

MYSTERIOUS MOOD

OVERALL DESIGN AS CONVEYER OF MEANING IN MAURICE SENDAK'S PICTUREBOOK DEAR MILI

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Mysterious mood

*Overall design as conveyer of meaning in
Maurice Sendak's picturebook Dear Mili*

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Abstract

In the 1980s, academic interest increased in the picturebook* as an art form, along with interest in traditional fairy tales. Amid the growing emphasis on visual and multimodal texts, the picturebook is also understood as an ever more complex mode of synergistic form of telling stories. Based on theories of picturebook and multimodal semiotics, the present article examines how immediate impressions of the overall quality and design of Maurice Sendak's picturebook *Dear Mili* create meanings and expectations, and how these meanings relate to deeper analytical perspectives.

Keywords: picturebook, overall mood, multimodal semiotics, peritexts, graphic design, illustration

* I have adopted the spelling picturebook (rather than picture book) to indicate the multimodal entity of pictures, text and book as artifact (see also Sipe, 2011, p. 273).

Introduction

In 1983, a previously unpublished tale by Wilhelm Grimm was discovered (see for instance Kushner, 2003, p. 28). The story was composed in the form of a letter that Grimm wrote in 1815 to a girl named Mili. Already a famous picturebook artist, Maurice Sendak was commissioned to illustrate the fairy tale, and the picturebook was published in 1988. The girl in the story (also called Mili) was sent to a forest by her mother, who was trying to keep her daughter safe from war. Mili walks scared in the woods; followed by her guardian angel, she manages to get to Saint Joseph. She helps him with the daily chores and plays with her guardian angel, who now looks almost like Mili herself. After three days, she has to leave. Saint Joseph gives her a rosebud, promising that she will come back when the bud opens. On returning to her home village, Mili realises that she has been away for thirty years rather than three days. She finds her mother old and blind, but they go to sleep, happy together. The next morning, villagers come to see them and find them dead. The rosebud has unfolded.

My first encounter with Maurice Sendak's *Dear Mili*, a picturebook based on Wilhelm Grimm's text, was in 1988, when the book was also published in Finland. As a young art student, pursuing my first masters thesis on picturebooks, I saw the book in a bookstore and immediately wanted to own it. The appearance of the book was so captivating that it was some weeks before I read the text. Compared to my own expectations of the children's picturebook genre—bright colours and glossy, illustrated covers—the first impression created by this book was exceptionally sophisticated, old-fashioned, mysterious and somehow solemn. It was of course also interesting that I had never heard of this particular tale, written by the famous brothers Grimm.

I returned regularly to the book, to browse and to explore the illustrations. Having read the text and examined the pictures in more detail, the story seemed even more mysterious and complicated. Nevertheless, my first impression, and the mood aroused by the book, persisted and even strengthened. The years went by, and I had children of my own, but I kept *Dear Mili* primarily as my own book. Today, there are annoying coffee stains on the dust jacket of my copy of the book rather than the children's scribbles found in most of the picturebooks we own.

In picturebook research, although it is common to emphasise the status of the picturebook as art, book publishing is also big business, and *Dear Mili* has sold over 200,000 copies (Zipes, 1995, p. 4). Many people choose the books they buy by looking and browsing in bookstores. In the case of a picturebook, overall appearance and design is likely to be especially important, given its nature as a very visual—or, more precisely, multimodal—medium.

In this article, I wanted to explore how one's first impression of a picturebook's overall quality or overall impression conveys meanings, and how these meanings relate to a deeper, more analytical level of multimodal semiotic analysis. My starting point was personal experience—those spontaneous questions aroused by *Dear Mili* concerning how the book by its immediate appearance indicates its overall mood, the potential reader and the type of story, as well as other, perhaps more detailed meanings. Does this single case reveal general features of how a book's design qualities relate to our expectations of that book?

Paratexts, Overall Impression and Multimodal Semiotics

In the late twentieth century, when *Dear Mili* was published, a lot was happening in the field of picturebooks. Academic interest had increased, and there was a visible expansion in terms of audience, themes and techniques. A number of studies focused on the concept of *iconotext* (Hallberg, 1982), classifications of different types of picturebook and the narrative relationships between text and picture. There were also some notions of layout and material design features as potential meaning making resources in picturebooks. (e.g. Schwarcz, 1982; Nodelman, 1990; Rhedin, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott 2001.) At the same time interest in classical fairy tales and their psychological meanings renewed, inspired in many cases by the writings of Bruno Bettelheim. The influence of postmodern aesthetics could also be seen, as parodic, eclectic and multilayered narratives grew in number, and the picturebook was increasingly seen as a unique art form combining text and picture. So-called *crossover* picturebooks (with a dual audience of children and adults) became popular. (Beckett, 2013, pp. 1–17.) These trends are also manifested in the overall quality of book in the case of *Dear Mili*.

In recent studies of picturebooks, the concept of iconotext has broadened to encompass artefactual elements of the book as media form. Among the theories informing picturebook research is Gerard Genette's (2001) concept of paratexts. Paratexts includes all those internal and external factors—beyond the textual content of the book itself—that shape our interpretation of and our attitude to the book. Genette refers to those external paratexts that do not belong to the book artefact as *epitexts*. (Genette, 2001, pp. 4–5.) In the case of *Dear Mili*, for example, some readers may already have known of the publishers' press releases reporting the sensational discovery of an unknown tale by Grimm, translated by the gifted translator Mannheim and illustrated by the famous Maurice Sendak.

