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## **Visual Narratives and Reader Participation: Postmodern Interactive Elements in Children's Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

Children's literature is a powerful tool for supporting the social, psychological and emotional development of children. It enables children to observe other people's lives, experiences and moral conflicts and recognise moral and ethical dilemmas. In children's literature, "visual narrative" refers to storytelling strategies that mainly rely on visual components like pictures, photos, and graphics to communicate the tale. Interactive components in visual storytelling urge readers to actively participate in the story, going beyond the conventional role of passive readers. With an emphasis on postmodern interactive aspects, this research paper investigates how visual storytelling and reader engagement intersect in children's reading. Visual narratives are essential in children's literature because they capture the attention of young readers and make the story more accessible for comprehension and interpretation. Postmodernism as a literary and artistic movement, questions established narrative conventions and encourages audience participation. Thus, postmodern children's literature invites readers to actively participate in meaning-making through the incorporation of interactive components into visual storytelling. This paper will not only talk about the significance of pictures in kids' stories; it will also investigate how the interactive features in visual narratives enhance reader engagement and promote active meaning-making.

**Keywords:** Visual narratives, interactive features, reader participation, postmodern elements, children's literature.

## Introduction

Children's literature facilitates social, psychological, and emotional development in young readers as it offers new knowledge and emotional support. In children's literature, visual narratives refer to stories that rely primarily on visual components, such as photos, graphics, and pictures, to convey the narrative. Readers can actively participate in the story through interactive elements in these visual narratives, transcending the traditional passive observer role. This paper explores the nexus of visual narrative and reader involvement in children's books, focusing mainly on postmodern interactive elements. Children's literature benefits significantly from visual narratives since they capture the interest of young readers and make it easier for them to understand and grasp the plot. Bodmer highlights that the primary function of visuals in a written text is to "expand, explain, interpret, or decorate a written text" (72). Postmodern children's literature encourages readers to actively engage in the construction of meaning by using interactive elements. "Like the traditional 'choose your own adventure texts', the reader is required to become an even more active participant in the navigation, interpretation and design of multi-modal texts" (Serafini 158).

As a literary and artistic movement, postmodernism questions long-standing narrative norms and promotes audience participation thus encouraging readers to engage actively in the process of meaning formation instead of merely passively consuming stories. Postmodern children's literature aims to engage readers deeply by including interactive aspects in a visual narrative, encouraging active reader participation and cooperation. In postmodern picture books, traditional stories are told from a different perspective, multiple narrators are used, disruptions occur and time and space relationships are disrupted; unexpected twists and turns are introduced, along with ambiguity and unpredictability (Sipe and Pantaleo). The primary objective of this research paper is to explore the relevance of illustrations in children's stories and investigate how the interactive features within visual narratives might increase reader engagement and support active meaning-making. This paper will examine the various ways in which visual storytelling and reader interaction intersect to highlight the transformative potential of postmodern children's literature, which allows for the active participation of young readers in the construction of the narrative. It will do this through a thorough analysis of pertinent literature and a close examination of a few select children's books.

## Capturing Attention and Facilitating Comprehension

Children's literature uses visual storytelling extensively to draw in readers of all ages. Humans frequently use their senses to interpret their environment (Serafini). Children are naturally drawn to books that have vivid and eye-catching images. "In picturebooks; each turn of the page reveals a new picture or set of pictures. This continuity takes children's attention more and more" (Karaman 3). In addition to grabbing their attention, the presence of lively and captivating graphics also piques their interest and compels them to learn more about the plot. Reading comprehension in children's books is greatly aided by the visual clues offered by the images. As Perry Nodelman hypothesises, young children require illustrations in books since "they find them easier to understand than words and need pictorial information to guide their response to verbal information" (216). Young readers rely on visual components to help them grasp the narrative, especially those still developing their reading skills. As Fang opines:

Picture books can serve as an effective tool to stimulate and promote children's creativity. By reading picture books without too much linguistic text, children learn to use their active imagination to interpret and (re)create a mental representation of the story. Children often associate pictures with their life experiences or familiar images, construct meaning based on their existing schemas or schemata. (137-138)

Young children also comprehend character qualities, interests, and emotions through picture book illustrations (Prior, Wilson, and Martinez). Visual representations offer hints about the story's setting regardless of a child's age. The tale may be made more approachable and understandable for young readers by using illustrations to "supplement characterization in the text by showing the characters' actions and reactions to one another or giving characters an extra fleshing out" (Fang 132). They can better understand the story's storyline, the characters' emotions, and its overarching message thanks to visual clues that assist them in linking the text with the accompanying imagery. Nikolojeva and Scott, in their work *How Picturebooks Work*, describe the relationship between images and text in picturebooks as "complementary". This term implies that the images either mirror and clarify the content of the text or present a contrasting perspective. In other words, the images and text work together, filling in the gaps or enhancing the meaning of the other (qtd. in Karaman 8).

