the next, how they defeat boredom, fear, pain and anxiety, and find joy" (qtd. in Lanes 85). On the other hand, such psychological critiques accept—and even further reify—the ahistoricism of the book. As an artist, of course, Sendak pleases by creating a timeless, internally focused narrative. Nevertheless, it is one obligation of criticism to tease out the historical and ideological roots within seemingly ahistorical and apolitical narratives. In this respect, the existing psychological criticism of *Wild Things* falls short and requires a more culturally oriented critical supplement.

I am arguing that the narrative structure of *Wild Things* is historically and culturally indebted to the nineteenth-century adventure/explorer narrative. In its reliance on a frame of feminine domesticity and masculine voyage through which the hero finds authority and control over the natives of the land he discovers, the narrative structure of *Wild Things* resonates with that of the Victorian and Edwardian adventure novel, a genre that has come under intense critical scrutiny with the emergence of postcolonial narrative theory. If we read *Wild Things* within the historical context of this genre, an entirely new meaning emerges—one that is sociopolitical rather than psychological.

During the middle of the nineteenth century, the discourse of children's literature began to shift away from the overtly didactic to embrace the conventions of the adult romance, particularly romantic adventure. Dennis Butts situates the emergence of the children's adventure tale amid the historical growth of imperialism, stating that "the rise, character, and popularity of adventure stories for children can be seen both as an expression and a result of popular interest in the rise of the British Empire, which grew rapidly in the nineteenth century" (66). Martin Green explores this political link in depth, noting that mid-Victorian children's literature was

in effect captured by the aristomilitary caste. . . . Children's literature became boys' literature; it focused its attention on the Empire...

## Where the Wild Things Are: Sendak's Journey into the Heart of Darkness

by Jennifer Shaddock

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—H. Rider Haggard,  
*Night on the City* (1892)

Cultural studies has enabled literary critics to reassess the ideological influence of all sorts, from classics to mail-order catalogs and tattoos. It would seem, then, that the function of children's books as the first print texts used to acclimate the modern child into literacy, and consequently into culture, should guarantee a central place in cultural studies for children's literature. But the long-established myth of the innocence and transparency of the children's book, particularly the picture book, works as powerfully today as it has in the past to designate children's literature a genre worthy of only marginal critical attention.<sup>1</sup> As Jacqueline Rose explains, "Children's fiction" is never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state" (8). Ironically, this myth of the purity of children and the consequent innocence of children's books has given the picture book an ideological scope of influence far exceeding that of any "fable," and therefore critically scrutinized, literary domain.

Take Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which holds a treasured position on perhaps more bookshelves than any other American picture book in history. It depicts young Max's rebellion against the restraints of civilization, his consequent voyage to freedom in an exotic land, his subjugation of the Wild Things that live there, and his triumphant return home. *Wild Things* has received an unprecedented amount of critical attention since its publication in 1963. But it has been interpreted in almost exclusively psychoanalytic terms, an approach foregrounding the internal struggles of early childhood development.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, psychological explanations of the book are especially appropriate given Sendak's own concept of his art as "a dream or fantasy" (Lanes 85). Moreover, Sendak explicitly considers *Wild Things* an exploration of "my great curiosity about childhood as a state of being, and how all children manage to get through childhood from one day to the next, how they deal with boredom, fear, pain and anxiety, and tend joy" (ibid. in Lanes 85). On the other hand, such psychological critiques accept—and even further—reinforce the ahistoricism of the book. As an artist, of course, Sendak pleases by creating a timeless, internally focused narrative. Nevertheless, it is one obligation of criticism to trace out the historical and ideological texts within seemingly ahistorical and apolitical narratives. In this respect, the existing

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During the middle of the nineteenth century, the discourse of children's literature began to shift away from the overtly didactic to embrace the conventions of the adult romance, particularly romantic adventure. Dennis Bruns situates the emergence of the children's adventure tale amid the historical growth of imperialism, stating that "the rise, character, and popularity of adventure stories for children can be seen both as an expression and a result of popular interest in the rise of the British Empire, which grew rapidly in the nineteenth century" (66). Martin Green explains this political link in depth, noting that mid-Victorian children's literature was

in effect captured by the antimilitary caste.  
... Children's literature became boys' literature; it focused its attention on the Empire and the Frontier; and the virtues it taught were dash, pluck, and lion-heartedness, not obedience, duty, and piety (220).

More recently, Rose argues that "the emergence of the boy's adventure story in the second half of the nineteenth century cannot be seen as a decisive break in the way that it is often described," she, like Green, fully grants its "colonialist concepts of development" (57). For Rose, the boys' adventure tale "completes the transition into narrative of that core aspect of the world in which discovering, or seeing, the world is equivalent to conquering, or subduing, it. As yet in his, as we have so frequently seen, is an equation between infancy, savagery and the territory of colonial lands" (58). The romantic values of courage and self-reliance inherent in the adventure/explorer tale were those values that would prepare young boys to leave their homeland and take up, in Rudyard Kipling's words, "the white man's burden" of Western imperialism.

We recognize these imperialist adventures in such classics as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Robert Louis



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