The internal paratexts (called *peritexts*) include all those things that make the text a material book, including title, please-inserts, dedications, covers and appendages, typography and illustrations. As Genette described peritexts as they appear in classical French literature, his focus was on literal peritexts—titles, please inserts, dedications and so on. However, he also noted that we must... bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation belong to other types of manifestation: these may be iconic (illustrations), material (for example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book) (Genette, 2001, p. 7).

Since Nikolajeva and Scott (2001, p. 241) observed that “almost nothing has been written about the paratexts of picturebooks such as titles, covers, or endpapers”, a number of articles have been published about endpapers (Sipe & McGuire, 2006) and typography (Serafini & Clausen, 2012), but there is still relatively little research of this kind.

These peritextual features work exactly like *thresholds* of interpretation in an audience's first impressions of a picturebook. Before reading the text or looking at pictures in detail, the reader's first impression of the book is shaped by peritextual features such as illustrations, format, covers, paper, typography, colour scheme—in short, all those spatial, visual and material things that cause the book to exist. Given my particular interest in first impressions of the picturebook, these immediate tactual and visual nonverbal elements are my main focus here.

As meaning can inhere in the very existence of peritexts like title pages, dedications and prefaces, these are likely to affect our preconceptions of a given book. In picturebooks especially, all the design elements convey meanings. For instance, the role of illustrations in picturebooks clearly differs from those in books based on verbal text and linear reading. In picturebooks, illustrations are seen less as peritexts than as part of the verbal-visual “text”. Nodelman (1990, pp.36-37) compares the overall impression of the picturebook to tone of voice—generated by non-textual elements, less by individual features in a given picture than by a general mood or atmosphere. Non-textual elements such as the book’s size and shape, its covers, paper, layout and colour scheme, the use of line and the selected technique (e.g. watercolour or crayon) together create the book’s overall mood, strongly influenced by our previous knowledge of different kinds of books and pictures. According to Nodelman (1990, p. 59), the concept of style differs from aforementioned elements. Style is not a distinct entity: “It is the name we give to the effect of all the aspects of a work of art considered together” Picturebook utilises the preexisting style of a certain period or artist as a source of information, conveying meanings in the context of the artist’s own personal style and the story in question (pp. 59-74).

On the field of visual communication research, the social semiotic theory of visual grammar formulated by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2005) has broadened from visual images to concern also other meaning making resources like layout, typography, colour and texture. In the context of multimodal social semiotics, picturebook can be seen as a communication comprising different modes, among which writing is only one. According to Gunther Kress (2010, p. 79), mode is a socially and culturally shaped and constantly changing semiotic resource for meaning making. Different modes have different semiotic potentials, and the meanings conveyed by them are always dependent on each other: co-present signifying elements can affect the meanings of others by narrowing or specifying—for example, typography with different colours, dimensionality or texture creates different meanings (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 144), or the same typography in books that differ in format or paper creates still different meanings in conjunction with certain pictures. For this reason, I examine the meanings created by all modes together rather than by a single mode such as typography. This is a challenging task in a single article, but my focus on the immediate overall mood created by a multimodal entity justifies an examination of how the most immediate impressions created by book originate. For the same reason, because the overall impression is formed mainly by the visual and tactual modes, no deeper analysis is pursued of the meanings aroused by the verbal text alone, although – after my really first experience of *Dear Mili* – I was aware of this content in the background when analysing the picturebook (see also Nodelman, 1990, p. 36).

To address the complex area of the multimodal text, Frank Serafini (2010) presents his tripartite framework with particular application to the picturebook. Drawing on “diverse fields of inquiry, including semiotics, art theory, visual grammar, communication studies, media literacy, visual literacy and literary theory” (Serafini 2010, p. 85), the framework combines three nested perspectives of interpretation: perceptual, structural and ideological. Where the social semiotic viewpoint emphasises the social formation of meanings (e.g. Kress, 2010, pp. 8–10), Serafini’s model incorporates more universal perceptual qualities: “...before images are interpreted in the social contexts of their production, reception and dissemination, qualities of the image must be perceived, processed, and categorized” (pp. 87-88). The structural perspective focuses on the elements of visual grammar as conventions established to produce meaning through visual and

compositional structures. From an ideological perspective, our meaning making need to be activated by producers and viewers in a given socio-historical context, based on the possibilities offered by perceptual processes and structural interpretations (Serafini, 2010).

All of these theories note the complexity of how picturebook—or any representation that combines different resources for meaning making—works semiotically. Even before reading a book in detail, certain elements related to genre and the implied reader are seen to affect the reader, provoking quite immediate expectations. Some of the meanings aroused, especially those dealing with the overall mood of the story, are more perceptual and universal by nature, as for instance in the association of muted colours with melancholy and sophistication. Other meanings are based more on semiotic conventions of visual structures in pictures and layout or existence of peritexts like the dedication or preface. Additionally, the idea of shared meanings in certain cultures positions me as a Scandinavian (and, more precisely, as Finnish) in a particular way in relation to *Dear Mili*, as will become evident here. Against this theoretical background, I will analyse the immediate overall quality (or mood, or “tone of voice”) aroused by Sendak’s book—the sense of traditionality and historicism, of ambiguity and mysticism, as well as the sombre undertone.

