**The deployment of myth towards childhood representation in Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Outside Over There***

**Selimi Glykeria**

Ph.D., Department of English Language and Literature, NKUA

EFL state schoolteacher

glikeriaselimi@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This article aims to explore Maurice Sendak’s response to the problematic of the depiction of childhood through the deployment of myth in his picture books *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and *Outside Over There* (1981). Myths encourage children to employ their imagination in their attempt to make sense of the world and find their place in it, as they make their gradual and by no means painless transition from childhood to adulthood. As a writer and illustrator of children’s stories, Sendak was devoted to the truthful representation of the joyous but also the difficult and less pleasant aspects of a child’s life, questioning the pervasive myth of the idealized innocent child. Influenced by William Blake’s artistic style and his mythopoeia aiming at the interpretation of the conflicting psychological aspects of human existence, Sendak makes use of the mythic motif of the adventure journey to illustrate the challenges of the child’s course towards maturation. Max, the child protagonist in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and Ida, Max’s female counterpart and central character in *Outside Over There* (1981)set out for their private Odyssey, an exploration of the darker aspects of childhood and an act of balancing the contradictory forces constituting a concept of childhood inclusive of conflicting, heterogeneous features.

***Keywords*:** myth, childhood, child-adult power relation

**Περίληψη**

Ο στόχος του παρόντος άρθρου είναι να διερευνήσει την ανταπόκριση του Maurice Sendak στην προβληματική της απεικόνισης της παιδικής ηλικίας μέσω της ανάπτυξης του μύθου στα εικονογραφημένα βιβλία του *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) και *Outside Over There* (1981). Οι μύθοι ενθαρρύνουν τα παιδιά να χρησιμοποιήσουν τη φαντασία τους στην προσπάθειά τους να κατανοήσουν τον κόσμο και να βρουν τη θέση τους σε αυτόν, καθώς κάνουν τη σταδιακή και καθόλου ανώδυνη μετάβασή τους από την παιδική ηλικία στην ενηλικίωση. Ως συγγραφέας και εικονογράφος παιδικών ιστοριών, ο Sendak ήταν αφοσιωμένος στην αληθινή αναπαράσταση των χαρούμενων, αλλά και των δύσκολων και λιγότερο ευχάριστων πτυχών της ζωής του παιδιού, αμφισβητώντας τον διαδεδομένο μύθο του εξιδανικευμένου αθώου παιδιού. Επηρεασμένος από το καλλιτεχνικό ύφος του William Blake και τη μυθοποιία του με στόχο την ερμηνεία των αντικρουόμενων ψυχολογικών πτυχών της ανθρώπινης ύπαρξης, ο Sendak χρησιμοποιεί το μυθικό μοτίβο του ταξιδιού περιπέτειας για να απεικονίσει τις προκλήσεις της πορείας του παιδιού προς την ωρίμανση. Ο Max, ο παιδικός πρωταγωνιστής στο *Where the Wild Things Are* και η Ida, η γυναικεία αντίστοιχη και κεντρικός χαρακτήρας του Max στο *Outside Over There* ξεκινούν για την προσωπική τους Οδύσσεια, μια εξερεύνηση των πιο σκοτεινών πτυχών της παιδικής ηλικίας και μια πράξη εξισορρόπησης των αντιφατικών δυνάμεων που διαμορφώνουν και ορίζουν την παιδική ηλικία ως μια έννοια συμπεριληπτική αντικρουόμενων, ετερογενών χαρακτηριστικών.

***Λέξεις-κλειδιά*:** μύθος, παιδική ηλικία, σχέση εξουσίας/δύναμης παιδιού-ενήλικου

**Introduction**

“Myth” or “mythos” as is the word in Greek, which means a story explaining the history of a tribe, culture or nation, is according to Joseph Campbell “apparently coeval with mankind. As far back as we have been able to follow the broken, scattered, earliest evidence of the emergence of our species signs have been found which indicate that mythological aims and concerns were already shaping the arts and the world of Homo sapiens” (Campbell, 1972, p. 21). Myth based on both fact and fantasy demonstrates the human need to unravel the inner meaning of the universe and life (Watts, 1953, p. 7); it has significantly contributed to the development of children’s literature and its substantial twofold role in shaping children’s perception of the realities depicted in its context as well as the exploration and negotiation of mainstream childhood ideologies. Myths encourage children to employ their imagination in their attempt to make sense of the world and find their place in it, as they make their gradual and by no means painless transition from childhood to adulthood.

