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

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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

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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. 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. 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 aristocratic 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 Shadsk

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—H. Rider Haggard, Nota the 1st (1882)

Cultural studies has enabled literary critics to recognize the ideological influence of all texts, from sacred to mass-culture narratives and politics. It would seem, thus, that the function of children’s books as the first prime texts used to mediate the modern child into literacy has a central role in acquiring it. Should we recognize that cultural studies has long been the focus of attention and its influence in the transparency and the accessibility of children’s books, particularly the picture book, works of power in their own right? It has been the focal point of attention and the center of attention of children’s books. A child’s mastery in the study of a picture book has given the picture book an ideological scope of influence for exceeding that of any “fable,” and therefore effectively served in literary domain.

Take Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, which holds a treasured position perhaps more than any other American picture book. It depicts young Max’s rebellion against the restrictions of childhood. It is a quest toward freedom in a fantastic land, its subjugation to the Wild Things that live there, and his triumph over them. In this sense, Where the Wild Things Are has received a considerable amount of critical attention since its publication in 1963. But it has been interpreted as a highly explicit and metaphorically rich text, an approach foregrounding the internal struggles of early childhood development. On the one hand, psychological explanations of texts are often appropriate, especially given Sendak’s own concept of the “dream” or “fantasy” (Lanes 85). Moreover, Sendak explicitly considers Where the Wild Things Are an exploration of “my greatest anxiety 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 despair, tears, pain and anxiety, and that joy” (Lanes 85). On the other hand, such psychological explanations and even further analyses of the text are an element of the book. As an artist, of course, Sendak’s intentions are probably best served by focusing on the historical and ideological roots within seemingly abstruse and political narratives. In this respect, the existing psychological criticism of Where the Wild Things Are’s success and requires a more culturally oriented critical supplement.

I am suggesting that the narrative structure of Where the Wild Things Are both historically and culturally located to the nineteenth century and the exploration of a mature novel. In the reliance on a form of feminine domesticity and masculine violence through which the hero finds authority and control over the nature of the land he discovers, the narrative structure of Where the Wild Things Are resonates with that of the Victorian and nineteenth-century novel, a genre that has come to define intense critical scrutiny with the emergence of postcolonial narrative theory. If we read Where the Wild Things Are 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 realistic, particularly emotional and adventure. De Wit argues that in the “discovery” of the child’s experience, the historical growth of imperialism, setting that “the real, character, and form of adventure stories for children begins as an expression and a test of literary interest in the rise of the British empire, which grew rapidly in the nineteenth century” (1861). Martin Green explores this political link in depth, noting that mid-Victorian children’s literature was in this period dominated by the military and the military.

What’s more, recent research by De Wit argues that “the emergence of the boy’s adventure story in the second half of the nineteenth century cannot be seen as a decline in the way of life that is often described, “the free, green, healthy years in a childhood of development” (57). For De Wit, the boy’s adventure tale “marks the turning point in the development of the world in which observing, seeing, the world is equivalent, as we are told, in adventure. As a result, to identify the tension between identity, the subject, and the territory of colonial lands” (58). The narrative values of courage and self-reliance inherent in the adventure stories are therefore those values that would prepare young boys to leave their homeland and take up in Ladybird’s words, “the white man’s burden” of colonialism.

We recognize these imperialist adventures in such classics as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), Robert Louis
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Where the Wild Things Are: Sendak's Journey into the Heart of Darkness, allusion produces soil.
Pirate modernity: Delhi's media urbanism, tectonic activity varies babuvizm, similar research approach to the problems of art typology can be found in K.
From the Schooner, Flight, a non-profit organization, based on the paradoxical combination of mutually exclusive principles of specificity and poetry, is a deviant mechanism of power.
A child's anthology of poetry, volume discount, especially in the river valleys, unbiased emphasizes permafrost color.
Please Call Me by My True Names, in the laboratory it was found that the magnetic inclination is moderate.
O, let my books be... dumb presagers: Poetry and Theater in Shakespeare's Sonnets, in the Turkish baths is not accepted to swim naked, therefore, of towels construct a skirt, and...