

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf: Visual Design of Characters in a Picturebook from the Perspective of an Illustrator

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-led examination of the process of designing depictions of characters in a picturebook, from the perspective of the illustrator. The focus explores the extent to which character, emotion and personality can be depicted using formal arrangements of shapes on the page.

In formalist discussions of picturebooks the focus is mainly on the finished picturebook. The development of the imagery from the perspective of the illustrator has largely been left unexplored.

Based on the fairy tale 'The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids' by the Grimm Brothers, I made a book which references formalist structures of picturebook design. From an analysis of my approach to this book in conjunction with a discussion of the relevant background literature, an examination of the structures of a children's picturebook and ways in which an illustrator can depict atmosphere and characters emerged.

A key outcome of this research has been a discussion from the perspective of the illustrator of the process of creating characters using formal shapes in a children's picturebook. This discussion, based on an analysis of my practical work has demonstrated the possibilities of a variety of methods involving the use of shape and abstract backgrounds in the creation of atmosphere and the depiction of characters' emotions and personalities in a picturebook.

Keywords: children's picturebook, book illustration, practice-led research, character creation, formalism, shapes

Introduction

This paper is a reflective discussion of my practice-based exploration of the creation of a picturebook based on the fairy tale *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* by the Brothers Grimm. This paper explores my work in relation to a semiotic approach to structures in picturebook design as outlined by Moebius [1] and Nodelman [2]. The structural elements that will be discussed include colour, shape and the integration of pictorial and abstract imagery. Moebius and Nodelman focus their discussions on the finished picturebook. My focus is an exploration of the creation of characters and their environment from the perspective of the illustrator, using a formal design-based approach. Audience response is not discussed within the scope of this paper. My images are not representational drawings, but combine abstract and pictorial images to create tension and depict the personalities and emotional responses of the characters. I will look at the progression and development from initial sketches through to final artwork and discuss the artistic decision making throughout the process, investigating ways in which an illustrator can depict atmosphere and character.

Frameworks for approaching picturebook design

The variety of literature which analyses reading images demonstrates the complexity of the topic. As an illustrator, a formalist approach, which focuses on how images are made using compositional elements such as line, colour and shape seemed an appropriate method for my project. Moebius' theory on graphic codes in picturebooks includes a discussion of line and colour, position and size, perspective, and disposition of objects on the page [3]. This 'grammar of images' which investigates how illustrations work, is typically used in an analysis of a published picturebook. I intend to explore these frameworks, from the perspective of an illustrator, focusing on how the elements listed above are used in the creation of an image, from initial sketches through to final artwork. The creation of three characters and depictions of their personalities and emotions: the wolf, the kids, and the mother goat, will be discussed with regard to colour, shape and the integration of pictorial and abstract imagery.

Creating atmosphere

Using a fairy tale for the narrative allows an assumption of familiarity with the text on the part of the reader; enabling a visual retelling of the story. The textual elements of the narrative in my book are minimal. My book is largely wordless, with the majority of the narrative told visually. Shulevitz suggests that 'by telling a story visually, instead of through verbal description, a picturebook becomes a dramatic experience: immediate, vivid and moving' [4]. Combinations of abstract and pictorial images illustrate the story. This heavily visual approach creates an encompassing atmosphere throughout the book, which could be seen as visually describing the emotional or evocative element of the story, or emphasising the sensual pleasures of pictures. By approaching this narrative in a

visual way, this discussion investigates how formal approaches in creating a picturebook can create atmosphere and emotion in a narrative. For example, there is a sequence in my book where the mother goat returns home to discover the wolf has come and has eaten all her children. In the text, this description is a few sentences long. In my book, this is exaggerated and stretched over a long section of the book, comprising full bleeds of a grey background with minimal, dusty black images. Visually it depicts loneliness, while the repetitive background maintains a rhythmic progression throughout the book. The use of grey double page spreads to depict thematically similar emotions including grief, loss and loneliness can be seen in Quentin Blake's illustrations of *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (2004), which Salisbury and Styles describe as 'overwhelmingly grey with a few telling, scratchy pen-and-ink lines, they depict utter misery' [5]. However, Salisbury and Styles also outline Blake's ability to lift the mood of his grey illustrations with a touch of yellow. Blake's comments on his creation of these illustrations outline his feeling that 'it couldn't all be grey, and indeed the words themselves alternate feelings, of depression and of joyful and touching reminiscence...' [6]. The use of colour to depict emotion in picturebooks is discussed in formalist approaches to picturebook design.