Traditionality Created by Design

Semiotic meanings consist in part of specific connotations formed by the earlier contexts in which they occurred; signs from one era or culture can be imported into another, introducing the original values and ideas into the new context. In the same way, we come to expect different kinds of content in different kinds of book (van Leeuwen, 2006, 146–147; Nodelman 1990, 37). The sense of traditionality informing the overall quality of *Dear Mili* derives largely from this kind of association. This meaning is strong because all the design elements participate in this meaning making.

Nodelman notes that “we expect more distinctive literature from hardcover books with textured, one-color covers and more conventionally popular material from books with luridly colored plastic coatings” (1990, p. 38). Unlike many modern picturebooks that also use the covers, endpapers and traditional front and back matters to enhance the verbal-visual storytelling (see for instance Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 241; Rhedin, 2001, p. 147; Serafini, 2012), the outermost layers of the *Dear Mili* “package” seem more like an old-fashioned novel. The outermost part is the dust jacket (*Figure 1*), which serves as the illustrated cover. Beneath the dust jacket, there is a hard cover with a linen-like, matte cloth bearing a small, blind-stamped symmetrical leaf ornament. On the spine are the names of the writer and illustrator, along with the title printed with gold. Pale endpapers in powder-like shades extend the subdued red colours of the dresses worn by Mili and her mother. (*Figures 1–2*). There follows a traditional title page, a half title page and Sendak’s dedication page, all without illustrations. The letter by Wilhelm Grimm to the girl named Mili, which serves as a preface, is distinguished by cursive/italic type. As cursive can also be seen to connote handwriting, this lends a more personal, informal “typographic tone” (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 148). The presence of all these traditional peritexts, material as well as literal, means that *Dear Mili* looks like belles-lettres: prestigious

and at the same time nostalgic. Additionally, the natural feel of the matte paper, which is typical of Sendak's books, echoes more "authentic" times before the advent of glossy, coated "industrial" papers. Finally, the muted, slightly greyish and brownish colours of the covers and endpapers and the off-white paper of the body matter strengthen the *patina* effect of the book as a whole.

Although, at first glance, *Dear Mili* seems not to use typography in an expressive way, the book's typography and layout impart much of its expectations in terms of genre and ideology. (Figure 3). The classic serif font (based on my investigations, some typeface of Esprit Std – font family) creates the impression of traditional textbook. The idea of an invisible typography, whose main function is to transmit the text content in a neutral way without distraction, has traditionally reigned the area of book typography (See, e.g., Warde 1956; van Leeuwen 2006, 141 *passim*). With the digital turn in graphic design during the 1980s, typography also began to gain more expressive potential, working increasingly like visual imagery rather than as verbal text (e.g. Zelman, 2000, pp. 53–54; Kuusamo, 1996, p. 196). In this light, the typography of *Dear Mili* represents the ideology of traditional book typography.

Ulla Rhedin (2001) has defined the fairy tale picturebook as a type of epic picturebook, in which the role of pictures is illustrative—that is, the pre-existing text can also be understood without the pictures. The epic picturebook has its origins in the tradition of illustrated books, in which the picture depicts an episode in the text. In the most formal classical layout model, resulting initially from printing techniques, text columns were placed on the left-hand page, with picture "plates" on the right. This layout also separated the acts of reading and looking, sustaining the idea of the verbal and the visual as two parallel but non-integrated experiences. Many picturebooks of classical fairy tales use this form of composition. (Rhedin, 2001, pp. 59, 77–78; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, 44.) While picturebook design is always connected to the printing techniques of the period, some elements of previous technical constraints began to be used as meaning-bearing resources, connoting traditionality or historicity. In *Dear Mili*, the traditional layout, separating the linear text and picture plates and framed by white space, awakens this sense of historicism and nostalgia. (Figure 3).

In *Dear Mili*, there is obvious use of the principle of symmetry. Looking at the double pages, the text is placed on the left of the spread and the picture on the right, creating a tension, but the text columns are justified and centered on their pages. The history of centered typography is long, deriving from classical ideas of symmetry as signified by measure and harmony. We have become used to seeing serif fonts in symmetrical layouts and sans serif fonts in asymmetrical ones, but in fact, the conventions of functionalist asymmetry and "traditional" symmetry in typography have provoked almost violent social reactions. In 1930s Germany, the new, asymmetric typography introduced by Jan Tschichold, the pioneer of modern typography, was suppressed as "cultural Bolshevism" while traditional symmetric typography was stigmatised as an expression of power structures, hierarchical thinking and conservatism. In recent Western culture, where we are accustomed to seeing both of these principles in book design, such ideological associations can still be surprisingly strong. (Hochuli & Kinross, 1996, pp. 11–30.) Thus, based on layout and typography, *Dear Mili* evokes expectations for highly literal, conservative content. On the other hand, especially in front matter, where the typeface is used as cursive, the calligraphy-like features of the font are clearly visible, creating associations to handwriting and meaning of historicism.

As well as meanings created by associations with cultural conventions, typography also has meanings that are shaped by our physical experience (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 146). It follows that the typography of the title on the dust jacket of *Dear Mili* can evoke a bundle of intertwined meanings; letters similar to Roman capitals create an atmosphere of ancient culture and text that has been carved into stone, and tine-like serifs and the curved tail of the capital R gain a tension from the co-existence of soft and sharp forms.