Additionally, visual storytelling helps young children's emerging literacy. Children rely on their visual literacy abilities to comprehend and interpret the world around them before

they can read independently. Children are introduced to storytelling through visual tales, which help them develop their fundamental understanding of story structure, character growth, and plot development. Young readers learn crucial pre-reading abilities including visual sequencing, result prediction, and inference-making through interactions with visual aspects in children's books. "The story's natural setting (established through illustrations) establishes a context that helps children better understand concepts such as porpoise, gull, barnacle, bay, island and driftwood, thus encouraging them to expand their vocabularies" (Fang 140).

### **Fostering Interpretation and Emotional Connection**

In addition to facilitating understanding, visual narratives in children's literature encourage interpretation and emotional connection with the story. According to cognitive psychologists Johnson, Huffman and Jasper, merely telling or hearing a story—even if it is made up—can boost our empathy towards those whom we may have previously thought of as being "outsiders." They are actively and favourably challenged to consider other people's sentiments by placing themselves in others' shoes (83-90). Young readers are given visual cues and hints via visual storytelling, encouraging them to interpret the story in their own unique ways. Illustrations frequently depict feelings, activities, and symbols that help readers relate to the story more deeply. Children's literature fosters the development of personal viewpoints and critical thinking abilities by allowing readers to analyse the visual aspects. Young readers can experience emotions and develop empathy via visual storytelling. Children may identify with characters' thoughts and experiences by seeing the facial expressions, body language and movements as depicted in the illustrations. Children may put themselves in the characters' shoes through visual tales and emotionally relate to their pleasures, sufferings, difficulties, and victories. Children's social and emotional development is promoted by this emotional involvement, which also aids in the development of empathy and compassion. Accordingly, Green and Brock state that "the strong empathetic bond established as a result of being mesmerised in stories can unconsciously modify attitudes, beliefs, and moods" (qtd. in Odumegwu et al. 4).

Visual stories may encourage diversity and representation in children's reading. Young readers are exposed to various viewpoints and encouraged to be inclusive when visual storytelling features characters with varied backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and experiences. Reading to children increases their feeling of identification and belonging because they may recognise themselves in the stories they read. Additionally, exposure to many visual tales

fosters empathy, comprehension, and admiration for others, helping to create a more accepting and inclusive society.

### **Postmodernism in Children's Literature**

Postmodernism is a literary and artistic movement that first appeared in the mid-20th century, criticising established norms and the idea of objective truth. Postmodernism promotes creative storytelling methods and offers a break from conventional linear storylines in children's books. The distinction between author, text and reader is muddled, which invites readers to actively engage in the meaning-making process. Scepticism of big narratives and stress on unique viewpoints and subjective experiences are characteristics of postmodernism. It opposes the notion of a single, unchanging truth and praises the variety of interpretations and the mutable character of reality. In terms of storyline, postmodern children's literature is sometimes characterised as non-linear, with several what appear to be unrelated text strands or stories with confusing plotlines that allow the reader to be the co-author. For instance, the language in *Black and White* (Macaulay) is so sparse that the spectator or reader has various possibilities for structuring the story (Aiken 3). Children's books in the postmodern age adopt a narrative style that embraces the postmodern spirit. In addition to non-traditional narrative forms and non-linear storylines, it frequently uses fragmented storytelling. These tales could have aspects of magic realism, surrealism, and fantasy, drawing young readers into imaginable and entertaining settings. As per Mackey and McClay, having or being characterised by several meanings, postmodern picture books are "polysemic...these books cause the reader's attention to move from place to place, from text to picture and back, in a fluid way" (qtd. in Wu 1).