Through the use and variation of archetypal cultural symbols, Sendak reveals the central themes in *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Outside Over There*; the child character’s need to come to terms with the process of maturation established on the complexity of the relationship of fantasy and wildness to realism, reason and socially accepted forms of behaviour; the themes of loss, self-transformation and the parent-child power struggle constructing the subtext in both picture books. Max, the child protagonist in Sendak’s iconic picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* is a mischievous boy determined to turn upside down his home, the domestic chronotope under the rule of the maternal authority. Due to his behaviour, he is severely punished by being sent supperless to the exile of his room which is magically transformed into a wild jungle functioning as a portal to the fantasy land of Where the Wild Things Are. This tiny, wolf-suited hero is now an adventurer and king-to-be of the mythic-like, anthropomorphic inhabitants of the Wild Land. He sets out for his own, private Odyssey, an exploration of the repressed, darker aspects of childhood as well as the conflicting, heterogeneous features constituting childhood. Ida, Max’s female counterpart, is the protagonist in *Outside Over There* which Sendak considered the closure of a trilogy based on the progressive movement of the developing hero from *Where the Wild Things Are* to *In the Night Kitchen* and *Outside Over There* (Hayward, 1987, p. 97). Although Sendak’s heroes are usually boys, *Outside Over There* is largely a female story with young Ida moving, as Dana Heller phrases it, “against the winds of great legend that recount the adventures of gallant male heroes” (1990, p. 1). Ida’s father is away at sea while her emotionally detached mother spends her time alone leaving Ida responsible for taking care of her baby sister. While Ida plays her horn, the goblins enter the room and kidnap her sister replacing the baby with an ice sculpture. When Ida realizes the horrific truth, she heroically embarks on a quest to save her sister from the terrible fate of becoming a “nasty goblin’s bride” (Sendak, 1989). Literally stepping outside the limits of the domestic sphere, which is connected to the subservient, passive role of women in patriarchal culture, but at the same time following the paternal advice carefully mapping the girl’s action against the goblins, Ida defeats the threatening dark forces she encounters and triumphantly returns her sister home, her noble quest successfully completed.

**Myth and Fantasy in the Land of the Wild Things**

The first book of the trilogy makes a bold statement about the power of fantasy in shaping childhood through the visual and textual illustration of Max’s unruly behaviour in relation to the monstrous wildness of the anthropomorphic creatures inhabiting the fantastical land of Wild Things. The presence of the hybrid Wild Things, which clearly allude to mythological creatures like the eagle-headed Griffin and the part-man, part-bull Minotaur (Singer, 2011, p. 25), plays an important part in Max’s journey towards self-realization. The complicated nature of the Wild Things blurring the distinctions between the human and the elusive Other simultaneously delineates and questions the binary opposition of the human body to the non-human body (Berger, 2009, p. 5; Nikolajeva, 2016, p. 135). The wild rumpus scene, though wordless, is highly expressive of the fluidity of boundaries separating Max from the monsters. The illustration of Max’s look and facial expressions manifests beyond doubt that he has become a Wild Thing himself undermining his position of power over the beasts as it is the beastly aspect of his selfhood that seems to have taken control of him. Max’s exploration of the cultural Other has reached a culminating point; the self/other opposition is overturned and Max’s attempt to control the Wild Things becomes an attempt to control a part of himself because the monsters represent the uncivilized, emotional aspect of his individuality that cannot be repressed but must be acknowledged and embraced (Cech, 2015; Hindle, 2017, p. 62; Nuzum, 2004, p. 211). If, according to Maria Nikolajeva’s argumentation, “anthropomorphizing is the learning brain’s strategy to make sense of the world” (2016, p. 135), the anthropomorphic, mythic Wild Things are Max’s way of realizing his own identity.