The first we see of a picturebook is its cover, which serves to advertise, promote and package the story (Sonzogni, 2011, p. 15). The front dust jacket of *Dear Mili* bears an illustrated cover design (Figure 1). It includes a small, oval vignette-like picture of Mili and her mother, framed symmetrically by decorative flower garlands. Illustrations of this kind were typical of the German Romantic tradition (Dal, 1969, p. 16; Dal, 1975, p. 17), and the framed image-in-image construction creates a window-like passage into the story world. Both the decorative and text elements on the dust jacket of *Dear Mili* (including the title and names of the writer and illustrator) are assigned much more salience spatially than the image depicting the protagonists. The faded colours, the Biedermeier-style dresses of the characters and the symmetric leaf decorations with puttos again create a sense of eclectic Romanticism.

Delving deeper into the book, we find some divergence between the “promise” of the cover and the connotations created by the design of body matter—that is, the story itself. The inner book reveals a much paler design, affording the illustrations a principal role. As a product of the postmodern period, *Dear Mili* also owes something to modernism, as the lack of decoration and the generous use of white space around the text blocks serve to express value and sophistication (Figure 3). While modernism originally employed white space for functional simplicity, it came to connote sophisticated luxury in the bourgeois modernism of the 1900s (Robertson, 1994, pp. 61–65; Pracejus et al., 2006, pp. 82–89). Paradoxically, the symmetrical flower ornaments on the covers also echo the connotations of high value associated with decorative book design before modernism (see also Hochuli & Kinross, 1996, 11–30). Together, the natural, faded effect in materials and colours, the decorative dust jacket and cloth covers with blind stamped decoration and pinch of gold on the spine, the literal peritexts, the classical serif font, the traditional layout and the use of empty space around the text and illustrations create an old-fashioned, romantic mood with the overtones of conservative sophistication.



Figure 1. Dust jacket, front cover.

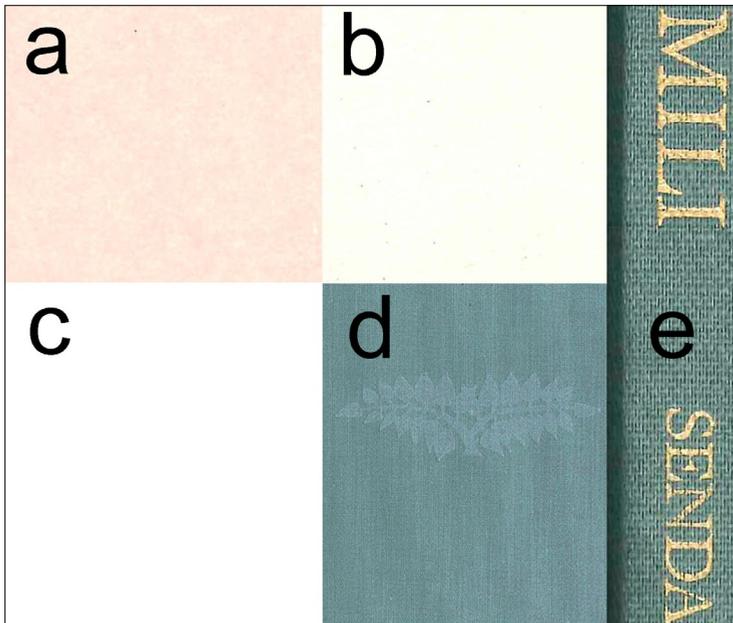


Figure 2. Peritexts: colours and materials

- a. Endpapers
- b. Dustjacket, background colour
- c. Body matter paper
- d. Cloth cover with the blind stamped ornament
- e. Spine



Figure 3. Layout and typography.

Mysterious Mood and Muted Tones— Colours, Composition and Style of Images

The most salient elements in *Dear Mili* are undoubtedly the images. Pictures are seen first because of their natural attractiveness (Nodelman, 1990, p.181), and spatially, they dominate the printed space of this book. Except the full spread illustrations, illustrations fill the page on the right of the spread, which according to visual grammar and our convention of reading from left to right is the place of the “new”, often used for visual key information (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 179-185). In terms of the style and technique of Sendak’s other works, the illustration style in *Dear Mili* is very similar to his earlier book *Outside Over There* (1981). Tony Kushner (2003, p. 18) describes the illustrations in *Outside Over There* as “almost hyperreal... like photographic dream-plates—paradoxically cavernously deep and hard-surfaced, impenetrably finished”. The matte paper used in *Dear Mili* intensifies the sense of three-dimensionality, various levels of light and darkness; the reader is looking into the depth of the forest, and the pictures are like windows that penetrate the two-dimensional surface of the page, making maximal use of the aesthetics of picture plate as “hole image”. (Nodelman, 1990, pp. 40–41; Moebius 1986, 150.) The emphasis on static solidity rather than active line creates the illustrations’ dreamlike stagnation (Nodelman 1990; pp. 73, 117). With regard to Sendak’s personal and persisting style, his characters are somehow heavily built with their big heads, hands and feet (see for instance Kushner, 2003, pp. 9–10, 18). In *Dear Mili*, they seem particularly slow, often sitting and a little hunched or remaining immobile (*Figure 4*). Only three of the fifteen pictures show Mili walking; even then, she appears slow, with both feet on the ground (see also Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2009, p. 6).