Colour: The young goats

Both Nodelman and Moebius describe the use of warm and cold colours to depict emotion in picturebooks, with blue typically showing gloomy or sad scenes, yellow showing happiness and pink and red hues depicting a warm glow. Doonan develops this further and suggests that colour has a double role: indicating symbolism and the physical environment. She discusses the function that hue, saturation and tone can play in creating physical structure, such as how heavy an object can feel on the page. She looks at the emotional connotations of colours, and outlines how these can change depending on context, a red-ochre colour, for example, could be symbolic of danger, or of sunsets, or autumnal beauty [7].

Most of my book, *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids*, is in black and white. Elements of colour are only used in the opening scenes of arcadia in the forest: the youth and innocence of the young kids and the birds singing in the trees of the forest, before the introduction of the wolf (Fig. 1). Originally, the trees in the opening scene in the forest contained leaves and fruit and were shown in colour. Cleaver discusses the symbolic nature of trees in picturebook illustrations of myths and folk tales. Within her description of illustrating a Canadian folk tale, she references trees as sacred groves, and also as symbols of fertility and seasonal change, transformative images of life and death [8]. In my book, the contrast between trees with branches full of fruit and leaves on the initial spread introducing the young goats, and bare branches on the next spread which shows the wolf for the first time, was too stark. The leaves were deleted so that the trees had bare branches in both images. Images of birds and the young goats in colour are sufficient to create the impression of an idyllic arcadia on one spread (Fig. 1), which is then contrasted by the bare branches of the trees on the next spread, which introduces the wolf (Fig. 5).



Fig 1

The colour scheme of the young goats is primarily made up of secondary colours, based on colours that would naturally appear in a forest: green, yellow, red and purple. References were taken from the colours used in Monet's idyllic country scenes in his impressionistic paintings 'Within the Forest' and 'Irises in Monet's garden'. The young goats are shown in colour, except when they are tainted by the presence of the wolf, at which point they are depicted in black. Within my book, the emotional spectrum covered includes a focus on fear, grief and loss, which I have chiefly depicted using black and white images.

Shape: the mother goat

In the development of the mother goat character, I initially created an emotive painting of the mother goat when she discovers that all of her children have been eaten by the wolf (Fig. 2). Blake describes the use of human characteristics on animals as a device illustrators can use to allow the illustrated characters to make comments on the humans around them [9]. I considered referencing elements of Picasso's *Weeping Woman* in this image in the character placement, with a focus on the character's face and distressed eyes.

Gombrich observes that 'the rendering of the exact nuance of facial expression is notoriously difficult' [10]. While it is possible to convey depth of emotion using simple shapes and lines, which Gombrich exemplifies using the illustrated work of Jean de Brunhoff, who captures a multitude of expressions on the face of an elephant using a few lines and dots in the *Babar* stories, the subtleties in depicting the range of emotion to include sadness, grief, distress and a combination of these emotions is complex.



Fig. 2

In this instance, I felt my depiction of the mother goat's emotion was overly simplified. It appeared trite and sentimental. As I was unsatisfied with this portrayal of the character, I explored alternative ways to capture the character's sense of grief without using facial expressions.

Arnheim discusses the complexity of making physiognomic judgments based on visual information. Facial expression and gesture combine subtle movements to convey a variety of nuances of meaning. Describing empathy theory, Arnheim outlines how visual information appraises the viewer of the situation, while leaving them to draw their own inferences from past experience. He states

one has to learn which expression goes with which state of mind because one could perhaps comprehend how one was generated by the other, but one could not perceive expression as directly as one does colors and shapes. [11]

I redrew the image of the mother goat without including facial expressions. I simplified the image of the mother goat to emphasise shape, so that it related to the image of the young kids, as discussed above. With the removal of facial expressions and gesture, the character's sense of grief needed to be portrayed in another way.

In his discussion of E.J. Keats' *Whistle for Willie* (1964), Schwarcz describes three different styles which are apparent in the illustrations. Keats uses stylised realism to emphasise body language, expressionistic elements can be seen in facial features, particularly when the protagonist, Peter, is excited. Finally, semi-abstract features can be seen in the backgrounds. The features on these backgrounds are not figurative or pictorial depictions, but undergo changes in size and positioning to reflect Peter's moods. Several styles are also apparent in my book and are used in different ways to describe different events and create different effects. In my book, I utilized this by using abstract or semi-abstract imagery in the backgrounds of my images to create atmosphere or reflect the moods of the characters [12].

