

The Magic of Maurice Sendak: Childhood Fears and the Heroes of Sendak's Trilogy

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Abstract

Three of Maurice Sendak's books are often considered a trilogy, where *The Wild Things Are*, *In The Night Kitchen* and *Outside Over There* because they are thematically similar. Each focuses on a hero who is able to overcome the disruptive fears, feelings, frustrations and behaviors of childhood and find for him/herself an identity in the complexity of his/her world. Each is able to reach the existential goal of self-awareness and understanding, and each is able to reshape his/her world and his/her individual destiny which imparts to these three books a magic that undoubtedly accounts for their appeal to children and adults as well.

Key Words: Sendak, Children's Literature, Childhood, Disruptive feelings and behaviors, Existential goals and Max, Mickey, Ida

Maurice Sendak's children's picture books have been widely read and popular since the publication of *Where The Wild Things Are* in 1963. This popularity results in a large measure from the uniqueness of Sendak's illustrations and stories. This is no more evident than in the three picture books that are the subject of this paper: *Where The Wild Things Are* (1963), *In The Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Outside Over There* (1981). These three books, which Sendak considered a trilogy, (Spitz 70) are very different from each other in both story lines and illustrations. However, the one component these picture books have in common, and which may well explain why they have been so widely read, is the hero of each story, Max in *Where The Wild Things Are*, Mickey in *In The Night Kitchen*, and Ida in *Outside Over There*. These three central characters are heroes precisely because they are able to overcome the disruptive fears, feelings, frustrations and behaviors of childhood and find for themselves an identity in the complexity of their world. They are each able to reach the existential goal of self-awareness and understanding. They are existential heroes who reshape their worlds and claim their individual identities, a goal that appeals certainly to children, and possibly to adults as well, which may explain the wide audience that these three Sendak books have reached.

Generally, people think of children's worlds as innocent and safe, a place where the children are cared for by parents and all their needs are met. They are free of the problems of the adult world, do not have to worry about the basics of life and, we hope, are provided with loving environments in which they can grow to be responsible adults. However, the world of children is not all it is often perceived to be, for children experience the adult world from a disadvantaged point of view. In essence, they have little control over their world. They are told when to eat, when to go to bed, what they can do, and they soon learn the word NO! In fact, there are probably many more of the NO things in their world than the YES things, all, of course, for the protection of them though they do not have any understanding of that concept until later in their lives. In interviews and other comments Sendak explains his special sensitivity to the fears and even terrors of childhood. In his interview with Bill Moyers on the PBS *Now* program, Bill Moyer says: "What I hear you describing is not a story that you just made up. It's a story you experienced." Sendak answers: "Yeah. Well, that's what art is. I mean, you don't make up stories. You live life" (*Now* N. pag). Sendak goes on to explain that his childhood was very difficult. For example, he had a childhood fear of dying. "Oh yeah. Yeah. Fear of dying because I was a very sickly child. My parents were immigrants. They were not decorous. They were not discreet. They always thought I was gonna die" (*Now* N. pag). In addition, his household was angry especially his mother of whom in the same interview, Sendak says; "No. My mother got mad at me all the time. It didn't seem an extraordinary thing at all. I mean, it seemed to me she was always mad.

And in Yiddish, she called me the equivalent of “wild thing” and chased me all the house. We used to hide in the street and hope she forgot before I crept up in the evening. It was all natural as you rather take swipes at you that you dodge. And your mother was rough, rough, rough. (Now N. pag) Further, it was his experience with his relatives that led him to the creation of the “wild Things.” Of them, he tells Bill Moyer, “I remember our relatives use to come from the old country, those few who got in before the gate closed, all on my mother’s side. And how we detested them. The cruelty that children...you know, kids are hard. And these people didn’t speak English. And they were unkempt. Their teeth were horrifying. Nose...unraveling out of their hair, unraveling out of their noses. And they’d pick you up and hug you and kiss you, “Agghh. Oh, we could eat you up. And we know they would eat anything, anything. And so, they’re the wild Things.” (Now N. pag) Thus, in his life, then, Sendak developed a deep and abiding understanding of the fears, even terrors, experienced by children because of the demands placed on them.