In picturebooks, there are some typical ways of creating a narrative rhythm. In books that emphasise fluid linearity—as in Sendak’s famous *Where the Wild Things Are*—the horizontal format is well utilised, with the text running below illustrations that fill the whole spread, without frames. Unlike standalone works of fine art, image compositions in picturebooks are often unbalanced, adding dynamism to the narrative by tempting the reader to turn the page to see what will happen next. For instance, in *Where the Wild Things Are*, the three points at the end of the last sentence of the spread work as just this kind of page turner. (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, pp. 152–153.) In *Dear Mili*, the use of white space as picture frame and the black hairline that frames the text spreads can be seen as tools for achieving visual balance—a calming, static symmetry. At the same time, they also influence the rhythm of reading. As with layout, the use of framing elements in composition serves to punctuate the verbal text (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 176), creating a pause or caesura that allows the reader to concentrate, looking at the pictures or reflecting on the meaning of the text. In this way, the rhythm of reading of *Dear Mili* is slow rather than hastening.

In terms of form, *Dear Mili*’s almost square format creates less tension than vertical or horizontal formats, especially as most of the pictures are the size of one page. In those pictures that fill the whole double page spread, there is usually some element on the gutter—a big flower or a fruit tree, for instance—that divides the horizontal format of the picture (*Figure 5*). Most of the pictures are balanced compositions, often construed by two characters set diametrically and framed by vegetation, cottage structures or the arches of ruins. As Gregory Maguire (2003, p.

670) notes, Sendak, who was also a scenic designer, had a penchant for tableaux vivants. These precisely designed, arrested scenes, in which the characters are caught at a certain moment, create a dream-like stagnation (see also Nodelman 1990, pp. 53, 73, 117). Together with the sense of depth and intimacy created by the three dimensional solidity of forms and strengthened by the matte paper, the dynamism of the pictures is directed inwards rather than onwards; it is psychological rather than physiological, encouraging the reader to attempt to access the characters' enigmatic minds.

Colour as a semiotic mode is construed in the complex interaction between meanings that are very local, sometimes almost individual, and those that are global and sometimes almost natural (van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 345). As colour is closely related to affects (e.g. Nodelman, 1990, p. 48) it is an especially significant semiotic resource in first impressions of overall quality. In the pictures in *Dear Mili*, the dominant hues are the natural colours of the flourishing forested landscape and the rural buildings: different shades of green, brown, grey and red. While usually using red in flowers, Sendak also selected red for the clothes of Mili and her mother, adding energy to a prosaic scheme of hues. In addition to hue, colour offers value and saturation as semiotic resources, and these are perhaps more significant than hue for the overall mood of *Dear Mili*. In general, light and dark are fundamental experiences, shared by all human beings. In the pictures emphasising the dark shadows of the forest and the night and evening scenes, the predominant colour values are dark. The overall appearance is darker and more muted than the real hues because of generously used dark, thin lines of hatching, that makes the water colour technique look like an engraving. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the key affordance of saturation lies in its ability to express emotive "temperatures": "High saturation may be positive, exuberant, adventurous, but also vulgar or garish. Low saturation may be subtle and tender, but also cold and repressed, or brooding and moody" (2002, pp. 355–356). In *Dear Mili*, the overall emphasis is on less saturated, muted colours, which – together with desaturating effect of matte, off-white paper – strengthen the patinated, sophisticated atmosphere while adding a sense of brooding, melancholy and mysterious twilight (See colour bars in figures 1, 4, 7 & 9).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2002, pp. 349–50) believed that the colour schemes now used in interior design or in software like PowerPoint, for example, may gradually become more meaningful than individual hues. Indeed, the aim of such schemes in a design context is to create an overall style that engenders certain meanings. In this sense, the same colour scheme can be seen throughout *Dear Mili*, from paper and covers to illustrations. Lighter and with only with a hint of colour, the paper, cover and endpapers connote old-fashioned sophistication. In the illustrations, the colours remain muted but darker and a little more saturated, evoking more intensive meanings of melancholy and mysticism. Compared to the palette of pure colors that has become the signifier for ideologies of modernity, the colour scheme of *Dear Mili* is closer to the hybrid colours associated with postmodern ideologies (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 356).

In pictures, we tend to look first at objects that occupy a central position or that are large in size or bright or diverse in colour. Because of their cultural importance, we also tend to focus on humans or animals, and especially on their faces. (Nodelman, 1990, p. 75; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 177.) Most of the pictures in *Dear Mili* are composed to include only a thin strip of sky (if any), right at the top of the image. With no clear vanishing point, these pictures create the effect that characters (even those in central positions) are hidden deep in the forest. Similarly, giant leaves and flowers, painted in almost surrealist detail, seem to fill the

entire picture space. The most saturated, salient colors tend to be used for certain flowers rather than characters, contributing to the forest's important role in the book's overall mood (see also Bosmajian, 1995; Perrot, 1991, p. 259).

The pictures vary from medium long shots (showing the whole figure but filling most of the frame) to very long shots, where the characters are shown at long distance and less than half the height of the frame. Characters are most often shown in profile; in some pictures, Mili has turned her back to the viewer. In combination with the use of framing white space around the pictures, the long distance between characters and reader has an alienating effect, which is strengthened by the oblique viewing angle. As noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2005, p. 136), "The oblique angle says, 'What you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with.' The pictures in which Mili is shown from behind are more complicated. This can be interpreted as the most detached relationship between character and reader; on the other hand, it indicates trust, as the viewing angle allows the reader to share the character's viewpoint. In this way, the reader is invited to follow Mili deep into the forest while she retains her distance. (2005, pp. 117-140; see also Bosmajian, 1995.)