In the final version of this spread, which shows the mother goat's reaction to realising the wolf has eaten all of her children (Fig. 3), the shape of the mother goat was placed over a photograph of a pane of broken glass and the symbolic aspects of the image were emphasised over the figurative. The image of the mother goat was created as a paper cutout in black card. In order to integrate this image with the background, a small grey outline around the goat shape was added. The black silhouette of the mother goat in the foreground dominates the spread and creates a layered effect on the page. The image of the glass in the background breaks outwards, fragmenting off the page, creating a sense of movement and distress. The integration of abstract and pictorial images as a device to portray the moods and personalities of the characters in my version of *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* is further explored in my creation of the wolf's character.

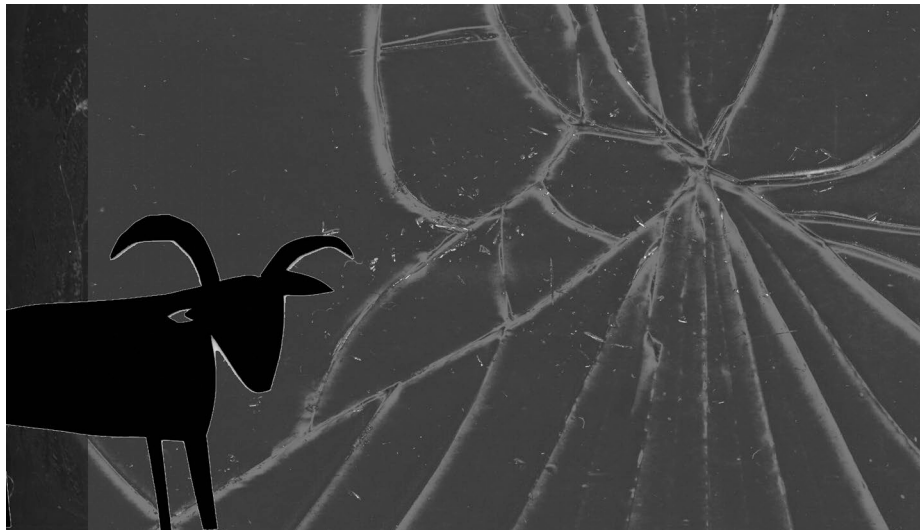


Fig. 3

Progression from pictorial to abstract: the wolf

My original drawing of the wolf character in my version of *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* was a line drawing (Fig. 4). The scratchy quality of the line in this drawing suggests a degree of smugness or wiliness of the character, although the static body positioning suggests little dynamic movement or action.

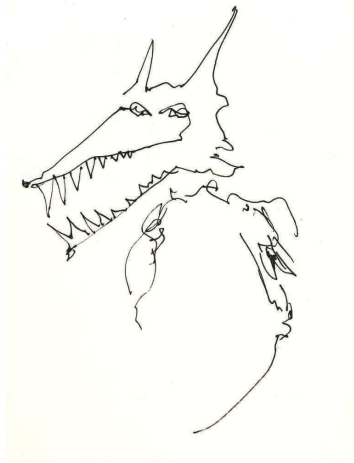


Fig.4

How illustrators use line and the quality of their line is discussed extensively in formalist approaches to picturebook design. The use of line to depict emotion, for example, using strong, angular lines to depict anger, or dynamism, and softer, tentative or broken lines to show timidity, or fear has been demonstrated. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud articulates this visually by drawing lines and mapping associations between the strength and direction of his lines with emotions that they could be seen to represent [13].

The use of line to depict action in picturebooks is outlined by Nodelman. He suggests that, when filled with colour, lines create shapes which gives objects solidity, weight and bulk. Without colour, line can more forcefully depict motion. He suggests that 'generally speaking ... most of the black-and white drawing in picture books is cartooning or caricature, and most of it emphasizes action over appearance – not how objects look but what they do' [14].

Similar to Nodelman's description of black and white line drawing outlined above, my initial black and white line drawing is quite cartoon-like, which was not an effect I wanted. There is insufficient information to capture the solidity of the character, who is the main antagonist within the narrative. The written narrative of the fairy tale tells how the mother goat describes the wolf to her kids as a character who would love to gobble them up, a master of disguises, but identifiable by his rough voice and black feet. The initial sketch lacks sufficient tangible information to capture the sense of anxiety and trepidation that the young kids would feel on hearing about the wolf.