Postmodern children's literature blurs the lines between various media formats by incorporating aspects of visual art, multimedia and interactive features. Postmodern elements in children's books slow down reading so that the reader is more aware of the transaction and all that is happening. Because of the complexity of each page and the associated shifts in perspective, this genre virtually forces kids to reread it and take their time to contemplate. The book encourages the reader to be more engaged and responsive by slowing down the process. Instead of being a list to be read all at once, the process takes on the characteristics of a conversation where information is disclosed gradually over time in layers. This kind of literature frequently prompts the reader, viewer, or listener to go back and reconsider, flip the page, and pose new queries. "What else was there in that picture?" (Aiken 3-4). In addition, metafictional elements, which emphasise a story's fabrication, are frequently seen in

postmodern children's literature. Postmodern picture books make a point of asking "[w]hat is real? The story? The page? The book itself?" (Goldstone 364). Characters may speak directly to the reader through the fourth wall, or the story may comment on the storytelling itself. These metafictional tactics encourage readers to make a critical evaluation of the story and consider where to draw the lines between fiction and reality, thus also encouraging readers to participate in self-reflection.

### **Interactive Features in Visual Narratives**

Children's books with visual storylines often include interactive elements beyond the standard reading experience. These interactive features encourage active participation from young readers and allow them to influence the plot and make significant decisions inside the novel. Children are encouraged to physically interact with books by using interactive features, including lift-the-flap, pull-tabs, pop-ups, and tactile textures. These interactive elements generate a sense of discovery and joy by encouraging readers to go deeper into the fictional world and find hidden gems. As Nodelman comments, "The excitement of a good picture book is the constant tension between the moments isolated by the pictures and the flow of words that join these moments together" (qtd. in Fang 137). Young readers may actively participate in the tale by making choices and acting out scenarios in interactive visual storytelling. Children can make decisions that affect the course and resolution of plots through choose-your-own-adventure stories or branching storylines. By enabling individuals to customise the narrative to their tastes and problem-solving abilities, this interactive aspect provides readers with a sense of agency and fosters critical thinking.

The popular children's book *The Bad Seed* is a prime example of how interactive components may be used to enhance visual tales. The plot centres on a cranky and rebellious 'seed' that sets off on a quest for growth and self-understanding. In order to increase reader engagement and encourage active meaning-making, the book includes interactive elements. The usage of flaps throughout *The Bad Seed* is one interactive feature. Lifting flaps reveal secret information about the seed such as its many facial expressions and detailed analysis of his deeds and emotions. This interactive element invites readers to actively participate in the narrative and explore how the character of the seed develops. Likewise, thought bubbles are another interactive component of the book. Separate speech bubbles for each idea of the 'seed' allow readers to follow the character's internal monologue and emotions. Young readers are

invited to identify with the experiences of the seed through this graphic portrayal of thinking, and it inspires them to consider how actions and feelings affect others.

As digital technology has advanced, visual storytelling in children's literature has incorporated interactive aspects in digital formats. Through e-books, interactive apps, and augmented reality (AR) activities, kids can participate in immersive and interactive storytelling. On these digital platforms, interactive features are commonplace and help to engage readers and provide dynamic reading experiences. They include touch interactions, animations, sound effects, and interactive riddles. These interactive elements enhance reading enjoyment while also fostering the growth of analytical and problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the use of technology and digital engagement creates new opportunities for capturing the attention of young readers in a technologically advanced society.

### **Active Participation and Co-Creation of Meaning**

Children's literature that employs visual storytelling encourages readers to actively participate in the tale rather than simply being passive consumers. "Illustrations in picture books entice children to read and interact with text. They motivate young readers to find/name hidden objects/characters or to predict what is going to happen next" (Fang 137). This active involvement not only increases reader engagement but also gives young readers more ability to co-create meaning. Children are invited to ponder on the tale, draw connections, and develop their interpretations through interactive components like prompts, questions, or open-ended visuals. By actively participating, they get more immersed in the tale, developing a sense of connection and ownership. Children's imaginations are sparked by illustrations and other visual clues. Moreover, they can mentally picture the setting and characters in the stories. The narrative is enhanced by the readers' perceptions, experiences and inventiveness as they actively interact with the visual components. Their reading experience is enriched by this imaginative and creative involvement, which also helps children to develop their interpretation of the narrative. "Children can relate what they think the picture is, and why, before turning the page to see if their prediction was correct" (Fang 137). Children's analytical and interpretative abilities are developed by helping them to understand visual aspects, draw conclusions, and exercise critical thought. They take on a more active role in creating meaning by using their past knowledge, life experiences, and emotional reactions to interpret the events. This process of active meaning-making deepens children's comprehension of the story and aids their intellectual and emotional development.