He learned personally that children even before they can speak have to learn to confront their fears, to confront this bewildering world, and learn to come to terms with their fears and their world. Hence, it comes as no surprise that in his Caldecott acceptance speech for *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak spoke movingly of “an awful fact of childhood”, which he explored in *Where the Wild Things Are* (345). He expanded on this idea further in the speech when he said, “What is too often overlooked...is the fact that from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, that fears and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, that they continually cope with frustration as best as they can. And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming wild things. It is my involvement with this inescapable fact of childhood--the awful vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves King of all Wild Things—that gives my work whatever truth and passion it may have.” (348) In another context, Sendak said of *Where The Wild Things Are* that it was an exploration of his “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).

This is, of course, different from the usual view of childhood, different from seeing childhood as a safe, comfortable place where the children do not experience “boredom, fear, pain and anxiety” (Lanes 85). It is in this world envisioned by Sendak where Max, Mickey and Ida have their place. It is in this world that these three heroes overcome their fears, pain, anxieties, and disruptive feelings, in order to find the joy of creating their own identities through their control over their worlds. It is in this milieu that these three reshape their worlds to find fulfillment and joy in their existence; in short, these three characters are existential heroes who create their own identities by overcoming the very real fears of childhood. In another sense, their stories are also constructive to adults who do not always want to recognize the strength or character of these feelings in children. Instead of recognizing these feelings, most adults would prefer what Anne Scott McLeod called “calm and sunny picture of childhood” that was common in picture books at the time Sendak published *Where the Wild Things Are* (106).

It is these kinds of disruptive feelings and emotions and the control of them that is at the basis of *where The Wild Things Are*. The story opens with Max in his “wolf suit” making “mischief of one kind and another” (N. pag.). The choice of the wolf suit is important because it connects Max’s behavior with the rich tradition in folk tales of wolves who are disruptive animals in many folk tales. The most familiar is “Little Red Riding Hood”, #333, classified in the section in the section “Fairy Tales” under “Supernatural Opponents” in Antti Aarne’s *The Types of the Folktale: a Classification and Bibliography* translated by Stith Thompson. However, there are other wolf tales found in the section “Wild Animals” under the type “Wild Animals and Domestic Animals”. Many of these tales are similar to “Little Red Riding Hood.” In fairy tale # 123, “The Wolf That Ate the Seven Kids,” “The Wolf comes in the absence of the mother and eats up the kids. The old goat cuts the wolf open and rescues them” (284). In a different version the fox buys a colt, and the wolf, in disguise, comes and eats the colt. In another interesting variation (123A), the wolf blows down the goose’s house and eats her up. In a precursor to “Little Red Riding Hood,” human beings are devoured by a wolf that is then cut open to achieve the rescue (125). Max, of course, does not eat anyone up, but as part of his disruptive behavior, he tells his mother “‘I’LL EAT YOU UP” (N. pag.)! This completes the connection to the wolves of folk tales and emphasizes the disruptive nature of Max’s behavior. Further, Sendak uses this phrase at the beginning of the book to set up the transformation of Max later in the story as he tames his disruptive feelings and forms his own identity in response to his punishment. In short, he becomes an existential hero in that he is able to understand his disruptive behavior and is able to gain control of his world by modifying his disruptive behavior.

Max's mother reacts to his mischief by calling him "WILD THING!" and sending him to "bed without eating anything" (N. pag.). Max is not repentant at all, and he stands in his room tapping his foot with a self-satisfied look on his face (N. pag.). Clearly, he does not accept the admonitions of his mother or the assumption that his behavior is incorrect. Instead, he feels those disruptive feelings of anger and frustration. He has not yet achieved the self-awareness sufficient to come to terms with and manage those feelings, but then, the magic of Sendak's genius becomes evident as we see Max's room begin to change. "That very night in Max's room a forest grew..." (N. pag.).

The forest continues to grow on the next page, and Max is utterly delighted. In the text accompanying the next illustration, Sendak writes "and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around..." (N. pag.). At this point, Max's bedroom has disappeared, and Max is once again behaving like a wolf as he howls at the moon. Then, out of nowhere, "an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day..." (N. pag.). Max, at this point, does not have control over his world as the jungle, ocean and boat simply appear out of nowhere, but his process of maturing into the hero who will have control begins in his journey to "where the wild things are," for it is also a journey through time and space, a maturation, "in and out of weeks and almost over a year...", a progress shadowed by the changing phases of the moon which goes from crescent when Max sets out to full as he returns in triumph (N. pag.).

