



Activity 2

Aim: identify food symbolism in an example from the visual arts

Many subgenres of children's literature place a high level of importance on visual images such as illustrations, book covers and endpapers; therefore the study of children's literature often uses ideas from the study of the visual arts. This activity invites you to apply visual literacy skills in interpreting an artist's response to the Land of Cockaigne stories.

Children's literature scholars take pictures seriously, focusing on their importance for developing visual literacy, their potential for helping readers express creative responses to their reading, and more. One of the most important threads of thought in picture book studies relates to the ways in which image and text work together to complement and contradict one another.

Visual images can be particularly potent in depictions of food: think of *Peter Rabbit*, *The Little Hungry Caterpillar* or *In the Night Kitchen*. The representation of abundance is also found in artistic responses to medieval food folklore. For this activity, we begin by carrying out a reading of a classic representation of food heaven – Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'The Land of Cockaigne' (1567). Next, we consider how the meaning of the image can be interpreted differently depending on the text that accompanies it. Finally you are invited to return to your childhood favourites to consider the ways in which images are used.

TASK A



Peter Bruegel the Elder's - The Land of Cockaigne, 1567

Via Wikimedia Commons

Write a short commentary about this image.

You could comment on any or all of the following:

- Overall impression/personal response
- Foreground/background/details
- Colour/technique
- Mood/perspective
- Vectors – where are people in the painting looking? Where are your eyes drawn to? What other connecting lines can you see?



TASK B

How does your reading of the image change when it is paired with each of the following descriptions?

Description 1

The Land of Cockaigne served as a moral tale, showing the consequences of greed, excess and laziness. Its modern parallel can be found in images of gluttony such as that in Homer Simpson's 'Land of Chocolate'. It is clear that we are supposed to view those who succumb to the pleasures of Cockaigne as stupid and idle.

Description 2

The Land of Cockaigne functioned in a radical way, promising complete freedom from toil and hunger to people in desperate circumstances. The representation of an abundance of food is a direct response to famine and was one of the ways in which people preserved hope and shared their dreams of a better tomorrow.

Comment

The two different perspectives above show the ways in which the same imagery can be interpreted as a moralising cautionary tale on the one hand, and a celebratory, much-needed escape on the other. Many portrayals of food in children's literature can be read in both ways, echoing debates on the purpose of children's literature: should we think of children's books in terms of 'instruction' or 'delight', in other words, education or enjoyment?



TASK C

Reading text and image together is a crucial skill in children's literature criticism. Look again at some of your childhood favourites and consider the following questions:

- What cover images have been used? Are there editions of the texts which use different cover images? What effect does this have?
- Do any of the texts include illustrated endpapers (inside the covers)? How do these ones help convey the meaning of the text?
- Do any of the texts include illustrations, decorated pages or whole-page/double-page spreads? How do these work with the written text to convey meaning?
- What do the images tell you that the text doesn't? You could also consider to what extent the images dictate or constrain your reading of characters, settings, etc, in ways that aren't specified in the text. For example, characters are often visually represented as white as a 'default' even if the text does not specify a character's race. This happens with book covers and film adaptations too – hence the recent furore over Noma Dumezweni, a black actress, being cast as Hermione in JK Rowling's play Harry Potter and the Cursed Child.
- Do the images position or reposition the text in a different context? For example, consider the difference between versions of Winnie the Pooh that use EH Shepard's illustrations and those that use the Disney illustrations.
- Can you find anything about the images that seems to actively work against what the written text is saying?