## Case Studies and Analysis

Hervé Tullet's children's book *Press Here* creatively uses interactive components to promote reader interaction and engagement. The reader is instructed to push or touch on particular-coloured dots or shapes on each page of the book. It may, for instance, instruct readers to click the yellow dot, and once they do so, they turn the page to witness the dot suddenly multiply or change colour. "...now press the yellow dot again..." (4). A cause-and-effect link is established by this straightforward action, engrossing readers and turning them into active participants in the narrative. *Press Here* uses tilting and shaking motions in addition to pushing and tapping. The book may instruct readers to shake the book to watch the dots jiggle or tilt the book to see the dots slant. "Try shaking the book...just a little bit" (11). These gestures incite readers to engage physically with the text by evoking a sense of surprise and amusement. In *Press Here*, the simple act of turning the pages becomes interactive. The modifications and changes brought about by the readers' activities are visible as they flip the pages. "Now tilt the page to the left ...just to see what happens" (12). Readers are kept interested in the story by the surprises that await them on every page. Instructions in the book frequently ask readers to add up or carry out particular tasks. Readers could be told, for example, to count the dots on the page or to touch on them in a specific order. "Rub the dot on the left...gently" (5). These exercises encourage interaction while simultaneously fostering cognitive and observational abilities. *Press Here* challenges readers to engage with the narrative and exercise their creativity. Children may visualise the dots changing colour, moving, or even disappearing by following the book's instructions. This creative involvement encourages inventiveness and encourages involvement with the text. The way that each reader responds to *Press Here* may be different. Based on the reader's choices, the interactive aspects of the book can produce various results. Due to the reader's interest in discovering what happens next based on their interactions, this customisation fosters a sense of ownership and curiosity. The overall goal of *Press Here* is to increase reader interaction and engagement via the use of a combination of straightforward yet compelling interactive components. The book gives kids an engaging and fun reading experience by including physical movements, cause-and-effect links, surprises, and chances for imaginative engagement.

Likewise, B.J. Novak's *The Book with No Pictures* is a creative and outlandish children's book that uses interactive aspects to increase reader interaction and engagement. The absence of typical images in the book is made up for by the active engagement of the reader

through a variety of techniques. The reader (typically an adult reading to a youngster) is asked to pronounce goofy and unexpected phrases like “glurrr-ga-wocko...grumph-a-doo...brroooooooooog...” (27) out loud to engage the audience. This feature makes the youngster giggle and keeps them interested as they wait impatiently for the next ridiculous thing to say. The book is unpredictable and hilarious since it depends on catching the reader off guard with foolish and unforeseen sentences. “I eat ants for breakfast right off the ruuuuuuuuuug!” (19). This feature maintains the reader’s interest and piques their curiosity about what will happen next, creating a joyful and exciting atmosphere. The rhythmic structure and repetitive sentences make the book easier for the readers to participate in. “Glug, glug, glug. My face is a bug” (18). A feeling of familiarity and participation is fostered as the children anticipate the recurrent portions. Despite the absence of traditional graphics, the book makes inventive use of typography to improve the reading experience. In order to emphasise a word’s significance, give it more prominence, or produce a certain mood, different fonts, colours, and sizes are used with words. The reading experience is further enhanced by the visual fun. The book speaks to kids on an emotional level by using language that is both accessible and expressive. “My only friend in the whole wide world is a hippo named Boo Boo butt” (21). It stimulates their imaginations, including them entirely in the narrative process. Although *The Book with No Pictures* does not address it specifically, readers frequently have physical reactions as a result of the participatory aspect of the book. The unexpected and light-hearted wording may cause children to giggle, gasp, or make amusing faces. Reading becomes a more active, multisensory activity due to this bodily involvement.

Overall, *The Book with No Pictures* deftly combines verbal involvement, surprise and humour, repetition and rhythm, quirky typography, emotionally engaging text, and physical connection to heighten reader engagement and interaction. It fosters a sense of excitement, laughter and connection with the tale by encouraging kids to engage in reading actively.

## Conclusion

Using visual narratives in children’s books that incorporate both classic and postmodern components improves reader engagement and interpretation. While the mix of visual clues and inventive pictures enables the creation of personal meaning, interactive elements encourage active engagement. Visual narratives crucially capture the attention of young readers, helping to develop their imagination and creativity and allowing them to create meaning actively while reading. Examining case studies such as *Press Here* and *The Book with*

*No Pictures* demonstrates how interactive components enhance reader participation, fostering active meaning-making and a deeper connection to the narrative.

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