When Max reaches the land of "the wild things," he is still a wild thing himself, and despite the frightening appearance of the wild things, Max asserts control over them by yelling "BE STILL!" and taming "them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all..." (N. pag.). By gaining control over the wild things, Max metaphorically gains control over the disruptive feelings that have brought him to this point, and thus, he can become the "king of all wild things" (N. pag.). This, of course, represents the beginning of his control over his own world and his effort to shape his world and create his identity in such a way that he will be able to return home to his mother and his dinner.

In order to fully cleanse himself of the disruptive feelings and behavior that brought him to this point, Max orders the wild things to begin "the wild rumpus..." (N. pag.). The wild rumpus occupies the next several pages without any accompanying text until Max is fully prepared to realize his new identity and control his world, so he orders the wild things to stop the wild rumpus. "Now stop! Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper" (N. pag.). By thus repeating what his mother said earlier, Max establishes his new identity and control over his disruptive feelings and behavior. Thus, he becomes an existential hero, for he has forged his new identity, and he is ready to return to his mother and the world where he has experienced the disruptive emotions and feelings of the child. This new state Sendak expresses in Max's decision of giving up his reign as king of the wild things and returning home to his mother. "Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are" (N. pag.).

However, the wild things do not want Max to leave, and in an expression of the transfer of Max's old behaviors to the wild things, they yell as Max begins to sail away for home "Oh please don't go---we'll eat you up---we love you so" (N. pag.)! Claiming his new status and identity, Max denies the very expression that he has used in the beginning of the story with the single word "No" (N. pag.)! As a result, in the next illustration, we see Max sedately sailing for home, and though the moon is again full, he does not even look at it or howl. For children, Max is the hero possessing a new identity carved out in the world of the wild things, an identity that gives him control of his world, and cleansed of his disruptive behavior, it is safe for him to return. Thus, when he returns to his room, he finds his old room back, but now all is well, for he finds his "supper waiting for him..." (N. pag.). To emphasize how central to the story Max's new identity is, we find on the last page of the story only the words "and it was still hot" (N. pag.).

In The Night Kitchen opens with Mickey in bed, but his safe environment is disturbed. "Did you ever hear of Mickey, How he heard a racket in the night and shouted "OUIET DOWN THERE" (N. pag.)! Then, the unexpected happens as Mickey falls "through the dark..." and "out of his clothes" (N. pag.). He continues to fall past his parents' bedroom where he calls out to them, and finally, he ends up naked in "the light of the night kitchen..." where he lands in the bakers' mixing bowl (N. pag.). The three bakers, (who look like Oliver Hardy of the early-twentieth-century comedy duo Laurel and Hardy) do not realize that Mickey is there, or they simply mistake him for the milk, and they stir him into the batter they are mixing. We see only Mickey's one hand reaching up like a drowning man. "Milk in the Batter! Milk in the Batter! Stir it! Make it! Bake it" (N. pag.)!

That is exactly what they do. “And they put that batter up to bake a delicious Mickey-cake” (N. pag.). The disruptive feelings and emotions that children might experience are here clearly exemplified, for not only is Mickey angry about being disturbed in his sleep, but he also experiences the fear of being put into the oven, a fear that connects to the famous fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel,” just as the wolf suit in *Where The Wild Things Are* connects to Little Red Riding Hood”. Further, as Hansel and Gretel triumph over the wicked witch, so too, does Mickey come successfully through his experience in the oven (N. pag.).

As the story progresses, the baking of the Mickey cake gets about half way through when Mickey pops out of the cake: “But right in the middle of the steaming and the making and the smelling and the baking Mickey poked through and said: ‘I’m not the milk and the milk’s not me! I’m Mickey’” (N. pag.)! Mickey asserts his identity, demonstrating Sendak’s insight into the lives of children. He is no longer afraid, and he is no longer angry. He is the new Mickey with his identity firmly in hand and which he shouts out to the bakers with such vigor that one of the bakers puts his finger up to his lips to quiet Mickey. However, Mickey is now the master of his feelings and emotions and is ready to establish his new place in this world of adults. “So he skipped from the oven [and] into bread dough all ready to rise in the night kitchen” (N. pag.).