Through vectors made by gestures or by the gaze, images can create interpersonal meanings between the depicted characters or between the reader and the characters. In pictures where characters look directly into the viewer's eyes, contact is established. Conversely, no contact is made when characters do not look directly at the viewer but remain objects of contemplation while the viewer is an "invisible onlooker". (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 117-119.) In *Dear Mili*, there is some eye contact between the characters; Mili and her mother look intensely at each other as her mother sends her daughter to the forest, emphasising the importance of the moment. There is similar but less intense eye contact between Mili and Saint Joseph and between Mili and her guardian angel. The absence of eye contact between characters and reader is also meaningful. When characters turn to face the viewer, their gaze is always directed elsewhere in the environment, often towards nothing special, or their eyelids are half-closed, gazing contemplatively to nowhere. (*Figures 4, 6 and 7*). This creates an evasive effect. In the double-page picture of Mili (*Figure 6*), sitting in the ominous forest with animated trees, with a group of people crossing the bridge in the background, Mili seems to gaze inward into her own mind, oblivious to her environment. Again, these distant or contemplative gazes deepen the overall mystery of the pictures. There is one instance of direct eye contact with a character, as the dog lying between Mili and Saint Joseph stares intently towards the reader. However, as the dog is unable to speak, it remains a mute witness of the inexplicable story (see also Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, pp. 168, 227-228). (*Figure 7*).

The cooperative action of different elements of design in creating contrary effects achieves a paradoxical tension (Nodelman, 1990, pp. 41, 43). *Dear Mili* exhibits such a tension between intimacy and involvement, created by the matte paper and the impression of depth, and the alienating effect created by the picture frames, the long and medium shot sizes, the oblique point of view and gazes that evade the reader. Coupled with the dreamlike stagnation derived from the three-dimensional technique and static composition, as well as the muted color palette, this tension defines the overall quality of the pictures; while inviting the reader to share their world, they appear to guard their inner secrets, which are presumed to be ambiguous and sombre.



Figure 4.



Figure 5. Full spread.



Figure 6. Full spread with colours.



Figure 7. One page -illustration (recto).

Romantic Quotes and Different Levels of Story

In 1980s graphic design, history made a comeback, in a period that has been called the “decade of appropriation” (Kalman et al., 1994, p. 25; Heller, 1994, pp. 34–38). Around the same time, classical fairy tales again became popular in the picturebook area. Thoroughly illustrated picturebooks of single fairy tales were one manifestation of this “market-driven renaissance” (Hearne, 1986); many of these books were illustrated in ways that evoked immediate associations with earlier styles in the history of art (see for instance Beckett, 2013, p.147).

In contrast to fine art, illustration is less concerned with expression of the artist’s personality, and illustrators commonly “quote” the styles of different artists or of different historical periods to communicate the ideology, attitudes and atmosphere of the original style in the new or contemporary context (Nodelman, 1990, pp. 60–64). Known as a brilliant “quoter” of styles, Sendak adopts a very different style in *Dear Mili* than, for instance, in works where he used a more cartoon-like style; the German Romantic art of Philipp Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich are most often mentioned as sources of inspiration (see Bosmajian, 1995; Kushner, 2003, pp. 18, 28). Style is created not only by technique but also by the objects presented: the ruins, gloomy forests, roses, monks and puttos in Sendak’s pictures are typical motifs in Romantic art. Following the rationality of the Enlightenment, Romanticism looked towards mysticism and the dark, irrational sources of past history, fantasy and emotion, where dreams were more interesting than reality and nature, and children represented creativity and purity. As well as the dust jacket design mentioned above, compositions in which the cottage, surrounded by creepers, creates an architectural frame for the characters between the outer and inner space echo the Biedermeier style of fairy tale illustrations, such as those by Ludwig Richter (*Figures 7–8*). Again, almost identical elements can be found in pictures made by Sendak and the German romantic prints of Carl Wilhelm Kolbe the Elder; the ruins in Kolbe’s work have been replaced by Jewish gravestones, but the details of vegetation are similar (*Figures 9–10*). Also the animated ghost trees in *Dear Mili* are reminiscent of those produced by Arthur Rackham, another famous illustrator of Grimm’s tales at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century.

The very personal features of Sendak’s style, seen in most of his works—the big feet of characters and their somehow stocky physique—do not make them humorous or cartoon-like. At most, they seem more gentle and childish, but they retain their contemplative seriousness. By using the style of the German Romantics, Sendak confirms the origins of the tale. In his preface to *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Wilhelm Grimm described the tales as “last echoes of pagan myths... A world of magic is opened up before us, one which still exists among us in secret forests, in underground caves, and in the deepest sea, and it is still visible to children” (as cited in Lerer, 2008, p. 212). At the same time, because the illustrations emphasise the irrational, mystical, dreamlike and subjective tones of romanticism, they dispel the sometimes moral, didactic tone of Grimm’s text.

As a product of its time, *Dear Mili* shares features associated with the postmodern picturebook. However, it stretches the limits of the genre, including the age group of potential readers and therefore the themes and topics addressed (Beckett, 2012). The book is constructed in such a way that the same story supports several layers of interpretation, according to the reader’s age and knowledge. In the book’s pictures—which Tony Kushner, a Sendak specialist, regards as “the darkest work in the Sendak canon” (2003, p. 28)—another kind of story is hidden, which

starts to reveal itself when the images are explored in greater detail. For instance, in one picture where Mili has left home and sits in the forest, some of the tree branches lying on the forest floor prove to be human limbs (*Figure 11*). Then, behind the forest, there are poorly dressed people crossing a bridge; behind them is a rugged tower, newer than the cottages of Mili's home village. The darkest level of the story become apparent when the reader notes the similarity between the dead branches and documentary images of Jewish victims of concentration camps; the tower in the background is the camp watch tower, and the people on the bridge are prisoners. Told only in pictures by visual intertexts, interpretation requires previous knowledge of the Holocaust (see also Steig & Campbell-Wilson, 1994).