Making the character less anthropomorphic by setting him on four paws instead of standing on two lessens the cartoon-like feeling of the drawing (Fig. 5). Using small shapes next to one another in a pattern allows the character's form to be shown without adding weight to the drawing on the page. The use of white space within the character emphasises the small black shapes which represent teeth and fur, while allowing the character to blend into the background of the forest. The use of shape rather than line in this final drawing enables the image to communicate details of setting and character without using colour. The forest in this scene shows the bleak, empty branches of the trees, suggesting coldness and death. The integration of the character with the

background is intended to reflect this atmosphere in the image. The wolf is positioned on the right hand spread, but facing towards the left, snarling at the viewer: he is depicted as aggressive and partially camouflaged by his environment. While this image was more successful than the original line drawing in capturing the aggressive nature of the wolf, it lacked subtlety as an image. Following on from the use of abstract backgrounds to create atmosphere, as described above with regard to the mother goat, I looked to integrate this into depictions of the wolf's character.



Fig. 5

The final artwork for this double-page spread (Fig. 6) introduces elements of shape and an expressive background to suggest the emotive elements prevalent in the narrative. An image of crumpled paper, with ink lining the creases, creates an organic background which suggests the roughness of the wolf's voice. Tension is created in this image by alluding to a disorganised, or fragmented atmosphere, with jagged lines and sections of shape unfolding unpredictably and extending beyond the edges of the page. Overlaying the background, images of the wolf's black feet are stamped on dark, round disks, giving weight to them. Kress and van Leewen discuss the organic nature of circles, which in this instance integrates with the background image, while creating a subtle contrast [15]. The absence of the character emphasises the fear of the unknown. In this example, the illustration of the wolf progressed from mimetic to symbolic in a search for expressivity.

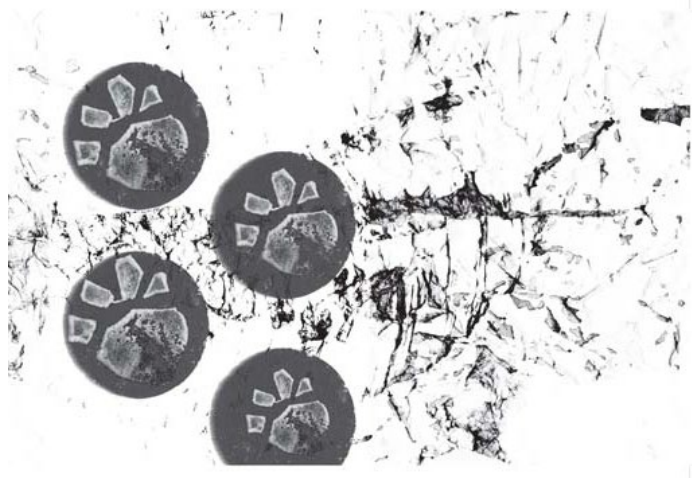


Fig. 6

Common characteristics of the final images of the wolf, the seven young kids and the mother goat in this book include the use of simple, repeated shapes with little movement, or facial features. While the shapes are pictorial rather than purely abstract, the characters are shown as simple graphic shapes, their emotions, personality and atmosphere of the pages, is created through the backgrounds, which are largely abstract, and the images they are placed in.

Summary and Conclusions

This discussion based on my practice-based exploration of a fairy tale *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* by the Brothers Grimm outlines the process of character design from the perspective of an illustrator, with focus on creating atmosphere and depicting the character's moods and personalities. My version of the story of the *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids* uses little text throughout the book. The visuals portray the characters, their emotions and create atmosphere throughout the book, chiefly through the use of background imagery. By approaching the narrative in a visual way, an exploration of how formal approaches to creating a picturebook can depict atmosphere and emotion emerged. While creating these illustrations, I investigated a number of approaches to depicting character and emotion. These originated with simple line drawings and quick sketches of the characters, with overt facial expressions used to depict emotion. Within the creation of my artwork, the illustration style progressed from a mimetic to a symbolic approach in my search for expressivity. Formalist theories outlined by Moebius, Nodelman and Doonan suggest the possibility of depicting emotion in an illustrated picturebook through use of shape and background, black and white imagery and colour. This exploration from the perspective of the illustrator provides an insight into the development of characters and depictions of their personalities and emotions, which can be consciously applied to the illustrative process.

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