Earlier in the story, he had lost his pajamas as he fell into the night kitchen and went into the batter naked, but now, he has a layer of cake batter on him creating a new brown suit as if he has been cleansed of the disruptive feelings and emotions to become a new person in control of his world. He has in existential terms created his new identity, and he is prepared to achieve new goals in this adult world of the night kitchen, and his first task is to begin kneading the dough to create something new. “He kneaded and punched it and pounded and pulled till it looked okay” (N. pag.). Mickey’s creation that looks “okay” is an airplane which Mickey has made from the dough. He starts it up and climbs in and begins to fly. To the great distress of the bakers, they have no milk for the morning cake, and they enlist Mickey’s help. “The bakers ran up with a measuring cup, howling” “Milk! Milk! Milk for the morning cake” (N. pag.)! In another assertion of his control of his world, of his new identity, Mickey reassures the bakers that all is well and that he can get the milk they need to bake the morning cake. “‘What’s all the fuss? I’m Mickey the pilot! I get milk the Mickey way!’ and he grabbed the cup as he flew up and up and up and over the top of the Milky Way in the night kitchen” (N. pag.).

Like Max, Mickey takes a journey, and this journey is like the return journey of Max; the outgoing journey for Mickey is his falling into the night kitchen in an expression of the disruptive feelings and emotions like Max had experienced on his journey to the Land of the Wild Things. Just as Max loses his boat and his jungle, so Mickey loses his plane and his brown suit as he dives down into the milk bottle, and naked once again, he pours the milk from the bottle into the batter for the bakers. “Then he swam to the top, pouring the milk from his cup into the batter below---.” The bakers are thrilled and they sing, “Milk in the batter! Milk in the batter! We bake cake! And nothing’s the matter” (N. pag)! This last, of course, reassures children that the disruptive feelings from earlier in the story have all been conquered and that truly nothing is the matter. This is reinforced by Mickey who is now naked as he was in the beginning but no longer with those disruptive feelings as he cries out in the night kitchen “‘Cock-a- doodle doo!’” (N. pag) like a rooster proclaiming the coming of the morning. In this way, Mickey reasserts his control of his world and his place in the adult world, so he can now safely “slide...straight into bed cakefree and dried” (N. pag.). On the last page, Mickey’s control over his world and the disruptive feelings of childhood are expressed in his new position in this world, for Sendak writes “and that’s why, thanks to Mickey we have cake every morning” (N. pag.). Thus, as we saw with Max in *Where The Wild Things Are*, Mickey too is an existential hero in that he creates his identity free from the fears and anxiety of childhood. He is the hero who now has control of his world and who can take a constructive place in that world.

Perhaps one of the most disruptive feelings for children is the fear that they will lose a parent, and this is the childhood fear at the center of *Outside Over There*. This book has many similarities to the other two which gives the three books the feeling of a trilogy. The structure is the same, especially the cleansing journey through which each main character passes and the final page resolution. However, *Outside Over There* is a more complex story because unlike the other two, it does have adult characters and goblins who from the beginning of the story are mysterious characters who are as evil as the witch in “Hansel and Gretel”. The problem is stated at the first page where Sendak writes “When Papa was away at sea...” (N. pag.). In this beginning, the sense of a child’s fear of losing a parent is not too intense; however, it will become much stronger later in the story through the picture of a sinking ship. But in this first illustration while Ida, who is holding the baby, and her mother watch from the shore as Papa goes to sea, the suggestion of evil is clearly present in the two goblins sitting in a rowboat.

They are mysterious creatures dressed in black hooded cloaks that cover even their faces so that we never see what they truly look like. They are not going to sea like Papa though they are in a rowboat. Instead they represent the unknown dangers that the father will face and the fears that a child feels at the idea of losing a parent. This sense of dread is reinforced by the gnarled tree on the left of the illustration and the jagged, rocky, and forbidding mountains on the right side of the illustration behind which is a clouded, stormy sky. This sense of dread is reinforced by a black pennant flying from the rowboat. Overall, the initial illustration in the story is intended to portray the fear and anxiety that a child would likely feel if he/she thought he/she was going to lose a parent. Ida's mother simply looks sad and wistful, and throughout the story, she is of little help. All the responsibility for her little sister falls on Ida. The only reassuring image is in the second illustration where a German shepherd (Alsatian) dog lies quietly at the mother's feet. While he looks quite comfortable, he does not seem to notice the goblins carrying a ladder right in front of him. However, this time, the goblins are facing forward, and the reader can see that their faces are a black emptiness which enhances their mysteriousness. Thus, in the beginning of *Outside Over There*, the illustrations are designed to play on the fear a child has of losing one parent. This fear is then enhanced by the faceless goblins whose motives and intentions are not clear.