Dear Mili does not share all the characteristics of postmodern picturebooks, in that the book's use of the genre's typical tricks is quite discreet and not an end in itself. Nonetheless, the visual intertextuality and pastiche create ambiguities of meaning, at the same time hiding and revealing the story's darkest level. It seems clear that after an already long career as a children's book artist, Sendak wanted to stretch the limits of both theme and audience (see also Kushner, 2003, pp. 24–33), leading to this overall mood, so ambiguous and intrinsically mysterious.

For those readers more familiar with Sendak and his art, there is a further explanation for some other inexplicable details. For instance, a full spread illustration depicting Saint Joseph, Mili and her guardian angel in the garden is—simultaneously—the Garden of Eden and a Jewish graveyard (*Figure 5*). A group of children can be seen in the background, like a choir conducted by a man resembling Mozart in his red tailcoat. This visual fragment references Sendak's passion for Mozart's music; in a 2004 interview with Bill Moyers, Sendak said, "I know that if there's a purpose for life, it was for me to hear Mozart" (<https://vimeo.com/33284145>). The choir, in turn, derives from a photograph of Jewish children, taken days before they were sent to Auschwitz (Kushner, 2003, p. 28). With the revelation of this most ultimate tragic theme, the pervasive dark ambiguity of the book seems finally to be fully explained.



Figure 8. Ludwig Richter (1803-1884): *Für's Haus: Im Winter*.

<http://www.goethezeitportal.de/wissen/illustrationen/anthologien-und-sammlungen/ludwig-richter-fuers-haus-im-winter/richter-winter-2.html>

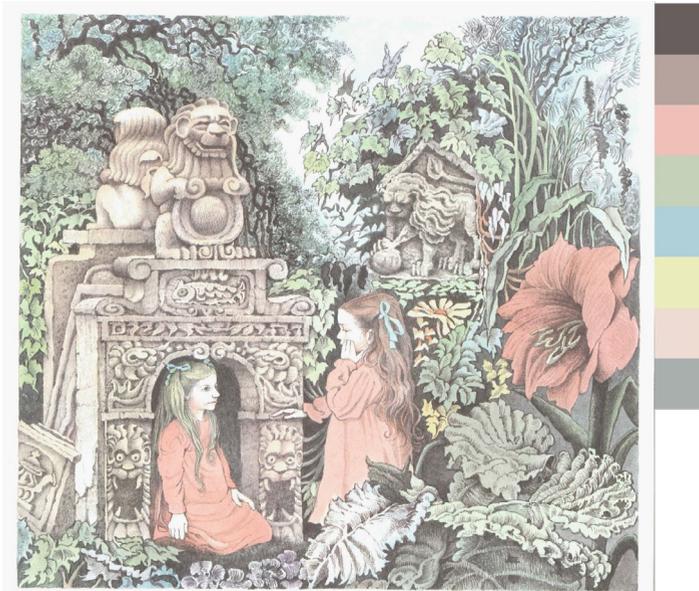


Figure 9. One page –illustration (recto) with colours.



Figure 10. Carl Wilhelm Kolbe the Elder:

Youth Playing a Lyre to a Maiden by a Fountain (c. 1803)

Etching and drypoint

Plate: 16 1/4 x 20 15/16 inches (41.2 x 53.2 cm)

Sheet: 18 11/16 x 23 11/16 inches (47.4 x 60.2 cm)

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Purchased with funds contributed by Marion Boulton Stroud, 1984

1984-88-1

Conclusion

While it is challenging to analyse in a single article how the total design of a picturebook serves to convey meaning, this seems the best approach to comprehending how the different elements of design interact. Semiotic resources like typography, layout, image and colour entail a countless set of sub-factors that in turn contribute to the meanings evoked. The different modes intertwine; typography deploys a certain colour, which can exert an effect in itself or as part of a scheme, and so on.

In *Dear Mili*, the sense of traditionality is achieved by traditional literal peritexts, cloth covers and dust jacket, typographic symmetry and traditional typeface, and a layout that separates images from text and uses white space to frame the illustrations. The faded, muted colour scheme and the matte paper further connote traditionality and, along with the use of white space, a sense of old-fashioned refinement. Taking care not to alienate potential readers, the illustrated dust jacket uses the ornamental Biedermeier style to hint at content that is more gentle and harmless than the story turns out to be.

The sense of mystery and darkness of tone is achieved mainly in illustrations; by Sendak's use of colour and visual structure. Static compositions strengthened by painterly technique that emphasises plasticity combine to create a dreamlike, contemplative atmosphere. This is further consolidated by viewing angles and the characters' shrouded gaze. Muted colour tones make the overall mood melancholic. The use of German Romantic print style conveys a sense of history and the Romantic ideology.