The synergistic relationship of the text and the illustrations in the double spreads following Max’s arrival at the land of the wild further illuminates the complications of the process of self-identity exploration for the young protagonist as he enters a world of fantasy contesting the rules of reason he has been expected to comply with at home. The verbal text gradually shrinks while the illustrations expand in a manner analogous to the amplification of the power of fantasy which sweeps over reality (Spitz, 1990, p. 125). As several theorists have pointed out, William Blake’s ideology lies at the infrastructure of Sendak’s work with the structural tension between the text and the image symbolizing the contrast between reality, the civilized world Max has left behind, and the wild, fantasy land he has been transported to through dream or imagination (Singer, 2011, p. 20). The two artists’ common practice of creating a gap between the words and their accompanying dreamlike illustrations functions in the manifestation of the centrality of imagination as an active force in the creation of the world. As soon as Max magically tames the Wild Things and is crowned their king, he announces the commencement of the wild rumpus. The scenes of the monsters’ parade unfold in three consecutive double spreads of illustrations entirely devoid of words in which Max is represented as the ultimate wild child embracing his natural instincts in the performance of a ritual glorifying the power of the omnipresent nature. The visual text resonates with William Mitchell’s reflection concerning “the redemption of imagination” through acceptance of the notion that the creation of our world is in many ways the result of the dialogue between language and image with nature being a vital part of this dialectic (Mitchell, 1984, pp. 531-532); thus, the image emphatically pays homage to William Blake’s themes and ideas regarding nature and imagination and the special bond between them as “to the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself” (Keynes, 1980, p. 62).

Max’s ambivalent position between the fantasy world of the Wild Land and the orderly reality of the civilized world is powerfully reflected in the theme of cannibalism embedded in myths and folklore which is deployed by Sendak in order to highlight Max’s position on the borders of his socially constructed identity. Karen Coats in *Maurice Sendak’s Theater of the Abject* argues that there is a persistent oral-sadistic drive in the fantasy of the abject addressing the child character’s feelings of anger and disappointment due to his rejection by the parental figure (2002). However, Max’s cannibalistic impulse also establishes the child character’s rebellious nature, and his resolution to resist and revolt against parental authority. “I’LL EAT YOU UP!” (Sendak, 2013) he menacingly answers to his mother taking the reader back to the ancient Greek myth of the Titan Cronus and his son God Zeus, in which the motif of cannibalism emerges as an act of preservation of power against potential rivals. Greek mythology displays an extensive collection of stories in which appalling parents mistreat, abuse and even cannibalize their children who, in turn, grow up only to reproduce the same twisted pattern of behaviour (Stuart, 2011, pp. 104-105). In the case of Cronus and Zeus when the latter was born his father intended to eat him up exactly as he had done with his other children so as to ensure he would maintain his position of authority. Zeus was nevertheless saved and eventually *did* turn against his father and overthrew him fulfilling the prophecy according to which Cronus would be dethroned by his child. Max’s mother in *Where the Wild Things Are* deprives him of supper punishing him for having challenged her authority; Max declares that he can be, in Sendak’s own words, “barbaric, cannibalistic and ruthless” (Hershenson, 1992) in response and retaliates against this display of power by threatening to eat her up instead, setting his mother up as the rival Other that he has to subvert to become King of his own fate.

**Ida’s journey to maturity through the challenge of the mythical labyrinth**

Shifting focus to the last book of Sendak’s trilogy, the analysis of Ida’s quest outside over there for the salvation of her baby sister from the nasty goblins sheds light on the complex narrative revolving around the equally complicated relationship between the parent and the child, that is Ida and her mother and Ida and her father, which lies at the very core of the story. From the beginning of the book, the visual text is suggestive of the problematic relationship of the daughter and the mother, the latter depicted sitting in the arbour with her body positioned in the opposite direction, away from her two children, her eyes fixed on the ship which can be discerned in the background of the picture, and which has taken Ida’s father away from home. In the following double spreads where the goblins kidnap the baby and Ida ventures on her rescue mission, the absence of the maternal figure underlines the emotional gap separating the mother from the daughter; in this manner, the fragility of their connection is pinpointed, but at the same time sufficient explanation is provided of the fact that it is young Ida rather than the aloof adult in the family who takes up the responsibility of protecting the baby. In this context, Ida’s position is shifted from being a child, the elder daughter, to becoming an adult, a surrogate mother. In relating Ida’s search for her lost sister and the mother-daughter relationship underpinning it, *Outside Over There* alludes to the archetypal myth of Demeter and Persephone whose subject is none other than the bond of the two women, the mother, and the daughter (Spitz, 1999, p. 411). In the ancient myth Persephone’s kidnapping by Hades, the God of the Underworld, triggers Demeter’s search for her daughter, however, in *Outside Over There* it is the child protagonist, Ida, who takes the place of the mother and goes out looking for her own Persephone, the lost baby sister/daughter.