Ida is given responsibility for her baby sister whom she hopes to put to sleep. "Ida played her wonder horn to rock the baby still--but never watched" (N. pag.). What she should have been watching for was the goblins who came to the window and "pushed their way in and pulled baby out, leaving another all made of ice" (N. pag.). Ida is at first fooled by the ice baby until "the ice thing only dripped and stared, and Ida mad knew goblins had been there" (N. pag.). Ida is angry, of course, because her world has gone out of control and this overwhelming loss of control is emphasized in the illustration by the picture on the wall which now shows a ship, we presume the father's, being dashed against rocks and going down in a terrible storm. The only part of the ship that is above water is the top of the mast illuminated by lightning in the background. Thus, the fear of losing a parent is enhanced by the loss of the baby and the illustration of the ship. Ida loses her father and her sister, the two losses melding into one in this illustration and eliciting Ida's very real anger and fear. Ida's world is totally out of control, a point emphasized by the sun flowers which grow into the room as if they are trying to take over, as the jungle did in Max's room. The presence of the goblins in the story thus makes more sense, for they serve to transfer the fear of losing the father who is at sea in an unmanageable place to focus on the baby who is in the same place as Ida and can possibly be rescued from her fate overcoming the fear that has been emphasized to this point in the story.

Ida does indeed attempt a rescue, and for that purpose, she "snatched her Mama's yellow rain cloak, tucked her horn safe in a pocket, and made a serious mistake" (N. pag.). She does not know it at the time, but her departure to chase down the goblins begins backward. "She climbed backwards out her window into outside over there" (N. pag.). Thus, she begins the journey that is typical of the three books we have been examining, and because she began her journey backwards she is swept past the "robber cave" where her baby sister is held by the goblins (N. pag.). In this crisis, Ida's father steps back into the picture by singing a song from far away, and this song gives Ida the clue she needs to rescue her baby sister. "'If Ida backwards in the rain would only turn around again and catch those goblins with a tune she'd spoil their kidnap honeymoon!" (N. pag.). Ida does as her father instructs in his song. This makes it possible for her to find her baby sister. However, when she does find her, all the goblins have turned into babies that look just like her baby sister, but Ida has a magic trick just like Max had in *Where The Wild Things Are*. Taking out her horn, "she charmed them with a captivating tune" (N. pag.).

As a result of her tune, "The goblins, all against their will, danced slowly first, then faster until they couldn't breathe" (N. pag.). This makes them sick, and they all want to go to bed, "But Ida played a frenzied jig, a hornpipe that makes sailors wild beneath the ocean moon," and "Those goblins pranced so fierce, so fast, they quick churned into a dancing stream" (N. pag.). With the goblins dispatched into a stream, Ida finds her sister as if newborn in an eggshell, and she takes her back to her mother who has a letter from her father who writes "'I'll be home one day, and my brave, bright little Ida must watch the baby and her Mama for her Papa, who loves her always" (N. pag.). In this way, the fear of the loss of the parent is overcome. The amplification of that fear expressed in the loss of her sister is also overcome, and Ida now as the hero is given the task of watching over her family until her father returns. Typical of these books, the final page reminds the reader of the hero's actions and his/her new existential identity, in this case as protector of her family. On the final page, we see Ida playing with her baby sister and the words "Which is just what Ida did" (N. pag.).

Sendak's trilogy presents us with three heroes, each of whom is confronted by the fears, feelings, frustrations and disruptive behaviors typical of childhood. Each takes a transforming journey from which each emerges a hero who has a new identity that allows each to master the fearful feelings and emotions he/she has experienced and to move forward with confidence, to reshape his/her world and gain control of those feelings. For the children this is truly the magic of Maurice Sendak.

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