All of these qualities become immediately apparent to the reader. Created by different modes acting together, the overall mood serves the ultimate theme of the story, supported by visual narration. This emerges gradually in the pictures; Romantic and historical associations are engendered by stylistic quotations (visual intertexts) and the objects depicted: a fairy tale forest, giant flowers, angels and a monk-like Saint Joseph. The use of pastiche, involving strange fragments of concentration camps, Mozart and the victims of Holocaust, reveals a parallel story that is much more serious than that originally told by Grimm.

Discussion

Reflecting on fairy tale publishing, Betsy Hearne (1986) noted that federal funding to schools and libraries in America dropped in the mid-1970s, forcing publishers to turn to bookstore trade. Available at no expense, fairy tales proved to be a low-risk solution. Crystallising the business case for picturebook publishing, Hearne declared that "Graphics carry the day when adults select on sight" (p. 21).

The sense of traditionality is most obvious in the design of the outermost layers of peritexts, hinting at belles-lettres, the traditional gift book and a sophisticated adult audience. This harmless Romanticism does not reveal the dark side of *Dear Mili*.

As is typical of fairy tales, the verbal text of *Dear Mili* is quite laconic, leaving open the possibility of different visual representations. As an epic picturebook, it follows in the tradition of the illustrated book. However, while picturebook text and illustrations are made by the same

artist or involve close co-operation of writer and illustrator, the epic picturebook poses certain specific challenges. Separation of text and pictures—and, by implication, the acts of reading and looking—is clearly visible in the layout. The static elements in the style and the composition of the images are typical of hole images, which means that the narrative rhythm in epic picturebooks often drags. In the case of *Dear Mili*, the book turns this challenge to its advantage, directing the tension inwards. The reader becomes absorbed in the depth of the story (in the psychological sense too), trying to understand the inner mystery that hides below the surface.

At an ideological level, *Dear Mili* can be seen as a postmodern interpretation of Romantic ideology. If the style of a certain period can be used to express the spirit of that time in a new context, Sendak's choice of German Romanticism is not a random decision. According to Hauser (2005), Romanticism had its roots in the "torment of the world". As for Jewish people, as for the new generation of the Romantic period, "the feeling of homelessness and loneliness became the fundamental experience..." (p. 160). In Sendak's post-modern story, an escape into past history is not entirely possible, and fragments of the tragic reality of a later age exudes through the images.

It has been widely suggested that postmodern picturebooks, laden as they are with cultural codes, sophisticated allusions and metaphors, are really intended for a more learned, literary adult audience (e.g. Rhedin, 2001, pp. 12–13). In this sense, Sendak's works could easily be seen as a symbolic code to be broken, taking account of previous research and Sendak's own commentaries (Steig & Campbell-Wilson, 1994). On the other hand, as children nowadays are familiar with various media forms, they seem paradoxically well aware of the book's structural recourses for meaning making (Crocker, 2011, p. 54; Mackey & Shane, 2013, p. 17). In short, the "postmodern" resides not only in the form of the narrative but also in the way it is read.

International picturebooks are translated and published in multiple countries, sometimes printed in the same place at the same time. From the social semiotic point of view, the interpretation of multimodal representations depends on culture and period and is never fixed: "The more pronounced the cultural differences, the greater are the differences in the resources of representation and the practices of their use" (Kress, 2010, pp. 7–8). In analysing *Dear Mili* as multimodal representation, it is important to possess "inwardness" in respect of the culture that produced it. Although picturebooks are published and marketed globally, there are still cultural differences in how semiotic resources are used. For me, the use of dust jacket and cloth covers connotes "high writing" and adult novels, as well as something old-fashioned, because in Finland, cover texts and illustrations are now commonly printed straight onto the cover (see also Kaataja, personal communication, 18 February 2016; Poskela, personal communication 26 February 2016). The traditional, literal peritexts of the front matter also convey strong associations with high literary adult content, in part because of my inwardness in Finnish culture. In American picturebooks, these elements of traditional book design are also more commonly used in picturebooks. It is commonly the case that peritextual features of the picturebook—paper, covers, layout and so on—can vary from edition to edition (Nodelman, personal communication, 28 February 2015; Happonen, 2001, pp. 11–14). If we take the semiotic resources of overall design seriously as an integral part of the story, the story itself changes each time these features are changed. So, for example, the American custom of pasting a gold medal on the cover illustration of Caldecott Medal winners surely conveys fame and market value. Overall, the fact that the design of *Dear Mili* is so similar in both Finnish and American versions indicates

that publishers have paid attention to design as a conveyer of meaning. Additionally, the typographic designer's name is mentioned on the copyright page, which is by no means inevitable, at least in Finnish book publishing.

In terms of cultural differences in how we use and interpret semiotic resources in picturebook design, *Dear Mili* is a real melting pot of cultures. Sendak, a Jewish American artist, visualises the Jewish trauma of the Holocaust in his illustrations for a German tale, which in turn has its origins in German Romanticism, which in turn generated an ideal of patriotism that later echoed even in National Socialist imagery (Bosmaijian, 1995, p. 192). As the peritextual features of *Dear Mili* are faithful to North American conventions of picturebook design, my interpretation of the book is inevitably marked by some outwardness. In this regard, Steig and Campbell (1994, p. 122) pointed out that illustrating (or, according to multimodal point of view, illustrating and designing) someone else's text is itself a rewriting, and any interpretation is therefore a rewriting of a rewriting. Granted these concerns, I believe the overall quality of *Dear Mili* conveys very affective, universal meanings—or can you imagine someone describing their first reading of Sendak's book as hilarious, racy, modern, unambiguous or shallow?

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