Highly expressive of the tantalizing contradictions in the experience of childhood, so vividly depicted in the ambiguity of Ida’s character, the text narrates that Ida commences her journey climbing *out* of her window and *into* outside over there suggesting the duplicity of this landscape of the unknown which Ida comes to explore and identifying it as a place forming the borders of the self as “both its constitutive outside and its intimate interior” (Coats, 2002). The visual text accentuates the effect of the verbal text by illustrating outside over there as a labyrinth of caves, stone arches and underground tunnels drawing upon this archetypal symbol of transformation, the labyrinth, which is extensively used in children’s literature as a reflection of the conflicting, transient state of childhood (McGillivray, 2012, pp. 13-14). In ancient Greek mythology, the maze-like construction of the labyrinth appears as the creation of the architect Daedalus commissioned by King Minos of Knossos in which a hybrid, man-eating monster, the Minotaur, is kept. The Minotaur is a beast with the body of a man and the head of a bull feeding on boys and girls sacrificed to it until the Athenian Theseus assisted by the King’s daughter Ariadne finds his way in the labyrinth and kills the Minotaur. The myth ends with both Ariadne and Theseus being sentenced to exile by Minos for their deed establishing the labyrinth as a place where discovery brings loss and wisdom is associated with pain (McGillivray, 2012, p. 15).

The symbolic meanings inherent in the mythical construct reverberate through the goblins’ labyrinth in Sendak’s picture book as young Ida is presented with a challenge; if she is to enter the labyrinth and lose herself in it without getting lost she has to cross the boundaries separating childhood from adulthood. The illustration of Ida putting on an adult’s garment, her mother’s cloak before the beginning of her journey is the outward, visible expression of the girl’s initiation into a process of maturation that gradually leads her away from her childhood. Nevertheless, the verbal text accompanying the image highlights the complexity of Ida’s transition to maturity by pointing out her serious mistake of climbing “backwards out her window into outside over there” (Sendak, 1989) which obstructs her exploration of the goblins’ caves. Ida’s oscillation between a state of childhood innocence and one of growing awareness creates a problematic situation for her which is resolved by her father’s intervention urging her to shift her approach to the labyrinth in order to fulfil her mission in it. The child-adult power relationship emerges as the key factor determining the course of the formation of Ida’s developing identity; in order not to lose herself Ida makes the mature decision and responds positively to parental guidance. However, at the same time, she maintains the power of childhood imagination by using her wonder horn as the ultimate weapon against the goblins echoing Blake’s perception of the transition “from Innocence through Experience to a higher Innocence retained and contained in the Imagination” (Natov, 2003, p. 21).

The final scene in the book, yet again, pinpoints the significance of the child-adult relationship in the construction of Ida’s existential identity. The reunited family is portrayed reading the father’s letter with the mother resting her hand on Ida’s shoulder holding her daughter close to her. This is the sole demonstration of affection and proximity of the mother towards Ida in the entire book occurring only at the very end of the story. The implication is that the long-sought reconciliation between the two female characters has been accomplished and Ida has eventually achieved her catharsis having reached a sense of balance in her relationship with her mother, her father and herself.

**Conclusions**

Sendak follows in the footsteps of his literary idol William Blake who reconstructed “the world’s mythologies and the biblical stories to produce a unique narrative out of diverse forms of expression” (Ryan, 2011, p. 49); the artist uses myth to capture the complexity of childhood and create a world of fantasy where unsettling emotional situations are resolved in a manner that does not exclude imagination from the child’s life or the process to maturation (Sendak, 1964, p. 151). John Cech the writer of *Angels and Wild Things*, a tribute to the artist’s work, comments, “These fantasies essentially broke through the relatively unperturbed surfaces of post-war American children’s literature, sending his [Sendak’s] children- Rosie, Max, Mickey, Jennie, Ida- on journeys into regions of the psyche that children’s books had not dared visit before” (1995, 244). Sendak’s artistic vision created a magical world *outside over there* making it impossible for those engaging with his work to resist the impulse to “let the wild rumpus start” at the land *where the wild* and mythical *things are*.

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